



# HOLLOW REGALIA

WHERE ANGELS  
FEAR TO TREAD

04

GAKUTO  
MIKUMO  
Illustration by  
MIYUU



**HOLLOW  
REGALIA**

**04**

**Where  
Angels  
Fear to  
Tread**

**GAKUTO  
MIKUMO**

Illustration by  
**MIYUU**



**Ayaho Sashou**

**HOLLOW  
REGALIA**











“In Japan.  
A different  
Japan than  
the one  
you know.”

“Where  
are we?”



Opening Act:	<b>Prologue</b>
Act 1:	<b>Relict Regalia</b>
Act 2:	<b>Sleepless Night</b>
Act 3:	<b>Backstabbing</b>
Act 4:	<b>Cease to Exist</b>
Act 5:	<b>Have It Both Ways</b>
Final Act:	<b>Epilogue</b>
Afterword	

# 04

**Where Angels  
Fear to Tread**

**HOLLOW  
REGALIA**



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Where Angels Fear  
to Tread

04

Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by MIYUU

YEN  
ON  
NEW YORK



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### HOLLOW REGALIA—Where Angels Fear to Tread Vol. 4

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UTSURONARU REGALIA VOL. 4 Where Angels Fear to  
Tread

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Gakuto Mikumo

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Translation by Sergio Avila

Cover art by Miyuu

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

UTSURONARU REGALIA Vol. 4 WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: April 2024

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

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owned by the publisher.

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

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

Other titles: Utsuronaru regalia. English Description: First Yen On edition. |  
New York, NY : Yen On, 2023- | Contents: v. 4. Where angels fear to tread —  
Identifiers: LCCN 2022048784 | ISBN 9781975352790 (v. 1 ; trade paperback)  
| ISBN 9781975368616 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975372620 (v. 3 ;  
trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975387778 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) Subjects:  
LCGFT: Apocalyptic fiction. | Monster fiction. | Light novels.

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

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

ISBNs: 978-1-97538777-8 (paperback) 978-1-9753-8778-5 (ebook) E3-  
20240320-JV-NF-ORI

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**Another  
Japan in  
ruins.**

A faint, light gray watermark is visible in the background. It consists of the words "HOLLOW" and "REGALIA" in a serif font, with "HOLLOW" positioned above "REGALIA". To the right of the word "REGALIA" is a decorative symbol resembling a caduceus or a stylized medical emblem. The entire watermark is centered horizontally and vertically on the page.

# 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

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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

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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. Now he travels alongside the Berith twins.



### Iroha Mamana—Moujuu Tamer

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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. Galerie Berith has now taken her and her siblings under their wing.

### Iroha Waon



### Giulietta Berith—Simpleminded Martial Arist

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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.





## Nina Himekawa

Researcher at the European Organization for Graviton Research (CERG). A genius who skipped grades and obtained a PhD at a young age. She is the medium of the marsh dragon, Luxuria, and is investigating the dragons' powers through the lens of physics.



## Miyabi Maisaka

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 has kept her right eye covered ever since she was injured.



## Sumika Kiyotaki

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.



## Hisaki Minato

Lazarus under contract with Nina. He obeys her every command like a loyal dog, but his true aim and intentions are unknown. He seems rude and unsociable, but is actually an honest young man.



## Douji Yamase

Lazarus under contract with Miyabi. He was known online as Yamadou: someone who exposes issues in various corporations and organizations. Professional news cameraman. He believed the truth must always be revealed, no matter what it takes, and this philosophy eventually led him to bend the truth itself. Lost his life during the incident in Yokohama.



## Zen Sagara

Lazarus under contract with Sumika. 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.

## Ganzheit

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



## Sui Narusawa—Earth Dragon Medium

Younger sister of Yahiro Narusawa. She is a medium with the power to summon dragons, and responsible for the J-nocide. She fell into a deep slumber after getting injured during the aforementioned event. Currently in 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.

# Prologue

An off-road bike raced along a desolate, cracked highway.

The driver was a tall boy wearing a high school uniform. A similarly dressed girl was perched on the rear seat—her long hair was a fashionable bleached blond. The medium of the water dragon Acedia. Sumika Kiyotaki.

“There she is, Zen! Up there!” Sumika yelled as she looked up at a building near the road.

A young woman stood on the rooftop of the half-crumbled building. A slender, beautiful woman. Yet her right eye was inhuman: it was like a snake’s and glowed gold.

“Miyabi Maisaka! Hold on tight, Sumika!” Zen Sagara hit the gas.

The bike kicked up gravel and rubble as it sped toward the building.

Miyabi Maisaka, medium of the wind dragon, Ira, working together with her Lazarus, Douji Yamase, had created a Ploutonion in Yokohama just four days prior.

After Yahiro Narusawa defeated Douji Yamase, Miyabi escaped and had been missing. Zen and Sumika would have never found her had it not been for Galerie Berith’s survey drones.

Still, as though mocking her pursuers, Miyabi kept jumping from building to building, leaping over gaps tens of meters wide.

Sumika was shocked by the woman’s supernatural abilities.

“No way! Miyabi’s able to do that sort of thing?!”

“That’s Ira’s Regalia. She’s got it down pat, even without a Lazarus!” Zen clicked his tongue.

The wind dragon had the power to control that element.



However, unlike the Lazarus, the mediums had regular human bodies—they normally weren't able to make much use of their powers. A human's brittle cells could not withstand the recoil of the Regalia.

Miyabi's body was able to surpass these limits, though, because it was draconized. At the very least, her right eye and left leg were already completely transformed. She no longer had reason to fear the Regalia's recoil.

The physical capability to jump between buildings was also a side effect of her draconization. It would not be an easy task to catch up to her even with the mobility of an off-road bike. Not to mention...

"What?! What's that sound?!" Sumika frowned at the noise coming from overhead.

"A helicopter...! They're picking Miyabi Maisaka up!" Zen groaned as he looked up at the aircraft's silhouette. It was a jet-black military chopper. Zen had seen it a few times before: Ganzheit's liaison aircraft.

"No, Zen! You can't attack the Ganzheit chopper!" Sumika shrieked as she realized Zen intended to stop the bike.

Ganzheit was a supranational organization that knew about the dragons since ancient times and had been preparing for their reemergence. Apparently, Miyabi was following Ganzheit's orders when she generated the Ploutonion in Yokohama.

Fighting them head-on wasn't ideal. Zen and Sumika's patron, maritime company Noah Transtech, was a member of Ganzheit.

But even so, they could not allow Miyabi to escape. She had betrayed her Lazarus and lost her reason to live—she was a ticking time bomb. Who knew what she'd do if they took their eyes off of her. Zen and Sumika had remained in Yokohama to track down Miyabi.

"I won't attack it."

Zen unsheathed the blade attached to the bike's front fork. An ancient small sword.

He held up the sword and pointed it at the approaching helicopter.

The blade turned a foggy white for one instant before water drops surfaced on the steel.

The following moment, the drops turned into a torrent of cold air blowing white mist.

Using the steam in the environment, he created a massive volume of liquid nitrogen and liquid oxygen. Acedia's—the water dragon's—Regalia.

Dense fog created by the sudden drop in temperature covered the ground and spread throughout the area.

One could only see a few meters ahead. Not even the most skilled pilot could get the chopper near Miyabi now. It could crash into a building if they lowered altitude carelessly.

“Wait, Zen! Now we can't see where she is, either!”

“Not true.”

“Huh? Oh, I see...”

Sumika smiled in relief upon realizing why Zen remained calm.

A thick ice wall surrounded the building Miyabi stood on. He had captured her in an ice prison, building and all.

Zen and Sumika opened a hole in the ice wall to enter the abandoned building. They climbed the dusty stairs until they reached the uneven rooftop five minutes later.

Miyabi Maisaka stood atop the wrecked building with a stumped expression on her face.

The ice wall made from Zen's Regalia was over two meters thick. Not an easy thing to break through, even with Miyabi's draconized powers.

“It's been a long time since I've been followed around by a fan like this. Stalking isn't good, kids.”

Miyabi slowly turned around upon noticing Zen and Sumika's arrival and jokingly rebuked their actions.

“Sorry, Miyabi, but we can't leave you be.”



“We need to ask you some questions. We’ll have to restrain you.”

Sumika and Zen spoke grimly.

Miyabi brushed her long hair aside in annoyance before smiling.

Out of the blue, a strong wind blew in a vortex around her.

Ira’s power. She was about to shoot shock wave—bullets. But before she could, Zen closed the distance.

“It’s useless, Miyabi Maisaka!”

Zen used the impact of a steam explosion to propel himself. Miyabi wasn’t used to battle and lacked the reflexes to react.

Zen charged through the weak, incomplete shock waves and landed right in front of Miyabi. Immediately, he brought his small sword’s hilt to Miyabi’s defenseless neck.

Suddenly, a sword appeared before his eyes to block the attack. A double-edged sword over one meter long, resembling a giant spearhead.

“...What?!”

Zen’s sword bounced back with a sharp metallic ring, forcing him to retreat.

A young man in a black hoodie, around Zen’s age, had blocked his attack.

“You...!”

Zen gripped his sword tight as his eyes grew wide in shock.

Miyabi, too, stared at the young man’s back with surprise. Not even she had expected the sudden backup.

The boy in the hoodie glared silently at Zen as he pointed his long sword at him. His eyes were devoid of hostility, though—his goal there was unclear. He looked like a mindless drone.

“You shouldn’t hurt womeeen!”

A gleeful voice rang out from somewhere behind Miyabi.

It belonged to a short woman dressed in a youthful, university-student-style outfit stood in a corner of the rooftop. Her under-five feet height and baby face

made it hard to determine her age.

Her image contrasted with the tall and mature Miyabi, but the two had a certain something in common—a dragon aura.

“Nina...Himekawa...!” Zen muttered her name.

The baby-faced woman grinned, as though praising the boy for getting that right.

“Zen, she’s...?”

“Yeah, another Japanese survivor...and Luxuria’s medium,” Zen answered Sumika’s question.

It was their first time meeting in person, but Zen knew of her. Her looks perfectly matched the description Yahiro Narusawa had given him.

There could only be one reason why she had appeared there—to get a hold of Miyabi Maisaka. She must have arrived in Ganzheit’s liaison chopper.

“How did you get through my ice wall?”

“Hee-hee... That’s a seeecret!” Nina evaded Zen’s question with a giggle.

There was no trace of destruction in the ice cage surrounding the building. That’s why Zen hadn’t realize they were approaching. They’d slipped inside like magic.

“I have no idea what you’re here to do, but would you mind handing Miyabi over?” Sumika asked with a friendly smile.

“Sorryyy. I’m here to see her, aaactually,” Nina refused with a smile.

Zen clicked his tongue.

“Ganzheit’s orders?”

“Would you leave if I said so?”

“No. Now that we know that they’re trying to replicate the J-nocide, we have no reason to trust them.”

“Of course.” Nina shrugged.

Everything changed a second later. Out of nowhere, Miyabi glared at Nina

with a betrayed look on her face and clutched at her throat in pain. Her graceful body swayed as though she was fainting.

Nina held her up with both hands as Miyabi silently collapsed. As though Nina had known that would happen all along.

“Miyabi?!”

“Nina Himekawa, what’d you...?!”

Sumika shrieked and Zen approached Nina, practically burning with ire.

Then the boy in the black hoodie blocked his way.

“Don’t touch her.”

“Tsk!”

Zen dodged the boy’s long sword by jumping back. He did so instead of blocking with his own blade. He had a hunch that he mustn’t touch that sword; his Lazarus instincts told him so.

“Hisaki, let’s not waste this opportunity. Catch them, too!”

“Got it, Nina.”

The boy immediately followed Nina Himekawa’s command.

His loyal hound-like behavior only enraged Zen further.

“Hisaki Minato... Luxuria’s Lazarus!”

“Kurao-no-Nuboko.”

Hisaki ignored Zen’s yell and stabbed his long sword at the surface beneath their feet.

The rooftop’s floor turned a purple color as though corroding, turning into liquid.

The marsh dragon’s Regalia: marshification—the power to melt anything at a touch.

“Marshification... Of course. You melted my ice wall to get inside.”

Zen calmly observed as the corroded area spread farther and farther.



Luxuria's power to directly transform matter was formidable indeed. Who knew how effective the Lazarus's regenerative power would be if marshification melted his body?

Not to mention there was no stopping the corrosion so long as Hisaki kept touching the floor. It was a fearsome power to be paired against.

"But it's all meaningless if I just freeze it."

Zen pointed his sword at his feet and activated his own powers.

A white mist of intense cold air froze the liquefied rooftop, stopping the marshification.

Zen's Regalia, functioning on liquid as well, was the perfect rival against Hisaki's. Sure of his superiority, he walked nonchalantly toward Hisaki.

"A-ha-haaa... Yeah, people uuusually think that," Nina said playfully.

Zen was taken aback by her composure.

The next moment, his vision wavered. His entire body went numb, and strength faded from his fingertips. His throat convulsed as he gulped, trying to take in oxygen.

"Zen... Sorry... We messed up..."

"Sumika?!"

The girl behind him collapsed with a gentle thud.

Upon seeing that, Zen finally realized: Luxuria's marshification didn't melt the floor. Hisaki's Regalia turned the whole field into a swamp. A marsh spurting dangerous gases that led to suffocation.

They had melted the floor to distract him. Their real aim was to neutralize Zen and Sumika with the gases.

The Lazarus's regenerative powers were useless if the gases remained nonlethal. His abilities couldn't prevent him from losing consciousness.

"Never step carelessly into a swaaamp! You never know what dangers you may fiiind!" Nina said blithely.

"You...sly..."

Zen spat hoarse insults as his consciousness slipped away.

†

Yahiro confirmed that there was nobody around before he opened a rusty metal door.

There was just one small bed inside the freight container.

A petite person lay on the bed. A beautiful, doll-like girl with white, almost transparent hair and skin.

She had electrodes all over her body and an IV inserted in her thin arm. Her lips were pale blue, and her childish visage was like fragile glasswork.

In stark contrast, multiple cuffs and heavy chains were attached to her feet, similar to a dangerous criminal or a wild beast in transit. The restraints signified the risk she represented despite being unconscious.

Yahiro knew the reason for the restraints: she was a dragon medium. Sui Narusawa had opened a giant Ploutonion in the middle of Tokyo and caused the J-nocide.

But now, she was defenseless.

Yahiro had rejected the dragon Sui tried to summon through him, and the vast dragon aura she'd poured into his body had been burned away by Iroha Mamana's flames. Sui was now so weakened from the effects of that experience that she could not stay awake.

"Sui...!"

Yahiro glared at his sleeping little sister as he unsheathed the knife he had concealed on his person.

The knife was small, less than fifteen centimeters long. Laughably unreliable when compared to the *uchigatana* he normally used against the Moujuu.

Still, it was good enough to slay the small girl in front of him.

For the past four years, Yahiro had crawled through life in despair with only one purpose: to kill her. To make her pay for the sin of killing 130 million Japanese people. To take revenge on her for using him.

Those long days of humiliation would end if he only stabbed the knife into her heart.

It would all end if he killed Sui Narusawa.

And yet, Yahiro could not bring himself to kill his little sister.

If he did, he would not be able to bring back the Japanese people. He needed Superbia's Regalia to bring those who'd turned into Moujuu back from the underworld.

*What do I care?*

It didn't really matter to him if all the Japanese died out, not if it meant he could take his revenge on Sui. Honestly.

Yet, he faltered as the image of another girl's face crossed his mind.

*She* wouldn't want him to kill Sui. And *she* would lament wasting the chance to restore the Japanese.

"Agh..."

Yahiro slowly lowered his right hand.

He would not have hesitated to kill Sui then and there had he not met Iroha. And just the thought of it made him feel cowardly.

Yahiro gritted his teeth as he sheathed his knife and turned his back on Sui.

*It's not the time for revenge yet...* he told himself as he left the container.

His mind was clouded, so he did not notice the small whisper as he left.

"Dear...Brother..." The girl's lips trembled as she sighed the words out.

A single tear ran down her cheek.

Like a child frightened by nightmares.

Sui Narusawa cried in her sleep.



04  
Where  
Angels  
Fear to  
Tread

Presented by  
GAKUTO MIKUMO

Illustration  
MIYUU



## Act 1 Relict Regalia

### 1

“A mountain! A huge mountain!”

“Mt. Fuji? That’s Mt. Fuji, isn’t it?”

“Let me see! Kyouta, Kiri, swap places with me!”

The kids’ loud voices rang out alongside the sound of the running train.

Iroha Mamana’s siblings, the nine-year-old-trio of Honoka, Kyouta, and Kiri, clung to the windowsill of the Yáo Guāng Xīng and exclaimed in joy at the scenery beyond the glass pane.

“If you’re going to be that noisy, go somewhere else. We’re still eating over here.”

Twelve-year-old Rinka Takio and another one of the siblings reproached the kids. It was her role as the dependable one to discipline the children in place of Iroha, who was too lenient.

As she said, the dining hall in the Yáo Guāng Xīng was full, with over ten operators on break having lunch. However, they were all quite forgiving, and no one looked irritated by the children’s squeals.

Galerie Berith’s destination this time was Kyoto, where they’d meet with a member of the Heavenly Imperial family: Karura Myoujiin. She had personally invited Lazarus Yahiro Narusawa, and medium of the fire dragon Avaritia, Iroha Mamana.

Naturally, the intention wasn’t to fight, nor to compete with a different private military company. Having heard that, the operators looked calmer than usual.

“I know how they feel, though. The view from the train is so exciting,” Ren

Sumita, age eleven, whispered to himself.

He normally looked mature for his age, but as he looked out the window, his eyes were lit up with childlike curiosity.

It had been about four years since Japan collapsed. Ren was among the oldest of the siblings, but not even he had many memories of traveling by train.

Travel on the heavily armored train couldn't exactly be called comfortable, but it was an invaluable unique experience for them. Ren was being honest when he described it as *exciting*.

"Ha-hah. You know it. Railways are so great. This huge lump of metal is not just a method of transport, but an accumulation of human history and culture. Don't you agree, Yahiro?" Captain Josh Keegan amicably placed his hand on Yahiro's shoulder.

"I don't know about their historical and cultural importance, but I love that they take me long distances. Also, Shen's food is amazing." Yahiro casually changed the subject while pretending to answer Josh's question.

Josh was a very helpful man, perhaps due to his former work as a policeman, but he was also a huge railway nerd, to the point of it being a character flaw. He loved the Yáo Guāng Xīng in particular, and he had even been involved in its design, so he wouldn't shut up once he started talking about trains. Yahiro, quite frankly, could not be troubled to listen to his ramblings.

"Food is definitely a big part of enjoying long journeys." Josh nodded and smiled wryly.

Kyoto was about five hundred kilometers from the Galerie's Yokohama headquarters. The trip would have only taken two and a half hours in the age of the high-speed bullet train. Even a trip via regular trains would've only taken half a day.

However, now that all the Japanese were gone, it took much longer. Without anyone to manage the railroads, Galerie Berith had to operate the switches on their own, watch out for the roads' conditions, and remove any obstructions.

Their arrival in Kyoto was estimated to be in seventy-two hours. Or later if they had to take out any Moujuu that emerged on the way.



It was an undeniable fact that food was the greatest pleasure for the operators in the meantime. Although the Yáo Guāng Xīng was cramped, it had a decent dining hall, and the Galerie's chef, Ji-Hwan Shen, served excellent dishes. Iroha's siblings had been permitted to join the Galerie's trip to Kyoto because they were expected to help in the kitchen, too.

"It's a real luxury, actually. Getting to see the scenery while having lunch," whispered Iroha with a joyful expression as she stuffed her cheeks full of malassada, a Portuguese fried dough sprinkled with sugar.

Today's menu included those malassadas and a Brazilian acai smoothie bowl. Iroha turned out to be a huge fan of the malassada and went back for seconds and thirds.

"Oh, you're not eating, Yahiro? What's the point of getting it freshly fried if you let it get cold?"

"I'm okay. You eat it for me, so it doesn't go to waste."

"Whoa! Really?!" Iroha blinked as Yahiro offered her his plate.

Yahiro had only eaten a bit of his acai bowl and left the malassadas mostly untouched. Iroha looked more confused than happy.

"That's not fair, Mama!"

"You said there was no more!"

"We wanted more!"

"Pipe down, you three. Just ask Iroha to share my piece... Uh, what're you doing?"

The nine-year-old trio protested Yahiro's present to Iroha, and he tried to shoo them away in vexation, but then Iroha placed a hand on his forehead.

"Are you okay, Yahiro? You didn't finish your meal yesterday, did you? Are you sick? Feverish?"

"I'm just not hungry. It's no big deal."

Yahiro gasped at the sudden proximity of her face. Josh and the other operators grinned at the sight of him, but Iroha didn't notice and only drew

closer.

“That’s not okay. You’re looking pale, too.”

“You’re seeing things. And stop it already. What’re you, my mother?”

“Don’t call me that! Say I’m your sister instead!” Iroha huffed indignantly.

Yahiro sighed.

“Forget about me and worry about your real sister.”

“My sister? Oh, Ayaho?” Iroha’s eyes widened for a moment before she smiled softly. “She’ll be fine. Her fever’s down, but she’s fatigued. No surprise after all that happened.”

“Yeah.” Yahiro nodded.

Iroha’s sister, Ayaho Sashou, was attacked by a Fafnir soldier before being saved by Acedia’s medium, Sumika Kiyotaki, and her Lazarus, Zen Sagara—who proceeded to kidnap her. They used her as a hostage to draw Yahiro out, and he had draconized and gone on a rampage.

It had been four days since. Ayaho was only fourteen, so it wasn’t strange for her to have become unwell as a consequence of the experience. Yahiro couldn’t help but feel responsible, too, as he had played a significant role in the whole mess.

As wrinkles appeared in Yahiro’s expression unconsciously, Iroha yelped.

“Hey! That’s my malassada!”

Kyouta and Honoka had snatched her malassada while her attention was on Yahiro. Iroha immaturely chased her siblings with a scowl on her face.

“It’s not yours, it’s Yahiro’s!”

“And you already had thirds!”

“You shouldn’t be eating that much. Your belly’s gonna show in your livestream today.”

“Ugh... I hate that you’re right...” Iroha stopped at Kiri’s warning.

She glared at her siblings with envy, put her hands on her stomach, and

sighed as the kids gobbled up the bread. Her stream outfit was quite revealing, so she needed to mind her figure.

“Stream? You’re doing one on the train?” Yahiro gave her a puzzled glance.

The acoustics of the Yáo Guāng Xīng, a military vehicle, were the worst for videos. There couldn’t be a reason to do one in these conditions, no matter how addicted Iroha was to streaming.

Yet, she nodded with a serious expression.

“I want everyone to know about the Moujuu. I should make the best use of my rising subscriber count.”

“Wait...you’re going to publicly announce that the Moujuu are all human?” Yahiro’s voice hardened.

The operators in the dining hall feigned disinterest while eavesdropping on their conversation.

“We can’t keep quiet about it. You realize the supposedly extinct Japanese people are actually alive, right?”

“But turned into Moujuu.”

“Shocking, right, Nuemaru?” Iroha said while picking up the Moujuu at her feet.

The puppy-sized white beast looked at her with annoyance for interrupting its nap.

“Could it be you were also a human before?” she asked the white Moujuu while forcefully rubbing her cheek against it.

Hearing that made Yahiro feel like he was about to faint. He staggered and leaned against the wall of the dining hall while subconsciously grinding his teeth. Sweat ran down his back. His throat closed up and left him unable to breathe. The small Moujuu in Iroha’s arms filled him with terror.

“Yahiro?! What’s wrong?!”

Iroha panicked as she noticed Yahiro’s pale expression. With Nuemaru still in her arms, she ran over to him.



“Don’t mind me. I’m just getting motion sick.”

“How can I not mind you? You should see your face. Here, take my seat instead. You’ll feel better facing the direction we’re traveling in, right?”

“I’m fine, just keep quiet. You screaming in my ear makes me feel worse.”

“Ah, sorry.” She hung her head.

Yahiro felt bad about souring her mood.

She shouldn’t have to worry about him. His sense of guilt had nothing to do with her. He brought it all upon himself.

So, Yahiro changed the subject.

“You got the twins’ permission for the stream?”

“Well, Rosé didn’t seem completely on board. Giuli said it was okay if I managed to post it, though.”

Iroha pouted.

“Huh,” Yahiro replied.

*Weird way to phrase that, Giuli,* he thought.

## 2

After that, Iroha took some time to get ready for the stream before sitting in front of the camera with an unusually stiff expression. She kept touching her wig to adjust the ears and her bangs, trying to distract herself from the anxiety.

“Gosh, I’m so nervous.” Iroha’s smile was forced, but she proceeded with her vocal exercises.

Under the effects of the dragon, humans had turned into Moujuu. The information itself was dangerous; it could plunge the world into a panic. Iroha wasn’t unrelated to that event, being a dragon medium herself. She could even be accused of causing the Moujuifications. She was aware of this and still decided to make it public; how could she not be nervous?

The anxiety infected Yahiro and Rinka, too.

“You could just...*not* do it. It doesn’t have to be you making it public,” Yahiro said, unable to stand the tension in the air any longer.

Iroha shook her head and smiled.

“Maybe, but there are soldiers out there fighting Moujuu as we speak. We could stop unnecessary conflict if we let everyone know they’re human.”

“You’re doing it to protect the Moujuu?”

“No? I’m doing it to protect all human lives.”

Iroha looked back at Yahiro with a baffled expression after his comment.

Yahiro clenched his fists in silence. Yes. The Moujuu were human. But few people would be able to accept the fact as easily as Iroha had.

After the J-nocide, armies all over the world sent troops to Japan, and had been killing millions of Moujuu since. Accepting that the Moujuu were human would mean accepting that those armies had slaughtered millions of people.

And Yahiro was no exception. During his four years living in the 23 Wards, he killed innumerable Moujuu. He did not do it for sport or anything, but that did not change the fact that he had massacred them. Iroha’s words reminded him of that painful fact and made him feel like a serial killer.

Unaware of his inner conflict, though, Iroha looked back at her phone’s camera and booted up the streaming app. After Douji Yamase’s exposé on her, her channel had surpassed five hundred thousand subscribers. There were already two thousand people waiting for the stream to begin, too, because she had advertised it multiple times before.

“Waoon. Hi everywaon, Iroha Waon here.”

Iroha did her usual greeting less energetically than normal.

Her viewers immediately reacted to her unusual mood. Words of confusion filled the chat.

Upon seeing this, Iroha steeled herself and paused to take a deep breath.

“I have an important announcement to make today. It’s about the current state of the Japanese people. I’m sorry to bring up such a serious topic out of

nowhere, but you see, the Japanese people that were thought to have died in the J-nocide four years ago... they're, u-uh... What?"

As she stared at the phone's screen, confusion quickly replaced Iroha's serious expression in the middle of her explanation.

Rinka, who was in charge of the lighting, whispered: "What's wrong, Iroha?"

"I dunno. The screen began buffering all of a sudden... The app didn't crash, so what happened? We still have internet, right?" Iroha asked as she stared at the unresponsive phone.

Iroha was using a military connection using a low earth orbit (LEO) satellite. The connection remained stable even on the train. If it wasn't the app itself freezing, then it would have to be an issue with the website's servers.

"I'll reboot it, gimme a sec... Wait, wha—?"

Iroha stopped the stream and tried restarting the app, but she froze when a message appeared. Her eyes grew wide in shock.

"No way! Why?! Whaaa?!"

"Iroha?"

"They...banned my account..."

"Banned? They deleted your account?" Rinka asked in confusion.

Iroha nodded weakly, tapping away at her phone on the verge of tears.

Yahiro took out his own phone and looked up Waon's channel, but he only found a cold message saying the channel he was looking for didn't exist.

"What the...? Why? No, no... Now all my old videos are gone, too... No freaking way!"





Tears began welling up as she continued tapping frantically.

Four years' worth of videos had disappeared in an instant. Of course she couldn't give up just like that.

Yahiro was dumbfounded.

"...So that's what we're dealing with," said a low, firm voice behind them. Yahiro turned around to find a tall Black man standing there—Ganzheit agent Auguste Nathan.

Nathan was technically Galerie Berith's prisoner, but he was under no special monitoring or restraint; he could move freely through the Yáo Guāng Xīng because they did not actually have the power to restrain Superbia's Regalia.

"Ganzheit must be behind it. They work faster than I thought," Nathan said, as though speaking to himself.

Yahiro looked at the man warily.

"You mean they pressured the website into deleting Waon's account? Why would they go through all that trouble?"

"To stop the information from leaking. The dragon's emergence summoned the Moujuu, and the humans they attacked turned into Moujuu themselves... The fear this could cause is a trump card they would want to keep in their hand."

"...So rumors going around of turning the Moujuu back into people would ruin their plans."

"Exactly. And it would be very inconvenient for such a rumor to come out of Iroha Mamana's mouth."

"Because the world already knows she's a dragon medium."

"Yes." Nathan nodded.

The idea of humans turning into Moujuu and the possibility of turning them back was unbelievable, unless someone like Iroha was relaying the information.

She was a dragon medium, one of the people involved in the J-nocide—and it had been Ganzheit themselves who made that public.

Because the concept of dragons turning people into Moujuu had been proven already, the idea of turning them back into humans was easier to believe. It wouldn't be surprising if Ganzheit really stopped the stream to prevent this.

"Aww... And I'd just gotten so many subs..."

Iroha held her phone in hand as she lay facedown on the table, finally giving up on getting her account back.

"Well, nothing we can do about that, but you could just make a new account, right?" Rinka placed a hand on her sister's shoulder.

Iroha, teary-eyed, pointed at her phone's screen.

"I thought so, too, but look."

"Whoa, impostors? That's awful..."

Search results on the website showed videos from different people pretending to be Waon.

Some of them were so pretty they overshadowed even the real Waon, and were doing interesting things in their videos, but most of them were of terrible quality. Not only did they look very different from the real Waon, the topics of their videos were unbearable.

It had to be part of Ganzheit's plan to erase any trace of her.

"Ughhh... This is unforgivable... I'm gonna sue them!"

"In which court?" Yahiro sighed as he saw Iroha's shoulders tremble in anger.

"Don't you care?! All those videos full of our memories are gone!"

"Our? What memories do I have in them?"

"You're one of my oldest fans!"

"Well, I mean, I won't deny there's a bit of nostalgia there...", Yahiro admitted.

Iroha Waon was the only psychological support he'd had in the past four years before he met Galerie Berith. He wasn't unfazed by losing those memories.

However, those four years weren't exactly a time he wanted to look back on fondly. And now that he had met Iroha in the flesh, there was no reason to be sad about the videos disappearing. After all—although he couldn't say so to her face—Iroha's videos weren't that good to begin with.

"Stupid Ganzheit... They'll see! They won't defeat me that easily!" Iroha declared with a scowl.

Then Nathan calmly said, "In that case, you'd better meet Karura Myoujiin soon."

"...Why?"

"The news would get around faster if you showed them a Moujuu turning back into a Japanese person. If you want to get back at Ganzheit, that is."

"That makes sense!" Iroha nodded emphatically, loving the idea of getting back at Ganzheit.

Yahiro silently observed Nathan, unable to ascertain the real motive behind the man's irresponsible words of encouragement.

### 3

"They took down Douji Yamase's video, as well," Nathan told Yahiro after Iroha and Rinka left to go to bed.

Nathan was forbidden from having communication devices to stop him from contacting the outside, but somehow he knew about what happened on the video-sharing website. He had always been a mysterious man, though, so that much didn't surprise Yahiro.

"Was that also Ganzheit?"

"Yes. The video might be gone, but the memory of it remains. They know it would increase fear that way. Talk about the J-nocide has become heated on social media."

"They've got everyone in the palm of their hand."

"For now, yes." Nathan nodded in agreement with Yahiro's cynical comment.

Yahiro sighed in irritation.

“Why do you sound so detached? Aren’t you part of Ganzheit?”

“That would make you a member of Ganzheit, too, Yahiro Narusawa.”

“Me?”

“House Berith is one of the twenty-two families making up Ganzheit. You and Iroha Mamana, under their wing, are technically related to the organization.”

“I’m only an employee of Galerie Berith to kill the dragons. Ganzheit wants to make use of them. We’re on opposite sides, aren’t we?”

“No, you are the same. While the dragons grant people’s wishes and bring them blessings, they are also monsters of disaster meant to be slain by the hero. There is no contradiction between utilizing the dragons and slaying them.”

Nathan smiled placidly while taking a seat in front of Yahiro.

Yahiro was taken aback. He didn’t know what Giuli and Rosé had talked about with Nathan, but he couldn’t believe the man would tell them everything he knew just because he was their prisoner. He didn’t expect Nathan to come speak to him like this.

Nathan, realizing Yahiro’s confusion, continued:

“That is the reason behind Ganzheit’s two-faced nature. In the end, they are simply the descendants of people who rose in society by utilizing the dragons.”

“What do you mean?”

“There were people in ancient times—royalty, nobility, priests—who attained their power and position by killing or taming dragons, yes?”

“Yeah...” Yahiro nodded.

In many Asian countries, dragons were considered auspicious beasts symbolizing the emperor’s power. There were also many nobles and members of the clergy who demonstrated their own power by slaying a dragon. Giuli and Rosé had told Yahiro and Iroha all about this.

“The Galerie’s House of Berith is one of them. As is the Heavenly Imperial



House.”

Nathan, for some reason, shook his head pityingly as he said that.

“However, over a thousand years have gone by since the last dragon emergence; they have been losing influence over society. It’s been so long since the Heavenly Imperial House was stripped of political power, and House Berith is now but a lowly arms dealer.”

“That’s why they want to resurrect the dragons? To get their glory back?”

“Precisely. One cannot slay a dragon without first pulling it out from behind the folding screen.” Nathan shrugged cynically.

“Is that also why the Heavenly Imperial House wants to resurrect the Japanese?”

“Well... you should ask Karura that.” Nathan evaded the question.

“What’s your personal goal here, then, Auguste Nathan? Why are you collaborating with Ganzheit and the Heavenly Imperial House?”

“Is it that strange for a Japanese person like me to try and revive my fellow Japanese?”

“Is...that really all there is to it...?”

Yahiro was taken aback by the firm look in the man’s eyes.

Nathan’s assertion had no contradictions. If the background he claimed was true, then he was born Japanese from naturalized parents, which was motive enough to try to revive his compatriots.

Still, that did not change the fact that he’d worked as an agent for Ganzheit until just recently; it was hard to simply accept that he had betrayed the organization.

“At the very least, I sheltered Sui Narusawa because she is necessary to resurrect the Japanese. I couldn’t let you or Count Raimat kill her,” Nathan added in response to Yahiro’s suspicion.

Yahiro unconsciously straightened at the sound of Sui’s name.

“But it’s her fault that we’re...!”

“Killing her will not atone for your sins.”

“...!”

Yahiro lost the will to continue after Nathan’s cold remark.

Yahiro hated his sister. He despised Sui Narusawa so deeply that he wanted to kill her.

She had murdered his family and turned him into a dragon. She caused the J-nocide and the collapse of Japan. He had more than enough reason to hate her.

At the same time, his hatred helped distract him from his own sins, and he realized this. The one who opened the Ploutonium in the middle of the 23 Wards, the one who summoned the Moujuu to the surface, the one who had killed those same Moujuu—it was him.

“What...are you implying?”

“I simply figured you were tormented by the thought of all the Moujuu you’ve killed up to now, was I wrong?” Nathan said with the tone of a clergyman.

“It was them who attacked first,” Yahiro weakly argued back.

He was not lying. Not once did he kill a Moujuu of his own accord. It was all in self-defense. They tried to kill him, so he retaliated. That’s it.

Nathan silently accepted his excuse. Then, pitying, or rather, mocking the young man’s weakness, he said: “Right. You only protected yourself. Your immortal body.”

## 4

The Yáo Guāng Xīng arrived in Nagoya the following morning. Yahiro spent most of the night unable to sleep, and just as he was beginning to get drowsy, Rosetta Berith barged in to wake him up.

“Good morning, Yahiro. You look awful today.”

“...That’s your greeting?” Yahiro grumbled while pushing himself up from the narrow bed.

He didn’t need to look in the mirror to know how terrible he looked. He

couldn't fall asleep after his conversation with Nathan.

In the Yáo Guāng Xīng's ninth car, a freight container held a comatose Sui Narusawa, who was connected to life support.

Yahiro had held a knife in hand and contemplated killing her for a long time before giving up and returning to bed. His insomnia was a result of that.

"No time for bickering. Please get up already. We're almost at the Nagoya Station Fortress. You must guard Iroha," Rosé said while throwing a face towel at him.

Yahiro grabbed the towel and furrowed his brow at a certain word she'd used.

"The Nagoya Station...Fortress?"

"Yes. The fortified city of Nagoya—the Chinese Federal Army's base is built upon the former Nagoya Station."

"...That's the station?" Yahiro groaned as he stared at the dark-green wall outside the window.

It was a never-ending wall covered in thick armor. It looked multiple kilometers long even just from the portion visible through the window. A giant fortified wall surrounded Nagoya Station like medieval European fortified cities.

The remains of Nagoya were a contested battleground after the J-nocide. Traces of bombings remained around it, and almost no buildings stood in the city's center.

The fortress that rose abruptly from the flattened land seemed fantastical, otherworldly.

The tracks the Yáo Guāng Xīng followed continued through a mechanical gate on the armored wall. One could see dense groups of buildings on the inside. A modern view that contrasted with the wasteland outside the walls.

"A base? That looks like a whole city."

"Indeed, the population estimates including soldiers and other military personnel is about seventy-five thousand people. They're the second biggest army stationed in Japan, after the US," Rosé responded sincerely to Yahiro's remark.

“What’re so many of them doing here in Japan?”

“The public reason for the eight countries occupying different sections of Japan is to maintain Japanese territory. Basically, they are monitoring each other so no one takes over the whole country.”

“So no one gets to do it before they can...” Yahiro sighed before roughly washing his face at the washbasin.

Japan had few subterranean resources, but it had plenty of water and a warm climate—it had more than enough utility value. It was also in a key location for sea traffic, making it an important strategic base.

The desolate Japanese archipelago was irresistible to other countries. International governments continued to spend large sums of their military budget to occupy sections of its land.

Yet, it didn’t sound like a reason to build a fortified city of this scale.

“Wait, but that means there’s another, private reason?” Yahiro asked Rosé as he raised his head.

“Yes, the same as us: collecting the assets and resources, tangible and intangible, left within Japan. If anything, I would wager that is the main reason. You must know what I mean.”

“Yeah...” Yahiro brushed his wet bangs back as he nodded.

Back when he was in the 23 Wards, Yahiro took art pieces left in the ruins to sell them overseas in exchange for intel and money for living expenses. Most of his clients were in the military.

Some officers hired him simply for personal gain or collections, but some of his clients were the armies themselves.

“Still, what’s the need to make something so big?”

“There shouldn’t be, but I suppose we won’t know until we ask them directly,” Rosé answered coldly as she watched him get ready.

“You think they’ll tell us?”

“Depends on their goals. Aren’t you curious?”

“I guess I am, but we’ve nothing to do in Nagoya, do we?”

“No. We just need to get past here to get to Kyoto. It’ll be up to our negotiations whether they let us through, though,” answered Rosé’s twin sister, Giulietta Berith, popping her head through the doorway as the other two approached the command car.

Giuli was not wearing her usual revealing combat uniform, but a business suit.

It appeared she would be the one to negotiate with the Chinese Federal Army as Galerie Berith’s representative.

“Lady Giulietta, we’ve received permission to enter the fortress. They have asked us to lower our speed to under fifteen kilometers per hour.”

The short and pudgy captain of the Yáo Guāng Xīng, Milo Aldiss, reported to Giuli, his headset still on.

The command car monitor showed the approaching Nagoya Station Fortress’s gates. A drawbridge came down to connect to the gates, finally allowing entrance to the station.

“Okay. Decrease the speed as slowly as possible. Be careful not to annoy the other side.”

“Roger. The Yáo Guāng Xīng will now enter the Nagoya Station Fortress.” Aldiss nodded before giving instructions to the conductor through the headset.

The gray armored train’s heavy body creaked as it decelerated.

However, the closer they got to the Nagoya fortress, the sterner Yahiro’s expression became—his grimace darkened when he saw the wall surrounding the station more clearly.

The barrier was not just thick and tall. There was recent damage on the dark-green armor plates, which already looked to have gone through countless cycles of repair.

The marks’ dark color stood out at a distance. Dried blood. It looked like the aftermath of an unending battle against an army of thousands.

Yahiro and the twins understood everything the moment they laid eyes upon it. The fortified walls surrounding Nagoya station were not there for decoration



or intimidation. This fortress was the front line of war.

“Rosé, what...?”

“It does not look good, I agree. We should get going as quickly as possible,” she responded flatly.

“Let’s hope they let us,” Giuli muttered with a shrug.

That wish put a bad feeling in their hearts as the armored train entered the giant fortified city.

## 5

The platform at the Nagoya Station Fortress was far wider than Yahiro expected.

It was a bay platform with nine lines and ten bays. The roof was crude, with only steel plates and blazing lighting, but it gave it more of a military base aura than that of a regular train station.

Most of the trains there were freight, carrying military supplies. The premises were equipped with simple gear for maintenance and refueling, with mechanics running hurriedly everywhere as armed guards watched over them.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng was ordered to stop at the end of a platform that was the most exposed to wind.

Giuli and her guards disembarked from the train to begin negotiations with a Chinese Federal Army representative. Meanwhile, Yahiro stayed inside the command car to guard Iroha and her siblings, as ordered.

It was now an open secret that Galerie Berith was sheltering Avaritia’s medium. No country dared lay a finger on her in Yokohama, land of mercenaries, but this was the Chinese Federation’s territory. It wouldn’t be that surprising if they asked Galerie Berith to hand Iroha over despite Ganzheit’s wishes.

After Rosé warned her about this, Iroha stayed put without complaint for once. Even her siblings, who the adults worried would begin making a fuss out of boredom, were all watching through the windows with a great deal of

interest for some reason.

“What’re they looking at?” Yahiro asked, puzzled.

Iroha looked sorrowfully at the video website she’d been kicked off from on her smartphone before glancing up to reply.

“They say there’s a cool train they hadn’t seen before.”

“A train?”

Yahiro looked out the Yáo Guāng Xīng’s window over the children’s shoulders.

Sure enough, there was an odd-looking train stationed at another platform. It looked comfortable and fast, with its aerodynamic form painted silver. However, what caught his attention was the many turrets hidden in the design the children liked so much.

It was a cutting-edge armored train with even more weaponry than the Yáo Guāng Xīng.

“A privately owned armored train...?” Yahiro muttered upon noticing the gaudy logo on its body.

Rosé replied, “Melora Electronics... That’s a big name in the Chinese Federation’s IT industry. I didn’t know they had a PMC division.”

“What’s an IT company doing in Japan?”

“Who knows? Perhaps they’re looking to get into weapons development by partnering with the army.”

“Weapons development...?”

“Yes. This country is perfect for testing state-of-the-art weaponry.”

“...” Yahiro silently bit his lip at Rosé’s flat remark.

The deserted ruins of Japan certainly were the best possible testing grounds for weapons manufacturers. There was no need to worry about civilians, and they had a wide selection of topography.

Not to mention Japan was perfect for trying out the weapons in real battle, by exterminating the Moujuu.

Yahiro and the Galerie, however, lacked the power to stop it. They had to meet Karura Myoujiin and resurrect the Japanese first, and for that, they couldn't make enemies of the Chinese Federal Army.

Yet there were no signs of Giuli coming back from negotiations anytime soon. On the contrary, Rosé's expression became grimmer by the second as she observed everything from a monitor.

"Rosé?"

"There's trouble, it seems."

"Trouble? Is Giuli arguing with them?"

"Yahiro."

"All right. You want me to follow you?" Yahiro predicted her request.

The Lazarus was Galerie Berith's greatest power, at least on an individual level. Rosé asking him to accompany her meant she expected the possibility of a fight. It sounded like the CFA representative was not intent on solving things peacefully.

"What about me? Shouldn't I go with you too, Rosé?" Iroha stood quickly; turned out *she* was the bored one.

Rinka sternly chimed in, "Don't do it, Iroha. It'll only make things worse."

"Wha?! What'd I do?!"

As Iroha looked in shock at the girl five years her junior, Ren and the other kids also shook their heads. She wore her heart on her sleeve—she wasn't a good choice for making a deal, and her siblings knew this better than she did.

Leaving Iroha behind, Yahiro and Rosé got off the armored train.

Giuli and her guards were near the center of the platform, facing what looked like administrative officials on the other side. There was one odd man out, however: a tall man wearing a military uniform.

It seemed that the military officer was the one dragging out the deal by making unreasonable requests. He glanced at Yahiro and Rosé as soon as he noticed them approaching.

“The other twin. You’re the other half of Galerie Berith’s leadership, aren’t you?” he asked curtly.

His bold expression brought the image of a leopard to mind. Leaner than a tiger, but faster and shrewder, with the same sharp fangs. Caution required.

“I am Executive Manager Rosetta Berith. May I please have your name?” Rosé asked perfunctorily.

The man snorted.

“Jiguan Xia. Deputy commander of the fortified city’s garrison.”

“Deputy commander?” Rosé furrowed her brow.

Xia looked to be around thirty years old—quite young for such a title. He must’ve had quite the connections or achievements. Likely the latter considering he was in Japan.

It only made him more dangerous. That kind of person made no concessions when it came to piling up further accomplishments.

“Yes. And I guess you’re the Lazarus?” Xia’s grin was aggressive as he glared at Yahiro, who stood behind Rosé.

Then, without any warning, Xia unsheathed the saber on his hip. He thrust its tip at Yahiro’s throat, and the young man just barely avoided the strike.

“Ah!”

“Ha... Can’t you do a better job at dodging, punk?!” Xia’s face lit up with joy as he continued stabbing the blade forward.

Yahiro took a defensive stance as he felt shivers run down his spine.

Dodging Xia’s attack was not something he did consciously. His body had automatically reacted to Xia’s animalistic hostility. Basically, Xia was testing whether Yahiro would be able to dodge it. Xia laughed.

“Could you please stop teasing our contractor, *Shangxiao* Xia?” Giuli admonished him with a smile, adding on his title—Colonel—for good measure.

“Contractor, eh?” Xia snorted as he sheathed his saber. “Whatever. Back on topic, you’re asking us to let you through the fortress for free, Galerie Berith?”

“We didn’t say for free. I said we’ll pay you.”

Giuli and Rosé countered: “The right to unimpeded harmless transit within Japan was agreed upon in the Nagasaki Treaty. We’ve already paid the Chinese Federal Army properly for the use of their facilities.”

The right to harmless transit granted free passage through other nations’ territories with the condition that the traveler causes no harm or disorder. It was a special case in the current Japan, since the land was occupied by eight different countries.

Xia’s lips thinned in irritation, and he asked his subordinate behind him, “Is that true?”

“Yes. Please look.” The administrative official nodded in a hurry and opened the metallic attaché case in his arms. It was full of gold.

Converting that to money would make for a huge sum, yet Xia only laughed it off.

“Not enough.”

“I would say we went above and beyond,” Rosé responded.

“This is nothing. We know you have the dragon medium with you. The cause of the J-nocide.” Xia glared at the twins. “Unimpeded harmless transit, right, Rosetta Berith? You got any proof that your transit here will be harmless? Give us enough compensation to prove it, or we won’t let you through.”

Rosé kept quiet, uncharacteristically overwhelmed.

Yahiro adjusted his evaluation of the man—he was more dangerous than expected.

Xia’s remark was arrogant, but logical. The dragon medium, merely by existing, brought about calamity by turning people into Moujuu. Or, at the very least, the assumption was that she could.

It would be difficult for Galerie Berith to prove their own harmlessness, and Xia used that. No wonder Giuli was having trouble negotiating.

“What do you want, *Shangxiao* Xia?” The younger sister reluctantly asked after glancing at Giuli.



“The Relict.” Xia grinned broadly. “I won’t ask for the dragon medium. Just give us Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia and move on. We’ll let you off the hook then.”

“Wha...?” Yahiro muttered.

It was his first time hearing the words *Relict Regalia*, but he immediately knew what they meant. It was the crimson crystal left behind by mountain dragon Vanagloria’s medium, Chiruka Misaki, and her Lazarus, Amaha Kamikita. Xia was demanding it in exchange.

“That reaction... So it’s true that Galerie Berith has the Relict Regalia.”

“That’s too big an ask for just a toll.” Rosé sighed.

Xia shook his head with a shameless smile.

“We’ll just be taking extra baggage off your hands for free. You should be grateful, actually.”

“What do you want to do with it? Hang it on your neck like jewelry?” Yahiro asked, glaring at him.

Xia stared back at him with raised eyebrows.

“What, Lazarus? You don’t know how to use it?”

“What...?” Yahiro mumbled.

Then a loud alarm went off on the premises.

It was earsplitting, as though alerting for war. The air around shook violently as all the mechanics on the platform hurried to evacuate.

“Deputy commander.”

Xia nodded to the soldier who called him.

“They’re here?”

His subordinate handed him a gun three times longer and thicker than a normal handgun. It was then that they noticed all his other men carried similar weapons.

“Yahiro!”

Yahiro turned around at the sound of his name among the chaos.

Iroha had jumped off the Yáo Guāng Xīng's command car, carrying a small dog-sized Moujuu in her arms. Her expression was stiff and her hair in disarray as she ran toward them.

"...Iroha?"

"Moujuu coming! A lot of them!" Iroha shrieked before he could ask her why she had gotten off the train.

"Moujuu...?"

"Huh... So you noticed," Xia said, impressed. "I see. You're Avaritia's medium. You're not dressed up in that stupid costume today?"

"What's stupid about my costume?! It's cute!!" Iroha argued back indignantly.

Xia cackled.

"Fine, then. I'll show you how to use the Relict. You'll see that it'd be better for humanity if you handed yours over!" Xia said defiantly as he glared at Yahiro and held the giant handgun up.

Then the Nagoya Station Fortress trembled.

## 6

"You stay inside the train, Galerie Berith. Don't you dare get in our way. If you don't want to end up crushed like the Moujuu, that is!" Xia said menacingly before leaving with his subordinates.

Giuli stuck her tongue out at his back, while Rosé simply sighed.

Then the latter got in contact with the command car of the Yáo Guāng Xīng through the comms in her uniform's collar.

"What's the situation?"

*"Give us a moment. We're just getting images from the drones. The jamming inside the fortress is too strong, so we only get footage from outside the walls..."*

Josh's voice came from the other side. He had sent survey drones the

moment the alarm went off.

*“We can see about three to four hundred Moujuu. Most of them Grade II or above. Not as big as that time in Yokohama, but we have fewer people now, too. Who knows if we can stave them off?”*

Josh bitterly passed along the drone intel.

The Moujuu that had emerged from the Ploutonion opened by Sui in Yokohama were estimated at over seven hundred, but back then the defensive line had included one hundred thousand Guild mercenaries.

Meanwhile, the Nagoya Station Fortress had a total population of seventy-five thousand. And half of them were noncombatants. They couldn't be optimistic, even with the tough walls surrounding them.

“What do the Moujuu want? They're not after us, are they?” Yahiro asked Giuli while Josh and Rosé communicated.

“Considering the Federal Army's reaction, I'd say they're under Moujuu attack every day. Maybe that's why they have that huge wall around the station,” Giuli said plainly.

Yahiro agreed with the analysis. He remembered how quickly the mechanics evacuated when the alarm went off. They had to be used to Moujuu attacks. And those marks on the fortress's walls were from battling them.

*“Lady Rosetta, please give us permission to start the engines. We can't remain inside. We can't use the Yáo Guāng Xīng's weapons like that. We should at least leave the station...,”* Captain Aldiss pleaded, obvious anxiety in his voice.

“But they won't open the gates for us.” Rosé sighed, rejecting the captain's request.

So long as the drawbridge embedded in the walls did not open, there was no leaving the Nagoya Station Fortress. And they could not open the gate when a swarm of Moujuu was approaching, lest they allow them to charge into the city.

*“We could've steered clear of this mess if they'd let us pass already. Damn miserly CFA bastards!”* Josh cursed.

The Chinese Federal Army was not even one of Galerie Berith's clients.

Naturally, they couldn't join the fight against the Moujuu of their own accord. They could only utilize the bare minimum of self-defense, and being unable to prepare properly for battle was stressful enough.

"No, it's no problem. Josh, you keep gathering intel on the situation. All operators on standby, get ready to fight Moujuu. Keep defending the Yáo Guāng Xīng, though. No offensive."

*"Defensive only? You sure? They'll break through the wall in less than five minutes."*

Josh worriedly relayed the data reported by the train's tactics AI. It predicted that the CFA forces alone would not be able to stop the Moujuu invasion. If they only stood and watched, the Moujuu would come in like an avalanche and surround the Yáo Guāng Xīng.

Still, Rosé kept a straight face and shook her head.

"I'm telling you, it's no problem. We have Iroha on our side."

*"Ah..."*

Josh mumbled.

Iroha was shocked by the sudden sound of her name while she was just standing around with Nuemaru in her arms.

"M-me?"

"You're our best bet against attacking Moujuu. Can you take care of the Yáo Guāng Xīng?"

"R-right. Yeah... I'll do my best." Iroha nodded awkwardly.

Yahiro looked at her suspiciously. She was being strangely meek; where did her mysterious and endless source of confidence go?

"Yahiro, you guard her. Do not take your eyes off her."

"...Yeah, I got it." He nodded, still confused and distracted by Iroha's unusual behavior.

With their sudden strategy meeting over, the Galerie operators moved in unison.

Giuli, not dressed for combat, returned to the Yáo Guāng Xīng while Rosé took over command. The operators spread out to protect every car of the armored train.

“Take care of the kids, Nuemaru.” Iroha put the white Moujuu down carefully.

Nuemaru looked up at her and shook its long fluffy tail reluctantly before heading back into the train to be with Runa and the rest.

Only Yahiro and Iroha remained.

“You’re acting weird,” Yahiro said while looking at Iroha’s profile. She was biting her lip in worry.

She turned to look at him with surprise.

“Huh? Why?”

“You’ve never been wary of Moujuu before.”

“Mmm... I’m not wary of them. It’s just, they’re weird.” Iroha’s eyebrows furrowed as she looked in the direction of the fortress wall.

Thanks to her dragon medium powers, not only did she sense them approaching, but she also felt something was not right with them.

“They’re weird?”

“Yeah. The truth is, Moujuu don’t usually attack people unless their territory is invaded.”

“Right.”

“But they hate this fortress. Not the Chinese Federal Army, but this fortress itself. I don’t know if they’ll listen to me...”

“They hate...the fortress?” Yahiro narrowed his eyes in confusion.

The Moujuu loathed their territory being intruded upon. Yahiro was attacked many times in the 23 Wards because he set foot into their habitat to retrieve artwork.

He now understood the reason why, if vaguely.

The Moujuu were Japanese people, and their territory was the very land

where they were born and raised. They were trying to protect their homeland from outside forces barging in.

This also meant that they rarely attacked people outside their territory without impetus.

The exceptions were the Moujuu summoned by Superbia's Ploutonion, and the marine Moujuu Vanagloria ordered to attack Yokosuka.

"The Moujuu attacking this fortress are not being manipulated by someone, are they?"

"No. That's why I don't know if they'll listen to me. I don't think they'll stop fighting until this fortress is gone." Iroha shook her head weakly.

Her power to control the Moujuu was not absolute domination. Although she could free them from the control of another dragon, she could not make them obey orders against their will.

If the Moujuu were seriously trying to destroy this fortress, then Iroha had no way to stop them. This was her weakness.

"Then...we're in big trouble..." Yahiro grimaced as he heard a change in the cannon roars beyond the walls.

The howitzer and machine-gun fire began to be frequently interrupted, allowing him to hear the Moujuu's howls more clearly. The fortress's defenses were coming apart; the Moujuu were inching closer.

The next moment, ringing slashes echoed throughout the metal walls. The entire platform trembled from the impact as guns and screams sounded.

*"They've broken through the walls. Heads up, Yahiro!"*

Giuli's sharp warning came through the comms in Yahiro's collar.

Moujuu crossed the barrier and two groups landed almost simultaneously behind and in front of the platform where the Yáo Guāng Xīng was stopped. A pack of giant wolves with jaws like crocodiles. Beetles with six monkey-like arms. Winged, mono-eyed, spherical vines. All hideous monsters that ignited physiological fear.

The CFA soldiers fired their assault rifles at them, but the Moujuu brushed



them aside and avalanched into the premises.

“Please, stop!”

Iroha ran recklessly toward the Moujuu near the Yáo Guāng Xīng. Yahiro clicked his tongue before following her.

They did hear Iroha’s voice; they showed no intention of attacking her. But they were not responding clearly to the call. This lack of reaction had never happened before.

“It’s not working! I can’t stop them!” Iroha cried weakly.

The Moujuu showed no leniency as they approached the Yáo Guāng Xīng, despite it being unrelated to the Nagoya Station Fortress. The Galerie’s operators aimed their guns in retaliation, but Iroha was in the line of fire.

“Iroha, move!”

Yahiro stepped between the Moujuu and Iroha as the operators hesitated to shoot. The one at the front was a grizzly-like beast with claws like giant scythes. It had to be Grade II, at the very least. A formidable opponent that needed a whole platoon to defeat.

The Moujuu slashed down but was stopped by Yahiro’s *uchigatana*.

Yahiro was knocked back five meters, the impact breaking both his arms and audibly rupturing tendons in his legs.

Yet Yahiro ignored the pain and launched a counterattack the moment he landed. His Lazarus powers regenerated his tendons. He dug his katana deep into the right arm of the Moujuu—defenseless right after its attack ended—and jet-black miasma surged out in place of blood.

Then he was paralyzed. Yahiro froze at the sight of the wounded Moujuu.

He could kill it with another slash. He knew that, and yet his body would not listen. Revulsion stirred his insides until he threw up on the spot.

“Yahiro...?!” Iroha sprinted toward him as soon as she saw him kneel before the Moujuu.

She held him close under her protection. The Moujuu did not attack dragon

mediums. However, the wounded beast was already halfway through launching a counterattack.

Iroha stared blankly at the giant claws approaching from overhead.

Yet the Moujuu never slashed her.

Right before it could, a shock-wave bullet blew its giant form away and tore it apart.

“What’s wrong, Lazarus? You scared at the sight of the Moujuu?”

“Jiguan...Xia...” As he sluggishly raised his head, Yahiro muttered the name of the man who had launched the shock wave.

Xia was holding that strange handgun. The shock wave it fired had defeated the Moujuu. A Grade II Moujuu. In one shot.

“Kept you waiting, huh? Clearing the enemies outside the walls wasn’t as quick as I thought, but hey, I am keeping my promise. Look closely: this is how you use the Relict,” Xia said with a savage, predatory grin on his face.

Yahiro finally realized, then. There was an odd stone embedded in the back of his right hand, the one he held the gun with. A crimson gem, like a blood clot.

“Vanish, monsters,” Xia said as he pulled the trigger.

In that moment, a storm enveloped his whole body. The air swirled around him before getting sucked into the bizarre handgun. The gun turned red from the compressed atmospheric pressure—it absorbed that much densely packed air.

Then Xia pointed the handgun at the Moujuu herd crossing the walls.

With a thunderous roar, he fired a bullet of compressed air that turned into a hypersonic shock wave. An invisible blade struck the Moujuu.

A dozen spectral beasts were torn apart in the blink of an eye before falling to pieces outside the wall.

Yahiro and Iroha gulped in awe at the tremendous sight.

“This power...is a Regalia’s?!” Yahiro exclaimed hoarsely.

He knew the attack Xia had launched. That supersonic shock wave. It was

Douji Yamase's—Ira's Regalia.

“The Lazaruses aren't the only ones who can use the Regalia,” Xia said while showing off the gem on the back of his hand. “With this Relict Regalia, any human can. And we cannot wait for you to die and leave us a new treasure, Lazarus and dragon medium.”

Xia turned his back on them, immediately losing all interest. He left leisurely to exterminate the remaining Moujuu in the fortress while Yahiro and Iroha watched in silence.



Ayaho Sashou was woken by frantic announcements and incessant sirens.

She sat up, feeling a bit dizzy. The fatigue and slight fever would not leave her body. She was told it had to be mental exhaustion, and so she'd stayed in bed for the last few days. It was convenient for her that way. She wouldn't have to see Yahiro and Iroha together so long as she stayed cooped up.

It hurt her to see those two get along. She was becoming aware of her feelings for Yahiro, not that she was jealous of Iroha or wanted to fight her for him. She realized those two were meant to be.

Still, she couldn't accept it that easily. Maybe telling him her feelings would solve things, but she lacked the courage and hated herself for it.

In any case, this was not the time to worry about that.

It sounded like fireworks outside—cannon fire. A battle was taking place. The earth shook frequently, so hard it swayed the heavy body of the armored train.

She was scared to go out, but she didn't want to die there alone.

Ayaho got off the bed and put on her shoes, still in her pajamas. She tightly gripped the crimson crystal Yahiro had left in her custody and moved to the following car with faltering steps.

The door was flung open the next moment.

"Ayaho! We're coming in!"

Two people entered from the end of the corridor. A small girl with hair dyed blond and a tall Asian man.

"Rinka...and Mr. Wei...?"

She found it a strange pairing at first, but soon she realized it was not that weird.

For Yang Wei, a Galerie operator, to be guarding Rinka, meant that not even the armored train was safe. The Yáo Guāng Xīng had gotten itself into a dangerous situation while she was in bed.

“Thank goodness you’re awake, Ayaho.”

“What happened, Rinka...?” She asked her sister two years her junior, trying to keep the anxiety away from her expression.

Then Wei cut in. No time for detailed explanations, it seemed.

“Sorry, but move to the briefing room in the third car, now. We’re under attack by Moujuu.”

“...Moujuu?” Ayaho gave him a look of confusion.

After years of living with Iroha, she couldn’t grasp the danger of the situation right away.

Yet Wei mistook her confusion for fear. He put on a cool smile and shook his head gently to put her at ease.

“Oh, don’t worry. They’re not actually after us. It’s just that you’ll be safer in a better-armored car. Just in case.”

“Okay. Um... Thank you, too, for coming, Rinka.” Ayaho smiled weakly.

Then Rinka took her hand and pulled her over to the third car. This was the operator’s standby room as well as the briefing room—the second-most secure car after the command center in car number two.

Iroha’s siblings were supposed to stay in this car until the Moujuu attack ended, with Wei guarding them, but he was not in the best condition, still wounded after his fight with the Fafnir soldier in Yokohama.

“Don’t worry. We’ve got Iroha on our side,” Rinka said cheerfully, concerned about Ayaho’s silence.

“Is she outside, fighting?” Ayaho looked out the window.

The Moujuu had already gotten inside the station. She could see soldiers, in uniforms she had never seen before, fighting back desperately.

The Galerie operators were also there, protecting the Yáo Guāng Xīng. It wouldn’t be strange for Iroha, dragon medium, to be in the middle of the fight.

“Not really fighting. She’s trying to talk with the Moujuu like usual. She’ll be fine. Yahiro’s with her,” Rinka replied, full of confidence.



“Yahiro’s...with...” Ayaho stopped when his name was casually brought up.

Even in this moment, they were together. And Ayako could only watch from afar, for she lacked the power to stand by their side. The fact shook her to her core.

“Um, Mr. Wei, who are they...?” Rinka asked with surprise, looking away from Ayaho’s face.

Soldiers with strange equipment charged against the Moujuu herd entering the station. They carried oddly big and distorted handguns that still looked incapable of dealing with the giant Moujuu.

Ayaho was shocked to see what happened next.

The Moujuu melted down like mud upon being shot.

The Moujuu herd was frozen over by a surge of cold air fired from the gun.

The soldiers’ astounding powers mowed down the giant beasts.

Ayaho watched, at a loss for words.

The soldiers fought in a style similar to Yahiro’s—facing the spectral beasts with their frail human bodies—but they fought even better than he did. They were trained soldiers, and they did not hesitate to massacre the Moujuu.

“The Relict Regalia...?!” Wei muttered as he saw the stones embedded in the back of the soldiers’ hands.

“Relict...Regalia...?” Ayaho subconsciously repeated the words.

Then her heart pounded harder. She felt something with tremendous pressure flow across her body. The crimson shard she unconsciously still held in her right hand began burning.

“Ow?! ”

“Ayaho?! ”

Rinka noticed Ayaho crouching and approached her with concern.

Ayaho shoved her away and ran in the opposite direction. She instinctively feared she would drag her into whatever was about to happen if she stayed there.

Rinka was frozen in shock as a steel-blue blade projected toward her face.

Thorns sharp like blades pierced through the walls and floor of the Yáo Guāng Xīng. Endless blades grew all over like quartz pillars in a limestone cave.

“That crystal...! Why is Vanagloria’s Regalia showing up here?!” Wei stared in disbelief at the crystal in Ayaho’s hand.

The crimson crystal glowed so brightly they could not look directly at it, all the while it let out a shrill vibrating sound that shook the glass all around. The vibration extended to the blades inside the Yáo Guāng Xīng and the armored train itself.

“Is it resonating with the CFA’s Relict Regalia?!” Wei ground his teeth as he surmised the cause of the phenomenon.

The crimson crystal Yahiro had left in Ayaho’s hands had been dormant up to that point, indistinguishable from a regular rock. But now it appeared to be awakening under the influence of other Relict Regalia activating nearby.

“Who...are you?” Ayaho asked the strong presence she felt from the crystal.

It did not reply. Instead, something hot flowed into her body.

“Th-this isn’t good.” Wei grimaced with desperation as he shielded a terrified Rinka behind his back.

The armored train’s floor and walls morphed around Ayaho. Saber Hills and Blade Groves was the name of this Regalia. The mountain dragon could freely manipulate metal refined from minerals and create blades for both attack and defense.

Ayaho, however, could not control it. In fact, her fear only made the power go berserk. At this rate, not only Wei and Rinka, but everyone else on the train would be harmed.

“U... Waaaah!” Ayaho screamed, crystal in hand.

Immediately, a tremendous amount of dragon aura oozed from her body.

“Argh!” Wei drew his handgun.

The most surefire way of stopping the crystal’s rampage was to get rid of its

owner—kill Ayaho.

But could he really kill the girl under the protection of Vanagloria's power with just a handgun?

Despite the hesitation, Wei pointed the gun at Ayaho's forehead.

Then, before he could pull the trigger, someone grabbed his gun from the side.

"Stay back, Galerie Berith."

"Auguste Nathan...?!" Wei frowned as he looked up at the man.

Nathan paid him no heed and walked up to the anguished Ayaho.

The crystal acted in self-preservation and shot a barrage of blades at him. He brushed them aside with his bare hand.

The shrill sound of steel breaking pierced their eardrums as Ayaho's defenseless form was revealed.

"...!"

Ayaho looked up with fear, and Nathan gave her a calm smile.

The next moment, she slammed into the floor. Nathan had swept her legs out from under her without moving a finger and knocked her unconscious.

Rinka screamed at the sight of the heartless act, and even Wei, who had been intent on shooting her dead, winced. Nathan ignored them as he walked over to Ayaho's limp body in silence.

"Who would've thought you'd be compatible with the Relict Regalia..." Nathan sighed.

As he looked at her, he noticed the crimson crystal was no longer in Ayaho's hands. In its place was a tattoo on her arm: an eerie, scarlet pattern like the marks of a dragon's claws.

Miyabi Maisaka sat in the cabin of a black military chopper.

Nina Himekawa and Hisaki Minato accompanied her. They had saved her from Acedia's medium, Sumika Kiyotaki, and her Lazarus, Zen Sagara's, pursuit. They were now heading west.

As expected of a Ganzheit craft, despite the crude exterior, the cabin was luxurious and comfortable. It had thick, cozy seats and was surprisingly soundproof for a helicopter. There was also a large display at the front, which at that moment showed a white-haired old man wearing a frock coat.

*"Looks like you got the job done, Nina."*

His hoarse voice came through the speakers.

Nina nodded and waved amicably at the camera on top of the display.

*"I diiid... We got Maisaka saaafe and sooound."*

*"Thank you. Douji Yamase died without leaving a Relict Regalia behind. We couldn't lose Ira's medium like this."*

*"Hee-hee, I knooow. And I'm hoping for a gooood reward."*

*"We'll try to live up to your expectations."*

The old man nodded solemnly while Nina maintained her usual expression.

Hisaki remained beside her in silence.

The old man silently observed them, his gray eyes showing no emotion.

*"Although you would have come in contact with Miyabi Maisaka even without our request. Am I wrong?"*

*"Maybe so, since she is one of us. But you helped out with the chopper!"*

*"...I see. You're as smart as they say, Nina Himekawa."*

*"Don't worry. My wish won't get in the way of your goals. Maaaybe."* Nina smiled.

The old man beyond the screen kept his expression unchanged.

*"Let's hope so, Luxuria's medium."*

He gave Miyabi one glance before cutting off the call. The display went dark and silence returned to the soundproof cabin.

“...That was Alfred Salas, from the Salas Foundation, wasn’t it? I believe he’s CERG’s board chairman,” Miyabi asked Nina once the call ended.

Nina turned to look at her and narrowed her eyes.

“Yes. He’s a descendant of merchants of death—people who amassed fortune by selling bombs in past wars.”

“Sounds like you don’t like your employer.” Miyabi smiled wryly at the woman’s ruthless description.

CERG—the European Organization for Graviton Research—was Nina’s patron. It was thanks to Alfred Salas that she, as a Japanese person, could live freely in her country now. And they pushed work on her in return, such as picking Miyabi up.

“But it’s fine. Now I know why you saved me. Salas couldn’t be closer to the core of Ganzheit.”

“You sure know a lot... You’re not a journalist for nothing, I suppose.” Nina’s eyes widened in admiration.

However, Miyabi knew the flattery was empty. Ganzheit’s composition was top secret, but once you got inside the organization, it was not that hard to look into. Especially when you had the title of dragon medium.

“Should we really have left Zen Sagara and Sumika Kiyotaki behind?” Miyabi asked as she looked back.

After she neutralized them with the gas, Nina didn’t try to take them along. Miyabi found it strange that she would leave them on the abandoned building’s rooftop.

“I was not ordered to capture them,” she said cheerfully. “And to be honest, I can’t actually handle their powers. I can neutralize them like you saw, but killing them’s another thing entirely. All the Lazaruses are way too tough.”

“Yes... I know.” Miyabi chuckled and shrugged.

Zen Sagara came back after being thrown into a Ploutonion, and Yahiro Narusawa turned himself back into a human after being halfway transformed into a dragon. Killing a Lazarus under protection of their dragon medium was

not easy, even with the power of another dragon medium.

“I must say I’m surprised. I pegged you as more arrogant and egocentric, Nina Himekawa,” Miyabi said provocatively as she pulled her hair up.

Hisaki frowned immediately; he could not stand hearing Nina get criticized.

Nina herself, on the other hand, shook her head without a care.

“You’re not that wrong. I didn’t save you for Salas’s sake, but mine, you see.”

“What do you mean? Salas also implied the same thing...” Miyabi got on the defensive.

Nina smiled but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“There’s something I want to confirm, and I won’t let you go until I can hear it.”

“How scary. I don’t think there’s anything I could tell you that you don’t already know.”

“But there iiis... Something only you can tell us, because you are the oldest of the dragon mediums we know about. I’m twenty-two, by the way.” Nina made two V-signs and shoved them in Miyabi’s face.

The boastful gesture irritated her.

“...You sure you’re not looking for a fight?”

“I am most definitely not.” Nina shook her head, offended.

Miyabi sighed. “What do you want to know?”

“Let’s seeee... How abouuut you tell us where you were nine years ago?”

“...Nine years ago?” Miyabi blinked at the random topic.

“Yes. Five years before the J-nocide. Around the time Sui Narusawa and Iroha Mamana were seven or eight. I doubt they’ve forgotten everything, but I imagine their memories are hazy.” Nina peered into Miyabi’s eyes. “Us, though, we can remember clearly.”

“Nina Himekawa... What are you...?” Miyabi felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.



Nine years prior, Nina Himekawa was already thirteen. And Miyabi was seventeen.

Naturally, she vividly remembered what happened to her that day. What happened in the world before then.

“Would you mind telling me about what you remember of the previous world, Ms. Miyabi Maisaka?” Nina asked in a serious tone.

A heavy silence filled the cabin.

The jet-black chopper continued its flight westward as the dusk dyed the sky bloodred.

## Act 2 Sleepless Night

### 1

The Chinese Federal Army's Relict squad, led by Jiguan Xia, repelled the Moujuu attacking Nagoya Station Fortress in less than an hour.

They drove back over two hundred Moujuu, most of them unilaterally massacred. Over two hundred Moujuufied humans had lost their lives.

Yahiro and Iroha could only watch, aghast.

Then, as they returned to the Yáo Guāng Xīng, battered by their powerlessness, they were informed of Ayaho's condition.

"Ayaho!" Iroha ran into the armored train in distress.

Nathan, Wei, and a very pale Rinka stood in the narrow corridor in front of the sleeping car. Ayaho lay on the floor in her pajamas as Giuli and Rosé, well-versed in medical technology, checked on her.

"Ayaho... Is Ayaho okay?" Iroha's voice trembled as she asked Wei, the closest to her.

"Shh, keep quiet." He brought his index finger up to his lips with a smile. "Don't worry, she's only sleeping. She's not hurt."

"R-really...?" Iroha muttered, all tension leaving her body, before hugging Rinka, who was trembling.

Yahiro entered the corridor a moment later and frowned at the scene.

Countless steel blades resembling crystals grew all over the inside of the car. The Yáo Guāng Xīng's armor and frame had morphed into blades.

"This...is Amaha's Regalia. Why...?" Yahiro's face contorted in confusion.

It was Vanagloria's Saber Hills and Blade Groves. He immediately recognized

her power to control minerals. But she, Amaha Kamikita, was no longer in this world. Lazarus Toru Natazuka killed her.

“Ayaho Sashou did it. She’s compatible with Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia,” Nathan responded.

“Ayaho did this...?” Iroha whispered in disbelief.

Rinka, still in Iroha’s arms, nodded weakly, communicating that she’d seen Ayaho use the Regalia.

“Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia? You mean the crystal Amaha left behind?” Yahiro asked, getting a bad feeling.

“The crystal Amaha Kamikita left behind... You are on the right track, yes,” Nathan said, his expression unchanged.

“Why did Ayaho have it?” Iroha looked suspiciously at Yahiro.

Pained by regret, he replied, “I gave it to her a while back. She said she’d sew a bag for it.”

“Oh... Yeah, she’s handy like that,” Iroha said before sighing.

She had no intention of blaming Yahiro for embroiling Ayaho in this. No one could have predicted that crystal would cause such a disaster.

“Did you know that the crystal was this dangerous, Rosé? Giuli?”

“We realized it would be dangerous, but we figured the probability of Ayaho Sashou being compatible with the Regalia would be nil.”

“Honestly, we weren’t expecting this, either. We only just found out the CFA’s using the Relict Regalia in real combat, too. I think that’s what made Vanagloria’s activate.”

Rosé and Giuli shrugged. It was unusual for them, but they both seemed to regret how things turned out. They felt guilty about not explaining the risks of the Relict Regalia sooner.

“What is this Relict Regalia? How is it different from the Regalia you mentioned before?”

“They’re the same. It’s only a matter of whether you treat it as a piece of art

or use it as a weapon,” Giuli replied.

“A weapon...?”

“Don’t act like you don’t understand. With proper use, a Regalia can be the most powerful weapon on the battlefield. It’s just that nobody believed it, until four years ago.”

“The J-nocide...”

“Yeah. Everyone realized when that dragon emerged. In order to fight an enemy that goes beyond the laws of physics, you need a weapon that breaks the laws of physics.”

Yahiro grimaced while Giuli gave him a beautiful smile.

“There are legends all around the world about dragon corpses retaining magical power, or someone retrieving a supernatural weapon the hero used to slay the dragon; and this includes Japan. Even if most of the stories are made up, there is a sliver of truth mixed in.”

“That’s...why?” Yahiro glared at Giuli with eyes flaring in rage. “The armies of the world are stationed in Japan because they might find these ‘Relict Regalias’?! They’re here looking for weapons?!”

“At the very least, the CFA is. Indeed, they’ve already gotten their hands on a couple of them.”

“...!” Yahiro was at a loss for words; Giuli admitted it too easily.

The CFA saw the Relict Regalia as nothing but weapons. They were in Japan to obtain them—they had no interest in the dragon mediums, the Lazaruses, or the restoration of Japan.

“Um...so going back to Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia, where is it now?” Iroha asked.

Rinka shivered in fear and Wei heaved a heavy sigh.

“Uh... Mr. Wei?”

“Sorry. Yahiro, look at Ayaho’s right hand.”

“O-okay.”

Yahiro felt Iroha's glare on him as he crouched beside Ayaho, like she was asking, *why him?* He gently grabbed the sleeping girl's right hand and gasped.

Ayaho had a strange pattern tattooed from the back of her hand all the way to her elbow.

"Amaha's... Vanagloria's crystal...is...," Iroha muttered, aghast.

The moment Yahiro touched it, the scarlet dragon claw scar tattoo glowed, and then Ayaho regained consciousness.

## 2

Ayaho slowly opened her eyes, breathing heavily as though waking from a nightmare.

Iroha jumped to hug her upon seeing Ayaho's frightened expression.

"Ayaho... Thank goodness! Are you okay?"

"Huh...? Iroha? What was I...?" Ayaho muttered in confusion.

She noticed Rinka's and Wei's eyes on her and then saw the metallic crystal blades growing from the walls and floor. Finally, she looked down at her own right wrist.

"This mark..."

"Erm, I—I think it looks pretty cool. Like a trendy tattoo!" Iroha said, flustered.

Yahiro sighed at the poor attempt to cheer Ayaho up before he kneeled by her side.

"Sorry... It's my fault for leaving it with you..." He bowed his head.

"Oh, no... It's not... I was curious about the stone the whole time, so it's my fault..." Ayaho weakly shook her head.

Then she touched the mark on her right arm. The surface of the dragon claw scar pattern was soft and glossy like a polished gem. Despite the hard, stiff impression, she could move her arm just fine. Iroha's description of it as a tattoo wasn't that far off the mark.

“So I can’t remove this?” Ayaho murmured, her eyes fluttering anxiously.

Rosé replied succinctly, “We’ll have to look into it. It’s our first time seeing an awakened Relict Regalia.”

“Relict Regalia...” Ayaho repeated the word that came out of Rosé’s mouth.

“It’s not harmful to her, is it?” Iroha looked at Rosé with worry.

Rosé kept quiet, reinforcing what she just said about them not having the data. Then Nathan cut in.

“At the very least, the Relict should have no effect on the host’s health.”

“R-really?”

“Yes. Depending on the conditions, it could even be beneficial for her body.”

“Beneficial?”

“How do you know that?” Yahiro butted in; he found Nathan’s confidence suspicious.

Nathan smiled placidly as he loosened his necktie and unbuttoned his collar.

“Because I am also a Deserver—compatible with the Relict.”

“...What?”

Nathan exposed his muscular chest, revealing a mark that extended from his heart to his left shoulder, with a design similar to Ayaho’s: a scarlet dragon claw. At the center of it was a piece of crimson crystal.

“Did you not find it strange that I could use the same powers as Superbia’s medium despite not receiving Sui Narusawa’s blessing, Yahiro Narusawa?” Nathan shot him a probing glare.

The repelling barrier by the name of Chibiki-no-Iwa. The pure-white Goreclad. The reason behind Nathan’s usage of Superbia’s powers had been unclear up to then. The mystery was now solved: he was a Relict Deserver.

“My father was a naturalized Japanese citizen before I was born; he worked as the chief priest of a small shrine in Kansai. The object of worship there was a bronze mirror. The treasure embedded in me, this Regalia, is that mirror.”



Nathan touched his left shoulder.

“Upon taking this Relict...or rather, upon the Relict taking *me* in, a Ganzheit agent immediately made contact. This happened nine years ago.”

“That’s...no coincidence, is it?” Rosé pointed out.

Nathan nodded inexpressively.

“I doubt it. I must have been monitored. Or the mirror was, more likely.”

“It was because of that Relict Regalia that you were appointed to guard Sui?” Yahiro scowled.

Upon reuniting with her after four years, Yahiro had tried to kill Sui, but Nathan stopped him with the Relict’s power. He could still vividly remember the disappointment and humiliation of that day.

“It’s convenient, having Superbia’s powers to control her. I suppose she calls me brother to spite you, though.” Nathan formed a smile of pity.

Iroha stared at the mark on his shoulder with a furrowed brow.

“So you can’t get rid of that? I—I mean, not to say that it looks bad on you... I really think it looks cool.”

“I doubt it. There’s no point trying to take it off forcefully in the first place.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Although this is only a supposition at the moment, we believe the Relict is a kind of creature. Something like a living organism.”

“It’s...an organism?” Iroha’s eyes grew round.

Yahiro was just as confused. From the look and feel of it, the Relict Regalia seemed no different from a treasure like a crystal or a pearl. He couldn’t believe it was actually an organism.

Nathan, however, continued explaining without pause.

“Once prokaryotes, through evolution they chose the path to parasitize other creatures’ cells and become part of their host. Endosymbiosis.”

“So they are like organelles—like mitochondria?” Rosé asked with interest.

While Yahiro couldn't understand half the words the man had said, it seemed she could make sense of the explanation.

"Yes. We call this organelle the dragon factor. And you are the host of this dragon factor, Iroha Mamana."

"M-me...?" Iroha pointed at herself in surprise.

Rosé's eyes narrowed.

"You mean the dragon mediums have the dragon factor in their cells?"

"Yes, though we don't know if it's congenital or if someone implanted it into you after," Nathan affirmed.

"B-but Rosé said I have a normal human body like anyone else." Iroha looked at her with confusion.

Rosé closed her eyes in thought.

"Yes. At the genetic level, your body and Yahiro's are the same as any regular human's. However..."

"Your mitochondria has independent DNA different from you, the host," Giuli added.

"Seriously?!" Iroha looked at the twins in disbelief.

Giuli and Rosé nodded at the same time.

They had a human body while also having organelles with non-human DNA. When explained by the presence of the dragon factor parasite, it made sense that Iroha would have normal genes while being able to use those special powers.

The ancient eukaryotes took in the mitochondria to achieve an overpowering evolution like never seen before. From primitive lifeforms only drifting in the sea, they became able to move by their own will and obtained the power to prey on others.

That being the case, by taking in the new organelles—the dragon factor—it made sense that the humans would achieve the supernatural powers of the Regalia.

“If this dragon factor Nathan is talking about mimicked normal mitochondria, it would be hard to tell the difference unless we analyzed it specifically for that purpose. Or well, if the dragon factor’s role is a spiritual one, then I would have to wonder if biochemical genetic analysis could work in the first place...”

“Your reasoning is correct, Rosetta Berith,” Nathan praised her. “It is impossible to confirm the presence of the dragon factor unless the dragon medium is activating her powers. And to further add, the Ichor is what we call a dragon medium’s bodily fluids with the dragon factor in an active state.”

“Is it also because of that dragon factor that a human bathing in the dragon medium’s blood turns into a Lazarus?”

Yahiro raised his head immediately upon hearing Giuli’s nonchalant question.

Nathan looked him in the eye and nodded.

“Yes. By taking in a dragon medium’s dragon factor, one becomes a Lazarus and attains immortality. When it leaves the medium’s body, it morphs and loses its infectiousness, instead giving its host supernatural regenerative capabilities... or so we hypothesize.”

“The dragon factor...” Yahiro subconsciously looked down at the palm of his hand.

It all fit together when thinking the dragon factor was the source of his strange Lazarus powers—the near-immortal regeneration and the armor of blood he called the Goreclad. It also explained the death slumber that followed a great deal of blood loss, it being the interval for his body to replenish the necessary dragon factor.

“Could it be that the Relict Regalia also has this dragon factor in it?” Yahiro asked as he looked at Ayaho’s right hand again.

Nathan fixed his shirt’s collar while nodding.

“The Relict is created from the medium’s Ichor, so naturally it should. In fact, I would go so far as to say the Relict Regalia itself is the dragon factor.”

“So Chiruka’s dragon factor is now in Ayaho’s body?” Iroha asked while holding Ayaho’s shoulder.

Ayaho looked down in silence. A natural response. Chiruka Misaki was famous, but Ayaho had never exchanged words with her.

“So that’s why Vanagloria’s Regalia activated. And now that the dragon factor is inside Ayaho’s body, there’s no point in trying to take the crystal off,” Yahiro said with a grimace.

Ayaho was infected with the dragon factor because Yahiro left the Relict Regalia with her. He couldn’t help but feel responsible.

The only saving grace was that Ayaho accepted the reality calmly. Probably because her sister Iroha also had the dragon factor, he thought.

“No point taking the Relict off a Deserver. Do the CFA realize this?” Giuli asked Nathan in an unusually serious tone.

Nathan held his chin in thought.

“They should, considering they’re using it as a weapon. It wouldn’t surprise me if their research is deeper than Ganzheit’s.”

“Mmm, that’s unfortunate.” Giuli pouted as she crossed her arms behind her head.

“Why?” Yahiro shot her a puzzled glance.

Giuli shook her head. “You forgot? The CFA wants us to give them Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia in exchange for letting us go through Nagoya.”

“Ah...”

“We were thinking about giving it to them if it’d save us the trouble, but a Relict without a Deserver is useless...”

“To think we had a Deserver right under our noses.” Rosé sighed.

“Yeah. Wow.” Giuli shrugged with an awkward smile.

“What if the CFA finds out about Ayaho?” Iroha asked with worry.

Giuli responded as though it was not her problem, “Well, obviously, they’d ask us to hand her over. A Relict without its Deserver is just a rock, but if they can get it *and* her, they can add her to their forces right away.”

“Wha?! Not happening! We’re not selling Ayaho off!” Iroha screamed as she

hugged Ayaho tight.

Rinka, behind them, also shook her head vigorously, pale in the face.

“Well, that depends on what deal we strike with them,” Rosé said while looking out the window.

Her eyes were set on the CFA officials approaching the Yáo Guāng Xīng, Deputy Commander Jiguan Xia among them. They were looking to restart the negotiations paused by the Moujuu attack.

“Iroha...” Ayaho grabbed her hand, trembling; frightened after hearing the CFA asked for the Relict Regalia.

“Don’t worry, we will protect you. Right, Yahiro?” Iroha smiled boldly, no shred of insecurity in her voice.

“Right,” Yahiro said succinctly while subconsciously putting a hand on his *uchigatana*.

Jiguan Xia noticed Yahiro’s glare and smiled jubilantly.

### 3

A few minutes later, Yahiro and the twins faced the CFA representatives in the Yáo Guāng Xīng dining room.

Seated at the negotiations table were Giuli and Rosé, plus Yahiro who was there as bodyguard.

On the opposite side were four CFA representatives: two administrative officials, Deputy Commander Jiguan Xia, and a pudgy middle-aged man called Chief Executive Zeming Hou—head of the Nagoya Special Administrative Region of the Chinese Federation.

“Hey. We meet again, Lazarus,” Xia amicably called out to Yahiro the moment they entered the dining hall.

He was not carrying the giant handgun now, but he looked just as imposing as on the battlefield. He reached out to Yahiro for a handshake.

“Jig... *Shangxiao* Jiguan Xia.”

“Drop the title, not like you’re my subordinate or anything. Just call me Xia.”

“The name’s Yahiro Narusawa,” he said while responding to the handshake.

Xia’s big hand felt too hard. Yahiro’s expression stiffened as he noticed the scarlet tattoo-like mark on his right hand.

“The Relict Regalia...”

“So you noticed.” Xia bared his canines with a smile. “The Chinese Federation has collected fifteen Relicts in this country. Six of them are basically useless, but the remaining nine are still active. Those two administrative officials are Deservers, too.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Just laying the power dynamics out on the table. Letting you know that we could blow this whole train apart if we wanted to. You may be okay even then, Lazarus, but what about the rest of the crew?”

Shivers ran down Yahiro’s spine as Xia said all that nonchalantly.

Xia’s threat was not empty. He would act upon it without hesitation if he found it necessary.

“That said, we’re not outlaws. We’ll follow the treaty. Leave Vanagloria’s Relict and go. Even the treaty recognizes our right to ask for compensation for transit through our territory.”

“...That’s enough, *Shangxiao* Xia.” Zeming Hou put a stop to the high-handed negotiations. “I don’t remember giving you the right to negotiate with foreign civilians. Much less when it’s the House of Berith’s girls—Ganzheit members—we’re talking about here.”

“My apologies, Chief. I am just not fond of roundabout discussion like you politicians,” Xia added cynically before backing off.

Although the garrison’s deputy commander and chief executive were in different lines of command publicly, the head of the Special Administrative Region took priority.

“You know about Ganzheit, Chief Executive Hou? Perhaps expected, considering your background in the Federation’s Ministry of Commerce. That

reminds me, a big technology corporation strongly recommended you for your post as head of the Nagoya SAR, correct?”

“Ho-ho, you’ve done your research, Galerie Berith. I’m impressed. I am fortunate to have my achievements recognized not only by the people, but also by the federal congress. Managing the Nagoya SAR has gone quite smoothly thanks to them.”

Rosé and the Chief Executive cordially greeted each other while Yahiro sighed.

It all sounded amicable on the surface, but, in reality, Rosé was suggesting Hou was guilty of corruption, while Hou responded that it didn’t matter because he had the Federal Congress backing him up. The negotiations were already getting fierce despite the roundaboutness.

In reaction to that, Xia snorted. His expression showed he found it all ridiculous.

“I brought coffee!” An out-of-place voice cut through the tension.

Yahiro immediately broke into a coughing fit. Iroha had changed into an apron dress and was bringing them drinks.

It was easy to imagine why she would do that. She needed a way to be present during the negotiations, no matter what, to protect Ayaho.

The Chief Executive was taken aback for a moment, but his face immediately lit up as he smiled at Iroha. “Ho-ho... To think I would have coffee served by a dragon medium. This is the kind of thing that makes life worth living. I had no idea the girl who controlled hundreds of Moujuu in Yokohama was this adorable.”

“You heard that, Yahiro? I’m adorable!”

“...Didn’t you notice the sarcasm in his comment?” Yahiro whispered in her ear.

“The what?!” Iroha was shocked.

“Ho-ho, oh no, I didn’t mean to sound sarcastic. Although, you weren’t able to repel the Moujuu attacking the Nagoya Station Fortress with your powers, were you?”



“Well, no, not really...,” Iroha mumbled awkwardly.

Apparently, reports of what she did during the attack had already reached his ears.

“Now you understand the reason why the Chinese Federation built this giant fortress. We did not turn Nagoya Station into this just for show or intimidation. Humanity would not have been able to settle here without these walls.”



Hou justified their actions with overly dramatic language. He was a politician after all, and used to this kind of speech.

“We’re not occupying this land because we want to, but well, we can’t go against the homeland’s orders. Being a soldier or functionary is not easy.”

“I feel you, Chief,” Giuli said casually while sipping some coffee Iroha had brought.

“Ho-ho. Thank you, Ms. Berith. Whatever the initial motive was, we were stationed here, and ended up protecting Nagoya’s railway facilities, you understand. But maintaining them is not easy for the Federation.”

“So it’s only natural that you would ask for compensation from those who make use of them. We would love to pay you properly, but the circumstances just won’t allow for it.”

“That’s surprising to hear. I heard you were not looking to obtain Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia when it fell into your hands. Is that wrong?” Hou gave Giuli a look of suspicion.

Giuli shook her head with an awkward smile.

“That is true of the Relict, but the problem is the Deserver.”

“The Deserver?!” Xia roared, standing suddenly.

If it weren’t for the table between them, he would have grabbed Giuli by the collar.

“...You don’t seem to be lying. What a surprise. To think you would find the Relict Regalia’s Deserver in such a short time...” Hou clearly found it ironic.

The value of a Relict with a Deserver jumped exponentially, as it went from simple research subject to powerful weapon.

Galerie Berith, being an arms dealer, couldn’t hand it out just like that. By stating the Relict had a Deserver, Giuli was essentially saying that she would not give it to the CFA.

“Yeah, so we can’t meet your request. We would really appreciate it if you could just let us through this once.”

“Tsk...” Xia clicked his tongue at Giuli’s demand.

The air in the car creaked at that moment.

The Nagoya Station Fortress was the CFA’s base; they had the upper hand. That said, the Galerie had a dragon medium and her Lazarus. Victory wasn’t certain if things turned into an all-out war. The only certainty was that even the victor would not remain unscathed.

“I see. That’s a problem.” Hou wiped away the sweat on his forehead.

He put on an intrepid act, but he was more timid than he let on. It was hard to picture him stopping Jiguan Xia when he inevitably went on a rampage.

Xia and Giuli glared at each other in silence from either side of the table.

Apron-dressed Iroha broke the heavy mood.

“Um, excuse me, may I ask a question?”

“Yes, of course,” Hou replied, a little more relaxed than before.

Iroha nodded in satisfaction before putting on a weirdly serious expression.

“Why are the Moujuu attacking this place?”

“That, we don’t know. You would have to ask the Moujuu.”

“But they’ve been attacking for a long time, so long that you had to build these walls, right? There’s gotta be a reason!” Iroha placed her hands on the table as she leaned forward.

Hou leaned backward, overwhelmed by her energy.

“And are you going to investigate the cause, Miss Dragon Mediu—?”

“Yes,” Iroha answered before Hou could even finish his question.

Yahiro looked at her with surprise. Rosé furrowed her brow, too. They knew what she had in mind, but they weren’t expecting her to say that.

“If we find out why they’re attacking, we can prevent it. So? How about we give you that instead of the Relict Regalia?”

“...I see, that’s a very tempting proposition,” Hou said, taken aback.

Surprisingly, Xia didn’t look annoyed by it. In fact, his shoulders were shaking

with mirth, his face cast down.

“But how exactly will you look into it?” Hou asked after clearing his throat.

Iroha wore a bold smile, as though saying, *Glad you asked!*

“That many Moujuu attacking means that there’s a colony nearby.”

“Sounds logical.”

“We’ll go there and take a look.”

“Wha...?” Hou was paralyzed with confusion.

The Moujuu were incredibly territorial creatures. Invading their colony would mean an all-out attack. Even a battalion would have trouble conquering one. There was no way just a girl could get inside and come out unharmed.

“Are you insane?” Even Xia looked at her like he’d just seen a ghost.

Still, Iroha puffed her chest.

“I’m very sane, thank you very much. If it doesn’t look like we can make it, we’ll just run back here.”

“Now that’s something... This woman is off her goddam rocker.” Xia sighed before cackling. “Chief, I’m going with them. They’ll need someone to confirm their findings.”

“Mmhmm, if you say so... But Galerie Berith, are you sure about this?” Hou could not hide the bewilderment on his face.

Giuli and Rosé looked at each other for a moment before nodding simultaneously.

“I would’ve preferred to solve this with money...”

“But we accept. We cannot hand over Vanagloria’s Relict Deserver.”

“...Fine. The Chinese Federation accepts the dragon medium’s suggestion. But I have two conditions.”

“Conditions? Are you coming with us too, Chief?” Iroha asked with a grin.

Hou grimaced in disgust.

“No way in hell! My first condition is that we take no responsibility if you

incur damages during this mission. Do not blame us, no matter which of you dies!”

“Oh...that’s it?” Iroha’s shoulders slumped; she was sincerely disappointed.

Xia laughed out loud at her reaction.

Hou sighed before continuing.

“The second is, if you find another Relict Regalia during this investigation, you must immediately hand it over to the Chinese Federation.”

“Quite the convenient deal for you,” Giuli softly opposed.

Hou did not let up. “We’re letting you do this in exchange for not giving us Vanagloria’s, to begin with. Wouldn’t you say it’s only fair that you hand over any new Relict you may find?”

“Uh... I don’t know...” Giuli insisted.

Either way, she didn’t seem seriously intent on fighting him over it. If anything, she was only provoking him to see how he reacted.

“Understood. I will draft a contract with the terms.” Rosé closed the deal before Giuli’s leg-pulling went too far.

Iroha nodded in satisfaction. She looked even more boastful than usual for having her plan accepted. Felt like she had fulfilled her promise to protect Ayaho.

“Are we heading out tomorrow, Dragon Medium?” Xia asked.

Iroha nodded fearlessly. Galerie Berith was the one being made to wait. They had to get this over with as soon as possible to continue to their real objective. No reason to stay around for long.

“Yes. Will you show us the way to the colony, Mr. Xia?”

“All right. I can help you with that,” he said generously.

Then he glared at Yahiro with a mix of disappointment and pity.

“Let’s hope you get a decent look on your face by tomorrow, Lazarus. Don’t want you shaking in your boots at the sight of the beasts again.”

“Ugh...” Yahiro gritted his teeth; it felt as though the man could read his mind. Iroha stared at them with a pensive look on her face.

## 4

“...Blaze!”

Yahiro engulfed the *uchigatana*’s blade in flames before swinging it down at the metallic crystal blades.

The purifying flames destroyed the metallic crystals in a flash, making them crumble into a million pieces like sand.

Yahiro breathed a sigh of relief. It was hard activating the Regalia without the heat of battle or even any opponent to fight, but after a few tries, he’d done it.

“Thanks, Yahiro, Iroha. Now we can do some emergency repairs,” Giuli said and slapped Yahiro’s back as he sheathed his sword.

“Thank goodness! We couldn’t have those hazards around.” Iroha smiled weakly.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng’s fourth car was badly damaged by Vanagloria’s Regalia, Saber Hills and Blade Groves; they would have to fix it before thinking about running the train. The twins gently pressured Yahiro and Iroha to get rid of the metallic crystal blades so repairs could begin. The two of them, feeling responsible for Ayaho becoming a Relict Deserver, couldn’t say no, and doing it took some weight off their shoulders.

“Iroha!” Ayaho called out as Iroha headed to the lounge for a break.

“Huh, Ayaho? You’re fine walking around now?” she asked her sailor-uniform-clad little sister.

She was already in poor health and now she had the psychological shock of being a Relict Deserver. Rosé, too, said she should rest for a while.

“Is it true you’re going to the Moujuu’s nest?”

Ayaho did not answer Iroha’s question; instead, she asked another one with a serious expression on her face.

Iroha and Yahiro looked at each other. They hadn't yet announced the deal with Xia—not even the Galerie's operators should have known yet.

“Um, yes, it's true. Who told you?”

“Well, the kids...” Ayaho turned around.

Her gaze was directed at her younger siblings. Kyouta, in particular, looked away guiltily.

“Kyoutaaa! You were eavesdropping?!”

“No, I was just following orders! Honoka said a detective should always be on the lookout for intel!”

“You little rat! Don't tell her that!”

“A traitor. The worst of the worst.”

“It was you who told Aya to begin with, Kiri!”

The trio of nine-year-olds began arguing with each other.

Iroha placed a hand on her hip and watched for a while, before giving up with a sigh.

“Haaah... Okay, it's fine. You would've found out tomorrow, either way.”

“But Iroha... Why do something that dangerous? Is it my fault? Because I was compatible with that stone?” Ayaho looked up at her anxiously.

Just as they felt bad about dragging Ayaho into this mess, she also felt guilty about getting the Relict for herself.

“No, it's not,” Iroha plainly refuted it. “I won't say you're entirely unrelated, but that's not it. I just can't leave the Moujuu be.”

“...The Moujuu?”

“You know that they're the Japanese people we thought were extinct, right?”

“Ah...” Ayaho's eyes grew wide.

Iroha nodded.

“If they attack this place again, more people will die, on both sides. We have to find out why they're attacking before that happens again.”



“But...you’ll be in danger...,” Ayaho muttered weakly, eyes downcast; Iroha could barely hear her.

“We’ll be fine. We’ve got Nuemaru on our side. Ah, and Yahiro, too.” She hugged Ayaho and gently caressed her head.

Ayaho did not resist.

“Leave this in your sister’s hands, okay?” Iroha whispered into her ear.

“Okay.” Ayaho nodded.

Yahiro tried to leave out of consideration, but after just a few steps, he stopped as he felt eyes on him. He looked up to find a tall Black man watching. Nathan had been standing by the lounge car’s entrance, waiting for a chance to speak.

“Are you fine with this? We’ll be making the Heavenly Imperial princess wait,” Yahiro spoke before Nathan could open his mouth.

Considering how he showed up everywhere, Yahiro figured he already knew about the deal with the CFA.

“We cannot reach Kyoto without going through the Nagoya Station Fortress. Now that we couldn’t hand over Vanagloria’s Relict, Iroha Mamana’s plan is the second-best choice,” Nathan said calmly.

Not only did he know about the deal, he even knew it was Iroha who suggested going to the colony.

“Of course, Lady Karura will be impatient waiting for you, but she’s already waited for four years. Another three or four days are nothing.”

“I guess.” Yahiro chuckled.

The man’s response was drier than expected. Yahiro thought he was infatuated with Karura, considering he’d betray Ganzheit for her sake, but perhaps that wasn’t the case.

“Do you know why the Moujuu are attacking the city?”

“Unfortunately, I lack the knowledge. Ganzheit does not monitor the international armies’ movements. Ganzheit’s policy with them is giving them

the Relicts in exchange for keeping their hands away from the dragon mediums.” Nathan shook his head curtly.

The dragons had tremendous influence upon the Relicts’ emergence, but they were full of mysteries. Meanwhile, the Relict Regalia and their Deservers were easy to understand and control.

Ganzheit obsessed over the former, while the armies of the world prioritized the latter. That way, they were able to collaborate instead of fight.

In other words, Ganzheit was uninterested in the Relict Regalia.

“But if I may offer speculation, I have an idea of what might be a cause,” Nathan said just as disappointment was showing on Yahiro’s face.

“What is it?”

“The Moujuu are coming from south of the fortress.”

“Yeah.”

“South of Nagoya Station...there is an old shrine.”

“A shrine?”

“Hikami-jingu. It enshrines the divine instrument the hero Susanoo obtained after slaying the dragon Yamata no Orochi—the Divine Sword Kusanagi, a Regalia handed down the generations of the Heavenly Imperial House.”

“A Regalia of the Heavenly Imperial House? Is it also a Relict Regalia?” Yahiro’s eyes widened.

He knew about the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi. It was a divine sword collected from the remains of a dragon—the most famous regalia in Japan.

“I can’t say for sure, since I have never seen it. But it would not be unthinkable to say that there is a Relict in the Moujuu’s colony that is exerting influence on the surroundings, would it?”

“I guess... So that’s why the CFA chief gave us that condition.”

Chief Executive Hou must have known about the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi from the very beginning, but was unable to send someone to the colony. That’s why he immediately set the condition that they’d hand over any Relict Regalia when

Iroha suggested going there.

“Will taking that divine sword away from the Moujuu nest stop them from attacking the city?” Yahiro asked Nathan with hope.

If the Moujuu were attacking the Nagoya Station Fortress because of the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi’s influence, then solving the issue was easy: just take the divine sword away from them. Even if it meant handing the Relict over to the Chinese Federation, the quick solution was welcome for Yahiro’s side.

Nathan shook his head.

“I wonder. I don’t think it would be that easy to take the divine sword out of the Moujuu colony.”

“Because Iroha’s power doesn’t work on the Moujuu here?”

“That too, but what I’m uncertain of is you, Yahiro Narusawa. Will you be able to fight the Moujuu when they refuse your intrusion?”

“What do you mean?”

“I am asking whether you can kill the Moujuu now that you know they’re Japanese people.”

Yahiro reeled under Nathan’s glare.

Kill the Moujuu. Physically achieving it was not difficult for him, not with his Lazarus condition, let alone the use of the Regalia. But it meant killing a Japanese person. Nathan questioned whether the young man was ready for what that entailed.

“How about waiting for Sui Narusawa to wake up? She could drive the Moujuu away with her Regalia without having to kill them.”

“You want me to ask for Sui’s help? The very same person who turned all those people into Moujuu?” Yahiro glared daggers at him.

Nathan kept his face blank as he ignored the hostility.

“I won’t force you. I’d also rather we finish this quickly before Sui Narusawa wakes up. Who knows when that’ll be?”

“I’ve already killed countless Moujuu. Adding another hundred or two to that

pile changes nothing,” Yahiro muttered, his voice hollow as he tried to convince himself.

“I see. Let’s hope that statement is not just a bluff,” Nathan said before turning his back on the young man.

Yahiro punched the wall of the car, his shoulders shaking as he was left alone.

## 5

After dinner and a strategy meeting for the investigation that would occur the next day, Yahiro did his daily practice of swinging his sword for one hour. Then he had showered and was now heading back to his room.

Because he was a Lazarus, he had been given the privilege of having a private, if small, room inside the armored train. It was also a security measure so no operators would be harmed if his Regalia rampaged while he was asleep.

It was kind of like quarantine, but he found it comfortable, especially on nights like this when he would rather be left alone with his thoughts.

And yet, the moment he opened the door, he froze. Iroha was sitting on his tiny bed, wearing her streaming outfit.

“Hey, Yahiro. I was just wrapping up preparations,” she said, as if her presence there was normal.

Yahiro put his hand to his forehead. He had no idea what was going on.

“Why are you dressed like that? Waon’s account was deleted, right?”

“Don’t remind me... Aw, my archive...” She winced.

*So she hasn’t gotten her account back. Which means she isn’t wearing that to stream?*

“I made a new account, but you need permissions to stream. I gotta upload regular videos first and get some subscribers.”

“You’re still gonna keep it up?”

“Of course! There might be other Japanese survivors out there waiting for my streams, like you.”

“Yeah.” He gave her an awkward smile.

Iroha’s supposition wasn’t entirely unfounded, but she sure was a positive person. It was one of her greatest strengths. Indeed, it was her streams that had saved Yahiro once.

“Okay, so I got that, but why are you in my room?”

“I told you, preparing to get back to streaming.”

“...Preparing how?”

“I can’t just repeat the same things I’ve been doing now that I’ve made a new account. There’s new stuff I wanna try, and I was hoping you’d help me practice,” she said, weirdly serious.

“Practice what?” He stared back at her cautiously; it was obvious she was plotting something, but he couldn’t imagine what.

“Please, sit down first,” she replied while slapping the spot next to her on the bed.

The current situation—being all alone with a girl in skimpy cosplay in such a tiny room—had Yahiro conflicted. However, she would only annoy him if he let her know he was overly conscious of her, particularly when she didn’t seem to mind at all.

“First of all, that’s my bed.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now then, lie down.”

“Huh? Wait...!”

Iroha pulled him closer as soon as he sat down. Taken by surprise, he couldn’t resist. He was now lying sideways with his head cushioned on her thighs.

Not only did Iroha not mind, she held him down with both hands to keep him there. Yahiro’s confusion only grew.

“...What’re we practicing?”

“Ta-dah! This is ASMR.”

With dramatic motion, she produced a thin strip of bamboo with a white cotton ball on one end. Yahiro grimaced. He had a bad feeling about this.

“ASMR? This just looks like you’ll be cleaning my ear...”

“I’ll be recording my stimulating voice while replicating ear-cleaning noises, using a mic that recreates what it sounds like to the human ear. I’ve always wanted to do this.”

“Then shouldn’t you be practicing with the actual mic?”

“Binaural mics are expensive and fragile, and it was difficult to find one in the ruins of the 23 Wards. But you...you can get hurt a little, no problem.”

“Are you kidding me?!”

He couldn’t stand being used for her silly projects. Yahiro pushed himself up and away from her lap to run, but...

“Bad boy.”

“Whoa...!”

She blew air into his ear, making him shudder. He got goose bumps all over and his body went limp.

Iroha did not waste the chance and began fondling his earlobe.

“How’s it feel, Yahiro? Nice?”

“No, it’s just ticklish. Why’re you even touching me there?”

“Okay, then how about here...?”

“Weren’t you going to clean my ear?”

“I will. So, feeling ticklish?”

“I don’t think this is cleaning my ear.”

“It’s not?” Iroha giggled, but then actually began the ear cleaning.

Yahiro gave up and left himself in Iroha’s clumsy hands. Although she didn’t seem to mind, Yahiro couldn’t help but feel conscious of her bare thighs against his cheek. Not to mention her chest would sometimes brush the back of his head. It only paralyzed him further.

“Hey, Yahiro,” she whispered into his ear.

“What?”

“How did it feel when Sui almost turned you into a dragon?”

“...In one word, awful. I don’t even want to think about it.” He frowned and sighed.

Sui’s objective in collaborating with Douji Yamase to trap Yahiro was repeating the J-nocide. She used his body to try and summon Superbia.

Yahiro turned into the dragon’s vessel, nearly lost his consciousness, and became a rampaging monster.

It was only thanks to fortunate timing that he avoided completely transforming into a dragon.

In the past, Yahiro had met Iroha just before bathing in Sui’s blood and becoming a Lazarus. Iroha’s blood saved him from near death.

It happened four years ago, and Iroha probably did not remember, but without that, he would be a complete dragon by now, bringing disaster on a worldwide scale.

“Did you think you would rather die?”

“Yeah,” Yahiro replied frankly to Iroha’s gentle question.

Yahiro was immortal, so being turned into a dragon seemed like suffering beyond imagination.

More than anything, he dreaded having his mind contaminated by rage and hatred as it turned into something unbearable. He had never cursed his immortality more than in that moment.

“Would you have resented me if I had killed you then?” she asked softly.

Yahiro denied it without hesitation, “If anything, I would’ve thanked you for freeing me.”

“I see,” she whispered sadly. “You see, they’re the same, too.”

“...You mean the Moujuu?”

“Yeah.” Iroha nodded before caressing his hair. “They’re in a sea of anger, hatred, suffering, and confusion... Negative emotions only. Nuemaru’s different, though. The guys who lived with us in the 23 Wards, too...I hope.”

“I see.” Yahiro closed his eyes and smiled.

Iroha did not discriminate between Moujuu and humans. She loved and cared for them just like family, which was why they did as she said—because she saved their morphed souls.

Yahiro understood how the Moujuu felt.

“I’m sure they don’t want to harm anybody. They would rather die than kill, but they can’t stop themselves.”

“...Iroha?” He called her name as he noticed her voice trembling.

Iroha hugged him, then.

“So you don’t have to carry all the pain by yourself. Not to say that everyone will feel the same, but I’m sure at least some of them were grateful to you.”

“But I—” Yahiro gulped down the words just before they could come out: *I didn’t want to kill anyone.*

“First of all, that power is something I gave you. If you have any sin to bear, then I deserve to carry half of it.” She raised her head and smiled gently.

She was charming enough as is, but that expression captured his gaze. It was the face of that streamer who kept him from despair for four lonely years from beyond the screen.

“Iroha.”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember where you were just before the J-nocide?” he asked, a serious look on his face all of a sudden.

Iroha blinked in surprise.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because maybe...we’ve met before,” he quietly replied.

Yahiro remembered when he was draconized, and then when he was about to die after Sui stabbed him, it was Iroha who saved him. His use of Avaritia’s Regalia was proof of that.



But the girl he'd met back then was like an entirely different person. He wanted to confirm whether she remembered that.

Opposite to Yahiro's expectations, Iroha blushed for some reason.

"Um, is that...your way of confessing your love to me?"

"No."

"That was quick!"

"It's okay if you don't remember. Forget I mentioned it."

"How am I supposed to take that?!" She pouted, feeling like someone was playing a prank on her. She continued quietly cleaning his ear. He only heard her sigh and the soft sound of scraping.

They said ASMR had a sleep-inducing effect, and sure enough, he was getting weirdly sleepy.

"Hey, Yahiro," she whispered into his ear again.

"What now?"

"Hee-hee. Nothing. Good night."

She said nothing more after that. Soon, she stopped moving altogether, and Yahiro began hearing her gentle snoring.

"You're the one who fell asleep?"

Yahiro stood up with a sigh while Iroha slumped over on the bed.

He stared at her sleeping like a log—on his bed.

## 6

The next morning, Yahiro woke up in the lounge car. Since Iroha took over his bed, he had to sleep on the lounge's hard bench.

Even a Lazarus got a stiff back, tight shoulders, and a crick in the neck if they slept in an uncomfortable position. But despite his discomfort, he woke up in a good mood. For the first time in a while, he'd slept without nightmares.

"Morning, Yahiro. You look refreshed." Giuli grinned when he arrived at the

briefing room.

“I hear you had fun last night,” Rosé said flatly, her face even more inexpressive than usual.

“I was just getting dragged into Iroha’s silly projects. No fun was had,” he scowled.

The elder twin smirked and the younger one smiled, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes.

Not even five minutes passed before the room got crowded.

Main operators Josh, Wei, Paola Resente, and others arrived, as did Auguste Nathan, Captain Aldiss, Iroha, and Ayaho.

“Well then, let’s begin our meeting. Everyone’s heard the situation. We’ve taken an investigation request in place of the toll. We’re gonna infiltrate the Moujuu colony south of the Nagoya Station Fortress and look into why they’ve been acting strangely. Nothing out of the ordinary for a PMC.”

Giuli explained while munching on a sandwich. She spoke casually like always, but the matter at hand was serious.

“Problem is...Iroha’s powers don’t seem to work on the Moujuu around here. So, we’ll send as few people as possible and just run the moment things get hairy. It’s gonna be Yahiro and Iroha, of course, as well as me and Paola’s unit.”

“You’re coming with us?” Yahiro raised his head in confusion.

Despite her looks, Giuli was the leader of Galerie Berith’s Far East branch. He saw no reason why she would have to risk herself by going into a Moujuu colony.

Yet Giuli puffed out her chest as if the reason was obvious.

“We’ll need someone to make decisions on the fly there. We talked about whether it should be me or Rosy, but in the end, we decided it should be me since we’re fighting Moujuu. Or did you want Rosy to go instead?”

“I must stay behind since the people left here need a commander to deal with the Chinese Federation. Yahiro, listen well... You mustn’t let Giuli get into any danger!” Rosé glared daggers at him.

Yahiro nodded shakily. The twins were very close, but Rosé's fixation on Giuli went beyond sane levels. Who knew how she would get revenge on him if he let Giuli get hurt.

"I'll be fine! You're such a worrywart." Giuli laughed and shrugged.

For whatever reason, Iroha nodded confidently.

"Don't worry, we have Nuemaru with us. So you can rest easy, too, Yahiro."

"Yeah... You may not be of much help, but that furball sure is reliable."

"Wha?! Why?! You wouldn't have Nuemaru without me, for starters!" Iroha raised her eyebrows indignantly.

She was as mysteriously self-assured as always. Even the white Moujuu in her arms seemed baffled.

"The Princess and Iroha aside, I would worry about Ayaho instead," Josh said seriously after finishing off the milk he'd been drinking.

"Me...?" Ayaho's back straightened when she heard her name.

Josh nodded brusquely.

"Wei and I are staying in the Yáo Guāng Xīng, and that's usually more than enough, but the CFA's got that Relict squad."

"You mean they might go after Ayaho?" Wei asked calmly.

"Whaaa?" Iroha's eyes grew wide.

The rest of the operators also frowned. The one with the biggest grimace was Captain Aldiss, who worried that the Yáo Guāng Xīng would become a battlefield.

"We can't dismiss the possibility." Giuli agreed with Josh. "We do have Ganzheit backing us up, but who knows how useful they'll be as deterrence when it comes to Relicts. So, here."

She took something out of her hoodie's pocket and handed it to Ayaho. It was wrapped in a cloth bag, long and thin, about the size of a military flashlight.

Ayaho received it and widened her eyes at the weight of it. She opened it to find a sheath painted black.

“Is this...a short sword?”

“A *kaiken*, rather than a *tanto*. Its name is Shinshukaku. Just consider it a sort of protective charm. It is a national treasure, though, so don’t lose it.”

“A-a national treasure?!” Ayaho nearly dropped the *kaiken* before frantically hugging it to her chest.

“You do not need any special tool to activate the Regalia, but holding a weapon or charm in your hand makes it somewhat easier. I believe it has something to do with psychology,” Rosé explained.

“You shouldn’t rely entirely on it, but hey, use it until you get used to it,” Giuli added.

Iroha had been listening in astonishment, but now she stood up, fuming.

“Wait a second! You wanna make her fight?!”

“No, we do not consider her part of our forces. However, if she gets attacked by soldiers with Relicts, we won’t be enough to protect her.”

“Indeed. Better she has a way to fend for herself just in case, don’t you think?” Wei muttered, eyes closed.

His failure to protect Ayaho from the Fafnir soldier in Yokohama came to mind. His expression had a tinge of regret.

“You know Vanagloria’s power, don’t you, Iroha?” Rosé asked.

“Well, yeah... I do...” Iroha mumbled.

Still, she didn’t feel good about dragging Ayaho into the fight.

Ayaho stared at Iroha’s glum expression before glancing over at Yahiro. Then, with a resolute look on her face, she gripped the short sword tightly.

“I’ll be fine, Iroha.”

“Huh?” Iroha turned around.

Ayaho looked her in the eye and said, “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

Iroha blinked in confusion at how assertive her usually timid little sister was being. Then she smiled softly.

“All right, Ayaho. Take care of Rinka and the rest.”

Ayaho nodded in response.

Nathan watched the sisters’ exchange with a look of interest.

## Act 3 Backstabbing

### 1

Jiguan Xia and his subordinates waited for Yahiro's group in the underground railyard of the Nagoya Station Fortress. They had two armored trucks ready, but not many soldiers—only seven, including Xia. Although their job was only showing Galerie Berith the way, there weren't enough people to head into a Moujuu colony.

"You're here, Lazarus! Just in time." Xia wore a look of relief as he saw them approach.

Yahiro was surprised by the man's reaction. *So even he gets nervous*, he thought.

"This is everyone coming from your side? Quite the sad party, wouldn't you say?" Giuli teased.

Xia only laughed boastfully.

"Never fear. They all have Relicts. We can't take people that will only get in the way into Moujuu territory. Although...there is an exception. Two exceptions, actually."

"Exceptions?" Giuli tilted her head.

Xia scratched his head and appeared to be embarrassed.

The next moment, a young soldier paused while checking the truck and yelled: "Waon!"

"Wh-what did you just say?!"

A big, bald man threw his wrench aside, stood up, and sprinted over to them. The young guy who yelled first followed close behind.

"Wha...?" Iroha mumbled. Nuemaru was cradled in her arms.

She froze in confusion at the soldiers' intense reactions.

The two men stopped in front of her and looked up to the heavens as if praising God.

"She's—she's real... The real Waon is right before my eyes...!"

"She's tridimensional! She moves in three dimensions...!"

The two soldiers hugged each other tightly, so elated they could cry.

"Um... Wh-who are you...?" Iroha asked as she took one step back.

The soldiers came back to their senses, schooled their expressions and straightened their backs to salute her.

"Excuse us. We're your fans, Waon."

"We discovered you thanks to Yamadou's channel and felt the hand of fate at work."

"We looked into the dragon mediums and became obsessed... We despaired at the news of your account being deleted, but to think we would get to meet you in real life!"

"We have all your videos saved and backed up, so rest easy! HA-HA-HA! Waooon!"

The androgynous young soldier and the brawny skinhead took turns speaking.

"Oh, r-really? Ah-ha-ha-ha..."

Iroha was uncharacteristically overwhelmed by their excited chatter. She could only force a smile and let their joy wash over her.

Xia sighed as he gave a sidelong glance to his subordinates' conversation with the dragon medium.

"So? The plan is to investigate why the Moujuu attacked the fortress, but do you have any leads?"

"First, we wanna go to Hikami-jingu. Care to show us the way?" Giuli cheerfully answered Xia's question.

Xia stared back at her, stiff with surprise.

“Are you insane? That’s the deepest part of the colony—the biggest danger zone.”

“And that’s why it’s worth looking into it, don’t you think?”

“Yup, you’re insane.” Xia sighed, but then sported a competitive grin.

He adjusted his evaluation of the Galerie and decided to be more wary of them once he realized Iroha was not bluffing about going to the core of the colony.

“All right. I’ll lend you a truck and a driver. Follow me,” Xia said while pointing at the armored trucks, which were all ready to go.

The Galerie operators boarded one after the other.

Yahiro and Iroha tried to follow, but Xia stepped forward to block their way. He smiled defiantly as Yahiro frowned.

“You’re coming with me, Lazarus and Dragon Medium. Not to say you’re hostages, but I need to keep an eye on you two menaces.” Xia pointed at another armored truck with his chin.

The truck, labeled 201, was the command car he was taking.

Yahiro and Iroha had no reason to say no, so they did as indicated.

The only one making a fuss out of it was a CFA soldier.

“W-Waon is getting on my truck...! Fuwooooh...!” The bald one’s nostrils swelled as he let out a cry of victory.

Iroha stopped in the middle of getting on the back of the truck, a strained smile plastered on her face.

“Sorry about them. They’re not incompetent soldiers, I promise.” Even Xia was embarrassed, holding his forehead as he excused them.

“O-oh, no... I’m sorry my fans are causing you a headache... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha,” Iroha laughed dryly.

Yahiro sighed as he got on the armored truck.

So began their exploration of the Moujuu colony.



The Moujuu colony was over four miles from the Nagoya Station Fortress. A ten-minute trip by train before the J-nocide, but the catastrophe caused by the dragon and the Moujuu after that left the surrounding area in terrible condition. The paths were closed off by fallen buildings and collapsed roads, leaving no vestiges of what the modern city was in times of peace.

“This is awful...,” Yahiro muttered, wincing at the bumps and jolts as the truck crossing the rubble.

The road was in such bad shape that the truck couldn’t get any speed. They could only travel a hundred feet before having to stop and move obstacles, then rinse and repeat.

It was so bad Yahiro even thought the 23 Wards were in better shape.

“Our armored troops have been ruthless with the Moujuu,” Xia said. He observed the destruction caused by cannonball pits without a shred of regret, his lips curving up.

The Chinese Federal Army had been shooting indiscriminately, turning their surroundings into ash in order to exterminate the Moujuu from their territory. These apocalyptic ruins were the result of that—of the CFA prioritizing their occupancy of the land over Japanese cultural assets.

“I heard that way too many people died, but in exchange, the Chinese Federation got that fortress. Our country is the only one that has been able to drive away the Moujuu, despite the losses, and build a base on their territory. But well, maybe that’s why they hate us,” Xia said with pride.

Iroha didn’t believe that was the case. She bit her lip and furrowed her brow in protest.

“Mmm... I don’t think they’d attack the city because of that. The guys that got into the station were acting a little weird...”

“Yeah, they did feel different from the Moujuu in the 23 Wards,” Yahiro agreed.

A far greater number of Moujuu lived in the 23 Wards than in Nagoya, but they never acted in herds. It was unthinkable that they would attack a human base in groups to take revenge for their fallen brethren.

The only exception was when they were manipulated by a higher being, such as the dragons. And finding a clue like that was the purpose of this investigation.

“Wait a second. Mr. Xia, stop the car.”

“What...?”

Iroha, sitting on the provisional troop seat, suddenly raised her hand. Nuemaru was growling where he sat on her knees, and his ears began twitching.

“Moujuu...!” Xia’s expression turned grim as he looked out the window.

Around fourteen or fifteen Moujuu surrounded the truck. A couple of them were Grade II or over. The driver stopped the truck immediately—breaking through was impossible.

Xia’s subordinates on the back of the truck began preparing their weapons: Relict Deserver equipment. Big, crude handguns similar to the one Xia used.

Relict users could easily take care of a dozen Moujuu. Xia was clearly intent on doing just that.

But right before the truck came to a complete halt, Iroha jumped off of it.

“Hey, wait! What’re you thinking, Dragon Medium?!” Xia yelled at her.

Xia drew his sword and started to follow her, but Yahiro stopped him before he could get out of the truck. Yahiro raised his *uchigatana* at the man, still sheathed. Xia glared at him with bloodshot eyes, and Yahiro returned the glare.

“Don’t get in Iroha’s way, Jiguan Xia.”

“...Now that’s a good look on your face, Lazarus. It’s like you’re a different person from yesterday.” Xia laughed heartily while pointing the gun at Yahiro’s chest.

Yahiro kept the katana up. Iroha was already right in front of the Moujuu, by herself. She would be in greater danger if Xia tried to attack.

“*Shangxiao* Xia...!” a Relict soldier shouted in a panic.

Then they realized the number of Moujuu surrounding them had grown.

There were over thirty of them in sight. More had to be on the way there.

“They’re swarming the place. Escaping this many won’t be easy. What now, Lazarus?”

“We don’t know if they’ll attack yet,” Yahiro responded calmly to Xia’s aggressive question.

“What...?” Xia raised an eyebrow.

Then the Moujuu’s roars echoed throughout the ruined city.

The giant beast facing Iroha let out a battle cry, and Nuemaru in her arms howled in return. The entire Moujuu herd followed with their own roars.

“Tsk!” Xia pointed his gun at them again the moment the bellowing shook the air.

He froze in place, his finger on the trigger. He was paralyzed by the sight of Iroha, surrounded by Moujuu, waving at them with a smile on her face.

Iroha walked over to Yahiro, dozens of Moujuu trailing behind her.

Xia and his soldiers could only stare in astonishment.

“We’re back. I talked to them. They’re gonna show us the way to their nest,” Iroha said as she pointed at one of the Moujuu behind her.

It was over six or seven meters tall, its silhouette that of an elephant with a shell. It was a specimen so huge it could pulverize one of the CFA’s armored trucks with one stomp.

“You *talked* to them? You made a deal or something?” Xia asked in confusion.

Iroha put her hand to her cheek, wondering how to explain it.

“We didn’t make a deal, per se, they just understood that we’re friends.”

“...Insanity. Your woman is insane, man,” he said to Yahiro with a sigh.

*I know.* The Lazarus shrugged.

Iroha’s absurd behavior when it came to Moujuu was nothing new. Yahiro’s allies was used to it at this point, and it still caught them off guard—Xia’s people had to be losing their minds.

Yet...

“Wooh! You did it! You’re amazing, Waon!”

The bald soldier got off the truck and knelt on the ground, overcome with emotion as he showered her with praise and worship. Iroha, expecting the overly dramatic reaction at this point, puffed out her chest with pride.

“I know, right? Hee-hee! Praise me more!”

“Waoon! I will follow you to the end of the world! Hail! Hail! Hail! Hail!”

“Hee-hee-hee, thank you, thank you.”

Iroha did a bizarre dance to the beat of the soldier’s clapping.

The rest of the soldiers stared in bewilderment while Xia shook his head with disgust.

“Tsk... I’m surrounded by idiots...”

“But hey, we’re not under attack. For now, at least,” Yahiro pointed out as he put down his blade.

Xia frowned in annoyance, but did not argue.

“Yeah. The power to tame Moujuu... But it’s not quite a power, is it? So said that woman.”

“What woman?” Yahiro narrowed his eyes with suspicion at Xia’s comment.

Xia chuckled as he realized his slip of the tongue. He kept the wariness unconcealed in his expression as he glanced suggestively at Iroha.

“Nothing. It’s just that I made the right decision coming here with you.”

## 2

“It appears the dragon medium and her Lazarus are headed to the Moujuu’s nest,” a man said merrily as he breathed in the fragrance of the coffee just brought to him.

He was an Asian man in his midthirties.

He had an intellectual air about him, yet looked younger than his actual age.

He wore no ostentatious accessories, but his suit and leather shoes were obviously high quality.

Giuli or Rosé would have guessed his identity right away, were they present. This young billionaire had adorned the covers of finance *and* world news magazines.

Chinese entrepreneur Liu Ryland—founder of Melora Electronics, one of the biggest IT companies in the world.

“Should we have let them go, Ryland?” Chief Executive Zeming Hou asked, his eyes wandering anxiously.

They were in the chief executive’s office, on the top floor of the SAR government office building inside the Nagoya Station Fortress.

Despite Hou being the master of the room, it was Liu Ryland, his guest, who seemed more relaxed. He felt at home because of Melora’s generous donations to Zeming Hou, as well as their sponsorship of the fortress’s construction.

“Don’t worry, Chief. It was the dragon medium who suggested investigating the Moujuu, wasn’t it? There is no reason for us to stop them.”

“That is true, but...,” Hou stammered.

He showed no surprise at Liu Ryland’s knowledge of the details of their negotiations with the Galerie. Everyone knew that Deputy Commander Jiguan Xia and the Relict Deservers basically worked for Melora; it was likely they had leaked the news to him.

“Do you think Galerie Berith might find the reason behind the Moujuu attacks, Chief?” Liu Ryland asked after taking a joyous sip of coffee.

Hou nodded with a bitter expression. “We can’t deny the possibility.”

“Indeed. But we can let *Shangxiao* Xia take care of things if it comes to that.”

“You mean Deputy Commander Xia might kill the dragon medium? B-but wouldn’t we be making enemies of Ganzheit?”

“If it worries you that much, you should have let the Galerie’s train through. You still have time to do just that, in fact,” Liu Ryland pointed out with an impish smile.

Iroha Mamana was only heading to the Moujuu colony because the Chinese Federation asked Galerie Berith for their Relict Regalia. Hou could do away with the request and the Galerie would have no reason to go there anymore.

Yet, he shook his head with a pained expression.

“No... I cannot do that. Losing a precious Relict goes against our homeland’s will.”

“We feel the same, Chief.” Liu smiled very softly, and just as wickedly. “If Ganzheit’s involvement is what you fear, then fear not. I called a helper just for that.”

“A helper?”

“Yes. Who better to take care of a dragon medium than another dragon medium? Ganzheit will have no reason to be upset, then. Leave it in our hands, if worse comes to worst,” Liu said, full of confidence as he gazed at the station building below.

Inside it was Melora’s own armored train, T(or Tau)-Bullet, as well as Galerie Berith’s.

“Can you really win?” Hou pressed.

Liu smiled coolly. “Of course. We’re lucky to have the Lazarus, the Galerie’s biggest player, away from their armored train. There will be no unnecessary deaths that way.”

“And the dragon medium? You saw that monster’s powers in Yokohama.”

“You fear that Iroha Mamana will work together with the Moujuu?”

“Naturally.”

“That is why the Relict squad is there, isn’t it?”

“Mmm...” Zeming Hou couldn’t argue against his strong rebuttal.

“Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia... I cannot wait. Perhaps it, newly born, will be able to wake *that* up,” Liu Ryland said to himself as he looked out the window again.

At the other end of his gaze was a strange building in the center of the

Nagoya Station Fortress. A cube-shaped building without windows, reminiscent of cutting-edge semiconductor factories, linked to a giant power plant. It endlessly exuded a crimson, blood-like smoke.

### 3

“Liu Ryland? Who’s that, Lady?” Josh Keegan asked Rosé while munching on sunflower seeds in the Yáo Guāng Xīng’s lounge car.

“Melora Electronics’ CEO. I don’t know his full history, but I hear he holds great power in the Chinese Federal Congress. His net worth is sixty billion dollars. One of the wealthiest people in the world,” explained Rosé. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder party dress and Rinka was doing her hair.

Her stiff, beautiful looks made her resemble a doll in the first place, but now that she was dressed up, her charm was far beyond that of any regular actress or model. Rinka looked to be having the time of her life, too.

“The owner of that armored train beside us? That’s who wants to meet you?” Josh snorted while glancing at the letter on the desk.

The envelope was sealed and embossed like an old-fashioned invitation.

“It seems he’s invited me for a tea party,” she said apathetically.

He had invited her just as Yahiro and Iroha were departing. The CEO of a huge corporation closely related to the Chinese Federation. Something was afoot.

“Does he want Ayaho’s Relict?” Rinka asked with worry as she braided Rosé’s hair.

“We can’t deny the possibility, but it doesn’t seem right. It makes sense for the army to ask for it, but why would an IT company’s top manager want it? I must look into this.”

“So that’s why you accepted the invite. Well, either way, I win, getting to see you dolled up like that,” Josh jested.

Rosé glared at him like she would an irksome mosquito.

“Unfortunately, I have no reason to turn him down. And I shouldn’t miss this

opportunity for negotiation.”

“Yeah, it’s obvious you got time on your hands, being stalled at this station. Who’re you taking as your bodyguard?”

“Wei. Your squad is staying on the Yáo Guāng Xīng to command the rest of the operators.”

“Wei, huh...?” Josh crossed his arms; Yang Wei was just coming into the lounge at that moment. “You okay? You’re not fully healed yet, are you?”

“I envy Yahiro’s powers at times like this,” Wei replied with his usual chilly expression. “But don’t worry, I can take care of Rosé. Shouldn’t be as hard as fighting a Fafnir soldier, right?”

“Right.” Josh smiled, content.

Despite his wounds, Wei was skilled enough—and in the first place, in terms of raw combat skill, Rosé herself was above anyone else in the Galerie. She also figured it was best to bring a fellow Asian to that tea party with Liu Ryland.

“It’s done, Rosé. What do you think?” Rinka finished styling Rosé’s hair and handed her a mirror.

The corners of Rosé’s lips curved up slightly, though her eyes remained inexpressive.

“You’re good at this, Rinka. I did the right thing asking you for help.”

“You think? Hee-hee...” Rinka blushed while putting away the brush and hairpins.

Rosé took off the apron protecting her outfit and stood up. Wei gave her a handgun and holster.





Rosé rolled up her party dress without no shame and bared her thigh to equip it. It was a flechette gun made of reinforced plastic that would show no reaction to metal detectors.

Her dress and accessories also concealed numerous blades and other weapons. With her superhuman skills, she would be able to take on an entire troop of the army's special forces. So long as they were regular people, that is.

"Rosé, do you mind?" a man wearing a chef's coat called out to her as she finished preparing for the tea party—Galerie Berith's cook, Shen.

"What's the matter, Ji-Hwan Shen?"

"Could you give me permission to go out? I want to get some ingredients."

"Ingredients... I see." Rosé put her hand to her mouth as she pondered his request.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng was full of military rations, but they would be lacking in fresh products if the operation were to take a long time. Now that they were stalled in Nagoya, it would be smart to procure some food.

"If you give me permission, I will bargain with the merchants. It doesn't seem like the Chinese Federation is prohibiting us from entering the markets," Shen suggested with a smile.

He had experience cooking all around the world; he was confident in his ability to hold such negotiations.

"Do you need people to carry the goods?"

"If you allow me to take a few off-duty operators, as well as young Ren."

"Iroha's brother? I see. Not bad, he won't draw eyes." Rosé nodded after a bit of thought.

Ten-year-old Ren Sumita was the oldest of Iroha's brothers. Thanks to his mature personality, he was a great help for odd jobs such as this. He would be handy for carrying the shopping.

"Very well. Let's choose who you'll take for defense, then—"

"What?! Only Ren gets to go?! Not fair!" A high-pitched voice cut off Rosé's

words.

“You idiot!”

“Stop it, Kyouta!”

Then, a clattering and rattling sound erupted, like small animals on a rampage. It came from beneath the lounge’s seats—the storage space.

Josh stood up with a chuckle and flipped the seat up. Hunkering in there was the nine-year-old trio.

“Honoka, Kyouta, and Kiri. Were you listening all along?”

“N-no... We didn’t mean to eavesdrop, we were just...playing hide-and-seek! Yeah!” Honoka, their leader, made up an excuse as she peeked out from the storage, her expression like that of a cat who was just caught in the middle of mischief.

“Oh... And who’s looking for you?” Josh asked with a grin.

Honoka looked away, unable to come up with a response.

“I’m sure the kids were just bored,” Wei said with a forced smile, trying to smooth things over.

Unlike the older siblings entrusted with jobs, there was little these three could do. The frustration led them to playing detective.

“...He’s right. We want to do something,” Honoka confessed.

Josh scratched the back of his head, at a loss.

Rosé replied in his stead, “Well, then. I will give you a mission.”

“Huh?”

“Really?!”

“Heck yeah!”

The three looked at each other in shock before holding hands and cheering.

Rinka, watching in silence, sighed with relief.

*Eavesdropping* was putting it nicely—they were just spying, and it could easily merit punishment if Rosé decided so.

“You sure, Lady?” Josh asked her, surprised.

“No problem.”

Rosé looked down at the storage.

She curved her lips in a beautiful, chilling smile, and said: “You’re good at hide-and-seek, aren’t you?”

## 4

The cargo lift came to a stop, and Ji-Hwan Shen and the Galerie operators got off. They were heading to the market inside the Nagoya Station Fortress to procure fresh foods.

No one found it strange for them to tow a cart carrying an empty wooden box. The guard at the entrance made a cursory check, but naturally, it was empty, so they set foot into the market without suspicion.

The fortress market was full of life, as expected of a place inhabited by over seventy thousand people.

The food was sent directly from the Chinese mainland. Meat, vegetables, fruit, spices, even candies and alcohol. Ren Sumita could not hide his excitement at the foreign sights.

Between looks at the market, he frequently glanced over at the luggage they towed.

The car dropped a step as the operators pulled it along, and a small yelp was heard immediately. Ren sighed anxiously at the sound.

The empty wooden box on the car rocked noisily.

“Ow...!” Kyouta let out a muffled scream inside the hot, restrictive darkness.

He had hit his head on the bottom of the box due to the drop.

“Stop moving, Kyouta. It’s cramped enough in here as it is.” Kiri elbowed him in the side.

They were inside the double-bottomed box, in a space less than half a meter tall. Impossible for an adult to fit in, but just right for the young kids.

“You feel the shock worse over here. Change places with me if you’re gonna keep complaining.”

“How? There’s a box above us.”

“Dammit...” Kyouta groaned while holding his aching head.

There was no sign of suspicion from any CFA soldiers yet, but they had to be careful. The three of them were on a top-secret mission ordered by Rosé herself.

“This biodrone is amazing, though. It’s like I’ve turned into a fairy,” Honoka sighed with excitement, a pair of VR goggles on her head.

On the screen, she saw the stalls of the market. Not from the main street that Shen and Ren walked, but from a back alley. She slipped through gaps no human could get through as she infiltrated a restricted area.

“A fairy? That’s a rat.”

“Don’t say it! I’d already forgotten!” Honoka grumbled at Kyouta’s teasing.

Honoka was controlling a biodrone Rosé gave them. A remote-controlled, hamster-shaped robot.

The station where the Yáo Guāng Xīng had stopped was under the effect of powerful signal jamming, and they could not send a drone inside the fortress from there. So, Rosé made good use of Shen’s shopping trip to send the trio along to gather intel on the inside of the fortress, a plan only possible thanks to their tiny bodies.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Honoka asked the boys while controlling the biodrone.

Kiri and Kyouta put on their own VR goggles and booted up their drones.

“No problem. I got the map memorized.”

“We just have to go to the buildings with the red marks, right?”

“Well then, hurry up. We have to be done with this before Ren’s finished shopping.”

Honoka showed the biodrone the way through a video game console-like

controller.

“Honoka, do you know what Rosé’s looking for?” Kiri asked.

“You don’t? Did you listen to her explanation?”

“I... Technically.”

“Rosé’s explanations are too abstract. Just give us the answer.” Kyouta gave up, too.

“The power plant.”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t see the huge power plant on the seaside?”

“Power plant... Oh, this?” Kyouta checked the location on the map.

“But with so many people living here, it shouldn’t be weird for them to have one,” Kiri said.

“Still, it’s too big. Too big for the population here. It even looks like the fortress was made for the power plant,” Honoka answered firmly.

“So the mystery is...where the energy is going?”

“Exactly. That’s what Rosé wants to know. And these marked buildings are connected to high-voltage lines. It doesn’t take much to make a guess.”

“Oh... Really?” Kiri said, impressed.

“...Could it be related to the Moujuu attacking the city?” Kyouta asked after a pause in an unusually serious tone.

Honoka paused, too, in surprise, before saying, “Maybe.”

“Then we might be helping Mama here.”

“Yeah... That aside, Kyouta... Your breathing’s been heavy for a while now,” she said with a teasing grin, worried about putting too much responsibility on her sibling’s shoulders.

Kyouta blushed so brightly that Honoka could see it even in the darkness.

“Wha?! N-no, it’s not! It’s just that your hair...smells nice...”

“Wha...? Perv.”

“Why?! I can’t help it in this cramped place!” Kyouta made up excuses.

Kiri sighed and brushed his long hair up.

“I don’t mind if you take a sniff. Want me to lend you my shampoo?”

“Wait, it was your hair?!”

“Shut up already, we’re gonna get found!”

“It’s not my fault!”

The trio argued childishly like always, while their biodrones ran around the fortress gathering intel.

## 5

“Whoa! A *torii*!” Iroha exclaimed upon looking at the giant, mossy shrine gate in the middle of the forest.

The wooden gate solemnly towering among the ruins definitely had a divine air about it. Yahiro was overcome by reverence at the sight of it—Galerie Berith’s operators were as well.

“So the shrine’s gotta be this way. Now that I notice, the air around here feels different,” Iroha said while bowing in prayer at the *torii*.

Jiguan Xia got off the armored truck and went past her with a look on his face that said *ridiculous*, to whisper into Yahiro’s ear: “You notice, Lazarus?”

“Yeah. There’s a Grade IV. Actually, two. Maybe more...,” Yahiro replied while glaring beyond the gate.

Grades were used to evaluate a Moujuu’s threat level in comparison to army forces.

Grade Is could be defeated by one troop. Grade IIs needed high-caliber firearms, such as autocannons. Grade IIIs were impossible to deal with without the support of a tank or armored vehicle. Nuemaru, when full-sized, was Grade III—tremendously powerful, but his defeat was still within the realm of possibility for a human.

Grade IV? Not so much. These were beings beyond the norm, immeasurable. Just one could wipe out a whole battalion. Literal monsters.

And both men could sense the gazes of Grade IV Moujuu from the depths of the forest surrounding the *torii*. Yahiro could feel it from the density of the miasma caressing his skin. He understood because he had met so many Moujuu back in the 23 Wards.

“Your medium doesn’t seem to mind, though? She okay?” Xia asked, giving Iroha a sidelong glance.

It could not be that she didn’t feel the Grade IVs’ presence, yet she passed through the gate without a care in the world, intruding on the shrine’s territory. The Moujuu’s territory, if Xia’s intel was correct.

“Don’t worry. Just make sure your men don’t get spooked and provoke the Moujuu.” Yahiro shrugged before reluctantly following Iroha.

“Oh, you’re on.” Xia glared at him with a grin, taking his words as a challenge.

Yahiro brushed off the aggression and asked, “Anyway...you’ve been here before, right, Mr. Xia?”

“Why do you figure?”

“Just looked like it. You seem used to the sight. Not to mention you noticed the Grade IVs’ presence from this distance.”

“You got good instincts, Lazarus.” Xia raised an eyebrow. “But you’re wrong. It’s not me who’s been here before.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Yahiro narrowed his eyes with suspicion.

Xia pursed his lips in an uncharacteristic display of self-deprecation and shook his head.

“Just think about it. The chief’s behavior should’ve clued you in that we’re under huge pressure from the Federation mainland. They’re impatient to get their hands on even one more Relict before any other country does.”

“Yeah.”

“You think he’d let a Relict right under the fortress’s nose go untouched?”



“I see. So you knew about the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi.”

“I hear it’s one of the country’s most famous regalia.” Xia nodded.

It all made sense. Yahiro was not well-versed in history or myth, yet he knew about the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi—no way the Chinese Federation, which was obsessed with collecting Relicts, wouldn’t. They had already sent soldiers to retrieve it.

“...But you couldn’t get farther than this?”

“No. Not us.”

The moment Yahiro crossed the *torii* behind Iroha, the trees in the forest swayed.

A giant Moujuu with the head of a lion, reminiscent of a shrine’s *komainu*, showed itself. It was well over ten meters long—one of the two Grade IVs Yahiro and Xia were wary about.

Yahiro and the rest were paralyzed by the violent pressure oozing from the creature. Even the Relict soldiers were frozen in place.

That Moujuu could turn everyone present into inert lumps of meat in the blink of an eye. They realized this, and still couldn’t move. The Grade IV monster was just too imposing.

Only one person moved. Iroha looked up at the lion-dog and amicably waved at it.

The Moujuu, upon seeing that, squinted its golden eyes before turning back into the forest. The tension in the air eased and everyone exhaled in relief.

The lion-dog Moujuu let them go.

“I see. The dragon medium and her followers have a right to cross... Just as she said,” Xia said with spite.

“Followers... That includes you?”

“I don’t think the Moujuu can tell the difference,” he answered Yahiro’s question sharply.

“Still, we can’t all go in like it’s nothing. We gotta avoid being wiped out if

anything goes wrong, right, Paola?” Giuli said as she got off the second armored truck.

Paola Resente, the silent, brown-skinned beauty beside her, realized what Giuli was requesting.

“Mhmm... Okay... Everyone, come here,” she ordered her subordinates and began putting together the heavy weaponry they brought.

Paola’s group would not cross the *torii* but build a base just outside the limits of the Moujuu territory, just in case.

“Sure, ensuring a way out is important. You guys should also move the truck back to a safe spot and stand by. We’ll need wheels to go back home,” Xia ordered his soldiers.

Their role was only showing the way, to begin with; there was no reason for them to intrude into Moujuu territory.

“Lieutenant Zhu! Lieutenant Feng! You’re coming with me.”

“Yessir!”

“Yes, sir!”

The androgynous young soldier and the big bald man ran over. Iroha’s fans.

“So you’re going with Waon, Deputy Commander?” Zhu, the young one, asked.

Xia grimaced at the name of *Waon*.

“You’re Relict Deservers, okay? And you’ll be good decoys in the worst-case scenario.”

“As harsh as ever, Deputy Commander, ha-ha!”

“It is an honor to receive this opportunity to guard the dragon medium!”

The two soldiers saluted without flinching at Xia’s “joke.”

Meanwhile, Iroha gathered the Moujuu that had followed them there, and was somehow communicating with the Moujuu using gestures. It looked like she was asking them to protect Paola and everyone remaining outside the *torii*.

“Okay guys, take care of them.” Iroha waved reluctantly at the Moujuu while going inside the forest.

Xia observed her with eyes narrowed and alert.

“Her power works even when she’s not present?”

“Yeah... Looks like it,” Yahiro answered.

Yahiro had no idea how intelligent the Moujuu were, but considering Nuemaru, they had to be at least smarter than a dog. They should be able to stay loyal to her instructions even after she left.

“Troublesome powers, the lot of them... All dragon mediums are the same...” Xia frowned blatantly, imagining what it would be like to have her as his enemy.

Yahiro reacted to his words.

“You know other dragon mediums?”

“Yeah... People traveling on railways always have to pass through the Nagoya Station Fortress,” Xia replied vaguely. Yahiro wanted to question him further, but he spoke first, “I also know about your sister, Yahiro Narusawa. She’s in your custody now, isn’t she?”

“How do you know that, Jiguan Xia?” Yahiro said in a low voice.

It hadn’t even been a week since Sui Narusawa came into Galerie Berith’s custody, and she had spent the whole time in a coma inside the Yáo Guāng Xīng’s container. A soldier of the CFA should’ve had no time to learn about her.

“How do you think? Take a guess,” he teased while turning his back on Yahiro.

Xia walked into the forest, behind Iroha. Yahiro gave up and followed, then Giuli, then Iroha’s two fans. This was the entire party entering the core of the Moujuu territory.

The forest inhabited by the Moujuu had no trace of its old existence as a shrine.

The land itself was deformed by cracks and cave-ins, and the vegetation that had grown over four years had buried the shrine itself. Still, patches of the gravel path remained, making it easier to walk across.

Yahiro and the rest advanced deeper into the colony under the gazes of hundreds of Moujuu hidden in the forest.

The intensity of the situation had Xia unusually quiet, and even his soldiers were beginning to breathe heavily. Not even the Galerie's most veteran operators would have been able to keep their sanity intact in this place. Now he realized Giuli had another reason to leave Paola and her men behind.

Among them, only Iroha and Nuemaru continued walking like normal.

After ten minutes of walking, Iroha came to a sudden halt.

"Yahiro, look!" she said with a serious expression.

Iroha pointed at where the trees ended. The ground itself was missing, only a giant pit, nearly fifteen meters wide, in its place. So deep, one could not see the bottom. A hole of pure darkness exuded a wicked aura that he had felt before. It felt just like in the heart of the 23 Wards.

"This miasma... That's a Ploutonion? What's one doing in here?"

"Wait, Yahiro. Don't you find this Ploutonion...weird?" Iroha pointed out.

Then, finally, he noticed, too. Just barely.

The density of the miasma drifting from within and the pressure coming from the bottomless darkness were the same, but this Ploutonion had something different about it from the one created by Superbia's powers. Put simply, it felt older.

The Ploutonion in the 23 Wards that triggered the J-nocide was only four years old, and yet, this one before their eyes felt decades old—maybe older.

Pieces of the hole's edge had crumbled under years of exposure to the wind and rain, and the ground around it was mossy. But most importantly, clearly man-made tombstones stood around the Ploutonion. Quite old themselves.

"It's a barrier," Giuli muttered, impressed, as she scanned the engravings on the tombstones.

""A barrier?"" Yahiro and Iroha asked at the same time.

"Yup." Giuli nodded. "A barrier cordoning off the Ploutonion so Moujuu don't

come out. And an old one, at that. It's centuries... No. A millennium or two old."

"Hold on, Giuli. This barrier's been here for over a thousand years?" Yahiro held his head in confusion. "But then, this Ploutonion's..."

"Been here for at least as long," she replied nonchalantly. "Nothing surprising, is it? If the Relict Regalia have existed for over a thousand years, then naturally, dragon mediums and Lazaruses have, too."

"A Ploutonion left by an ancient dragon...?" Yahiro groaned, his vocal cords shaking with fear.

A dragon emerging in such ancient times must have had equally catastrophic effects as the J-nocide. And not just in this country. Legends of dragons were found all around the world, as were ruins of civilizations destroyed by unknown causes.

The dragons had brought cataclysm to the world multiple times in the past. This ancient Ploutonion was proof of that.

"So now we know why Moujuu appear endlessly to attack the Nagoya Station Fortress." Giuli grinned at Jiguan Xia.

"Right. But it doesn't actually explain *why* they attack the city," he argued back, his expression unchanged.

Giuli, however, raised her eyebrows smugly.

"You can't tell?"

"What?"

"Look. The barrier's broken," she said as she touched the biggest tombstone by the Ploutonion.

The stone lay on its side, broken from its base.

"I was wondering why it didn't look like the Ploutonion was blocked off. So it's because that tombstone's broken?"

"Probably. The barrier broke two years... No, one year ago at most. Would you say that's around the time the Nagoya Station Fortress began getting attacked?"

“Nice bluff, Giulietta Berith. I can tell your deduction’s the other way around. You calculated the timeframe of this barrier-breaking by looking at the age of the scratches on the fortress walls, didn’t you?”

“Oops, cat’s out of the bag.” Giuli stuck out her tongue. “But you don’t deny it, *Shangxiao Xia*.”

“No need to deny it. We just gotta look into it,” Xia said curtly.

So they decided that the tombstone was broken about one year prior.

“Did the Moujuu in the forest break it?” Yahiro asked in confusion.

The tombstone looked sturdy, but a Grade III Moujuu could smash it with ease. He couldn’t believe the Moujuu themselves would willingly undo the seal on the Ploutonion, but it wasn’t unthinkable.

Yet Giuli denied it right away.

“No, that’s not it. A person entered these sacred grounds and broke the barrier.”

“Sacred grounds... But this place was a Moujuu colony before the seal broke, right?”

Yahiro remembered the terrible state of the ruined city of Nagoya.

Even if the attack on the Nagoya Station Fortress began only one year back, it didn’t mean there were no Moujuu around before that. In fact, the city was already the site of a fierce battle against them.

It wasn’t realistic to imagine someone crossing the zone even Relict soldiers had trouble with to enter the Moujuu colony.

“Yup. Normal humans couldn’t come here. But we could.”

“But that’s because Iroha’s with...” Yahiro gasped in the middle of his argument. “It was...a dragon medium? One of them broke the tombstone and undid the seal on the Ploutonion?”

Iroha had already proven that a dragon medium could do what was impossible for any regular human and reach the heart of a Moujuu colony.

“But why do that? What’s there for a dragon medium to gain by unsealing the

Ploutonion?” Yahiro asked Giuli, puzzled.

If there was one dragon medium out there who opened Ploutonions on purpose, it was Sui. But there was no reason for her to undo the seal of an ancient Ploutonion. She could open new ones wherever she liked.

“They didn’t *want* to break the seal. It just happened.” Giuli smiled at Yahiro’s reaction. “Just think, where is the power coming from that is closing the Ploutonion and stopping the Moujuu?”

“I get it...! The Relict...! The Relict Regalia!” Yahiro stiffened in response.

A source of power so huge it could seal off a Ploutonion opened by a dragon—if there was one, it had to be one born from the same dragon factor: the Relict Regalia. And Hikami-jingu housed the Heavenly Imperial House’s Relict Regalia of Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi. It was keeping the barrier up.

“So if the barrier’s undone...then the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi is...”

“Not here.” Giuli raised a hand to touch the broken tombstone.

Then, Iroha, who had been staring at the tombstone in silence, exclaimed.

“Yahiro! Giuli! Look at this! This mark!” she yelled while pointing at the broken tombstone’s base.

Under it was a space big enough to fit a couple of people. It was made of ashlar, reminiscent of ancient stone burial chambers. Probably the spot where the Relict Regalia had been enshrined to activate the barrier.

However, Iroha was not pointing at the inside of the stone chamber, but the damage on the roof of it, and the base for the tombstone.

The center of the giant base, several tons heavy, melted like candy.

It was not scorched by high temperatures. Nor was it corroded by a strong acid. It was melted. Liquefied.

Yahiro knew the power that caused such strange deformation. The liquefaction power was the marsh dragon’s. Luxuria’s Regalia.

“*They* opened this?” Iroha looked at him with worry.

The look in Yahiro’s eyes was grim.

“Hisaki Minato’s Regalia.”

“But why would he and Nina...?” Iroha muttered in astonishment.

Instead of answering the question, Yahiro glared at Xia.

“Jiguan Xia... You knew they had taken the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi?”

“No use hiding it.” Xia sighed quietly.

The dragon medium that reached the center of the Moujuu colony before them, that Xia knew himself, was Nina Himekawa. It must have been her, through Ganzheit, who told Xia that Galerie Berith had Sui in custody.

“So you wanted to lead us here by hinting at the Relict Regalia.” Giuli gave him a smile that oozed hostility.

Xia knew the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi was no longer there, yet he didn’t tell Galerie Berith. Not when Iroha suggested looking into why the Moujuu were attacking, nor when she found the Ploutonion.

There could only be one reason why he would do that. To make them go check whether the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi was really there. To bring them here.

“Basically. I bought enough time.” Xia smiled without remorse.

“Bought time...?” Yahiro was confused.

At first, Yahiro thought Xia wanted to stop them from reaching Kyoto, but immediately Yahiro noticed that wasn’t it.

Xia’s role was to take them away from the Nagoya Station Fortress. The Chinese Federal Army’s real aim was in the Yáo Guāng Xīng—Ayaho’s Relict Regalia.

“Even with this, we couldn’t think of another way to kill a Lazarus. Honestly, you saved me a lot of work by finding the Ploutonion yourselves.” Xia drew his handgun and pointed it at Iroha.

“Tsk...!”

“*Shangxiao?!!*”

“W-Waon...!”



Yahiro and the two CFA soldiers moved before Iroha to protect her.

Xia gave a creepy smile and pointed the gun at their feet.

The Relict embedded in his right hand glowed dazzling crimson.

“Blow off... Dàfēng!”

The shock-wave bullet fired from Xia’s handgun gouged the ground they stood on—right by the Ploutonion’s edge.

Their footing lost, they fell into the bottomless darkness of the pit alongside myriad rock pieces.

## 6

Liu Ryland welcomed Rosé at the hotel lounge inside the Nagoya Station Fortress.

This was normally the place to receive high-ranking army officials visiting the fortress; one could look at the whole of it from the viewing platform.

“It is an honor to meet you, Ms. Berith. You’re as beautiful as the rumors say.” Liu stood up from his seat and bowed gracefully.

The handsome man looked younger than his real age, and his bearing was flawless.

“Thank you for the invitation, Chairman Liu. And please, call me Rosetta.”

“And you can call me Ryli,” he responded cheerfully to Rosé’s gruff greeting.

Rosé took a seat as an undoubtedly luxurious teacup was placed before her and amber-colored tea was poured into it. The sweet scent of ripe fruit wafted about.

“These are good tea leaves, Chairman Liu.”

“I am glad to hear you like it.” Liu shook his head with a forced smile as Rosé ignored his request to call him by a nickname. “Have you heard of Melora Electronics before?”

“Yes, of course. It’s one of the biggest IT corporations in the world, covering

everything from semiconductors and industrial robots to game consoles. Everyone in the financial world knows about how you grew it from a five-employee venture to this scale in under fifteen years.”

“I admit I feel bashful hearing about it like that so directly.” Liu smiled at Rosé’s flat praise.

“But why would such a successful man be here in this tiny, ruined country?” Rosé glared sharply at him.

Liu smiled ambivalently and evadingly.

“Haven’t you realized the reason yet?”

“No... I am but a paltry arms dealer. How could I?”

“Ha-hah... Wonderful. You are very wise. It was very worth the hassle to ask you over.” Liu clapped overdramatically as Rosé stressed the words *arms dealer*. “Yes, it’s just as you imagine—I am here to develop new weapons. Melora is collaborating with the Chinese Federal Army to create the next generation of biotactical weapons.”

“Mass-produced Relict Regalia?” Rosé inquired nonchalantly.

Liu Ryland’s eyes grew wide in shock. Even though he expected her to surmise Melora was in Japan to test new weapons, he could have never anticipated her to realize the weapons in question were artificial Relicts.

The dragons’ powers brought about cataclysmic destruction beyond the known laws of physics—were one to mass-produce artificial Relicts that replicated them, one would create the strongest army in the world.

That was the Chinese Federation’s and Melora Electronics’ goal, and the reason why they built the Nagoya Station Fortress. The Chinese Federation was fixated on obtaining the Relict to use as a sample for their research and development.

“...Precisely. Do you know the true nature of the Relict Regalia?” Liu asked shortly after getting a hold of himself.

Rosé replied without hesitation, “The dragon factor—the dragon mediums’ and Lazaruses’ organelles, or so I’ve heard.”

“Indeed. Just as the mitochondria creates ATP—the chemical energy necessary for the eukaryotes’ biological activity—the dragon factor creates the dragon aura for activating the medium in the Lazarus’s Regalia. Magical energy.”

Liu took a handheld device out of his pocket and projected a complex tridimensional image on the table, like a molecular model. A strange conceptual model that seemed to be a mix between a magic circle and a chemical formula. A graphical representation of the dragon aura field created by the dragon factor.

The dragon aura field an individual dragon factor could create was not very powerful, but by linking multiple through a network, its area of effect increased geometrically.

Upon surpassing a certain threshold, the dragon aura field generated a small gate connected to a foreign space. By the mutual annihilation of the matter flowing from there with the matter on this world, it created massive energy—the source of the dragon’s Regalia.

This meant that the energy created by the dragon factor had no upper limit. The dragons were literal masses of energy that could destroy the world.

Supposedly, only Ganzheit was aware of this, and yet Liu Ryland also seemed to know.

“With our company’s microfabrication technology, we can copy the dragon factor down to the nanometer. We can manufacture Relict Regalia.”

“Professor Chihaya Narusawa’s dragon factor cycle theory?” Rosé sighed.

Liu smiled in satisfaction at the sound of that name.

“Of course you know. I’m shocked. To think the professor’s son would survive as a Lazarus. I suppose this is fate.”

“I wonder... Perhaps it is all as the professor wanted,” Rosé muttered as she stared into the distance.

Liu took that as a joke and chuckled.

“The Nagoya Station Fortress was constructed as the base to make the mass-

produced Relicts. We are still in the developmental stages, but once we get to mass production, our artificial Relicts will be shipped throughout the world,” he said, brimming with confidence.

“Very interesting indeed, but why tell me?” Rosé’s eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“I’ll cut to the chase. Are you interested in leaving Ganzheit and joining us?”

“You ask Galerie Berith to betray Ganzheit?” she asked with a condemning glare.

Liu nodded.

“Once we succeed in mass-producing the artificial Relicts, Ganzheit will suffer the biggest blow. Their goal is to awaken all the dragon mediums hidden around the world and bring about a disaster like the J-nocide on a global scale, but if the armies have Relict Regalia, they will be able to oppose the dragons. Even if we cannot kill the dragons themselves, we can eradicate the Moujuu, at least.”

“So the moment your artificial Relicts enter the production stage, you will automatically be Ganzheit’s enemy.” Rosé took a sip of tea, her expression unchanged.

“Yes, and the purpose of our meeting here is to decrease Ganzheit’s power before that happens. With the Lazarus, two dragon mediums, and a Relict Deserver, you will be more than enough deterrence against them.” Liu revealed his true intentions.

It did not look like he was lying. Indeed, there was reason for Melora wanting the Galerie on their side, and Liu’s analysis of their power was on the mark.

“Of course, that is not the only reason why I brought up this deal. Once we can begin mass production of the Relicts, we will need export and sales routes, both of which Galerie Berith has. After all, we lack the know-how when it comes to selling weapons.”

“So you say there are benefits for both sides to cooperate.” Rosé gave a charming smile as she licked her tea-damped lips. “I see. No wonder you were such a successful entrepreneur, Liu Ryland.”

“*Were*? What do you mean by that?” Liu frowned in confusion at the use of past tense.

Rosé put down her teacup, her eyes cold, as though pitying Liu.

“I mean that you have a critical lack of experience. You know nothing.”

“...Oh?”

“Melora Electronics is only fifteen years old. Meanwhile, House Berith has existed since the prehistoric eras of ancient Egypt and Greece, or perhaps all the way back to the age of the *Shenxian* in ancient China. You think our family has never tried replicating the Relict Regalia before?”

“So you’ve tried to mass-produce the Relicts.”

“Yes, many times, over more than fifteen hundred years.” Rosé smiled charmingly.

Liu scowled in annoyance.

“But that was before science advanced to modern levels. Even if you weren’t successful in replicating them before, that’s no reason for us to fail now, too.”

“When did I say that we failed in replicating the Relicts?” Rosé blinked in amusement.

Liu gasped, bewildered. “You mean...?”

“The technology to copy Relict Regalia already exists. In fact, legend says the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi has two substitutes, and that they are both as mighty as the original.”

Liu was at a loss for words. The Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi had copies—of course he knew about the famous legend.

“Impossible... Then why would Ganzheit keep that technology a secret? Why rely on the unstable dragons instead of using mass-produced Relicts to more easily take over the world?!”

“That’s exactly where you’re mistaken. Why would you assume you can control the Relicts, knowing that the dragons are unstable?” Rosé rebutted.

Liu put on a cool facade, but the serenity of before had escaped him already.

“You mean the Relicts are defective?” Liu asked, impatient.

“I mean that, no matter the shape, great power comes with a cost just as big. Whether you believe me or not, that’s up to you.” Rosé stood up quietly.

Her curt demeanor revealed that she had not a shred of interest left in Liu.

“So the deal is off, Rosé?” Liu asked tensely.

Rosé turned back to him, unexpressive.

“You may not want to hear this, but I think you ought to have experienced failure at an earlier stage. Before falling too deep into the abyss in your search for a power beyond you.”

“There is no need for me to hear any of your nonsense. Personally, I have a taste for women like you, but unfortunately, the one to experience failure here and now will be you.”

Liu operated his handheld device to send out instructions to his subordinates waiting outside the lounge. A dozen armed operators poured into the room in the next moment. Not CFA soldiers, but Melora’s private army. The guns in their hands glowed the red of artificial Relicts.

“You will regret this, Liu Ryland.”

“Right back at you, Rosetta Berith.”

Galerie Berith’s executive manager and Melora Electronics’ CEO glared at each other from either side of the tiny table.

Then an explosion echoed from afar.

It came from the Nagoya Station building. The Galerie’s armored train was under attack by the CFA.

## Act 4 Cease to Exist

### 1

Yahiro reached out to stop himself from falling, but it was for nothing. He felt himself float downward, and a feeling of discomfort circulated through all of his organs.

Endless darkness below. Plunging into the Ploutonion by Jiguan Xia's hand. Gravity pulled him mercilessly into the pit.

The sound of a strong wind struck his ear.

Would it be a hundred feet to the bottom? A thousand?

The only certainty was that death awaited at the end of it.

"Yahiro, over here!"

Iroha's voice reached him just as he gritted his teeth.

Then he felt himself float up. A pure-white Moujuu held him up. Iroha was atop a full-size Nuemaru, and they'd caught him.

"Nuemaru, keep us up!" She shouted at the Moujuu.

The giant beast used the falling rocks as footholds to jump and hold on to the Ploutonion's wall. He then kicked the wall to jump to the other side. Nuemaru repeated the motion to break the fall's momentum and finally landed softly on the bottom of the pit.

"...We're saved?" Yahiro slid down Nuemaru's back to ground.

His whole body was tense, weak with the fear of death. Becoming a Lazarus did not rid one of their innate fear of falling.

"Nuemaru's so amazing, right?" Iroha puffed out her chest and held her chin up.

“Yeah. Thanks, Nuemaru,” Yahiro said with sincerity while reaching out to the giant Moujuu’s fluffy neck and petting it.

Iroha jumped down from Nuemaru’s back and watched the petting with envy.

“You can also thank me! Don’t forget about me!”

“Where’re Giuli and the guys?”

“Aww... Thank me!”

“You called?” Giuli appeared silently from the darkness behind Yahiro.

“Whoa?!” He exclaimed. Giuli looked unharmed, despite the huge fall. “You’re okay? How in the world?”

“Thanks to this.”

Giuli held her light stick with her mouth and held her hands out to him as though playing cat’s cradle. Thin, shiny threads crossed the fingers of her gloved hands like a spiderweb.

“Wires...”

“Thank goodness it was shallower than I thought. Considering how much wire I have left, seems like it’s about ninety meters?” Giuli retrieved the wires shot into the walls with a smile.

A ninety-meter-deep pit was not something you would call *shallow*, but it certainly did not seem as deep as one would think a Ploutonion would be.

The Ploutonion did not end there, however. At the bottom of the pit was the entrance of a long underground tunnel, spurting a stinging amount of miasma.

“Here’s your light. One of these lasts twelve hours, but I don’t have many, so take care of it.”

Giuli handed each of them a light stick. They were just bright enough for their eyes, now used to the darkness.

Then the CFA soldiers came, attracted by the light.

“Waon!”

“You were fine... Thank goodness!”



Sections of Giuli's wires tangled all around their bodies. She saved them as well. They weren't as unharmed as she was, though: their uniforms were tattered and covered with dust.

"You...!" Yahiro pointed his sword at the approaching soldiers. "What's the big idea?! What is Xia thinking?!"

"Eep! L-l-le-let's calm down, Mr. Lazarus."

"Wait! Hear us out! We didn't know anything!"

"What?!" Yahiro exuded hostility.

Xia not only nearly killed Yahiro, but Iroha, too. And the soldiers were Xia's men. Yahiro had no reason to pity them.

"It's true! We have no idea why the deputy commander would do that!" Zhu, the younger soldier, pleaded with teary eyes.

Yahiro gripped his katana tighter as the blade touched Zhu's neck, but then, Giuli pushed his hand aside.

"That's enough, Yahiro. It doesn't look like they're lying."

"You believe them?"

"Not really. They never were our allies, in any case."

"No way! Executive Manager! Mr. Lazarus!" Feng, the big baldie, jumped at their legs.

Giuli swiftly dodged him.

"But it's true that their boss cut them off. I was not expecting him to throw his valuable Relict Deservers into the Ploutonion, even if it was to take us with them."

"So they were just decoys to get our guards down?" Yahiro sighed as he sheathed his sword.

Right before Xia pushed them into the Ploutonion, his subordinates were already looking at the pit right beside Iroha. That got them to lower their defenses—they had no reason to expect Xia would take his own men out, as well.

“Our Relicts aren’t very powerful. I guess he didn’t hesitate to get rid of us second-raters.”

“They were shoddy replicas to begin with.”

Zhu and Feng explained.

*So he didn’t cast them away just because they were annoying.*

“Replicas? Copies?”

“They’re making artificial Relict Regalia?”

Iroha and Yahiro asked in confusion. It was their first time hearing about technology to artificially replicate the crystallized dragon factor.

“I see. Now it’s starting to make sense.” Giuli giggled.

Yahiro gave her a look of suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“This is why the CFA is obsessed with collecting Relict Regalia. I mean, even if you get a superpowerful one, if only a select few can even use them, they won’t be that valuable as weapons. It’s no longer an age where one-on-one duels between generals decide the outcome of war.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But what if you could mass-produce the Relicts? The Nagoya Station Fortress isn’t just a CFA base—it’s a Relict factory. Am I wrong?”

“No, you got it right,” Zhu responded.

It was top-secret military information, but now that Zhu had been betrayed by his superior, he judged he no longer needed to keep it secret.

“So they broke the barrier and took the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi to make a replica?” Yahiro said as he looked up.

“Probably. I imagine that’s why they asked Nina Himekawa to get it. They don’t need Iroha to collect a Relict Regalia, any dragon medium would do.”

“But then why would they bring us here?”

“Well, to push us into the pit, duh.”

“What...?!”

“To push *you* and Iroha, more precisely. Even with Relict Deservers on their side, they wouldn’t want to directly fight a dragon medium and her Lazarus,” Giuli said coldly while spinning the light stick in her hand like a pen; she sure looked like her twin when she got serious. “This also means that, with you two out of the picture, nothing is stopping them from attacking Galerie Berith.”

“Attacking... You mean to take Ayaho?!” Iroha gasped.

The CFA had been fixated on Vanagloria’s Relict ever since Galerie Berith arrived at Nagoya.

The only reason they hadn’t stolen it from them was out of consideration for Ganzheit backing them up, and the Galerie’s own firepower.

However, with the power of mass-produced Relicts, the CFA would be capable of opposing the dragons’ threat. Not even Ganzheit would be able to strike back so easily.

Yahiro and Iroha, capable of fighting back against the Relicts, had to be taken out of the picture. Now the only obstacle keeping the CFA away from Vanagloria’s Relict was gone.

“Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia is perfectly preserved, newly born, and it comes with a Deserver. They figured it would be worth the hassle.”

“Is it my fault? Is it because I suggested investigating the reason behind the Moujuu attacks...?” Iroha’s face turned pale.

They were away from the Yáo Guāng Xīng because Iroha proposed looking into why the Moujuu were attacking the city. Her decision to protect Ayaho ended up backfiring.

Still, that didn’t mean it was Iroha’s fault they went after Ayaho. Yahiro immediately tried to refute it: “That’s not tr—”

“That’s not true!”

“It’s not! It’s all our boss’s fault for tricking you!”

The two soldiers argued fervently, cutting Yahiro off.

“Huh? R-really...?” Iroha was caught off guard by their energy.

She didn't look cheered up, but now she had lost her opportunity to mope.

"I definitely agree, but it doesn't feel right when they say it, somehow." Yahiro sighed bitterly as he looked at the two men.

"In any case, we gotta get out of here. I'm worried about Paola's squad now," Giuli said as she looked around the hole.

"But how? I don't think we can climb this," Yahiro asked as he touched the wall.

Even with the barrier, the Ploutonion's walls were weathered; it didn't look like even Nuemaru could climb them. Giuli's wires were useless, too.

"Nope. We gotta look for another exit."

"Another exit?"

"So we said the barrier was broken about a year ago, but that doesn't mean there were no Moujuu around before that, right? Otherwise, there would be no reason to build that sturdy wall." Giuli looked at the soldiers.

The two of them nodded hesitantly.

"So there's more Ploutonions nearby?" Iroha's face lit up a little.

Climbing the over-ninety-meter wall was impossible, but there could be other pits in Nagoya. This one could be connected to another shallower, slanted Ploutonion.

"There's no guarantee we'll find an exit. I'm clueless about the inner structure of the Ploutonions. I've never met someone who's come back alive from one, after all."

"But it's worth looking into." Yahiro shrugged with annoyance as he glared at the cave connected to the Ploutonion.

The hollow full of miasma lured him in with a calm wind that sounded like weeping.

Guāng Xīng. She was in the middle of slicing an apple pie Head Chef Shen had prepared for the kids.

“An enemy attack... Just as the lady feared.” Josh, who just happened to be there for a snack, clicked his tongue before beckoning Ayaho.

“...Enemy attack?”

“Yes. They took the chance now that Yahiro and the princess are away.”

“Wait, is it...because of me?” Ayaho’s voice trembled as she held her right hand down with her other.

Josh ruffled her hair.

“Don’t worry. The Yáo Guāng Xīng is sturdier than your average tank in case of occasions just like this. It won’t fall easily so long as we keep them outside,” he said firmly while looking down at the screen on his arm.

Reports were flooding in from the operators in battle to the temporary commander of the Yáo Guāng Xīng.

The attackers were surprisingly few. A company, including backup. Only a dozen were currently firing.

As the armored train’s heavy weaponry could be used for self-defense, the Galerie had an overwhelming advantage in simple firepower.

The balance was about to tip, however.

Ravaging fireballs appeared out of nowhere, ignoring the laws of physics. Lightning and ice spears followed.

The impossible attacks shattered the Galerie’s defenses in the blink of an eye. The Yáo Guāng Xīng’s autocannons were rendered unusable, frozen.

“Regalia! Relict Deservers!” Josh’s temples twitched as he glared at the video on screen.

The Galerie’s operators were not heavily wounded, thanks to their being accustomed to Yahiro’s Regalia, but their hopes to stop the attackers’ approach were already close to nil. It was only a matter of time before they infiltrated the train.

“Not good. Chris, deploy the Boxer. Get the children out of the fortress,” Josh indicated to his subordinate in the same car.

Two armored fighting vehicles were stored in the rear car of the Yáo Guāng Xīng. Josh judged the best way to keep Ayaho safe was to get her out of the fortress in them. Because Giuli and Paola’s squad was out there—Yahiro and Iroha were, too.

However, a shock from the side blocked Josh’s plan. The armored wall of the dining hall was ripped apart, its debris raining on Josh and his men as they were blown away.

“The wall!”

“We have to run!”

“But where?!”

Ayaho heard her siblings exclaim in disarray, but she lacked the calm to care for them.

“Mr. Josh!” Ayaho ran over to where the man lay covered in blood.

Runa stood between them. The youngest of her siblings, only seven, and she looked even younger. Runa spread her arms to stop Ayaho.

“Don’t.”

“Why, Runa?! We have to help him or he’ll...!”

Ayaho tried to pick her little sister up to put her aside, but then her sight turned crimson. Scorching flames blew through the hole in the Yáo Guāng Xīng’s armor. Ayaho would have been engulfed by the Relict Deservers’ fire had Runa not stopped her.

Soldiers avalanched into the scorched, unarmored train. They wore not the Chinese Federal Army’s uniforms, but PMC suits with the logo of Melora Electronics.

“Found you, Japanese children,” one of the assailants said in English, a thick accent coming from his face mask.

“Which one’s the girl in the picture?”

“Don’t care. Take them all!”

“Come here.”

“NOOO!”

“Rinka!” Ayaho yelled as she heard her sister’s scream.

The attackers caught Rinka. They aimed to capture every child in sight to be sure Ayaho didn’t escape.

“No, let me go! Help me, Iroha! Iroha! Mama!”

“Rinka!” Ren, seeing Rinka fearfully call the name of someone absent, tried to punch the assailant grabbing her.

However, the man brushed him aside as one did a fly.

“Ren!” Rinka cried as she saw Ren kicked away.

“No... Please...” Ayaho fell to her knees, holding her head and trembling in fear.

At the same time, a fierce rage overtook her. Anger at her own powerlessness.

Iroha was always the one protecting them, but she was not there. Now Ayaho was the oldest of the siblings present, and she had to protect them in Iroha’s stead, but she lacked the power.

She...lacked the power? Truly?

Ayaho felt heat filling her right arm.

Something within reacted to her loathing of the attackers.

“STOP!” Ayaho glared at the assailants.

Guided by her gaze, steel-colored blades thrust out of the Yáo Guāng Xīng’s floor and walls.

The metallic crystal blades resembled an accumulation of infinite swords. They pierced and skewered the attackers armed with Relicts.

“A Regalia...?! It’s her?!” A survivor aimed his gun at Ayaho as he spat blood.

Ayaho could not counter the attack. She was in a daze, shocked by the

damage her Relict caused.

“A-aaah...” she cried out weakly as the man pulled the trigger.

A gunshot followed.

A small hole opened in the attacker’s forehead, fresh blood gushing from the back of his skull.

“Well done, Ayaho,” Josh said. Blood dripped from his lips, but he was now on his feet and had his gun in hand.

He finished off the survivor to save her.

“Mr....Josh... I—I killed...!” Ayaho held down her trembling right hand as she turned to look at him, her face scrunched up in misery.

Josh gave her a gentle smile.

“No, Ayaho. You protected your siblings. It was me who killed him.”

“But...all that blood...” Ayaho looked at the other skewered attackers.

Her face tensed up in fear. The men who the metallic crystal blades had torn apart were moving once again. They glued their sliced arms and legs back together, and the holes all over their bodies closed up.





Ayaho had seen this bizarre sight before.

It was Yahiro Narusawa's—the Lazarus's—power.

"No...way..."

"Tsk... Now I'm not sure even I killed anyone."

Josh emptied his magazine, and still the attackers would not stop.

Ayaho could only watch in silence and shiver at the horrific scene.

### 3

"That's a slope... It feels like it goes all the way to the bottom of the earth." Iroha sighed in wonder as she lit her way with a light stick.

They were going down a long slope that took them deeper into the Ploutonion.

"I should've brought my stuff for long-time recording. Imagine the views I would get on a video of me trekking the inside of the Ploutonion!"

"Always looking for a way to improve her content. Truly an icon for all streamers."

"That's my Waon."

The two CFA soldiers praised Iroha's random thought.

Yahiro, Giuli, and Nuemaru sighed as they followed behind the cheery princess and her subjects.

"By the way, should Nuemaru stay this big?" Yahiro asked out of the blue.

Nuemaru had been staying alive by keeping the size of a medium-sized dog ever since he bore a nearly lethal wound. He wasn't supposed to be able to keep his original giant size for long stretches of time.

While Yahiro worried, Iroha calmly patted Nuemaru's snout.

"Yup, he's fine. Maybe it's due to the dense miasma here."

"Miasma...eh?" Yahiro grimaced as he stared at the black mist drifting all over

the cave.

It had no smell, nor did it affect the skin, but just touching it filled one with intense discomfort. The same miasma that flowed within the Moujuu's bodies filled the Ploutonion.

"Supposedly, the miasma is basically like the air from another world," Giuli said nonchalantly, as though talking about tonight's dinner, while walking beside Yahiro.

"Air...from another world?"

"Yup. To begin with, the Ploutonion are like corridors connecting this world to that one. Not strange that they would be full of miasma."

"Should we be breathing this stuff?"

"I mean, that other world is still Earth, so it shouldn't be a problem. I've never heard of it containing unknown pathogens, either. In any case, we'd turn into Moujuu before getting sick."

"A Moujuu...!" Yahiro tensed as Giuli said something so terrifying with a calm smile.

"Oh, you're worried about me?" Giuli drew her face near to his, an impish look on it. "No need to worry about Moujuufication, at least for now."

"How come you're so sure?"

"Because of the serum. Or I guess it isn't quite that."

"...Serum?"

"Yup. The antivenom serum made from people with immunity to Moujuufication."

"Where in the world do you find someone immune to Moujuufication...?" Yahiro asked in confusion before looking at the back of the girl in front of him; she turned back with a raised eyebrow, feeling his gaze. "...Iroha's blood?!"

"Huh? My blood? Now that you mention it, you did take a sample the other day..." Iroha looked at Giuli with shock.

Not even she expected her blood to be used like that.

“The blood didn’t have the dragon factor excited, so I’m not turning into a wyrm, either. Don’t worry. We’re still in the human experimentation stage, but thank goodness it works.”

“Human experimentation... Giuli...” Yahiro shook his head astounded at her shameless admission.

Even if it ended up working, Giuli’s experiment could have turned her into a wyrm. Although it was very like her to do such a dangerous experiment on herself.

“I guess those two don’t turn into Moujuu because of the Relicts’ effects?” Yahiro asked, staring at Giuli.

“Yup. Being Relict Deservers, they already have the dragon factor in their bodies. I imagine it works as an antibody against Moujuufication.”

“So the power of the superior monster, the dragon, is keeping the effects of the miasma away,” Yahiro said while staring at his own right hand.

Yahiro was the same in that he had the dragon factor in his body. He found it awfully ironic how he needed the power of the dragon to stand against the disastrous Ploutonion it created.

“But even if the antibodies are working, I don’t know how long they’ll last. I hope we can get back to the surface before the miasma becomes denser,” Giuli calmly analyzed the situation.

“Yeah.” Yahiro nodded.

The miasma getting denser also meant the inside of the Ploutonion was drawing closer to the other world. Who knew what effects it could have on the human body beyond Moujuufication?

“Waon, stop! There’s something there!” Lieutenant Zhu called out all of a sudden.

Yahiro noticed then, too. There was a faint silhouette ahead in the darkness.

Beyond the long slope was the boundless underground cave. They could not see the end with the weak glow of the light sticks, but the roof of the cave was almost a hundred feet tall—its depth had to be multiple times that.

The silhouette in the limestone-like cave turned into two, then three, then so many they covered nearly the whole area. All Moujuu.

The sight made even the Lazarus shudder.

“A giant...Moujuu herd?”

“That’s so many. Doesn’t look like they’re here to welcome us, either.” Giuli horsed around even now.

While the group stood still in shock, even more Moujuu appeared, steadily growing in number. How Yahiro and the others wished to run away that same moment, but if they didn’t cross this underground cave, they had no hope of escaping the Ploutonion.

While Yahiro, Giuli, and the soldiers hesitated, Iroha walked up to the Moujuu.

Yahiro shivered at the sight.

“Iroha!”

“Don’t worry. They bear no animosity,” Iroha said softly as she turned around.

Yahiro and the two CFA soldiers were at a loss for words seeing the almost divine aura that surrounded her.

“Really...?”

“Probably. I think they’re just scared. They don’t want us to move ahead.”

“They don’t?”

“No. They’re scared. There’s something scary ahead,” she said before walking deeper into the cave.

Yahiro gulped down the fear surging in the pit of his stomach before following her.

“Maybe the barrier on the surface wasn’t sealing the Ploutonion itself, but that scary thing inside it,” Giuli theorized.

The pieces of the puzzle came together inside Yahiro’s head.

“Oh... That’s why they attacked the Nagoya Station Fortress... Because they

needed the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi to restore the barrier...!”

“Dunno about that, but it makes things simpler if so. Try telling them we’ll take care of whatever’s over there so they let us through,” Giuli told Iroha.

“Gotcha.” Iroha gave her a thumbs-up.

“You sure we should make such a deal without even knowing what that something is?” Yahiro said, looking at Giuli with stupefaction.

She smiled tightly and said, “Either way, we gotta get through here or we’re not getting out.”

“Right.” Yahiro put a hand on his sword’s hilt.

It didn’t matter whether they had to face hundreds of Moujuu or something even scarier. They had to break through to get back alive, even if it meant massacring everything along the way.

“All right. They understand.” Iroha turned around with an innocent smile, unaware of Yahiro’s grim determination.

The sea of Moujuu parted ways before her eyes.

“W-Waon... You’re amazing!”

“Magnificent! I’ll follow you to the end of the world, Waon!”

“Y-yeah? Good to hear I live up to expectations.”

Iroha simply brushed aside the shower of praise the two CFA soldiers gave her while they kowtowed. She was already getting used to handling them.

Yahiro ignored their antics as he moved farther into the underground cave.

The Moujuu’s gazes pierced him from every direction, but thanks to Iroha assuring they weren’t hostile, he quickly adjusted.

What worried him was the strong miasma blowing from beyond the darkness. It was clearly denser than before. So thick it felt sticky.

“Were the Moujuu blocking all the miasma up to now?!” Yahiro broke out in a coughing fit, the unpleasant feeling making him nauseous.

He turned and saw Zhu and Feng in the same situation.

“Agh...!” Giuli staggered, pale in the face.

It was the first time he saw her weakened. Even with the antivenom serum, she wasn’t going to stand this dense miasma for long.

“Iroha, can you purify this?” Yahiro asked as a last sliver of hope.

“I dunno, but let me try!” Iroha nodded with a serious expression.

A blinding glow emerged among the darkness of the miasma. A small flame lit up in Iroha’s hands as she held them together before her chest.

The flame was smaller than a candle’s at first, but it grew in the blink of an eye and whirled around, surrounding them.

Avaritia’s power: flames of purification. The fiery whirl burned away the miasma surrounding them, scorching even the ground and spreading farther.

Iroha’s Regalia burned the power of the dragon. Her flames could even vanquish the Ploutonion itself.

The Ploutonion quaked violently in agony at the touch of the purifying flames. The earthquake made Yahiro and the rest lose their balance.

“This...doesn’t look good...,” Giuli said with a strained smile.

Miasma stronger than what Iroha burned away gushed from a big rupture in the ground, creating a solid shadow. A jet-black shadow that soon covered the entire vast cave.

“Y-Yahiro...!”

“No way...,” Yahiro grumbled as he stood before Iroha, who was covered in flames, and looked up at it.

The shadow, squirming like a living creature, was shaped like a giant monster.

The ground shook ferociously as the monster roared.

An ancient, eight-headed dragon.

“This was the scary thing sealed by the barrier?! What’s a dragon doing

here?!” Yahiro yelled, glaring at the pitch-black dragon approaching him.

The underground cave shook. The pressure of the surging miasma alone was enough to suffocate them. The air around Yahiro and the others was sticky, restricting their movement as though they were at the bottom of the ocean.

If it wasn't for Iroha's flame barrier, Giuli and the soldiers would already be dead.

“...Blaze!” Yahiro activated his Regalia.

The unsheathed *uchigatana* enveloped itself in flames as he struck the miasma the dragon breathed down on them.

A single, sharp flash flew toward the dragon's neck.

He felt the hit. Yahiro's attack landed, but his opponent was far too big. The ancient dragon did not even feel a tickle.

Then it countered by breathing fire—a black fireball that could crush Iroha's flames. Yahiro unleashed his Regalia once again to parry the fireball upfront.

The two dragon powers clashed, brewing up a storm that shook the entire cave.

“This power... It's a real dragon?!” Yahiro fell to one knee, short of breath. The continuous use of the Regalia sapped his stamina.

He had no idea why one had appeared inside the Ploutonion, but there was no doubt that the monster before his eyes had the same power of a dragon. It was just as imposing as Vanagloria, materialized.

“No...!” Iroha screamed behind him, so weakly, like a frightened child; a scream like he had never heard. “No, stay away...! Don't make me remember!”

“Iroha, what's wrong?!” Yahiro sheathed his sword and ran up to her.

Iroha cried, her hair in disarray, and clung to him.

“Yahiro... This can't be... I know this dragon...”

“What?”

“That dragon is me... It's us...!”



“Us? What in the world are you—?”

Yahiro held her close in confusion and, in the next moment, they felt themselves floating.

*Shoot.* Yahiro gritted his teeth. *We fell into a fissure?*

Yet the fall they feared did not come.

Instead, Yahiro saw a bright, clear blue sky.

The strong rays of the summer sun reflected off the glass of a skyscraper.

Cars waiting for a light to turn green gathered on the street ahead.

The noise of the engines. The smell of exhaust. The light changed and the cars advanced. Yahiro stood on the stylish tiles of a plaza, watching it all.

He could hear the buzz of the people going about their business.

Innumerable pedestrians. Congested streets. A myriad of bright billboards. It was so foreign—and so nostalgic. It was the sight of the city before the J-nocide.

Yahiro was in the middle of a big terminal station plaza.

Nagoya Station. It was unlike the one he knew, and yet, the sign nearby indicated it was indeed Nagoya Station.

“Iroha...?”

She escaped Yahiro’s arms.

He reached for her hand reflexively.

She looked up at him with a big smile.

Shivers ran down his spine.

The girl before him was not Iroha. It was a different person wearing her face.

“Who...are you?” he asked, still holding her hand.

“I wonder.” The girl played dumb.

Her outfit was a cute, girly dress that Iroha would never wear.

Then she gripped his hand and ran. She weaved her way through the crowds, swiftly entering the immaculate station.

“Where are we?” Yahiro asked.

A big LED screen inside the building showed the news. A channel he didn’t know. An announcer he didn’t recognize. The name of the current era: Reiwa. A name he had never heard.

“Japan. A different Japan from the one you know,” the girl answered with Iroha’s voice.

“So we’re in...a parallel world?”

“I’m surprised you know that term.” She smiled, eyebrows raised. “But not exactly. This place has already ended.”

“What does that mean?”

“What I just said. This world already reached its end. Look.” She snapped her fingers.

The view before his eyes morphed.

The world was tainted crimson with flames, the skyscrapers turned to dust.

The land tore apart, swallowing countless cars. The people running about in the chaos turned into black silhouettes in the fire. A storm brewed, drowning their screams.

The end of the world—there was no other way to describe it.

“You did this?” Left behind in the middle of the collapsing world, Yahiro glared at the girl.

“Me? No way.” She shook her head. “This is the world I was brought up in. Why would I wish for it to end like this?”

“Then who...?”

“Isn’t it obvious? The dragon slayer. Your cohort,” she said coldly.

Yahiro felt his body freeze.

“The Lazaruses...destroyed the world...?”

“You look like you don’t believe it.”

“Obviously.”

“That’s okay. Just remember: the world can break far more easily than you think.”

The girl with Iroha’s face stared at him, her eyes emotionless, almost artificial.

“Do you even know how many places exist in this universe that allow for the survival of intelligent life-forms?”

“You’re on an eco-tirade or something?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m asking whether it really was a coincidence that humanity was able to build civilization on Earth.” She shook her head softly.

The collapsing scenery vanished. Instead, a pure-white darkness sprawled infinitely around.

“Who are you?” Yahiro asked.

“You know the answer, don’t you?”

“A dragon medium.”

“Yes. From a perished world.” She shook her head sadly.

Her upturned glance was bewitching, yet, for some reason, Yahiro felt nothing at the sight of it.

“Where’s Iroha?”

“She’s been here the whole time. Hearing your voice.” She shrugged.

“Then why are you using her body?”

“She’s in shock after remembering who she was. I’m borrowing her body in the meantime.”

“Is that so?”

“You’re not asking who she is?”

“Do I need to know?”

“Don’t you want to know?”

“No.” Yahiro shook his head without a moment’s hesitation. “I’ll hear her out if she wants to tell me, but honestly, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Wow... Even if Iroha Mamana isn’t human?”

“I’m not, either. I’m this monster they call the Lazarus.”

“But she was the one who made you a Lazarus.”

“I asked her to. She’s just forgotten it.”

“You wouldn’t care even if her whole personality was...just a conglomeration of dragon factors?” the girl with Iroha’s face asked with a trembling voice.

Her eyes shimmered, like she was about to cry. Yahiro brusquely pulled her close and hugged her with both arms.

“I don’t care. You’re still you. Come back here, Iroha.”

“Yahiro...” Iroha whispered in his ear, so weakly he could barely hear her. “Yahiro... I...I remembered everything...”

“Yeah. Just leave the talk for later, okay? First, we gotta do something about this.” Yahiro still held her as he sighed and looked around.

The white darkness was already gone, replaced by the vast underground cave.

Right before them was the ancient black dragon with eight heads. It glared at them, its posture unchanged from right after spitting the black fireball. Apparently, time here had been frozen while he met that mysterious girl.

“Hee-hee.” Iroha giggled. “You really don’t care what I am.”

“Nope. I promised you I’d be with you until the end.”

“You remembered.” Iroha smiled in bliss and wiped away the tears on the corners of her eyes.

She was wearing her usual Galerie uniform. Yahiro was a bit disappointed about that—she would look great in that mysterious girl’s dress now.

“So what’s with this guy?” Yahiro asked, glaring at the dragon.

“It’s the carcass of a dragon. A remnant of the dragon factor that destroyed the world in the past. A phantom of an ancient dragon.” Iroha stared at the black dragon.

“I see... Right, so the Ploutonion itself is an ancient ruin.” Yahiro sighed

deeply.

Now he understood why that dragon was so filled with rage.

This was the rage of the dragon whose world was destroyed. Only its wrath and grief at the loss of its world remained in this Ploutonion.

“Let’s take it down, Iroha.” Yahiro unsheathed his katana again.

“But...” Iroha hesitated.

She could see herself in the ancient dragon. How was she any different from this immaterial remnant of dragon factor?

Yahiro pulled her delicate body toward him.

The Lazarus’s dragon factor resonated with the dragon medium.

“We gotta save Ayaho, right?” Yahiro whispered into Iroha’s ear.

Iroha’s eyes grew wide. She hugged him back with a strong smile on her face.

“Yeah!”

## 5

Yahiro pointed his blade at the ancient dragon, still holding Iroha close.

The dragon’s giant silhouette was more visible than when it first appeared, perhaps due to the fire all over the cave. Its eight heads, each moving independently like different creatures, were imposing, but the torso and four limbs supporting them was more overwhelming.

It was slow, but its sheer size made up for it. Its sixteen eyes also left it with no blind spots.

The entire underground cave shook with every step it took, and its long tail gave them no place to run. The moment they ended up with their backs to the wall would be their end.

Yahiro’s only weapon against it was his katana, and yet, curiously, he felt invincible.

He couldn’t lose now that he knew the dragon was only a phantom waiting to

perish.

“Waon, are you okay?!”

“Waon!”

The two CFA soldiers ran up to Iroha with worry.

They were armed with big handguns like Xia’s, the Relict Deservers’ standard equipment. They had been keeping the dragon at bay while Yahiro and Iroha were unconscious.

“Iroha looks different now. Did something happen?” Giuli looked at her with curiosity.

“Sorry to make you wait, Giuli, but I’m fine now. We’ll take care of this guy.” Iroha smiled at her.

“Uh-huh.” Giuli’s eyes narrowed with amusement, despite Iroha not answering her question.

Then Giuli jumped away one way, and Yahiro and Iroha the other.

A metallic crystal blade split the ground where they’d been standing with a shrill noise.

“This power...! It’s the same as Vanagloria’s!” Yahiro groaned as he slashed at the crystal blade that managed to graze him.

The ancient dragon’s attack did not stop there, however.

Shock-wave bullets flew one after the other toward Yahiro and Iroha. At the same time, a pure-white stream rained down on them and froze the ground it touched.

“Now it’s Ira’s! And Acedia’s! It can use all the dragons’ powers?!” Yahiro shouted bitterly.

Each of the eight ancient dragon’s heads spat a different power. One or two they could handle, but not all of them at once.

“Still, don’t worry,” Iroha whispered into his ear. “That’s just a phantom. A remnant of its rage and hatred for the dragon slayer. No dragon medium wish, no Lazarus vow—our Regalia can’t lose!”

“Right!”

Yahiro’s dragon aura blew up within him in reaction to Iroha’s will.

The flaming Goreclad covered his right arm and he slashed apart the freezing stream raining down.

“Waon!”

“Let us help, too!”

The two CFA soldiers exclaimed as they fired their guns.

Their Relicts’ element was lightning. Blueish-white flashes tore apart the underground darkness as they stabbed the dragon’s heads one after the other.

Then they noticed the Moujuu inside the Ploutonion were fighting against the ancient dragon, too. No idea if they were already its enemies, or if they were trying to help Iroha, but either way, the support was welcome.

“Electric shock coming!” Giuli warned.

One of the dragon’s heads in Yahiro and Iroha’s blind spot was about to fire a dark lightning.

*Shoot.* Yahiro pursed his lips. There was nowhere to hide to block the strike.

He had no time to think whether it was possible, but only his Regalia could protect Iroha, Giuli, and the soldiers. His other Regalia, not the purifying flames.

“Chibiki-no-Iwa!”

Yahiro launched his dragon aura, picturing Auguste Nathan’s repellent barrier.

This was not Avaritia’s power, but Superbia’s. And the earth dragon’s medium was not present.

“Guh...” Yahiro moaned in pain.

The ancient dragon’s lightning struck the repellent barrier, slowly breaking the invisible shield down.

The Regalia was too weak with only Yahiro there to activate it. He felt the black lightning would cross it with ease.

Then he felt someone touch his back.

A strange warm sensation filled his whole body. Then Yahiro's Regalia became a giant repellent shield that crushed the black lightning and the dragon's head with it.

"Yahiro... That was..." Iroha looked at him with surprise.

"I know." Yahiro nodded.

The repellent barrier Regalia was not Iroha's power. It was Sui's.

But this was not the time to talk about it.

"Burn to ash... Blaze!"

Yahiro used the other Regalia again. Iroha's—Avaritia's flames of purification.

Yahiro's slash became a fiery torrent as it sliced four of the dragon's eight heads. One of the remaining four was already crushed under Superbia's repellent barrier. Three remained. Yet...

"The dragon's heads...!"

"They're coming back!"

Zhu and Feng screamed in despair. Both of them were clearly worn out from the continuous use of their artificial Relict Regalia.

Still, no panic showed in Yahiro's or Iroha's eyes.

"Iroha, lend me your power!"

"I've got this! Let's go, Yahiro!"

Yahiro nodded with a savage grin as he felt his whole body's cells warm up. A massive amount of dragon aura flowed from Iroha's skin, surrounding the both of them in a whirl of scorching flames.

The flames soon turned into a giant illusion—an image of a dragon glowing white-hot.

"Flame...dragon...!" Giuli muttered, with equal parts shock and fear, and a little bit of excitement.

"Burn it all down, Avaritia!"

Yahiro unleashed his Regalia and the flame dragon spat out a scorching flash.



The flash enveloped the ancient black dragon's giant body, bleaching the underground cave white.

The dragon continued to resist, regenerating, but the heat of the flames would not allow it. Its gigantic form crumbled to ashes as the purifying flames burned it away.

Then, among the noise of the raging hot wind and the explosions, Yahiro heard the voice of a girl, bright and liberated.

*"Thank you."*

"I see... So it was you...", Yahiro muttered.

The repellent barrier that blocked the dragon's lightning had not been created solely from his power. Nor Iroha's, nor Sui's.

There had been one other dragon medium there.

The girl with Iroha's face he'd met in the white darkness.

It was her who helped him.

The ancient black dragon itself.

"Wow... You really defeated a dragon... No wonder Waon chose you."

"That was incredible, Mr. Yahiro. Now I can leave her in your hands without worry."

Lieutenant Zhu praised him somewhat haughtily, while Lieutenant Feng crossed his arms and nodded in satisfaction behind him.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Yahiro sighed with exhaustion as he sheathed his sword.

The air inside the underground cave changed after the dragon vanished. The black haze of miasma cleared up, and they could now see farther into the cave.

Light leaked from one of the multiple paths sloping up. The way to the surface.

"You okay, Iroha?" Yahiro asked as he released her from his arms.

He was worried about Iroha feeling guilt or grief over the death of the dragon

she empathized with.

Iroha's response, though, was a surprising one. She silently jumped at him and hugged him hard.

"Iroha...?"

"Thank you, Yahiro. I feel much better now, in a lot of ways."

"...Same goes for me. You saved me, too," Yahiro said while looking away bashfully.

Iroha saved him when the guilt of killing Moujuu was about to crush him. The guilt didn't disappear, but he was ready to accept it now. To bear his sin as a Lazarus.

"Hee-hee, I'll clean your ears again sometime."

"That's not what I meant..." Yahiro furrowed his brow at Iroha's off-the-mark reply.

"Wait, Waon cleaned your ears?!"

"What?! She's never even done a video like that!"

Zhu and Feng heard her comment and got all worked up.

"You shouldn't have said that." Yahiro glared at her under the pressure of the guys' envious gazes.

"I was practicing *because* I'd never done it!" Iroha averted her gaze.

Giuli tapped their shoulders and pointed at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but don't you think we're in trouble?"

"...Huh?"

Yahiro's and Iroha's expressions froze as they noticed the pebbles falling.

They could hear a faint quaking. The bedrock weakened and began to fracture. The Ploutonion was about to collapse now that its source of dragon aura was gone.

"Looks like the inside of the Ploutonion was an unstable border with the other world. We won't be able to get back to our world at this rate. We'll be buried

alive first.”

“Stop explaining and start running!”

“Nuemaru! Where’s the exit?!”

Yahiro picked up Giuli while Iroha called out to the white Moujuu.

Nuemaru looked puzzled in reaction to Iroha’s impossible ask. Not even he could sniff out the exit in this situation.

Then a Moujuu resembling a *komainu* appeared before their eyes. The Grade IV they met on the surface.

“You...followed us...?!”

The lion-headed Moujuu growled shortly in response to Iroha’s question and crouched down. Yahiro and Giuli nodded and climbed onto its back.

“Th-the Moujuu...”

“They’re going to save us...!”

One Moujuu grabbed Zhu by the collar with its mouth, and another did the same for Feng. Iroha, naturally, rode Nuemaru.

“The wall...!”

The giant bedrock fell down on them just before they could run for the exit.

Yahiro unsheathed his katana and slashed the rock with his Regalia. Then the Moujuu safely carried them out of the collapsing underground cave.

## 6

Josh glared bitterly at the retracted slide of his pistol—it was out of ammunition.

In front of him were the assailants from Melora Electronics. They still moved around the Yáo Guāng Xīng’s dining room even after getting torn to shreds by the metallic crystal blades.

“You’ve got to be kidding me... Blowing their heads off doesn’t kill them?” Cold sweat ran down Josh’s temples.

The children trembled behind his back, pale with horror. Among them was Vanagloria's Relict Deserver, Ayaho. The blades that skewered the attackers were her Regalia, but she had no experience in combat—it wouldn't be fair to expect her to fight further.

Still, could he kill the Relict Deservers with just a few reserved handgun bullets?

Josh changed the pistol's magazine unconsciously, the movements all engraved into his body, while gritting his teeth in desperation.

"The Deservers have received the dragon factor from their Relicts. Basically, they are a discount version of the Lazarus. Do not think you can kill them easily," a calm, low voice said right beside him.

The next moment, an invisible shock wave crushed the attackers' bodies against the floor. All their bones were broken and they stopped moving as the damage exceeded their regeneration's limits.

"So they're like Fafnir soldiers. A bit harder to process their deaths since they're still rational." Josh sighed in relief as he turned to look at Auguste Nathan, who had appeared beside him before Josh realized.

Who knew what went through his mind, but this Black envoy from the Heavenly Imperial House had decided to help out Josh and the Galerie.

"Still, something's off," Nathan muttered as he looked down at the crushed assailants.

Josh raised an eyebrow. "What is?"

"Their Regalia were too weak."

"What?" Josh stared at Nathan's profile in disbelief, but soon he brushed his hair back and gave it some thought. "...Now that you mention it, maybe. Otherwise, we wouldn't be holding our own against them like this."

"Precisely." Nathan stared at the fight still ongoing at the platform.

Galerie Berith had fewer numbers and no way to counter the Regalia, yet they were putting up a good fight. Although they'd allowed the enemy to get inside the armored train, the victory was still contested.

“There are too many Relict Deservers to begin with... It’s highly likely their Relict Regalia are not originals.”

“Not originals? You mean they’re replicas?” Josh asked in befuddlement.

“Yes. And bad ones, at that.”

“...That explains it. So this huge-ass fortress is a Relict factory.” Josh snorted, glancing at the center of the fortress.

The amount of defenses and stationed forces were overkill. Not to mention the giant power plant. It all made sense upon realizing it was for the sake of mass-produced artificial Relicts.

“That explains why they are so obsessed with Vanagloria’s Relict,” Nathan said while looking at Ayaho, who was sitting on the floor.

“Because they can make better replicas with a better original? Rubbish.” Josh shook his head.

Then a hoarse voice full of negative emotion sounded in the blood-soaked car.

“That’s...why?”

“...Ayaho?” Josh looked at her in shock.

Ayaho looked back at him with eyes devoid of emotion.

“That selfish reason is why they’re attacking us...?”

“Wait, Ayaho... Melora hasn’t given up on taking you—”

“They won’t get away with this... Not after daring to harm Rinka and Ren for that...!” Ayaho raised her voice as she gripped the short sword Giuli had given her.

She glared daggers at the assailants still fighting on the platform.

“Ayaho, don’t!”

Josh tried to stop her, but he was paralyzed under the overwhelming dragon aura she exuded. The Regalia might attack him if he approached her carelessly.

“They’ll pay! They’ll pay! They’ll pay! They’ll pay! I will make you pay!”

Ayaho jumped down to the platform through the blown wall of the train without hesitation.

The attackers paused their fight when they noticed her eerie presence.

Ayaho pointed her right hand, the scarlet mark glowing on it, at them. She gathered as much dragon aura as she could before unleashing her Regalia.

But the moment before she could, a cheerful voice stopped her.

“Stop right there!”

“...Huh?!” Ayaho was taken aback by the unexpected visit.

Among the incessant barrage of bullets all over the platform was one short woman wearing clothes more befitting of a university student. Ayaho recognized her face.

“Nina... Why...?” she muttered in astonishment.

Nina Himekawa reached amicably out to her.

The next moment, Ayaho’s vision went hazy. She collapsed unconscious on the floor before realizing what happened. Gas created by Luxuria’s power had sucked the oxygen from the air around her.

“Nina Himekawa... Luxuria’s medium?” Nathan called her name as he disembarked.

Nina, holding Ayaho in one arm, made a V-sign with her open left hand and smiled amiably at him.

“That’s meee! Long time no see, ladies and gentlemen of Galerie Berith. And Auguste.”

“Why are you in the Chinese Federation’s base?” Nathan asked, expression unchanging despite Nina’s friendliness.

Nina minded it not and replied indifferently: “Heh, that’s a funny question, little Auguste. Why are *you* helping the Galerie? Could it be that you’ve betrayed Ganzheit?”

“...Where is Hisaki Minato?” he asked, looking around.

The young man under the marsh dragon’s blessing. That Lazarus was like a

loyal dog—he wouldn't leave Nina's side for no reason. His absence was enough to put Nathan on guard.

"Hisaki's picking up the princess!" Nina replied with a gentle smile.

Nathan's expression turned stern. "Are you after Sui Narusawa?"

"Well, we can't let you keep her after dropping your job as Ganzheit's agent, can weeee?"

"You think I will let you take her?"

"Back at you. You think you can stop uuus?" Nina narrowed her eyes and tilted her head, all warmth gone from her voice. "You underestimate us!"

"...!"

Nathan reacted quickly to the fierce hostility striking him from the side. He braced himself and jumped away.

Fresh blood spurted from his right arm. From his blind spot, the edge of the long sword slashed the air and dug deeply into his upper arm. It reached his bone.

"You?! Where did you pop out from?!" Josh roared as he pointed his gun at Hisaki.

Hisaki appeared on the platform out of the blue. Behind Nathan was the heavily armored Yáo Guāng Xīng, leaving no space for someone to cross from. Unless he literally crossed the wall of the train car itself, he could not have appeared from that spot.

"Luxuria's power...matter permeation...," Nathan muttered, holding down his wounded arm.

Luxuria's Regalia could freely liquefy matter. Hisaki applied the power to morph the Yáo Guāng Xīng's wall into a state between solid and liquid to cross through it.

Not even the strongest prison could keep him in or out. The armored train's container might as well be a public plaza to him.

As proof, he carried a white-haired girl in his left arm, sleeping like a puppet

with its strings cut. Superbia's medium—Sui Narusawa.

Nina and Hisaki aided Melora in the attack in order to take the Galerie's captive back.

"I suggest you surrender sooner rather than laterrr. Now that you have no hostages, the CFA won't hold back anymooore." Nina waved at Josh with a big grin on her face.

Vanagloria's Relict Deserver was taken from them, and their other Deserver, Nathan, was wounded. Galerie Berith had no way to oppose Nina and Hisaki now.

Josh gritted his teeth, and then he heard a shrill follow-up cackle.

"You heard her. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be, Galerie Berith."

"Jiguan Xia...?!"

Josh exclaimed in confusion as he saw the CFA soldier nonchalantly walk up to them.

He was told Jiguan Xia had accompanied Giuli and the rest to the Moujuu colony.

"You... Where's my princess and Yahiro and everyone else?" Josh glared daggers at the man.

"Princess? Oh, Giulietta Berith?" Xia curved his lips provokingly. "That woman's at the bottom of the Ploutonion, along with Yahiro Narusawa and Iroha Mamana. Probably getting devoured by Moujuu as we speak."

"The Ploutonion...?! You pushed them into the pit?!" All blood left Josh's face.

The Ploutonion was a mysterious giant pit said to be connected to another world. No one had ever heard of a human coming back alive from it. Not even a Lazarus like Yahiro could climb back from the bottom of the deep hole, much less Giuli.

"You should've handed us the Relict from the beginning, and then you might've had a more peaceful death," Xia said pityingly, ridiculing him.



“You piece of shit...!” Josh aimed his gun at Xia.

Xia aimed his own gun back. The giant Relict Deserver handgun. Josh had no hope of beating that, and still, he couldn't stop himself from pulling the trigger.

But a moment before Josh's pistol could fire, a rumble shook the Nagoya Station Fortress.

A shock like an earthquake. The armored train swayed and the fortress's walls creaked. Then explosions went off intermittently in the distance. Facilities all over the fortress went up in flames.

“What?! What is going on...?!” Upset showed on Xia's face for the first time.

Hisaki narrowed his eyes, alert to his surroundings, while Nina's widened in surprise. Not even they were expecting that.

“Moujuu...?!” Josh groaned, staring at the buildings up in flames inside the fortress.

A giant Moujuu, Grade IV, showed itself, breaking through the crumbling walls. Behind them were a few—no, over two dozen more.

The Moujuu became more and more numerous as they attacked every building in the fortress indiscriminately.

The once-thought-invincible fortress of the Chinese Federal Army slowly fell to the abnormality of Moujuu emerging from within its walls.

## Act 5 Have It Both Ways

### 1

Having lost its connection to the other world creating the ancient dragon, the Ploutonion was nothing but a giant cave. An ant colony–like maze that the Moujuu guided Yahiro *et al.* through.

“Unbelievable! We’re riding Moujuu!”

“Is this...a dream?!”

Zhu and Feng were still worked up.

Yahiro, meanwhile, could not even be surprised at this point. And Giuli was already pulling out her comms like nothing in order to call her subordinates. She got in touch with Paola Resente, on standby outside the Moujuu colony.

“Paola! Can you hear me?”

*“Yes, but we’re in combat.”*

“Combat? With whom?”

*“Jiguan Xia’s men. CFA troops. Not very hard, but too many. Wouldn’t hold ground without the Moujuu’s help.”*

“Oh, so they’re keeping their word to Iroha.” Giuli chuckled at the report of her taciturn subordinate.

Jiguan Xia must have taken his squad with him to wipe out Paola’s while he was heading out. He must not have expected the local Moujuu to help the Galerie.

“Don’t worry anymore, we’re almost there. Prepare yourself.”

*“I see you. I see why you say that.”*

Paola sighed from the other side of the line. She had lost contact with Yahiro’s

group for a while, and now they were back with a herd of Moujuu. Of course she would sigh.

“What about you two? You’ll be treated as traitors, won’t you?” Yahiro asked Zhu and Feng, hanging from the Moujuu’s mouths.

One could easily imagine how awkward things would be if they just charged into the fight against the CFA. In reality, they were the victims of betrayal, but only Yahiro’s side could attest to that. And if they continued following Iroha, they would become enemies to the CFA.

“We will follow Waon. Either way, we have no place in the army now that *Shangxiao Xia* has cut us off.”

“Why would we even want to be back with him to begin with?”

Perhaps they were feeling resolved after surviving the dangers of the Ploutonion.

“I guess I get how you feel, but...”

“No, this is still for the good of our homeland. Personally collecting Relicts and making private use of the Deservers is a clear deviation of *Shangxiao Xia*’s authority.”

“The truth is that the mainland ordered us to look into his actions. Too bad he made us fall into the Ploutonion, though.”

“Wait, you were monitoring Xia?”

“The top brass figured individuals like us would be clear of suspicion.”

The two of them laughed, while Yahiro grimaced. *So they realize they’re weird.*

“That’s okay, but either way, I don’t think you’d like to point your weapons at your compatriots. Just catch up with us later, okay?” Giuli waved at them before signaling Iroha.

“Got it.” Iroha nodded and gave instructions to the Moujuu carrying the soldiers.

“Uwah?!”

“Lady Giuliii?!”

Zhu and Feng screamed as the Moujuu threw them away.

The others ignored the pair rolling on the ground as their Moujuu made their way across the forest.

At the end of it, Paola’s squad was in the middle of a shoot-out, using the armored truck as a shield.

The CFA soldiers fighting them immediately fell into chaos as the Moujuu herd suddenly appeared for their counterattack.

A few Relict Deservers could not stand their own against a couple dozen Moujuu, including a Grade IV. They lost their will to resist without putting up much of a fight and scattered away.

“Kept you waiting, huh, Paola? Any wounded?” Giuli got off the Moujuu and approached her.

Paola’s team had eleven people. A quick look said they were all fine.

“Only minor wounds. We can still fight.”

“And we can still use the truck. All right, time to go back to the Nagoya Station Fortress. Looks like the Moujuu are coming, too, hm? Iroha, catch.”

Giuli took a portable device out of her pocket and threw it at Iroha.

Iroha caught it by reflex and gave a puzzled glance at the map on the screen.

“What’s this?”

“The way into the Nagoya Station Fortress. Let the Moujuu know. With how many transport routes and sewers that huge fortress has, I knew there had to be some secret path.”

“...How did you find them, though?” Yahiro looked at her with surprise.

The Galerie arrived at Nagoya two days ago; too little time to find a secret path into the city. There should have been no spare hands to investigate it in the first place, considering their forces were already split by the Moujuu colony search.

Giuli grinned. “Honoka’s trio looked for it, with the help of our biodrones.”

“You made them do that?!”

Iroha glared at her in disbelief, shocked that her children had been given such a dangerous mission without her knowledge.

“Ugh... Oh well. It’ll help these guys, too.”

Iroha sighed in resignation after a short while.

Yahiro was surprised to hear her conclusion. He thought she would hate the idea of using the Moujuu as tools.

“You’re gonna make them destroy the artificial Relict factory?”

“That’s what they want. All the Moujuu here attacked the fortress in order to stop the CFA from making the artificial Relicts to begin with.”

“That’s what they were doing?” Yahiro furrowed his brow.

Sure, more Deservers would mean more trouble for them. But he couldn’t believe the Moujuu would be intelligent enough to think of stopping the production of artificial Relicts.

“Artificial Relicts are basically degraded versions of crystallized dragon factor, remember? Mass-producing that would naturally spread crude dragon factor into the sewage and emissions,” Giuli answered.

Yahiro was honestly surprised to hear that. “That’s what they wanted to stop? Then that’s also why Iroha couldn’t reach them?”

“Yup, another effect of the dragon factor. For starters, the dragon factor here was abnormally dense after they broke the seal on the ancient dragon.” Giuli wore a nasty grin. “If there’s an artificial Relict factory currently operating inside those walls, then that’s the fortress’s weak point. We’ll force our way into the Nagoya station while the Moujuu plunge the army into chaos from within.”

“Wouldn’t that get us on the Chinese Federation’s bad side?” Yahiro gave her a look of worry.

The CFA’s military strength was great even without the Relict Deservers. It didn’t feel like a smart idea to make enemies of them outright.

Then, surprisingly, Iroha agreed with Giuli.

“They started the fight. Too late now.”

“Iroha?”

“They won’t get away with trying to lay a finger on my dear little sister.” Iroha sneered as she glared at the Nagoya Station Fortress.

At that sight, Yahiro finally realized. Iroha was mad this whole time—furious at the Chinese Federal Army for breaking their promise and going for Ayaho.

## 2

A Nuemaru-riding Iroha led the way into the Nagoya Station Fortress underground. Part of the thought-to-be collapsed subway tunnels remained, allowing them to infiltrate the fortress.

“Is this the right way?”

“Yes. The Moujuu are noticing something, too.” Iroha nodded confidently at Yahiro’s worried question.

It was not feasible to build everything anew inside the sprawling Nagoya Station Fortress, so they recycled many facilities of the old station, such as the underground shopping centers. Yahiro’s team made their way through desolate areas to reach the center of the artificial Relict factory unnoticed.

“I had no idea there was a place like this inside the fortress,” said Lieutenant Zhu, who somehow caught up with them, as he looked around the factory with surprise.

“Why didn’t you know?” Yahiro asked in puzzlement.

Zhu and Feng were Relict Deservers; how could they possibly not know of the factory?

“This factory is Melora’s, and not even the Deservers could get in.”

“Except for the deputy commander, I guess.”

Yahiro snorted at their response.

“Jiguan Xia has a personal connection with Melora, for sure. Maybe he pushed you into the Ploutonion to keep that hidden.”

“Now everything begins to make sense. If Melora has a monopoly on artificial Relict manufacturing, then maybe it wasn’t the Chinese Republic, but Melora who decided to go after Ayaho,” Giuli inferred.

“What?! So it really was just greed!” Iroha fumed.

While the conversation went on, they reached a dead end in the underground corridor. Unlike other paths haphazardly blocked off, this one was dammed up by a thick wall. The core of the Relict factory had to be on the other side of it.

“Yahiro!”

“I know. Iroha, keep the Moujuu back.”

Yahiro stepped before the wall, gripping his sword’s hilt.

The reinforced concrete was about a dozen feet thick. A regular *uchigatana* could never hope to break it. And yet, Yahiro did not doubt for a second that he could. This barrier was but a paper screen compared to the ancient black dragon.

“Blaze!”

Yahiro’s katana was engulfed in the flames of purification as he slashed the thick wall, melting it away like butter. It sliced a square in the wall that fell to the other side with a quake, revealing the modern interior of the factory.

The Moujuu jumped into the opening one after the other.

It was a positively pressured clean room, reminiscent of a semiconductor factory. It was mostly automated—almost no people were around. The Moujuu destroyed the modern and spotless production lines without mercy.

“M-Moujuu?!”

“Wh-who are you?! Don’t think you can get away with thi...”

Factory supervisors yelled as they noticed their intrusion, but Yahiro grabbed one of them by the neck.

“What the hell is this?!”

Yahiro spat aggressively, pointing at the culture tanks in glass cases.

Moujuu were trapped inside them, tubes cruelly connected all over their

bodies.

“Why are there Moujuu in here? Wasn’t this an artificial Relict factory?”

“I-in order to excite the Relicts, we need the original Relict Regalia and their Deserver...” the supervisor wheezed, still grabbed by the neck.

“I know that! But what’s this?!”

“P-people compatible with the Relicts aren’t found that easily. If we forcefully embed one in a non-Deserver, their body won’t be able to take it and they’ll die.”

“And...?” Yahiro gripped his neck tighter.

Stricken by fear, the supervisor explained rapidly in a coughing fit.

“The Moujuu... Their cells can excite any Relict. The only issue is that the replica ends up largely degraded from the original, but if we can find how to overcome that...”

“And what happens to the Moujuu?”

“...What?”

“What happens to the Moujuu when you embed the Relicts in them?”

The supervisor blinked, confused as to why he would ask that.

“Well... They die, obviously... But they last about seven times longer than a human, which is enough to replicate the Relict, so...”

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?! The Moujuu used to be humans!”

“Y-yes, so I’ve heard.” He nodded, dumbfounded.

He did not seem the least bit remorseful about treating the Moujuu as expendable to fabricate the Relicts.

“I see. You can shut your mouth now.”

“Wha?”

After his quiet whisper, Yahiro let the supervisor go. He stumbled as he fell suddenly, but his eyes lit up with relief.

Then Yahiro put his entire body weight into punching the supervisor in the



face.

The attack was hard enough to break Yahiro's fist. He would heal soon thanks to his Lazarus powers, but the supervisor could only writhe in agony before losing consciousness, never realizing what happened.

"So this is why Melora Electronics built the artificial Relict factory in Japan instead of the Chinese mainland," Iroha muttered sadly as she looked at the place burning and collapsing.

Iroha did not try to help the Moujuu in the culture tanks. She knew that nothing would save them. That their only salvation was the destruction of the factory to put them to rest in peace.

"I'm guessing another reason to use Xia was to get the live samples," Yahiro said flatly, holding in his wrath.

"Maybe the Moujuu weren't attacking the Nagoya Station Fortress because of the dragon factor, but because they knew their brethren were being killed," Iroha said, as though in a prayer.

"Yeah." Yahiro sighed softly.

Then a sneering voice complemented their comments: "But that is all over now..."

"...!" Yahiro raised his head at the mature-sounding voice, finding it familiar.

Right by the ceiling, standing on the maintenance catwalk, was a beautiful woman with long black hair. The dragon medium who disappeared from their sights back in Yokohama—Miyabi Maisaka.

"Miyabi?! What are you doing here?!" Iroha asked in shock.

Yahiro put up his guard. Who knew why she would show herself here and now? Could it be she was cooperating with the Chinese Federal Army? Only one thing was certain: she was not on their side.

"Allow me to add: the one leading the manufacture of the artificial Relicts was the founder of Melora, Liu Ryland. He bought out not only Jiguan Xia, but the fortress's chief executive too, to do as he pleased."

Miyabi walked the catwalk with firm, loud steps. Her draconized left leg was

exposed—no point hiding it now.

“But that’s over. I imagine they will send a person with more scruples for their next chief executive.”

“Miyabi! Wait!” Yahiro exclaimed with a serious tone before she could leave.

Miyabi turned around with a smirk, and then he saw the silver-colored case in her hands.

“That’s a Relict Regalia, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Good catch,” Miyabi replied with an impish smile.

She held a metal case that was about three feet long. Just about the right size to carry a sword.

“One of the three regalia of the Heavenly Imperial House. I figured I ought to take advantage of the trip.”

“The Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi...! That was your goal?!” Yahiro ran toward her.

He had no idea what her endgame was, but he felt he should not allow her to take the sword. The Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi was a Relict Regalia powerful enough to seal that ancient dragon. Who knew what could happen if it fell into the wrong hands?

“Who asked you for it?”

Giuli appeared in Miyabi’s way on the catwalk out of nowhere. She had used her wires and some acrobatics kicking off the wall to climb all the way up near the ceiling.

“Going by what you said, I can’t imagine it’s Liu Ryland.”

“My employer is Salas. Ganzheit’s Alfred Salas.”

“Ganzheit...!” A shadow cast in Yahiro’s eyes.

Ganzheit’s usual stand was to not get involved with the Relicts. Something had to be up if they were going against that to get their hands on the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi now.

“Yahiro.”

“I know. Catch Miyabi, right?”

Yahiro approached Miyabi so as to put her in a pincer attack. The catwalk was less than three feet wide. She had nowhere to run.

Still, she kept her expression unchanged, smiling serenely with the Relict case in her arms.

“My. Should you be wasting your time on me?”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the only Relict Regalia Ganzheit wants. I may not be the only dragon medium they hired.”

“Not the only...?” Violent anxiety struck him.

He could not believe there was *anything* more valuable to Ganzheit in Nagoya than the Heavenly Imperial House’s Regalia. But there was *someone*.



The dragon medium they originally owned that was now in the Galerie's custody—Sui Narusawa.

"Miyabi, what is your endgame?! You have no reason to help Ganzheit, do you?!" Yahiro yelled in disappointment.

"I'm sorry." She looked at him and softly shook her head.

Then she kicked the catwalk with her left leg and jumped. She leaped far higher than any human could, crossing above the wrecked facilities and disappearing into the flames.

"Let us meet again. If you survive until then, that is."

Miyabi's last words echoed in Yahiro's ear.

He looked down at the burning factory, frozen and in silence.

### 3

Liu Ryland headed to the Nagoya Station through the VIP route, for the sake of getting on Melora Electronics' armored train: the T-Bullet.

"Apologies, Chairman. We let Rosetta Berith get away." A man in combat uniform waiting by the station's entrance bowed his head at the sight of Liu.

He was the commander of Melora's PMC division and Liu's bodyguard. His uniform was stained in blood, and he had a fresh wound on his cheek, a consequence of Rosetta Berith's counterattack.

"What are our losses?" Liu asked calmly.

He was not disappointed. He already expected them to be unable to take Rosetta down.

"Eight gravely wounded, six without hope of recovery."

"Our elite couldn't take on that combat doll, eh? No wonder it is House Berith's pride and joy, I suppose. Truly regrettable that we couldn't join forces with the Galerie." Liu sighed self-deprecatingly and pursed his lips in discontentment.

Their conversation was too short-lived, but still enough to see how exceptional Rosetta Berith was. Galerie Berith's other pawns, while few, were also outstanding. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to topple the Nagoya Station Fortress so easily, even with the help of the Moujuu.

Had he gotten them to collaborate, then surely Liu's plans of getting ahead of Ganzheit and ruling the world after the new genocide would have gone smoothly. No use crying over spilled milk, though.

Liu gave up on that and switched gears.

As CEO of one of the biggest corporations in the world, he knew how important it was to cut one's losses. He had no hesitation in doing away with what did not benefit him. Even if it was Galerie Berith. Or the Nagoya Station Fortress.

"Liu Ryland..." Someone called his name as he walked the stairs toward the platform; an exhausted voice like that of someone in their deathbed.

"Well, well, Chief. What brings you here all alone?" Liu smiled as he turned to look at the worn-out Chief Executive Zeming Hou.

The pudgy man almost fell down the stairs as Liu drew closer to him.

"Mr. Liu! What is this disaster?! What is happening?!"

"It seems like Moujuu have appeared in the artificial Relict factory," Liu Ryland flatly responded, coldly glancing down at a confused Hou.

"Moujuu?!" Hou's face was overcome with indignation.

The chief executive of the fortress finally realized what was going on in his command post.

"Is it that woman?! The dragon medium brought the Moujuu?! Wh-what about *Shangxiao Xia*?! What is the Relict squad doing?!"

"Calm down, Chief," Liu chastised him as his bodyguards took Hou away.

The Relict factory was wrecked, and the Nagoya Station Fortress would collapse any moment. There was no utility in Zeming Hou anymore. However, his title remained useful. Liu calculated everything while staring at a wailing Hou.

“Mr. Liu! What should I do?!”

“There are too many Moujuu. Now that they’ve entered the fortress, it’ll be impossible to eradicate them.”

“Impossible... But then the fortress...”

“It should be abandoned. That’s the wisest,” Liu said, devoid of emotion.

Zeming Hou twisted his face in despair.

“You’re telling me...to forsake the fortress and run?!”

“So long as we retain the original Relict Regalia, we can build another factory, and another fortress. What’s the issue?”

“But...they wouldn’t let me! Who knows what the mainland will do to me if we lose the fortress...”

“I see. That’s unfortunate, Chief. Now then, I must go.” Liu smiled, cold and cruel.

Zeming Hou yelled as Liu turned his back on him.

“Liu Ryland... You’ll betray me?! You’ll betray the Chinese Federation?!”

“Betray? We were only business partners.”

“Call all the Relict Deservers back! Have them wipe out the Moujuu!”

“What if I said no?”

“S-seize him! That’s your chief’s order!” Hou yelled at the soldiers guarding the platform.

Yet the soldiers only looked at each other in confusion. As an administrative official, Zeming Hou had no direct authority over the army.

“Catch them all. Kill them if you must. Liu Ryland is a national enemy!”

“Good grief. Now that is unfair.” Liu chuckled before glancing at his operators.

The guards nodded back and drew their guns. The Relict Deserver handguns. Crimson flashes swept the platform, burning the standing soldiers to a crisp.

“What...? Why do you...have the Relict Regalia...?” Zeming Hou took a step back, eyes wide in bewilderment; he was shocked to learn the PMC operators

were armed with Relicts.

“Melora Electronics is in charge of manufacturing the artificial Relicts, after all. Is it that surprising that we would have our hands on a Relict or two that you weren’t aware of?” Liu shrugged. “Besides, all Relict troops are on my side. Naturally. It wasn’t the CFA, much less you, Chief, who gave them their power. It was my Melora Electronics.”

“Wha...? This can’t...”

Hou’s face turned pale as the operators aimed their guns at him. He did away with any shame and pride and knelt in place and begged for dear life.

“W-wait, Mr. Liu! I was wrong. I’ll help you. The Chinese Federation will support you all the way, so please...”

“The chief executive of the SAR fell at the hands of the Moujuu. Don’t worry, Chief. You have no need to fear the mainland’s retribution.”

“D-don’t, Mr. Liu! Please! No...!” His scream was cut off as a crimson flash pierced his chest.

The operator silently opened the handgun’s breech and ejected the artificial Relict that had lost its glow. The inferior Relict could not stand the use of the Regalia, and had to be replaced periodically.

Liu inexpressively observed the motion while thinking about the room for improvement. Hou’s corpse was no longer in his attention.

The fire in the factory caused by the Moujuu was already spreading throughout the residential area of the Nagoya Station Fortress. They lacked the facilities to put out a fire on this scale, all because Chief Executive Zeming Hou appropriated the funds for himself.

He only reaped what he sowed, but even if they had sufficient facilities, it was doubtful that they would be able to withstand the Moujuu attack. This fortress was fated to fall the moment they stalled Galerie Berith and the fire dragon’s medium—Iroha Mamana.

“Hey, General. Made you wait?” A soldier in an officer’s uniform came from the opposite side just before Liu was about to get on the armored train.



The tall soldier carried Ayaho Sashou, unconscious, on his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. So he actually completed his mission to retrieve Vanagloria's Relict Regalia.

"You're just in time, *Shangxiao Xia*." Liu smiled in satisfaction.

"Sorry about that. I was not expecting the Lazarus to come crawling back from the Ploutonion." Xia apologized with uncharacteristically sincerity.

Liu raised his eyebrows at the news.

"They're back from the Ploutonion? They're monsters even beyond our expectations."

"Yup. That's why the fortress is like that now. Sorry about your factory, too," Xia said with pity as he stared in the direction of the wrecked factory.

Liu simply shook his head. No one expected that the Lazarus could survive even the Ploutonion. It would be unfair to criticize Xia for it.

"It stings, but there is nothing that can be done. Let's be glad we got a better look at the Lazarus's powers. Either way, we got Vanagloria's Relict."

"Yeah."

"A perfect Relict, Deserver included. This will be far more valuable than the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi we couldn't even activate. It will be worth the sacrifices." Liu Ryland smiled complacently as he checked unconscious Ayaho's right hand.

Xia nodded before pointing at the armored train's door.

"All right. Let's get away from here, then. Before the Lazarus comes after us."

"Yes, indeed. This land is no longer of use."

Liu Ryland got on the T-Bullet as Xia and his Relict Deservers followed.

The silver train, ready to go, roared its high-power diesel engines and slowly left the crumbling Nagoya Station Fortress behind.

The Moujuu that charged into the Nagoya Station Fortress with Yahiro's group

totaled sixty.

Thanks in part to walls being demolished from the inside, the number grew with time. However, they were comparatively peaceful Moujuu, perhaps satisfied that the artificial Relict factory was already destroyed. A sizeable fraction of them were already heading back home, following Iroha's instructions.

The only thing in the way were the Chinese Federal Army's soldiers guarding the fortress. They attacked the Moujuu without question the moment they were in their sights.

"Stop, don't shoot! Stop! Don't shoot them!" Iroha yelled at the firing soldiers, but her voice was drowned out by the gunfire.

The Moujuu naturally countered in self-defense. Mutual slaughter between Moujuu and humans. A senseless war.

"Why...? They have no reason to attack people anymore...!"

"The soldiers don't know anything—the Moujuu are nothing but a source of fear for them. And the Moujuu won't let themselves get killed," Yahiro muttered as he held up Iroha, who had gone pale.

Agitated by the smell of blood, the Moujuu escaped from Iroha's control. Even with that aside, her power didn't have its full effect due to the dragon factor remnant.

"Waon, we must go. We have to protect the civilians."

"Sad to say goodbye, but the time has come."

Zhu and Feng said as they prepared to part ways with Iroha.

The battle between Moujuu and soldiers didn't look like it would end anytime soon, and the damage was spreading to the residential zones. The aforementioned pair wanted to go keep control of the situation.

"Protecting this place is our duty, so don't worry about us and go on. We will tell the soldiers to stop fighting."

"Just let me hold your hand before I go!"

“...Thank you, guys. Stay safe.” Iroha kept her distress down and shook their hands.

The CFA, its line of command crumbled, had little chance of eradicating the Moujuu. The safest choice was to avoid combat and let them go back to their colony.

But that wasn't Iroha's job. Only Zhu and Feng, as fellow members of the CFA, could convince the soldiers.

“Let's go, Yahiro. I'm worried about Sui, too.” Iroha raised her head, setting her doubts aside.

Yahiro nodded and stood before her, prepared to dash, but Giuli stopped him.

“Wait, Yahiro!”

“Giuli...?!”

A rain of bullets hit the ground at his feet. Yahiro raised his head in shock and saw the soldiers glaring at Iroha with bare hostility.

“Galerie Berith's dragon medium!”

“It's her! She's controlling the Moujuu, telling them to attack the base!”

The soldiers fired at her in a frenzy. Iroha stood frozen in shock while Yahiro just barely covered for her with gritted teeth.

“This is not the time for humans to be killing each other...!”

“Indeed. How dreadful is a man overcome with fear.”

The cold voice of a girl echoed alongside gunfire, and the soldiers dropped their guns, their dominant arms shot.

Yahiro's jaw dropped as Rosé, wearing a lavish party dress, appeared before his eyes.

“Rosé?! ”

“Where'd you get that dress?! It's adorable!” Iroha huffed in excitement.

Meanwhile, Wei and his subordinates suppressed the confused soldiers, opening a safe path to the station.

Rosé put her gun down upon seeing that and looked around. Then, as she confirmed Giuli's presence, she sighed in relief.

"You're okay, Giuli...!"

"Gee, you're such a worrywart, Rosy."

Giuli carefully caressed her little sister's head after her unusual show of emotion. As coolheaded as she was, Rosé sure was fond of her sister.

"So, what's the situation?" Giuli asked while heading quickly toward the station.

Rosé, already calm and collected, replied, "Melora attacked the Yáo Guāng Xīng."

"They're after Ayaho's Relict? Just as we thought."

"Josh's team should be enough against Melora's operators. I can't imagine the CFA has the spare manpower to help them," Rosé said, uncharacteristically optimistic, perhaps not wanting to worry Giuli.

"No, Rosé. They're not up against Melora. They have a dragon medium," Yahiro responded quickly and irritated.

"A dragon medium?" Rosé narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"We met Miyabi at the Relict factory. Ganzheit hired her to retrieve the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi."

"...And there are more dragon mediums than her?"

"Yes. They must be after..."

"Sui Narusawa." A shadow cast in Rosé's expression.

The next moment, Yahiro raised his head with a jolt, feeling a swelling dragon aura.

"Run!"

"Get back!"

Iroha and Yahiro yelled at the same time. Giuli, Rosé, and the Galerie operators did as told without asking questions.

Then the station's ceiling collapsed. Liquefied concrete fell from the stairs, pushed by an invisible wall. It was like looking at cold lava.

"This Regalia...! Hisaki Minato?!"

Yahiro dodged the molten concrete as he ran up to the platform. There awaited a young man in a black hoodie holding a long sword. Luxuria's Lazarus—Hisaki Minato.

He held a white-haired girl in his left arm, sleeping like a doll.

"Mr. Nathan!"

"Iroha Mamana... You're back." The Black man facing Hisaki turned around at Iroha's call, his voice turning a tad cheerful.

His right arm was stained with fresh blood. He had been fighting Hisaki to stop him from taking Sui.

"Narusawa." Hisaki raised his sword in high alert at their arrival, clearly prepared to fight them for Sui.

"Let her go, Minato!" Yahiro, too, unsheathed his sword.

Then part of the platform transformed into a toxic-purple marsh, blocking his way. Yahiro tried to burn away the mud, but his purifying flames were too slow. The two Regalia clashed.

"Nina...?!" Iroha shook her head in confusion at the sight of Nina Himekawa beside Hisaki.

"Heeey! Long time no see. How've you been?" Nina smiled amicably at her without remorse.

Iroha gasped at her attitude.

"Nina, why?! What do you want to do, taking Sui?!"

"I couuuld explain it to you, but then again, should you be wasting time talking to uuus?"

"What do you mean by that?" Iroha was perplexed.

Then a shrill childish voice echoed:

“Iroha! Please, help...!”

“Rinka?!” Iroha grimaced as she looked in the direction of the voice.

Rinka was crouched down right beside the broken Yáo Guāng Xīng, tending to her brother’s bleeding forehead.

“Ren?! Is he hurt?!”

“Ren’s fine...! You have to save Ayaho!”

“Wha...?!”

“You’re taking Ayaho, too?!” Yahiro’s whole body shivered with anger as he glared at Hisaki.

Hisaki stared back inexpressively. He was not going to make excuses.

“It was Jiguan Xia, Yahiro. He took Ayaho,” Josh corrected Yahiro’s misunderstanding.

Yahiro, while confused by the news, understood. He knew Jiguan Xia was after Vanagloria’s Relict, and it explained Ayaho’s absence.

“Sorry, Lady, Princess. I couldn’t protect her.”

“No, you did well simply keeping everyone alive against the Relict Deservers,” Rosé responded calmly to Josh’s apology.

Even with Nathan’s help, they were up against a battalion of Relict Deservers. Not to mention Lazarus Hisaki, who was a completely unexpected adversary. The team protecting the Yáo Guāng Xīng did a good enough job.

“Jiguan Xia is working for Melora Electronics. You should hurry after them, or it’ll be too late!” Nina rushed them, glancing at the stopped silver train on the other platform.

The armored train roared its engines, ready for departure, and began slowly moving. They were about to abandon the collapsing Nagoya Station Fortress and save just themselves.

“Why are you taking Sui, Nina?” Yahiro asked, his voice low.

Nina gave him a sudden serious look.

“Did you meet the ancient dragon?”

“What?”

Her question caught him off guard. Even Iroha froze up at the sound of it.

“You entered the ancient Ploutonion, didn’t you? Didn’t you peer into the dragon’s memories?”

“Did you...see that, too?” Iroha asked, voice trembling.

The image of the girl in the white darkness came to mind, as did the sight of that unfamiliar Japan in the so-called Reiwa era.

Perhaps Nina and Hisaki didn’t see that exact same scene, but clearly they knew something they didn’t.

“What’s the ancient dragon have to do with you taking Sui...?” Yahiro questioned her, pushed by irrational concern.

Nina only grinned.

“Wait, for the Ploutonion...?! You’re taking her to make her open more of them?”

“Mmhmmm... But it’s nothing you need to worry about. We made a promise, didn’t we?” Nina said, her tone appropriately mature.

Yahiro was overwhelmed, if only a little.

“...Promise?”

“Yes. That we would help you kill Sui. We’re only making good on that promise. So don’t you worry, and go after Ayahooo.”

The moment Nina said that, Hisaki unleashed his Regalia. The platform floor turned into a swamp and blew a sinister green mist, taking away Yahiro’s sight.

By the time the putrid-smelling haze had cleared up, Nina and Hisaki were nowhere to be found.

The armored train ran away with Ayaho, too, as though laughing in the faces of Yahiro and Iroha, who could only stand and watch, aghast.

“Yahiro...” Rinka was the first one to break the silence.

After staring at Yahiro with pleading eyes, she looked at the departing silver train. Her expression begged him to get her sister back, but she couldn’t say it out loud.

“Let’s go, Giuli,” Yahiro said as he sheathed his *uchigatana*. “Melora’s armored train left. We must follow them now or we won’t be able to get Ayaho back.”

“Yahiro?!” Iroha’s eyes grew wide in shock.

Pursuing Melora to get Ayaho back meant letting Nina and Hisaki take Sui.

“If we lose Sui, we might not be able to turn the Japanese people back. Are you sure?” Giuli warned.

Rosé, too, gave him a condemning glance.

“B-but who knows what they’ll do to Ayaho...?!” Rinka insisted, her voice weak.

The rest of the kids had the same look in their eyes, although they said nothing.

Yet the person who one would expect to agree with Yahiro quicker than anyone else remained silent. It took a while before Iroha nodded, resolute.

“Thank you, Yahiro, for caring about Ayaho.”

“...Iroha?” He furrowed his brow at the look of her smile. That was not the reaction he was expecting.

“I should respond in kind.”

Yahiro remained confused while Iroha clung to him and reached her lips to his ear.

Then, with a loud *chomp*, she bit it.

“Oww!” Yahiro yelped in pain.

Rinka, Josh, Wei, the twins, and even Nathan dropped their jaws in



bewilderment.

“What the hell’re you doing at a time like this?!” Yahiro glared at Iroha, holding his ear.

The bite left a mark, and it was bleeding. She nearly tore it off.

Even a Lazarus felt pain. And minor wounds that did not affect his life healed as slowly as a regular person’s.

Yet Iroha showed no remorse as she puffed out her chest and said: “Just a little tender nibbling!”

“T-tender...?” Yahiro parroted in astonishment.

Rinka immediately covered her face. “Iroha... You’re not supposed to actually bite him...”

“Wha?! Really?!” she replied in shock, then straightened her back under Yahiro’s reproaching glare. “Erm, anyway, I did it precisely because of the situation. Getting you marked like this will let you use the Regalia while away from me for a while, right?”

“...What?” It took him a bit to realize that she intended to split up.

Iroha smiled a bit smugly at his surprised reaction.

“You don’t have to choose who to save. You’re not alone anymore. I’ll go get Sui, so you take care of Ayaho.”

“Wait! Why’re you going for Sui? Go save Ayaho!”

“We’re just saving each other’s sisters. It’s only fair, right? And if I leave you to follow Sui alone, you very well might just let her die,” she answered obstinately.

The logic was somewhat forced, but he couldn’t entirely deny it. It was true that he had asked Nina to help him kill Sui.

“I mean, what can you even do against Minato and Nina all alone?!”

“I’m not alone. I’ve got Nuemaru,” she said while picking the white Moujuu up from the floor.

“That makes no real difference!” Yahiro was beyond baffled and beginning to

feel nauseous.

Nuemaru was Iroha's trusted companion, but it was not a Grade IV super Moujuu or anything. Iroha's Regalia was purification, and she was not suited for combat, personality-wise. Letting her go after Nina would only get her beaten in retaliation.

And yet...

"No, splitting up is not so bad an idea."

"Nathan?" Yahiro's eyes grew wide as he heard a shocking source of agreement for Iroha.

Nathan looked at them with his usual cool gaze.

"I will go retrieve Ayaho Sashou. You and Iroha Mamana go take Sui Narusawa back."

"...You're going for Ayaho? You expect us to trust you?" Yahiro glared at him with suspicion.

He needed Sui in order to bring the Japanese people back, and had already fought Hisaki Minato to protect her.

Meanwhile, he had no reason to protect Ayaho. Vanagloria's Regalia was worthless to him. It wasn't motive enough for him to risk his life, even if it was part of a deal.

"I cannot promise I will get her back to you, but you can hope for me to stall Melora. My Relict is perfect for the job," he said while holding his left shoulder.

Yahiro had no idea where his confidence came from, but it didn't look like he was lying.

"I trust him. He's never lied to us." Iroha grabbed Yahiro's arm.

Yahiro sighed quietly.

She cared for her sister more than anyone else. Yahiro couldn't say no when she already decided to trust Nathan with her.

"Can you do it, Giuli, Rosé?"

"How can I say no?"

“We cannot allow them to get away with it, for the sake of our reputation.”

The Berith twins nodded simultaneously. Sure enough, Melora had unilaterally picked a fight with the Galerie. Wrecking the Relict factory wasn't enough to get them even. Josh and the veteran operators also seemed to think the same, as they looked highly motivated.

“Rinka, take care of everyone. We'll get back to you as soon as we get Sui,” Iroha said with a firm smile.

Rinka nodded in relief at the sight of Iroha's usual baseless self-confidence.

“I trust you, sister.”

## 6

The rotor on a military helicopter began spinning on the rooftop of the Nagoya Station Fortress government office.

In its cabin were Nina and Hisaki. As well as Sui Narusawa, sleeping like a corpse.

Miyabi Maisaka, who had accompanied them, was to leave separately. She would take the Relict Regalia to Ganzheit on her own. Ganzheit did not like dragon mediums gathering, on principle.

Their caution was not without reason, considering the nature of the dragon mediums. They feared the world could end unexpectedly.

“Cannon fire? Galerie Berith...,” Hisaki muttered, staring out the window beside Nina.

Galerie Berith's armored train was escaping the Nagoya Station Fortress by destroying the walls with its cannons. Apparently, they had explosives set up by the gate, anticipating the need to open their way forcefully. The veteran PMC sure was well-prepared.

The next moment, the armored train's cannons began firing warning shots at their helicopter.

They were not close enough for them to land a hit, but flying away amid the

thick hail of bullets was impossible. Unable to take off, the chopper had no choice but to hover just above the rooftop.

“Doooesn’t look like they’re just doing it to annoy us.” Nina shook her head regretfully.

The Galerie didn’t need to attack them if they were pursuing Melora’s train. Cannon shells were not cheap. These warning shots meant that they had not given up on taking Sui Narusawa back.

Then a boy and a girl riding a giant white Moujuu appeared on the rooftop, confirming her suspicions.

“Nuemaru! Get them!” Iroha pointed at the chopper as she ordered the Moujuu.

The white beast’s fur stood on end as bluish-white lightning enveloped its giant form.

A thunder blast shook the helicopter violently.

The chopper itself resisted the shock, equipped with the appropriate countermeasures, but the engine stalled. No longer able to hover, it made an emergency landing right there at the heliport.

“Can you still get it to flyyy?” Nina asked the pilot.

“I’ll reboot the engine. Give me some time,” he answered frantically.

The cockpit was dyed red by flashing warning lights as grating alarms blared. The lightning damaged the chopper’s wiring heavily; it wouldn’t be able to take off for a while.

“You heard him, Hisaki.”

“Got it, Nina.”

Hisaki forced open the locked hatch and jumped out of the chopper. Yahiro Narusawa, too, jumped off the Moujuu, grabbing his sword’s hilt.

“Nina! Give Sui back!” Iroha called, still riding the Moujuu.

Nina sat down on the helicopter’s step and took a hand to her forehead, troubled.

“Mmm, this I did not expeeect... We weren’t supposed to fight you heeere.”

“Then give us Sui back and join hands with us! The Moujuu are human! The Japanese people haven’t died out yet!” Yahiro yelled at her, his glare set on Hisaki.

Nina looked at Yahiro serenely, then blinked in confusion.

“The Moujuu are humans? So what?”

“Nina...?”

“You knew all along?”

Iroha and Yahiro grunted in agitation.

Nina stared at them and tilted her head, not realizing why they were shocked.

“Anyone with a brain could reach that conclusion. Intel gathering and analysis is the basic of basics, you knooow?”

“Then...!”

“So, you want to change the Moujuu back into people, and then what? You think everyone lives happily ever after?” Nina asked coolly.

Her remark put them at a loss for words.

In truth, they realized.

Even if the Moujuufied survivors were turned back, multiple times more people were already dead.

The cities’ infrastructure was in shambles; who knew if they could rebuild everything? There was no guarantee that the armies of the world currently occupying the land would pull out willingly.

Turning the Japanese people back solved nothing. If anything, it only brought further tragedy.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not going along with your shallow plans, mmmkay?”

“All right, we have no time to waste trying to convince you...” Yahiro gave in as he unsheathed his sword.

Nina’s take likely was not wrong. But even so, that was no reason for them to

give up on turning back the Japanese. And it did not justify Nina taking Sui away.



“We’re taking Sui back, either way.”

“If anything, I would say it’d be best to kill her as soon as possibleeee...” Nina shook her head with a wry smile.

Yahiro ran up to her, but the young man in the black hoodie stood in his way.

“Stay away from her, Narusawa!”

“Out of my way, Minato!”

Hisaki turned the rooftop into a poisonous swamp to stop the other Lazarus’s approach, and still, Yahiro charged.

They were both Lazaruses. Yahiro’s Regalia could not burn away all of Hisaki’s marsh, but clearing the path immediately around him was not so difficult. Realizing he could not stop Yahiro, Hisaki scowled.

“Beat it, Minato!”

“Piss off!”

Hisaki dodged Yahiro’s flaming sword, diving into the marshified concrete using Luxuria’s matter permeation.

Yahiro lost sight of his opponent for a moment, and Hisaki attacked from an unexpected angle. He stabbed his long sword like a spear toward Yahiro’s back.

Then scorching flames blew into Hisaki’s face.

Iroha had shot a stream of purifying fire.

The half-liquefied rooftop turned back into concrete after being burned, stopping Hisaki in his tracks. At the same time, Yahiro countered, but Hisaki evaded by jumping back.

“Yahiro, are you okay?!”

“Sorry. I let my guard down.” Yahiro thanked Iroha as he got back on his feet.

In terms of raw destructive force, Ira’s shock waves or Acedia’s freezing were more powerful, but Hisaki’s Regalia far exceeded them in trickiness. On top of being shapeless and unpredictable, what hurt the most was that there was no way to block his attacks besides countering with the purifying flames. Hisaki



could very well melt the Kuyou Masakane if Yahiro tried slashing him head-on.

“Dammit... Slippery bastard!”

“Ah-ha-ha, it’s a very Nina-ish Regalia. But...”

“Yeah. We can burn it away if we focus the attack.”

Yahiro held his sword at hip height as he lowered his center of gravity.

Luxuria’s matter liquefaction was menacing, but its wide area of effect made it possible for Yahiro’s Regalia to be effective when focused. It shouldn’t be impossible for Yahiro to break Hisaki’s defenses in close-quarters combat, and yet...

“If we can...just get...close...to him...” Yahiro felt dizzy all of a sudden and fell to one knee. “What? I feel so heavy...”

“Yahiro...?!” Iroha ran up to him in a panic.

Nina stared at them with a smile of relief.

“Miasma born from Luxuria’s power. A lethal amount like that would suffocate any regular human, but you should get well after a bit of rest. Sweet dreeeams!” Nina explained triumphantly as Hisaki sheathed his sword.

Yahiro crawled desperately toward them, but he was too slow.

“Wa...it...”

Nina and Hisaki turned their backs on Yahiro and Iroha after confirming they were unable to fight anymore.

In that moment, a fierce smile popped onto Yahiro’s face, certain of his victory.

“...Yeah, right!”

Yahiro, who they thought was nearly unconscious, kicked off the floor, and Hisaki turned around, jaw dropped.

“Nina!”

“Gotcha, Minato!” Yahiro yelled.

Yahiro’s flaming sword slashed Hisaki’s horizontally. He took the hit, covering

for Nina. That would kill any regular human. Even a Lazarus needed some time to recover.

“Hisaki...?!”

Yahiro touched Nina’s neck with the tip of his sword.

She gave up and stopped all movement. Blocking Yahiro’s attack was impossible at this distance, even with her powers.

“I see... You warmed up the concrete at your feet and used the ascending air current to clear the miasma. You knew I would use a colorless, odorless gas?” Nina asked, looking up at Yahiro with interest.

Her innate curiosity would not let up, even when she was cornered.

“Sumika told us about how you ran away from them!” Iroha showed Nina her smartphone as she stood up, dropping the act.

Zen Sagara and Yahiro’s relationship was not good in the slightest, but Iroha was friendly and in contact with Ira’s medium.

Sumika Kiyotaki had grumbled to Iroha about the time Nina and Hisaki took Miyabi Maisaka right from under their noses. Iroha, too, coerced Yahiro into putting on the act, based on that info. For a moment he was worried Iroha’s act was overly dramatic, but they’d tricked them in the end.

“Ahh, the girlfriend network... I couldn’t have come up with that, seeing as I don’t have any friends. Geez, kids these days...” Nina pouted sulkily.

“We’re taking Sui back.” Yahiro didn’t move the sword from Nina’s neck.

But he spun around when a sudden hostile presence sent shivers down his spine.

Hisaki forced himself up despite his injuries, using his long sword as a cane.

He was not healed yet. Not able to fight yet.

And still, the air around him was overwhelming.

The massive dragon aura he exuded intimidated Yahiro.

“Do not touch her, Yahiro Narusawa!”

Hisaki's dragon aura, like purple flames, drew an illusion in the air. The image of a giant nine-headed hydra. A phantom that covered the whole of the government building rooftop, glaring at Yahiro and Iroha before it roared.

"This is Luxuria's real power?!"

Yahiro jumped away from Nina.

Hisaki's Regalia did not hurt his medium, but Yahiro and Iroha weren't safe. Even a Lazarus was not guaranteed to survive the hydra's attack.

"Yahiro!"

"I know."

Iroha dove for Yahiro's chest and he held her close.

There could only be one way to block the hydra's attack: for Yahiro to summon a dragon to counter Hisaki's.

Yahiro's dragon aura exploded out of fear and a duty to protect Iroha. It spread out and pushed against Hisaki's, the air itself creaking under the pressure of the opposing forces.

Then, just as his dragon aura was about to bring forth the phantom of a giant dragon, a sudden clap rang out.

"Thaaat's enough. Stop it, Hisaki." Nina grabbed Hisaki's right arm and buried it in her voluptuous chest.

Hisaki, up to then lost to his wrath, let his dragon aura fade and the purple hydra disappear.

"Nina..." He looked at her with dissatisfaction, a rare reaction for the usually devoted young man.

Yet Nina shook her head, her expression stern as though scolding a small child.

"We can't keep going. Let's give Sui up. Old Salas won't complain so long as he gets the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, so let's call it a truce."

The last bit was directed at Yahiro. He shot her a bitter glare.

"I'm supposed to trust the woman who won't hesitate to use toxic gas on

us?”

“From the very beginning, I said I had no intention of fighting youuu!” Nina pouted and puffed her cheeks; she had a baby face to begin with, and the expression only made her look even more childish. “But well, I understand your skepticism. So I’ll give you a little bonus to compensate.”

“...Bonus?” Yahiro and Iroha looked at each other in confusion; the suggestion had no context whatsoever for them to imagine what she would say.

“Eeeyup! You want to get Ayaho back, don’t you?” Nina grinned.

Then she glanced at the military chopper, its engine finally restarted.

## 7

The armored T-Bullet train accelerated gradually as it left the Nagoya Station Fortress.

On its command car were Liu Ryland and Jiguan Xia. Their destination: the Port of Osaka. Liu had connections with the English army occupying the Hanshin area, as well as a Melora branch. His plan had already been to depart for Osaka, even if he hadn’t lost the artificial Relict factory.

“You sure about leaving the Galerie behind like that, General?” Xia asked while polishing his precious handgun.

Xia also understood that they had to abandon the Nagoya Station Fortress. It was only a matter of time until it fell now that the Moujuu had infiltrated it.

However, he was upset at not being able to crush Galerie Berith. Perhaps he wouldn’t have been able to kill the Lazarus, but with the full forces of the Relict Deservers, at least they could have destroyed the Galerie’s armored train.

“It’s no issue, *Shangxiao* Xia. Nina Himekawa will stall Yahiro Narusawa and Iroha Mamana. Let the Lazaruses kill each other for the rest of eternity.”

Liu Ryland sneered as he took a vintage wine out of the fridge.

“Even if the Galerie comes after us, they won’t stand against your troops without the Lazarus. Or is it that you’re feeling guilty about forsaking your

compatriots?”

“I don’t give a damn whether that mass of drones lives or not. What I’m asking is how much you’ll give us.” Xia frowned at Liu.

Xia’s violent and independent personality had never been acceptable to the army’s top brass. Which was why they sent him to Japan on top of assigning him to the artificial Relict experiments.

His frustration with this treatment only made him more willing to abandon the Nagoya Station Fortress.

His focus now was on seeing how high he could rise by using the Relict troops. In the end, Melora was but another tool for him to achieve that goal.

“Don’t worry. Chief Hou will bear all the responsibility. The reports will say that you weren’t in the fortress at the time of the attack because you were guarding me. I have many friends in the Joint Staff Department of the CFA—I will not let your standing take a hit.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“The production of artificial Relicts using Moujuu was already reaching its technological limits, in any case. It will not hurt us much to abandon that base. It’s a shame we lost the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, but in exchange, we got her.” Liu smiled in satisfaction as he held his glass of wine up to the light.

Laying on the seat behind him was Ayaho Sashou, hands and feet bound. Now that the marsh gas’s effect had worn off, they had her drugged unconscious in order to stop Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia from losing control.

“Now you’ll use that girl’s flesh to cultivate the Relict?” Xia asked wryly.

Liu did not refute it.

“Her Relict compatibility is off the charts, not to mention Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia is the freshest dragon factor crystal in existence. The Relict troops will be even stronger with the data drawn from her body.”

“Let’s hope so.” Xia grabbed the wine bottle off the table and gulped it down like water.

Then the sound of cannon fire shook the T-Bullet’s windows. A rocket

launcher's point-blank shot. Only another armored train could attack one at high speed.

"Looks like Galerie Berith's armored train is here." Xia licked the red off his lips and bared his teeth.

The T-Bullet was running on the Tokaido Main Line, which they had destroyed so Galerie Berith could not pursue them.

But the Galerie's armored train was running on the Meitetsu Nagoya Line parallel to the JR track.

"How stubborn. They have no incentive to get Ayaho Sashou back." Liu Ryland raised his voice in anger for the first time.

The Galerie's armored train ran just under a thousand feet from the T-Bullet, and it was getting closer.

The closer they got, the more precise their shots. The point-blank fire continued nonstop, shaking the T-Bullet violently every time. They slowed it down.

"It must be out of consideration for Iroha Mamana's feelings. She called her *sister*," Xia said as he looked down at sleeping Ayaho.

Liu Ryland clicked his tongue violently.

"Foolish...! What are you doing?! Strike back!"

"They've crushed all of our cannons! As though crushed by invisible walls!" the operator on the fire control seat reported with a crack in his voice.

Liu's cheeks twitched at the sound of that.

"Auguste Nathan's Relict? What a nuisance."

Jiguan Xia finished his handgun's maintenance and stood up.

Nathan's Relict came from an original dragon factor crystal, just like Ayaho's. His repelling barrier could not be broken with regular attacks, and it was difficult even with the artificial Relicts.

The only one who could stand a chance against him was Xia and his reinforced artificial Relict, tuned for the commander.

*“Shangxiao Xia.”*

“I know. I’ll go out. How many useful Deservers are there?” Xia asked his subordinate on standby.

“Seven. The damages from the Deserver girl when we attacked the Galerie were too great, and also...”

“I know. The guys I pushed into the Ploutonion.” Xia chuckled.

The clownish duo, self-proclaimed fans of Iroha Mamana. Xia got rid of them because he was suspicious they were keeping an eye on him, but perhaps they survived along with Yahiro Narusawa. He had to finish the job soon, if that was the case, and so Xia got up on the armored train’s rooftop.

The rooftop was equipped with turrets, already destroyed by the Galerie’s fire. Even if they were still intact, though, their fire would be like pellet guns against Nathan’s repellant barrier.

“Whatever, no problem. Just gotta wreck their motorcar and that’ll be it. Relict troop, spread out. We’ll launch a simultaneous attack. Nathan can’t keep them safe on his own.” Xia instructed through the radio.

The rail lines met, and Galerie Berith’s armored train pulled up right next to them. However, there was only a short distance left for them to run parallel. Once they left them behind, the Galerie would never be able to catch up again.

“It’s over, Galerie Berith.” Xia aimed his giant gun.

The shock waves from his reinforced artificial Relict could easily blow away the Galerie’s motorcar. His subordinates would attack first as a distraction to saturate Nathan’s barrier, creating an opening for Xia to fire the decisive shot. A simple but effective tactic.

However, the moment Xia put his finger on the trigger, he heard an explosion from an astonishing angle. With it came the sound of a helicopter’s rotor.

“What?!” Xia looked up to see the black military chopper.

Its hatch was open, showing a Japanese boy and girl who should not be there, along with a white Moujuu.

“You...!”

The Moujuu shot bluish-white lightning to defeat Xia's subordinates before he could even react.

The boy and girl, riding the Moujuu, jumped down to the T-Bullet's rooftop.

Jiguan Xia exchanged glares with the black-haired boy holding a Japanese katana in hand.

"We meet again, Lazarus!" Xia roared, aiming his gun.

"We're taking Ayaho back, Jiguan Xia!" Yahiro shouted as he jumped down from Nuemaru.

## 8

"That girl is Sui Narusawa, isn't it? Nina Himekawa betrayed us? That bitch!" Jiguan Xia grumbled as he pointed at the sleeping girl on Nuemaru's back.

The military chopper flew away with Nina and Hisaki on it, their work there done. They were not going to interfere with the fight between the Galerie and Melora. Perhaps they thought they didn't need the help.

"Deputy Commander!"

"Kill 'em!"

Xia's Relict Deservers aimed their giant guns at Iroha and Yahiro, but even though they pulled the trigger, their Regalia would not activate. Iroha's purifying flames enveloped their guns.

The poor-quality Relict cartridges loaded in their handguns shattered as the Deservers yelped. The artificial Relicts on the backs of their hands fell off in a million pieces.

"Looks like your flames really can vanquish the artificial Relicts." Yahiro sighed quietly as he looked at the agonizing soldiers with pity.

Nina had informed them of the Relicts' weak point.

Unlike the original Relict Regalia from the crystallized dragon factor, the artificial Relicts were unstable. Iroha's flames accelerated their instability, which degraded them, and upon trying to forcefully activate the Regalia in such a



state, the Deservers received the full blow of the recoil.

“What the...? That bastard Liu never told me about this!” Xia scowled.

The artificial Relicts’ weak point was *his* weak point. Naturally, he was distressed. Still, he wasn’t about to let Yahiro win.

“It’s time for revenge, Jiguan Xia! You’re gonna pay for throwing us into the Ploutonion and for harming Iroha’s siblings!”

“Tsk! You should’ve died at the bottom of the Ploutonion!”

Xia pulled the trigger.

Yahiro sliced the shock wave with his flaming blade. He won the Regalia clash—Xia’s shock wave shattered without much effort.

But then Yahiro spurted fresh blood.

“Yahiro?!” Iroha’s eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped.

“Stay away!” he yelled as he saw her approaching.

“Surprised? My Relict is a bit special. Don’t think I’m like the other fakers.”

Xia raised both arms and exposed the backs of his hands. He had marks similar to Ayaho’s, but too uniform and mechanical.

“You’ve got multiple artificial Relicts?!”

“Yes. That’s how I can do this!”

In the next moment, a flash pierced Yahiro’s right shoulder.

His flesh burst open, spreading the smell of burnt meat all around. Yet Yahiro’s face reflected more shock than pain. That lightning blast was Tristitia’s Regalia.

“It can’t be... You’re compatible with two different Relicts?!”

“Who said it’s only two?”

Xia’s eyes lit up sadistically as he took a firm step forward. Sinister dragon aura oozed from the tip of his right toes, morphing the armored train’s rooftop. A metallic crystal blade then slashed shallowly at Yahiro’s feet. It was smaller in scale, but there was no doubt: it was Vanagloria’s power.

“Wha...?!”

“A Relict Deserver’s body sure is convenient. It heals so quickly even with all sorts of reckless modifications.”

Xia rolled up his uniform’s sleeve, exposing an incongruent left arm. It was bizarrely thin compared to his other—it was clearly a woman’s arm.

“You...got an arm implant?!”

Yahiro felt violently nauseous.

Certainly, a way to embed multiple Relicts in one person would be to chop off a Deserver’s arm and implant it in another.

But that was an inhuman thing to do.

Yet Xia caressed his implanted arm with pride.

“I’ve got monstrous healing abilities thanks to the Relict compatibility. It would be a waste not to undergo this kind of transformation, don’t you think? I may not be up to your Lazarus standards, but being a Deserver is not so bad. And I can get as many Regalia as I want!”

“This is ridiculous... You really want the Regalia that much?”

“Why wouldn’t I? This is power incarnate.”

A strong dragon aura shot from his whole body. An aberrant cacophony of auras born from the multiple active Relicts.

“Come, Lazarus. Let’s put that immortal body of yours to the test! How long until you turn into a lifeless lump of meat?!”

“Stop it, Jiguan Xia! If you keep using that many Regalia...”

An explosive shock wave drowned out Yahiro’s voice. He received the blast with his flames, but metallic crystal blades shot up from the train’s rooftop to pierce him. Then came lightning, making every muscle in his body spasm.

Each individual Regalia was not very powerful, but the threat came from the simultaneous attack. Yahiro would have died four or five times already if it weren’t for his Lazarus powers.

However, the rash use of the Relicts also put a strain on Xia’s body.

His implanted left arm turned to white crystal and began collapsing into dust.

“Tsk! Already at the limit!” Xia clicked his tongue in hatred, glaring at his left arm.

The dragon factor was going berserk due to the excessive use of the Regalia. He was in a near-draconized state. The Deserver’s healing powers fell far short of the Lazarus’s. His cells crumbled upon surpassing their limit.

“Stop it already!” Iroha yelled at Xia still fighting. “Please, stop. Give Ayaho back. You have no reason to push yourself this hard to fight us!”

“I...do.” Xia sneered at Iroha’s scornful glare. “I will do anything for power. Anything to prove my superiority over anyone else! The man who doesn’t, the people who don’t, the nation who can’t, they will spout pleasantries while they keep getting robbed for all eternity! You should know this better than anyone else, Japanese!”

Xia activated his Regalia once again, shooting lightning at Iroha.

Yahiro just barely blocked it, wearing his full-body Goreclad.

“Stay back, Iroha!”

“Yahiro?! But...!”

Iroha tried to argue, but lost her words halfway at the sight of the bizarre dragon aura oozing out of Xia’s body.

“What the hell is this power...?” Yahiro groaned hoarsely.

The volume of Xia’s swelling dragon aura went beyond a Relict Deserver’s limits. It was warped, as an amalgamation of different dragons. Still, in terms of raw output, it met or perhaps even exceeded Hisaki’s when they’d faced him at the Nagoya Station Fortress.

“Let’s settle this, Lazarus. Will I reach my limit faster than you can despair?!”

“He’s...got even more Relicts...”

“It wasn’t just his arms and right leg—his chest, his hip, every section of his body had been implanted, glowing eerily with the power of the Relicts.

Naturally, the burden on his body was huge. The crystallization spread

throughout his whole body, and fissures began spreading across his face. His hair turned white.

And still, Xia sneered ferociously.

“I told you, the powerless can only keep getting robbed for all eternity! I’ll blow you away, Galerie’s train and all! You could’ve kept the number of victims down if only you had given up on that girl!”

“...That’s not true.”

The clear voice of a girl echoed among the raging dragon auras.

Iroha’s long hair swayed with the wind as she spoke resolutely.

“No matter how great the power in your hands, you will never get what truly matters that way. And the reason you can’t get anything without relying on violence is because you’re weak and wrong. Your weakness cannot rob us of anything.”

“Shut your mouth!!”

Xia aimed his large handgun.

His massive dragon auras converged into one point on his gun, creating a dense Regalia bullet.

Upon firing that, not only would he destroy Yahiro, Iroha, and most of the Yáo Guāng Xīng, but also part of the Melora train he stood on.

Still, Yahiro remained oddly calm as he raised his sheathed sword.

Iroha stood close behind and warm power flowed from her into him.

“Burn to ash... Blaze.”

Xia went to pull the trigger, but before the bullet could be fired, Yahiro ran beside and beyond him in a flash.

Xia’s eyes grew wide as his gun crumbled in his hand. The Relict crystals all over his body shattered one after the other.

The rampaging dragon auras vanished like they were never there, and the wicked Regalia bullet was not shot.

Yahiro's purifying flames, focused on the tip of his blade, burned away all of Xia's dragon aura.

"Well done, Lazarus... Now that is true power."

Xia smiled in satisfaction as he held his deeply wounded chest and spat blood.

"Go and burn this whole corrupted world, you monster..."

He fell, his shredded cells flowing from his crystallized body.

Yahiro's strike was not lethal, but by breaking the Relicts, Xia lost his healing abilities. His body was torn apart as he exceeded the Deserver limits, and could no longer regenerate. He could never fight again.

Yahiro mulled over the man's last words as he looked down at the fallen soldier with a bitter expression.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng's cannons destroyed the T-Bullet's motorcar and it began decelerating.

It did not take long before the train stopped completely and they captured Liu Ryland.



## Epilogue

“It is my loss. I surrender. To think you would actually defeat Melora’s Deserver troops completely...”

Liu Ryland received Galerie Berith with an oddly serene attitude in the silver train’s command car.

“Give Ayaho back,” Iroha demanded as she shoved Nuemaru, dog-sized, against Liu.

Technically it was a dreadful threat with a Moujuu, but she only looked like a silly girl holding a plushie to his face. Liu smiled stiffly in surprise, but then he nodded amicably.

“Of course. Let us make a deal,” he said, hiding tied-up Ayaho behind him.

“A deal?” Iroha parroted in confusion.

“Yes. Without the Japanese government, there is no law in this country prohibiting kidnapping. The situation must be decided between us two parties. A deal for freeing Ayaho Sashou.”

“You arrogant prick...” Yahiro fumed at his sophistry.

Sure enough, there was no Japanese law to punish his crime, but at the same time, there was no law forbidding Yahiro from killing Liu. No one would blame Yahiro if he did that to take Ayaho back.

Liu realized this, of course. And he also realized that Yahiro would never make that choice. Ayaho, raised in peacetime Japan, would not be able to accept Yahiro murdering for her sake. Liu understood this.

“Okay. Let’s strike a deal,” Giuli answered in Yahiro’s stead.

“Giuli?!” Yahiro looked at her in shock.

He didn’t think she would agree, even if it was to get Ayaho back.

Giuli paid him no mind and continued: “First, let’s make a truce starting right now. No retaliation allowed. That enough to guarantee your safety? We won’t demand damages, either. What else do you want?”

“N-nothing... That enough is great...” Liu Ryland’s eyes wandered in confusion; the deal was too good.

The Galerie had incurred severe damages thanks to Melora, including the harm done to the Yáo Guāng Xīng. He could not believe that they wouldn’t even ask for reimbursement for that.

“Are you...sure about this?” Liu stared at her with suspicion.

“Yeah.” Giuli laughed.

“You will hand Ayaho over, naturally. Just that and let’s call it even. I would love to charge you for repairing our train, but you can’t pay for it anyway.” Rosé sighed.

Liu Ryland’s eyebrows twitched; Rosé’s casual remark hurt his ego.

“What do you mean we can’t pay for it? You think I can’t secure the funds to repair one or two armored train cars?”

“That’s what I said. You can’t. Haven’t you seen the news?”

“The news...?”

Rosé handed Liu her smartphone.

The screen showed a news site from the Chinese Federation mainland.

“All Melora Electronics assets frozen... Patents invalidated... Delisted from the stock market, claims for damages, class-action lawsuits... What in the...? What is this?! What is happening?!”

“This is what making an enemy of Ganzheit entails, Liu Ryland. Your bribery schemes and inside trading, among other crimes, have been made public—you’re wanted internationally. Whether those crimes are true or not, that is none of our concern.”

“You... It was you... You reported me to Ganzheit! You told them I was trying to get ahead of them!”



Giuli and Rosé stared coldly at Liu Ryland as he lost his temper.

Liu's power, his personal assets that ranked him among the world's wealthiest, was no more. Melora Electronics' future as a company was in peril, too.

Liu was only a ruined CEO. All the Melora staff and operators, including the train's drivers, had already forsaken him. Anything that could protect him in the lawless land of Japan was gone.

He couldn't even be sure he'd escape the country alive.

"Y-you've got to be kidding me! I am Liu Ryland! I-I'm not going down at the hands of you filthy death dealers...!" Liu cursed as he grabbed the sommelier knife on the table.

Then he ran to Ayaho's side and held the knife to her throat to use her as a hostage.

"Ayaho!"

"Don't worry, Iroha..." Ayaho opened her eyes and smiled at her screaming sister.

The anesthesia was already wearing off. Her Relict Deserver healing powers were neutralizing its effects.

It was already too late by the time Liu noticed.

A metallic crystal blade shot from the train's wall, cutting Liu's wrist. It was no deep wound, but enough to make him drop the knife and fall to his butt as he shrieked.

"I'm no longer a child who needs protection."

Ayaho cut the tape restraining her using the Regalia and slowly stood.

Liu crawled away from her, but Josh and his men caught him. He lost all will to even beg for his life as they tied him up and threw him on the floor.

"Thank goodness... Thank goodness, Ayaho..."

"Iroha... I'm sorry I made you worry so much. Please don't cry..."

Ayaho hugged and patted the wailing Iroha to comfort her.

One could no longer tell which one was the hostage, let alone the older sister.

““Ayaho!””

“I’m back, guys.”

Her siblings received her in the Yáo Guāng Xīng. They cried and clung to her as she hugged them back with a smile.

Yahiro stared at the family while holding a sleeping Sui in his arms. The contrast between their relationships was laughable. There would no longer come a day when he would celebrate Sui’s safety that way.

Still, he felt relieved by the fact that he managed to get her back safely.

“Thanks, Iroha.”

Iroha was still weeping at the sight of her siblings but raised her head at Yahiro’s words. She narrowed her reddened eyes.

“Why thank me?”

“We got to save both thanks to you never giving up.”

“But it all went well thanks to your and everyone else’s efforts.”

Iroha placed her forehead on Yahiro’s shoulder. It looked like she was asking to be patted, but his hands were occupied.

“Ahh! Mama’s flirting with Yahiro again!” Kyouta yelled, poking fun at the mood they had going on.

All the kids turned around at the sound of that.

“N-no, I’m not!” Iroha, red in the face, raised her fist at Kyouta.

The nine-year-old trio kept poking fun at her as she chased them around.

After catching them and giving them a spanking, Iroha came back short of breath and stood before Ayaho. While the rest of the children laughed, she looked oddly serious.

“Ayaho, really, I wasn’t flirting or anything,” Iroha said timidly out of concern for her sister.

Ayaho stared back at her before wearing a naughty smile.

Then she turned toward Yahiro and bowed neatly.

“Yahiro, thank you so much for saving me.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Yahiro nodded.

Ayaho smiled beautifully, somehow maturely with her usual shyness gone.

“Thank you, too, Iroha.”

“What’s with the formalities?” Iroha asked, confused by her distant behavior.

Then Ayaho drew near Iroha’s ear and whispered: “But I won’t lose.”

“Huh? What? Ayaho? What’s that mean?”

“Hee-hee. What, I wonder?”

Ayaho left the scene, a suggestive smile on her face.

Iroha was frozen in confusion.

“Looks like we can go now,” Yahiro told the twins after handing Sui to Nathan.

“Yes. What a bother all of it was this time around.”

“We lost a lot of time, but I guess we won some things in exchange.” Giuli glanced at Yahiro meaningfully.

Although they’d retrieved Ayaho and Sui, the girls were nothing new—they only prevented their kidnappings. Miyabi took the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, too, and Galerie wasn’t profiting off the destruction of Melora’s Relict factory.

However, due to all that happened, they saw the world inside the Ploutonion. They spoke with the ancient dragon. They didn’t know what significance that conversation might have, but it could eventually become their trump card—so Giuli was suggesting.

They took anything useful from Melora’s abandoned train and the Yáo Guāng Xīng was ready for departure.

As Yahiro was trying to get on the train, he realized a girl remained outside.

Runa Senou. The youngest of Iroha’s siblings held Nuemaru in her arms, looking at the horizon, in the direction of their destination—Kyoto. The western sky, illuminated by the setting sun, was dyed an ominous crimson.



“I don’t like the look of this sky,” Yahiro muttered unconsciously.

Runa, though it was impossible that she’d heard him, met his eyes and smiled. A frail, somewhat lonely smile, like a phantom’s.



The cooling fans of a glowing PC hummed lowly.

A young man hit the keys rambunctiously in a corner of the dark, closed room.

“Hmmm... You dodged that? Not bad. Not on the leaderboards for nothing, eh? But you’re too naive still,” he muttered flatly.

His eyes lacked vitality. His gray hair hung down his back. He wore a cheap long-sleeved T-shirt, the sleeves going way beyond his hands.

“Uwah! Got me!”

The screen turned red with a thunderous sound and he threw the mouse before falling onto his back.

He stayed there, staring at the ceiling for a while.

The room was tiny, like a cell. The window on the ceiling had thick iron bars. The walls were dense, bare steel plates. It was a cage for sure, but not for imprisoning people—it looked more like a jail for Moujuu.

“Toru, it’s mealtime.”

The cell-like room’s door opened and Kaname Kashima showed her face.

In the short, hakama-clad girl’s hands was a black tray reminiscent of what they used in luxury inns. On it, a steaming, vivid meal.

“You didn’t touch your dinner? Head cook Ninose will cry again.” Kaname frowned and sighed at the sight of the cold food in the middle of the room.

“Ah, sorry. I forgot... Why do we even have to eat in the first place?” The gray-haired young man, Toru Natazuka, grumbled like a child, still lying down.

“Don’t overdo it with the gaming, either. Have you been at it all night?”

“Who knows...? Wait, it’s already morning...? That’s strange...”

“You’re the same as usual.” Kaname shook her head while switching breakfast for the ignored dinner.

Who could believe that the young man with this slovenly lifestyle was a Lazarus? Not to mention, the strongest Lazarus—imprisoned by Ganzheit due to his violent power.

Kaname was the only one Natazuka opened his heart to, for he was the Lazarus of the thunder dragon, Tristitia’s, medium. Even the fiercest beast got attached to their zookeeper, that was all. And were she to let her guard down, he would kill her, as a Moujuu did to any who tried to cage it.

“By the way, I heard they caught that girl.”

Natazuka sat up and looked at Kaname.

She blinked and asked, “Which girl?”

“The white-haired chick Nathan was guarding. Superbia’s medium.”

“How did you find out they captured Sui Narusawa?”

“They told me that in the chat. My opponent just now,” he answered plainly.

“Who were you even playing against...?” Kaname stared perplexedly at the screen showing a replay of the match.

Natazuka narrowed his eyes and the air in the room was filled with an electric charge.

“Hmmm... So it’s true. You knew about it, too?”

“I wasn’t hiding it from you. I just found out, actually.”

“I see... Okay, then.” Natazuka relaxed. “So, who caught Sui Narusawa?”

“Galerie Berith.”

“Who was that, again?”

“An arms dealer. You met them during the deal with the Council for Japanese Independence.”

“Ah... That two-faced guy’s group...”

“Yes. It seems Ganzheit used Ira’s medium, Miyabi Maisaka, and her Lazarus,

Douji Yamase, to try and summon Superbia, but they failed. Sui Narusawa fell into a coma and was captured. Miyabi Maisaka is missing and Douji Yamase died.”

“Douji Yamase...died?” Natazuka lowered his voice in surprise.

“Is that strange? You knew how weak he was. It’s the same man who faced a pathetic loss after daring to face Lady Karura.”

“No, Kaname. That’s not the point.”

Natazuka stood up all of a sudden, with swift movement unthinkable of his usual bearing. Kaname felt chills down her spine, overwhelmed and fearful that she might have incurred his anger.

“...Toru?”

“It was Yahiro who killed him, wasn’t it?”

“Y-yes...most likely,” Kaname replied with confusion.

Natazuka’s expression was devoid of anger; if anything, he seemed amused.

“That guy... You’ve earned my interest, Yahiro Narusawa...”

“Indeed, it is surprising that that boy has obtained enough power to kill a Lazarus in such a short time. Acedia’s medium was also present at the time, though, so perhaps they collaborated.”

“What, really? That’s not fair.”

Natazuka reached for his breakfast: Japanese seafood. He ignored the chopsticks, though, and grabbed the sashimi and rice with his bare hands.

“Hey, Kaname, what about Nathan?”

“Auguste Nathan surrendered to the Galerie along with Sui Narusawa.”

“He surrendered? To the Galerie?” Natazuka stopped eating and stared at Kaname.

She tilted her head.

“I imagine he had no other choice than to protect her, since she is in a coma?”

“That can’t be...”

“Huh?”

“That can’t be it. Nathan can take that chick by himself easily. There’s no reason for him to stay prisoner... Unless... I get it...!”

“Are you thinking he betrayed Ganzheit?” Kaname asked serenely; she had considered the possibility, and Ganzheit probably had, too.

Yet Natazuka shook his head hard.

“No, Kaname. There’s no point in him going against Ganzheit by himself. The traitor is Karura.”

“You must be joking. Lady Karura would never go against the wishes of the Heavenly Imperial House,” Kaname replied, offended.

Still, Natazuka asked very calmly, “Kaname...where is Raiu?”

“Huh?” Kaname froze in surprise.

Raiu was a bird of prey with a ten-meter wingspan. The Moujuu Karura Myoujiin tamed with her powers.

She had lent Kaname Raiu to use as transport, yet Kaname could not feel its presence.

“Raiu...is gone?” Her voice trembled.

Natazuka clapped and cackled.

“Ha-hah! Just like Salas said. Karura’s been tricking us. She never meant to obey the Heavenly Imperial House.”

“No... That can’t be... Lady Karura...wouldn’t forsake the Kashima...” Kaname’s lips lost all color.

Karura Myoujiin had taken back the Moujuu she lent them. That not only meant she left Natazuka without a method of transport, but it also proved that she did not trust Kaname.

Natazuka walked past the disconcerted Kaname to the exit.

The door was locked. But that was useless. No door could ever stop Toru Natazuka’s full power.



“Where are you going, Toru?”

Natazuka turned around at Kaname’s question and smiled.

“To see Yahiro.”

“You’ll break the barrier without permission?”

“That’s none of my concern.”

The metal door blew to the outside with an ear-piercing thunder. Toru Natazuka’s—Tristitia’s Regalia. A metal cage was like paper before his control of electromagnetic fields. He was never trapped. He just allowed himself to be kept.

“Everyone’s doing as they please, so how about we join in the fun?”

Natazuka beckoned Kaname, like the sweet call of the devil: Do away with their loyalty to the Heavenly Imperial House and break free from Ganzheit’s control to do as they wish. Question Karura’s intentions for forsaking her. They had the power. The dragon’s power.

“C’mon, Kaname.” Natazuka grabbed the hesitating girl’s hand, then whispered into her ear, “Don’t worry. I won’t betray you.”

On that day, one of Ganzheit’s facilities was lost to a fire from a lightning strike.

The disaster was so massive, no matter how many PMCs they mobilized for a search, no survivors were found. The Relict Regalia stored in there, the divine sword, Kotofutsu-no-Mitama, was reported as lost in the fire.

Rumors spread of the names of two Japanese people, a race thought extinct, to be among those in the missing persons list, but its veracity was unproven.

Days later, Ganzheit deleted all records of the facility.

## Afterword

Here you have *Hollow Regalia* Volume 4.

The subtitle *Where Angels Fear to Tread* refers to a place where no wise person would approach—somewhere only fools enter. It directly represents the story this time, as they journeyed into the Moujuu colony, as well as the other world Iroha and Yahiro wandered into, while also being a metaphor for the power of the dragons itself.

Now then, the stage this time around was Nagoya. I haven't been able to visit in a long time due to various circumstances, but I personally like Nagoya a lot, and used to travel there frequently. The food is so good... The *misokatsu*, the chicken wings, the Taiwan ramen, the *hitsumabushi*... I haven't tried the popular *piyorin* pudding yet, but I really should. (Excuse me for gushing about Nagoya to apologize for turning it into ruins in the story.) A few elements I was hoping to write about from the planning stages finally came into shape in this fourth volume, so I'm personally quite satisfied with how it turned out. Each dragon medium and Lazarus camp taking action for their own goals, the goals of Ganzheit and the countries occupying Japan, the secrets of the dragons' Regalia becoming clear... Finally, it feels like everything in the story has been set up.

I'm also glad I finally got to write a battle scene between two armored trains, which I've been wanting to do for a while now.

I also have this hidden goal of making Iroha do something streamer-ish every volume, and I tried a few things out around that subject this time. I would love to have an actual ASMR released as merchandising, but I feel like that noisy girl probably wouldn't be capable of making something relaxing in the first place...

Now, I am incredibly thankful because the manga adaptation of *Hollow Regalia* began in the November 2022 issue of Dengeki Maou. Matsuki Ugatsu is taking care of the adaptation. The brutal world has been replicated perfectly, and all the heroines look exceedingly cute. I hope loyal readers of the novels

will also check it out!

As always, Miyuu has my deepest thanks for providing the book with the most wonderful illustrations. The alternate choice for the cover was so amazing, I suffered to the very end having to choose. The designs for the secondary characters are perfectly in line with my vision, too!

Everyone else involved in the creation of this book has my utmost thanks, as well.

Of course, a big thank-you to all my readers, too!

Now then, let us meet again in the next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

I will not let  
anyone else have  
my dear brother.  
He's the only  
one I have.

05.

When Heaven  
Shatters and Falls

Stay away  
from us!

We've been  
waiting for this  
moment. For the  
dragon who will  
devour the world  
to return.

Should we  
just run?

I'm sorry I  
couldn't be with  
you until the end.

# HOLLOW REGALIA

The world is  
out of chances!

It's time for  
revenge!



# Jiguan Xia

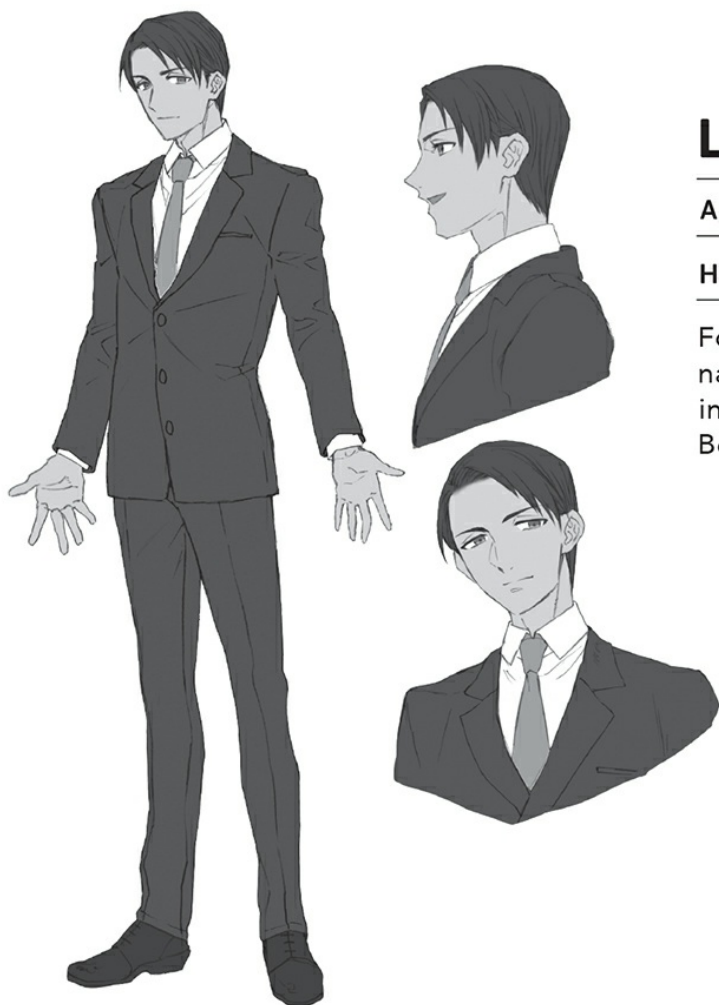
Age: 32      Birthday 10/23

Height: 6'0"

Soldier of the Chinese Federal Army and vice-commander of the fortified city's garrison. Relict Regalia Deserver, he can use a power similar to Ira's.



CONFIDENTIAL



## Liu Ryland

Age: 36 Birthday 5/20

Height: 5'8"

Founder of Melora Electronics, big name in the information devices industry. He plans to steal Galerie Berith's Relict Regalia.



## Zeming Hou

Age: 49 Birthday 3/3 Height: 5'5"

Chief executive of the Chinese Federation's Nagoya SAR. He accommodates Melora in exchange for receiving a large political donation from Liu Ryland.



◀ Lieutenant Zhu

Lieutenant ▶  
Feng

## Lieutenant Zhu and Lieutenant Feng

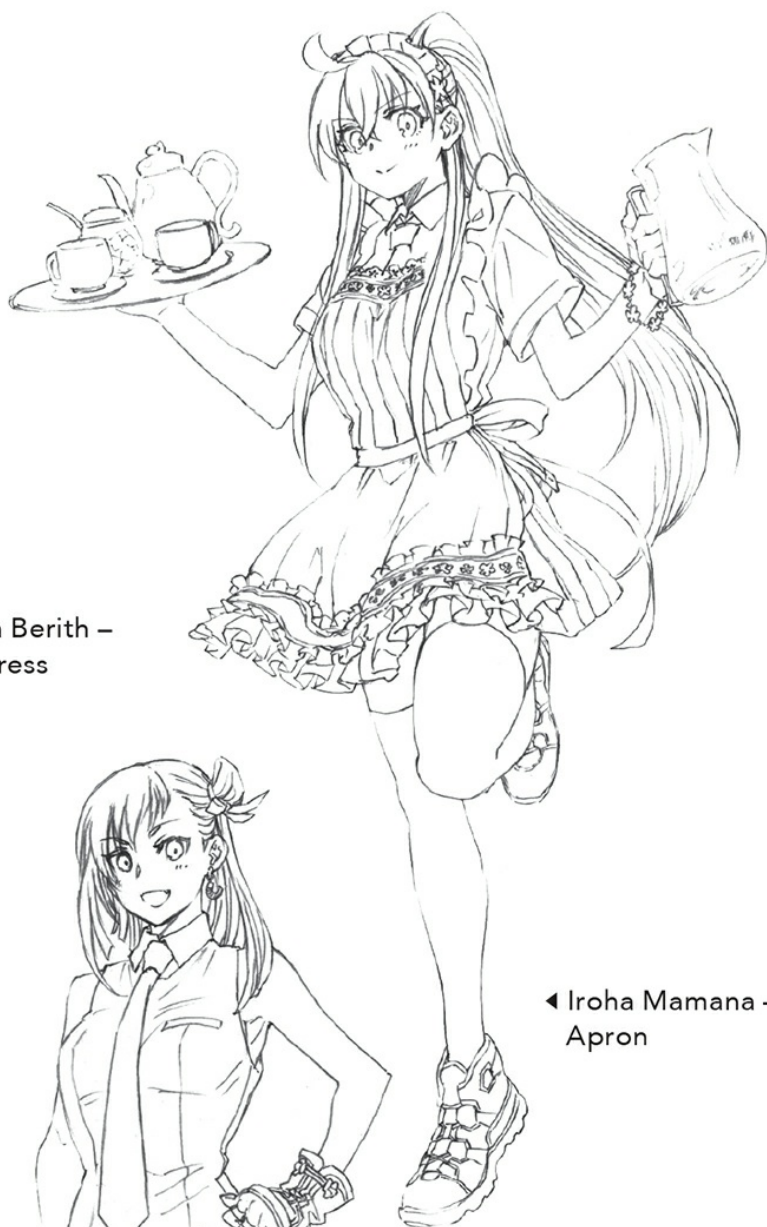
Jiguan Xia's subordinates and Relict Deservers. Big fans of Iroha Waon.



# Costumes



◀ Rosetta Berith –  
Party dress



◀ Iroha Mamana –  
Apron



◀ Giulietta Berith –  
Suit

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Bonus Comic



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