

6

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

RETURN OF THE ALCHEMIST





9 STRIKE THE BLOOD

RETURN OF THE ALCHEMIST

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

An anime-style illustration of three young women in school uniforms. They are all wearing blue blazers with dark blue bows at the neck and blue and white plaid skirts. The girl on the left has short, wavy light purple hair and blue eyes. The girl in the middle has long, straight black hair and brown eyes. The girl on the right has short, wavy dark green hair and brown eyes. They are all smiling and looking towards the viewer. The background is a stylized cityscape with blue and white buildings under a light blue sky.

Kanon Kanase

Faux-Angel
The kindhearted
Saint of Middle School

Yukina Himeragi

Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

Nagisa Akatsuki

Sister of the Primogenitor
Innocent, outspoken, and wise



Motoki Yaze
Hyper-Adapter
Cheerful classmate
or two-faced jester?

Kou Amatsuka
The Great Alchemist's Apprentice
The wicked alchemist,
half-man, half-metal

Natsuki Minamiya
Witch of the Void
Vainglorious, noble teacher



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STRIKE THE BLOOD

RETURN OF THE ALCHEMIST

6

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 6

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque

Cover art by Manyako

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SUTORAIKU ZA BURADD0

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INTRO

INTRO

Kojou Akatsuki, his entire body bathed in pure white light, raised his voice in anguish.

“G...ahh...”

It felt like the dazzling sunbeams pouring in the open window were going to burn him alive. As Kojou lay there, the morning sun was a blazing orange, its powerful ultraviolet rays shining merrily upon his cheek.

Even with the end of autumn fast approaching, the sun seemed little different when viewed from a tropical city.

This was the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City, a man-made island floating some three hundred and thirty kilometers south of Tokyo—a city where midsummer never really ended.

“So hot... Gonna burn to a crisp...” Kojou groaned from his bed, blinking blearily.

What he saw through his teary, misty vision was the familiar sight of his bedroom and a small silhouette standing before him. It was a middle school girl, wearing a gray duffle coat over her uniform. Her long hair was tied up in a short, stern style, but the image she projected was one of liveliness, and her big eyes were the main feature on her highly expressive face.

As Kojou awakened, Nagisa Akatsuki, his younger sister, peered down at him cheerfully. “Morning, Kojou! Awake yet?”

She was always a boisterous girl, but today she seemed to have an extra helping of amusement on her face. With a practiced hand, she opened the curtains of the room one by one, causing Kojou to pull the blanket over his face.

But it was to no avail. With a sigh of dismay, Kojou gingerly sat up and combed down his sleep-rumpled hair. “Yeah, anyone would after all that

sunlight in their face...”

It was sometime past six AM, given the light. To Kojou, who was emphatically not a morning person, this sunny greeting was how the dead of night felt to most people. He was forced awake, and the gears in his muddled, sleepy head felt too rusted to move.

Nagisa grinned at this display awkwardly, quite clearly exasperated. “Oh, you big baby. This time of year, even a *vampire* could take the morning sun and not even twitch.”

“Apparently that’s not exactly the case...”

“Hmm?”

“Er, nothing.” Kojou averted his eyes from his sister’s stare of suspicion, his resentful glower shifting toward the windows.

The big blue sky spread out beyond the window, white sunlight twinkling as it reflected off the windswept sea. To be blunt, it was a hard sight for a nocturnal vampire to take—even if you *were* the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

“So did something happen? It’s early enough you could’ve just let me sleep, right?”

Kojou checked the clock a second time as he spoke. It was way too soon to be heading to school. At a minimum, he ought to have had fifteen more minutes to sleep, maybe even thirty if he sprinted to the train station. Regardless, he sounded displeased to have been robbed of this precious sleeping time.

However, his sister smiled wryly in response, her cheeks reddening slightly. “Well, just a bit. It’s been a while, so I wanted to show you something right away...”

Nagisa began twirling around. “Show me...what?” Kojou asked, perplexed.

The expression on Nagisa’s face stiffened and froze over. “Wait... You don’t know what I’m talking about?”

As heartless eyes glared down upon him, Kojou shrugged his shoulders. “Nope.”

Nagisa’s cheeks puffed up in a visible sulk, and she spread her arms wide like

a cobra spreading its hood.

“Ta-daa!” she reiterated.

“...Huh?”

As Kojou tilted his head, his sister rammed his shoulder with her own. She didn’t exactly have enough mass to leave a dent, but the fasteners of the duffle coat definitely hurt as they dug in.

“Ta-da-daa! Ta-da, ta-daaaa!”

“Wh-what the heck are you doing?”

“Um... A fashion show? Kinda?”

“I...ah...don’t think that sound’s from a fashion show...”

Kojou sighed in exasperation as he fended off his sister’s newest attack. But as he did so, something tugged on his mind, and he suddenly raised his eyebrows. *Wait, fashion show...?*

“Come to think of it, what’s with that coat? Why are you wearing...”

He was going to ask, *something that looks so stuffy*, but Kojou swallowed his words with a vengeance, for he had noticed the sparkling, expectant eyes with which his little sister was looking at him.

“Does it look good? Does it?” Nagisa’s body squirmed as she awaited his answer.

A bit taken aback by her forcefulness, Kojou nodded awkwardly. “Y-yeah. It’s pretty cute on you and all.”

Nagisa put a hand on her chest as she sighed with relief, a smug smile coming over her lips.

“Is that so? Tee-hee-hee. This is the mail-order one that finally arrived yesterday. I’ve wanted to try it since way back. The pattern on the lining is really cute, too. Having a long hem is important, as well—the way it just barely hides the school uniform skirt, it’s like wearing only tights! But it’s cheaper than I thought. It’s a secondary line of West Langobard, and that’s a big brand. Asagi told me all about it!”

“Really...”

Not that Kojou really got everything Nagisa was saying, but he pretended that he did. Her tendency to drown people in words was one of his little sister’s few faults.

Kojou waited for a pause in Nagisa’s rapid-fire delivery and then bluntly asked, “Why a coat like that, though? The season’s not exactly over yet...”

With Itogami Island’s combination of heat and humidity, you rarely needed a coat even in the middle of “winter.” In fact, Nagisa was already sweating outright from wearing the coat in the house.

However, it was Nagisa who looked surprised. “What are you talking about? It’s November already. It’s cold on the mainland. It’ll be winter anytime now.”

“Well, on the mainland, sure...”

“Geez... You’re hopeless, Kojou. Did you forget about last year?” As Nagisa spoke, she sighed, completely beside herself.

“Last year...?” Kojou put a hand on his forehead as he tried to grasp a few vague memories. Last year, Kojou was in his third year of middle school, the same as Nagisa was now. It was before he bore the nonsensical title of “the Fourth Primogenitor.” As for events taking place at the time—

“Wait, you mean the middle school class trip?”

“Well, more like field trip than class trip...” Nagisa poked her tongue out, disappointed.

The Saikai Academy Middle School’s class trip provided the students in the Demon Sanctuary, who were isolated from the wider world, an opportunity to study and observe regular society in its natural state. The destinations were not famous tourist attractions, but rather high-rises and factories and the like. There was virtually no “free” time to be had.

Even so, it meant traveling and spending nights together with classmates, so by no means did middle schoolers find it a chore.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been back to the mainland, maybe since elementary school? It wasn’t fair you got to go when your club had matches.”

Kojou scowled a bit as he replied. “Not that it was anything pleasant, but yeah...”

After all, by ship it took eleven long hours to get to the mainland from Itogami Island. Of course, a small athletics club with a meager budget picked second-class ships with the cheapest rooms money could buy. It took half a day to get to where the basketball game was being played, and then they went straight back to the harbor as soon as the match had concluded. After taking a rocking boat all the way back to the island, they had the privilege of going to school the next day without a single wink of sleep. It wasn’t a lifestyle he could recommend to others. He recalled the middle school field trip as paradise by comparison.

Seeing the smile on Kojou’s face as he reminisced, Nagisa said with a small measure of pride, “Well, I’ll pick up a souvenir for you.”

“Yeah, you do that. Well, if that’s all...”

Then get goin’, thought Kojou, dismissing the girl with a wave of his hand as he flopped back onto the bed. He crawled under the bedsheet to hide.

“Hey, don’t go back to sleep!”

Nagisa hastily grabbed Kojou and dragged him back to the light. As Kojou desperately tried to escape from her assault, a tiny corner of his headspace lazily thought of an entirely different middle school girl: the one titled “the Watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor,” who stuck to him like glue.

Of course, she wouldn’t be able to keep an eye on him if she was outside of Itogami Island on a cultural exchange excursion, so just what was Himeragi planning to do—?



Island North District Six—

The facility had been constructed in a research district deep underground, cut off from sunlight year-round.

It was a small, gray, grimy building. Its windows had steel plates bolted over them; the entrance had barbed wire leading up to it. Even at a glance, it didn’t

seem anything like a mere abandoned building.

However, those humans attuned to magic would surely notice the presence of multilayered wards spread around the property. They were powerful aversion wards, so much so that normal human beings wouldn't even be able to approach.

The building was the private property of the Gigafloat Management Corporation—the organization that administered the Demon Sanctuary. It was a safe house for concealing and protecting demons who went unregistered for certain reasons and criminals who had reached deals with law enforcement.

As a de facto prison, it had strict internal security. Armed security guards patrolled the facility 24-7, keeping everyone but restricted personnel out.

The silence of this safe house was broken by a furious, thunder-like roar of gunfire.

In spite of the guards' volley of submachine gun fire, the building shook uncomfortably as a hole was gouged into the interior wall. The gunfire continued for but a single moment longer, and afterward, in its wake, came the echo of Phobos and Deimos, the Greek gods of fear.

Finally, as silence returned to the building's corridor, all that remained were the footsteps of a single man.

His shoes did not make the same sounds as the guards'. In fact, as he walked, the corridor's bulkhead, locked by a magic spell, was being violently ripped asunder. Slowly, the intruder who had wiped out the guards approached the center of the facility.

Until finally, the last bulkhead was destroyed, and the intruder revealed.

He was a lithe young man. He wore a pure white coat with a red shirt, and both his tie and hat sported a red-and-white checkered pattern, and in his left hand, he carried a silver cane with a skull engraved onto the handle. Overall, he had the air of a shady stage magician.

Said magician touched the tipped brim of his hat as he looked around. The deepest part of the isolated facility had been turned into a surprisingly futuristic laboratory. It was a sorcerous engineering research office, equipped with the

latest diagnostic tools.

Standing in the office were several automatons acting as assistants, and a man. The man was grim-faced and middle-aged, with a solemnity that resembled a clergyman.

Gazing without reaction at the ripped bulkhead, the man spoke in a composed tone: "...That was an overly violent way to knock on my door, was it not?"

Faced with such biting sarcasm, the young man gave a self-deprecating smile. "I suppose so. Well, it *was* a pretty rough welcome."

Speaking as if he were doing parlor tricks, the young man suddenly opened his right hand. His palm held a small clump of metal; it fell to the floor with a high-pitched clang.

He had dropped silver electrum alloy anti-demon bullets, probably some forty or fifty shots' worth. The young man had calmly made his way over despite the guards having shot that many straight at him.

The young sorcerer gave off a carefree smile as he continued. "Kensei Kanase, I presume? Former palace sorcerous engineer of Aldegia, the sorcery manufacturing powerhouse? I remember your thesis on spiritual matter conversion. What a revolutionary concept. You took a real risk just by publishing the thing, didn't you?"

Kensei Kanase's eyebrows failed to even twitch. "I take it you didn't come here just to talk shop?"

"I suppose that's true." The young man narrowed his eyes coldly. "It's certainly not money I want."

"What happened to the guards who 'welcomed' you?"

"Oh, I didn't kill them," the young man declared, airily waving at the corridor behind him. "Though I'm not sure you can call them alive, either..."

Five guards were standing in the hallway, unconscious. None had obvious external injuries or even any signs of blood loss. However, they were immobile with their guns still drawn, as if they'd been frozen in place. The skin exposed by

the gaps in their uniforms had a dull, metallic sheen; they were indistinguishable from gray statues.

“What a laugh. As if a bunch of goons like that was going to stop the likes of me? To be honest, it was a lot harder ripping through the wards on those bulkheads.”

Gazing at the guards that had been transformed into living metal statues, Kensei Kanase murmured, “I see... An alchemist...”

“A novice still in training, but yes. You can call me Kou—Kou Amatsuka.”

“Kou Amatsuka...? One of Nina Adelard’s apprentices, then.”

“You really are sharp on the uptake.” The young man calling himself Amatsuka curled up one corner of his lips in an appreciative sneer. “Then you know what I’m here for. Hand over my master’s heirloom. Now.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Kensei Kanase replied coolly.

The young man’s smiling lips twisted in rage. “Don’t play dumb,” he snapped. “I want the Spirit Blood core you sealed five years ago. It’s mine to begin with, and I want it back.”

Kanase went unmoved. “I regret that I can do no such thing. As Adelard’s apprentice, surely you know the reason why.”

“I’m not asking about what’s *convenient* for you!” Amatsuka shouted. Simultaneously, a malevolent flood of magical energy surged from his body, releasing a high-pitched whine.

From a safe in the back of the room, a sealed magical device resonated in response. A ferocious smile came over the intruder.

“Hah, found you.”

“I said, I will not hand it over,” Kanase grumbled, drawing a tiny magical circle in the air with his fingertip.

It was the *Make Golem* spell, breathing artificial life into a humanoid object and turning it into his faithful servant. A moment after the spell triggered, gunfire erupted from behind Amatsuka.

It had come from the guards. With their flesh turned into metal, Kanase's spell had reanimated them as his own.

Amatsuka had no way to evade the surprise attack, even though the figures were still immobile. His white coat ripped into shreds from the bullets' countless hits.

Even so, the young man mocked them with a laugh. "And there's Kensei Kanase for you. To think, you can still use a spell like this with your magic power sealed..."

The old man's expression tightened. The alchemist had pointed out an inconvenient fact: As a criminal in custody, Kensei Kanase's magical power had been heavily restricted by the Gigafloat Management Corporation. He couldn't use the vast majority of magical energy available to him as an engineer of sorcery.

"What a pity. You can't kill me with tricks like these."

"Nn...?!"

Amatsuka raised his right hand high. A viscous, black metallic fluid flowed from the cuff of his sleeve. The fluid, extending to the length of a whip, instantly transformed into a sharp, polished blade and mowed down the golem statues.

Then, having lost his servants, Kanase too was cut down. Slashed from his shoulder almost to his heart, the engineer gushed blood as he silently crumbled to the floor.

"A foolish decision. If you'd just politely handed it over, I wouldn't have had to hurt you..." Scowling at the fallen man, Amatsuka advanced into the heart of the lab.

Now exposed to the light, his right arm, covered in a metallic fluid, gave off a wet-looking sheen.

No—his arm was not *covered* in the liquid; his right arm *was* metal to begin with. The metallic black fluid, flowing with the consistency of quicksilver, was merely imitating a human hand.

Realizing the nature of Amatsuka's form, Kanase groaned in pain. "I see..."

Wiseman's Blood... That's what destroyed Adelard's Abbey back then..."

The alchemist did not reply. All he did was shoot a hateful smile.

"Sorry... I'm taking back the half of my body Master stole from me."

Amatsuka sliced apart the thick metallic safe with ease, as if it were paper.

Alchemists could freely construct and deconstruct anything made of metal. Even the hardest of alloys became as fragile as a tin can under their touch, no matter how slight the contact.

Crouching down, Amatsuka removed a ball about fifty centimeters in diameter from the safe—a transparent scarlet gemstone. When he held it up to the light, a satisfied smile came over his face.

When the young alchemist finally departed, it was to the sound of his cane rhythmically tapping the floor.

When Kensei Kanase had heard the man's steps grow distant, his frail lips formed a single word:

"Kanon..."

As he sank into the pool of blood, he spoke only his daughter's name, begging for forgiveness.



CHAPTER ONE
THE WATCHDOG'S
HOLIDAY

CHAPTER ONE

THE WATCHDOG'S HOLIDAY

1

Yukina Himeragi awoke to the first wan light of morning creeping over the eastern horizon.

Getting out of bed as silent as a cat, she brushed back her sleep-disheveled hair and let out a small, unguarded yawn. Teardrops stung the corners of her eyes, and she wiped at them with a sleeve.

Though many people thought otherwise, Yukina was not actually a morning person. In fact, at that very moment she sported a vacant look, her mind still hazy. But at times like this, she looked much younger than her usual cold, mature countenance conveyed.

Without fanfare, Yukina stripped off and tossed aside the white shirt she wore as a nightgown and proceeded straight to the bathroom. Because it seemed she might nod back off at any moment, she ran a cold shower to wake herself up, bit by bit.

Coming out of the bathroom, she dried off with a towel and looked herself over in the mirror. She was in perfect physical condition; no fatigue remained from the deadly combat she'd endured during the Harrowing Festival. However, seeing her slender body unchanged, she sighed inadvertently. *Maybe I should drink more milk*, she thought absentmindedly.

After that came maintenance on her weapon, Snowdrift Wolf. It was a gleaming silver spear that she polished, one she considered synonymous with her own being.

Just as wild beasts did not do morning exercises in the natural world, the Lion King Agency's Sword Shamans did not undergo any special conditioning. In the

first place, a little bodybuilding wasn't going to make a person any more able to fight a demon on even terms. Instead, they thoroughly trained their senses and reflexes. To Yukina, breathing, walking, and other unremarkable activities of everyday life were the training that heightened her ritual energy strength.

In short order, the apartment next to hers became much livelier, too.

Apparently, the Akatsuki residence's girl had slapped her older brother awake a little earlier than usual. Yukina smiled as she imagined the back and forth taking place between the siblings—they got along extremely well.

“Ah—!”

All of a sudden, her soft, charming smile changed into the sharp look of an Attack Mage. Someone's ritual energy was invading the wards that Yukina had erected around her apartment.

Down from the sky the intruder danced, until it stopped right outside her window.

Yukina would be at a disadvantage, wielding a spear indoors; she set Snowdrift Wolf aside and drew a knife she'd hidden in the bottom of her schoolbag. Though not as mighty as the spear, it was nonetheless an enchanted weapon imbued with fierce exorcist power, something standard-issue for Sword Shamans.

Keeping her guard up with the knife raised, Yukina got to her feet and forced open the window in one move.

But there were no enemies there.

Instead, a single bird of prey stood before her eyes, one with the glimmer of cold steel in its gaze.

But before Yukina's eyes, it suddenly changed shape—into an ordinary piece of paper. It must have been a *shikigami*—a familiar—and one strong enough to pass through Yukina's ward with ease. Even the Lion King Agency contained few practitioners able to use *shikigami* of such power. For simple messenger duty, the ritualized spell was complete overkill.

However, she sensed no hostility from the caster.

It was a mystery, but Yukina picked up the letter and opened it anyway.

This time, she was so shocked that her voice exclaimed:

“Eh...?!”

The sun’s rays outside the window were already shining brightly. It seemed that Itogami Island would have another balmy day.

2

Coastal scenery flowed past the train car’s window.

Kojou and Yukina took the monorail to get to school. Thanks to boarding earlier than usual, they were in a less crowded car. The extra space seemed to make the air conditioning more effective.

However, what was truly different from usual was Yukina’s behavior as she stood beside him.

She had her silver spear sheathed in the guitar case on her back, just as she always did when monitoring Kojou. But she seemed far away, somehow; from time to time, she looked like she was gazing in the distance as she sighed.

Kojou, mindful of this, leaned close to her ear and called: “Himeragi? Um, Earth to Himeragi...?”

But she made no response. All she did was worry her lip a little, mulling something over; she didn’t even respond when he waved his hand in front of her eyes. The lack of reaction from her perfectly shaped face gave him the distinct feeling he was talking to a hologram.

“Hey, are you all right...? Or maybe you’re not feeling well?”

Maybe she has a fever, Kojou thought with concern as he peered at his watcher’s face.

Curious, he put his hand to Yukina’s forehead, hidden under her bangs. Her skin felt pleasantly cool to the touch—but the moment Kojou’s palm registered the feeling, his field of vision literally turned upside down.

“Eh?! ”

Kojou had no idea what was going on as his body soared into the air. As it turned out, Yukina had swiveled around on the spot, using the weight and motion of Kojou's body to toss him judo-style.

Her face still as neutral as that of a doll, Yukina proceeded to put Kojou's arm in a lock. It was a martial arts technique used by Sword Shamans, experts in anti-demonic combat. Kojou, the so-called World's Mightiest Vampire, could do nothing to resist her incredible might. In pain far surpassing what one would normally expect from a girl that size, Kojou pathetically cried out for mercy.



“Nuooo! I give up, I give up—!!”

“Ah...?!”

Kojou’s plaintive cries seemed to have finally brought Yukina back to her senses. She released Kojou’s right arm from its rather unnatural twist and hastily squatted close to him as he groaned in agony.

“Senpai... A-are you all right?!”

A hollow smile came over Kojou as he spoke, rather sarcastically, “...Well, you’re in better health than I thought. That’s good.”

Kojou’s touch had made Yukina’s body go into self-defense mode without any conscious thought. Once more, he had become painfully aware of the off-the-charts combat capabilities of a Sword Shaman. *Note to self: If I ever come across Yukina sleeping, DO NOT TOUCH.*

But what hurt even more was how not a single one of the passengers had lifted a finger to help Kojou while Yukina was twisting the screws on him. The greater half of the passengers sported looks that said they didn’t think it was worth the effort so early in the morning; the rest were glaring at Kojou like he’d done something to deserve it. The underbelly of human society was truly ugly.

Looking seriously embarrassed, Yukina hung her head as she earnestly apologized to her classmate. “I’m sorry. I was thinking about something.”

Well, it was bad manners on my part, too, Kojou said, smiling at his own expense.

“Something on your mind?” he inquired.

“Something... Yes, there is something, in a sense.”

Kojou raised his eyebrows at the strange phrasing. “In a sense?”

But then the back and forth that morning with his little sister came to mind: “Oh yeah, the middle schoolers are heading off on an extended field trip real soon. You ready for it, Himeragi?”

“Field trip...”

Yukina’s expression grew darker still. *Did I say something wrong?* Kojou

wondered nervously.

Yukina wasn't just any student; she was an Attack Mage dispatched by the Lion King Agency to watch over Kojou. In that sense, Saikai Academy was just a place where she observed the Fourth Primogenitor according to her duty. It was quite possible she wouldn't be able to participate in a field trip irrelevant to her mission.

If that was the case, he could understand why she'd be brooding over it.

"You don't mean you're not going? —The Agency said you couldn't?"

"No, that's... This morning, I received...this."

Yukina pulled an oddly folded piece of stationery from her schoolbag.

"What's this? Some kind of letter...?" Kojou asked.

The page was so white that it looked like glittering silver, but the writing on it was English in a very floral style. It didn't seem to be written in code, but even so, Kojou had trouble reading the contents.

"It says," explained Yukina, *"Lion King Agency Advisory: Snowdrift Wolf shall be sealed for four days beginning at midnight tomorrow. Ensure that you turn it in prior to that time—"*

"'Snowdrift Wolf'... Isn't that your spear? And 'sealing' it means..."

Yukina's tone was grave. "Yes, it means I am relieved of my duty as Watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor."

Her spear, granted the name of Snowdrift Wolf, was properly called Demon-Purging Assault Spear Type Seven, aka a Schneewaltzer, the Lion King Agency's secret weapon. The spear, able to nullify any magical power and rend through any barrier, was deemed to be the ultimate anti-demonic weapon, powerful enough to destroy a vampiric primogenitor. When Yukina became the Watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, she had been granted the right to slaughter Kojou at will. Snowdrift Wolf was the very symbol of that right.

In other words, sealing the spear meant relieving Yukina of her duty as his keeper. But four days starting the next day—that was the same time frame as Saikai Academy's middle school trip.

“...So that means you’re on vacation,” Kojou muttered. “Lucky for you, huh?”

Apparently, the people in the Lion King Agency thought it was a fine idea to arrange things so that Yukina could attend the field trip.

Perhaps it was no more than a simple tactical decision; having infiltrated Saikai Academy while keeping her identity a secret, participating in the trip would keep her cover intact. Even so, the bottom line was that she’d be able to take time off and spend it with friends her own age—definitely a good deal from Yukina’s point of view.

But for some reason, Yukina had an oddly sullen look as she glared sidelong at Kojou in displeasure.

“Lucky...you say?”

“Well, it’s a good thing, ain’t it? Anyway, it’s good you don’t have to watch me during it. Sticking close year-round would mean never getting a moment’s peace.”

Kojou’s smile was quite bright as he spoke.

It had been a little over two months since Yukina had entered his life. During that time, she had been at Kojou’s side throughout, watching him without a break. Surely taking time off once in a while and living it up with her classmates wouldn’t hurt anything.

Of course, Kojou was also happy for the temporary reprieve. No matter how pretty a girl Yukina was, having a government-approved stalker walking around with a deadly weapon and watching him 24-7 was a major weight on his mind.

But Kojou’s reaction brought even greater displeasure to Yukina’s face.

“You seem quite pleased by this, senpai.”

“...Eh?”

“I had no idea you regarded not having me around as so enjoyable. Is that so... I’m a little surprised, to be honest.”

After hearing Yukina vocalize her pain, Kojou rushed to excuse himself. “Er, no, it’s not that it’s enjoyable, I just think I can, you know, spread my wings a little bit more while you’re not around—”

“That’s what worries me!” Yukina appeared to be mulling over the issue, lowering her eyes as if appealing to a higher power. “I mean, really, what will you do when I don’t have my eyes on you, senpai—?”

“I won’t do anything!! Things’ll just go back to how they were before you came. Nothing’s gonna happen from you taking your eyes off me for three or four days, geez!!”

Kojou had to object to being discussed as if he were some fiendish criminal. However, Yukina glared at him with narrowed eyes, very nearly pouting.

“Just the other day, didn’t you end up drinking Yuuma’s and Sayaka’s blood in just the three or four hours you were out of my sight...?”

Kojou went red-faced. “You’re gonna talk about that *here*?!”

In the first place, a vampire’s vampiric urges were triggered by lust—in other words, sexual arousal. Thanks to Yukina’s mentioning it, he had vivid flashbacks as he recalled just what had taken place between him, Sayaka, and Yuuma that night.

“That was an emergency, you know! Something that big doesn’t happen every day!”

“...I suppose you’re right. It *would* be nice if *nothing* happened.” Yukina sighed, still a bit worried. “But will you really be all right, senpai? Nagisa won’t be with you either this time, will she? Are you going to wake up on time in the morning? Then there’s closing up at night and checking for fire hazards—”

“Geez, what are you talking about? I can hold down the fort for a few days.” Kojou forced a reassuring smile, exasperated. “I’ll be *fine*. If the Lion King Agency says it’s okay to take a break, there’s no reason for you to worry ’bout me, Himeragi. No need to go overboard.”

Kojou’s throwaway declaration was an effort to calm Yukina’s overactive imagination.

Emotion vanished from Yukina’s eyes, which then turned icy. She ceaselessly echoed a phrase in her mouth, over and over:

“...No reason, you say? Overboard, you say...? Is that so?”

“Ah...er... Miss Himeragi...?”

Unable to understand the cause of her anger, Kojou called out to Yukina, once more perplexed.

Right around then, the monorail arrived at the terminal closest to school.

3

A scent tinged with fried butter wafted through the classroom. Sliced onions sizzled as they were added to the well-heated frying pan.

This was a home-ec morning practicum, with the class divided into several teams. The menu called for Caesar salad, omelets with rice, and beef stew for a high-calorie, three-piece set. With a practiced hand, Kojou controlled the frying pan while pouring seasoning on top, causing Yaze to let out a whistle of admiration. “Whoa, that’s pretty good, Kojou.”

Rin Tsukishima, the class representative, followed suit, sounding like she was praising a pet for doing a good trick. “Indeed. He’s quite good.”

Dressed in an apron and munching on salad croutons, Asagi Aiba commented, “I guess all human beings have *one* thing they’re good at.”

Without pausing his cooking, Kojou shouted back, “Oh, shut up, you guys! Don’t stare like it’s got nothin’ to do with you. Why do I have to make it all myself?!”

The other three gazed enigmatically back at him. Their looks said, *Why is he asking the obvious only now...?*

Yaze sighed with an exasperated shake of his head. “Hmph, stupid question, Kojou... I dunno about Tsukishima, but if Asagi and I were helping, it’d only mean more work for you.”

“That ain’t a line you should say like you’re proud, y’know?” Kojou retorted in a low voice.

You’d never know it from his appearance or his laid-back attitude, but Yaze was the son of a family running a conglomerate. Kojou could understand why

Rin and Asagi had no cooking experience, being daughters of surprisingly upper-crust families. *But there's no way not helping's better than helping, is there...?*

"So naive," Yaze pontificated. "I mean, that cake Asagi made in fifth grade was a weapon of mass destruction that put fourteen boys in the hospital. Thankfully, I expected that, so I was able to escape unscathed. But..."

"What, you're gonna drag up that old story now...?!" Asagi squeaked, her face bright red.

Judging from her demeanor, Yaze's tragic tale was the gospel truth. Noticing the gazes of her classmates falling on her, Asagi hastily cleared her throat. "...I-I mean, don't judge people on info from years before like that. I can cook as well as the average person now."

"Huh..."

"What's with that look of doubt?!"

As Yaze's expression projected a complete lack of trust in her story, Asagi grabbed the oil near her hand and splashed him with it. This was peperoncino oil, which Kojou was using for the secret ingredient of his dish. Bathed in the spicy oil from garlic and red pepper, it was the perfect ammo for Yaze to press his hands to his face and dramatically faint in agony.

With a very mature expression, Rin coolly surveyed the two childhood friends as they took potshots at each other.

"Well, it's fine, isn't it, Akatsuki? I think it's wonderful for a boy to specialize in cooking. Don't you agree, Asagi?"

With the topic abruptly tossed onto her lap, Asagi's voice became shrill. "Eh?! W-well, that's certainly one theory... Th-though it's just one popular view among many!"

However, Kojou was too involved in his cooking to notice her awkward response.

"...Whether it's cool or uncool, there's no way I'm gonna get this done on time on my own. At least set the dishes, geez!!" he snapped.

Rin giggled and smiled as she added, "Come to think of it, Akatsuki's little

sister is a great cook.”

Ah, yeah I guess, Kojou haltingly agreed.

Nagisa’s cooking skill was definitely up there by middle-schooler standards. That was a result of their mother being absent from home so much, which forced her to do the housework. Kojou could cook half-decently himself, but he and Nagisa weren’t in the same league.

“That’s ’cause she’s had to do lots of cooking lately. Besides, frozen pizza’s the only thing our mom can cook.”

“If I married you, I might be able to enjoy that little sister’s cooking for the rest of my life,” Rin said. “A pleasant thought...”

Kojou, unable to comprehend, sighed and set about refuting her. “...Er, no, that doesn’t make any sense.”

Figures, thought Yaze as he wiped his oil-drenched face, silently voicing agreement with Kojou. “I mean, Nagisa’s gonna get married at some point, too.”

Kojou’s voice squeaked. “Married...?!” He fought to remain calm, but he was unable to completely hide his unease. “There’s no way Nagisa would... Th- there’s no one who’d be marrying—hot!”

Asagi, watching Kojou completely lose his cool with obvious scorn, murmured, “Whoa... He took it seriously, gross!”

She didn’t actually say, *Damn him and his sister complex*, but her frosty glare conveyed it directly to his mind, loud and clear.

“Sh-shaddup! It’s only ’cause you guys said all that stuff!”

In contrast to Kojou looking ready to flee, Rin serenely inquired, “Isn’t the third year middle school field trip just about to begin? What will you do for food in the meantime?”

Kojou wiped the sweat off his brow. “Oh, yeah, that. Er... I didn’t think of anything in particular, but I’ll just buy something good and eat that. It’s hard to cook for one person, y’know.”

“Hmm...” Rin narrowed her eyes, looking even more delighted as she looked

up at Asagi, her chin in her palms. “It’s the perfect opportunity, Asagi. How about you make something for him?”

This time it was Asagi’s voice that squeaked. “Wh-what?!”

Kojou was aghast at how Rin, who was normally chilly and unsociable if anything, seemed vibrant and full of life as she twisted the knife into Asagi.

“Wh-why do I have to—?!”

“You’re good at cooking now, aren’t you, Asagi? Food doesn’t taste as good when you eat it alone, so I was thinking you could have dinner with Akatsuki, *just the two of you—*”

“J-just the two of us...?”

Asagi glanced toward Kojou as if prodding him for a reaction. However, Kojou made none. His entire nervous system was devoted to skimming scum from the top of his beef stew.

“I’ll do no such thing...!” Asagi continued. “N-not that I’d mind eating out somewhere together...”

Kojou let his classmate’s sullen words roll right over him. “Mm, sure.”

For whatever reason, Rin and Yaze met each other’s eyes. *They’re hopeless*, they sighed together.

After a brief pause, Yaze asked something else to restore the mood. “Hey, Kojou, is that middle school transfer student gonna go on the field trip, too?”

By his standards, he had an oddly serious expression on his face. Kojou thought that was rather suspicious as he looked up from the stew.

“Himeragi said she was gonna, but... What of it?”

Yaze immediately returned to his usual frivolous tone as he ran a hand through his spiky, combed-back hair.

“Ahh... Nah, I was just a little jealous. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to appreciate her in street clothes, her sleeping face, getting into the shower...”

Asagi, listening to the boys’ chatter, sullenly grumbled, “You’re both complete morons.”

“Hey, I didn’t say anything!” Kojou complained aloud as he cracked an egg. He bore an unusually serious expression as he prepared to soft-boil the egg for the omelet rice.

Watching Kojou from the side, Asagi began to nibble on some chopped-up lettuce. She murmured, nearly inaudible, “I see... She’s gonna be gone, too... I see...”

Shortly after, Kojou’s cell phone signaled the arrival of a text.

4

Soaking up the rays of the setting sun, Nagisa Akatsuki raised her voice in bewitching admiration.

“Ahh... Yummy...”

She sat at the outdoor table of a café terrace in a commercial district’s shopping mall, licking a giant, three-flavored ice cream cone. It was an extravagance almost beyond description, weighed down with so many toppings that it barely held its shape.

Kojou and Yukina sat at the same table with her, along with a girl who had silver hair and pale blue eyes. She had a beautiful Northern European face far removed from Japanese norms, with a gentleness that made her seem reminiscent of an angel. This was Kanon Kanase, “the Saint of Middle School.”

Nagisa drowned herself in ice cream like a child would. “Yeah, Lulu’s ice cream is just the best. The taste is luxurious and just melts in your mouth.”

Though Kojou’s little sister was fond of talking to begin with, she was particularly chatty during mealtime.

What are you, a food critic? Kojou grumbled internally, his chin in his palm. His face was visibly dismayed.

“Geez... I was wondering what this ‘big favor’ was, but it’s nothing but being your mule. Just what do you think your seniors are here for?” he continued.

“Well, *that’s* why I’m treating you to ice cream, isn’t it? You can at least come

shopping when it's your cute little sister asking. We can't take our time at the shops if we're lugging all that around, can we?"

As Nagisa spoke, she pointed to the large bags sitting at Kojou's feet. There were three people's worth of street clothes and bags. It was enough luggage that you'd think she was moving out.

"If you needed a travel bag, we've got one at home." Kojou pointed at the largest shopping bag as he spoke. It was luggage Nagisa had bought on impulse, handing over an extravagant sum at the counter.

However, Nagisa grimaced, nose scrunching. "You mean the sports bag you used before? No way. I mean, that thing stinks from all the jerseys in the boys' locker room."

"Oh, come on, it doesn't stink *that* much!" Kojou sullenly replied.

Yukina, unable to contain herself any longer as the siblings quarreled, let out a small chuckle.

Nagisa puffed up her cheeks in an emphatic pout. "You just complain too much, Kojou. And in front of these girls, too! A lot of guys would get sex changes if it meant being able to go out with Yukina and Kanon."

Kojou clutched his head as he groaned. "I think that's overstating it a little... Middle school guys aren't that messed up, right...?"

He thought she had to be joking, but that he couldn't completely dismiss it terrified him. That was how off the charts Yukina's and Kanon's looks were, beautiful enough that they were actually very hard to approach, but—

Noticing that Kanon was gazing into space rather than joining the conversation, Kojou asked, "What is it, Kanase? You're spacing out there."

Kanon blushed a little. She shook her head, swaying her seemingly transparent silver hair. "I'm sorry, the tasty ice cream just made me so happy."

Her smile and delight in such an ordinary thing completely captivated Kojou.

Born as an illegitimate child of the former King of Aldegia, she had no conscious appreciation of the tremendous spiritual power exclusive to the royal line that she'd inherited. Lacking any memory of either parent, she had been

raised since infancy as an orphan at an abbey. But she'd lost that home due to some incident, and her adoptive father modified her into the monster known as Faux-Angel—Kanon's past was a nigh-unbearable series of painful experiences.

Yet she was able to smile with such happiness in spite of it all. Her gentle expression was truly worthy of what they called her: a Saint.

His face red and eyes turned away, Kojou offered the remaining ice cream scoop in his cup.

"You can have this, too, if you want..."

There was just too much of Lulu's ice cream that Nagisa loved for Kojou's stomach to handle.

Kanon's eyes seemed to twinkle in delight.

"I'll have one bite, then... Actually, I've become rather fond of strawberry."

"Good to hear."

Seeing Kanon as happy as a puppy, Kojou sighed with relief and patted his chest, when suddenly—

"Ah, Akatsuki, you have ice cream on your face."

"Eh?"

As Kanon spoke, she wiped Kojou's lips with a napkin. Kojou, frozen in surprise, felt several dagger-like stares from nearby. Nagisa and Yukina were indeed glaring at him, though he had no idea why.

"Err... Did you girls...want to have some strawberry, too?"

"That is not it."

"Idiot!"

Both girls gave him frigid responses. Kojou grimaced without any clue as to what was going on.

Nagisa, giving in to her anger, wolfed down her remaining ice cream.

"Oh yeah, there! We're going in that store!"

As Kojou and Yukina spotted the store Nagisa was pointing out, they

exclaimed at virtually the same time:

“Eh?!”

The display window was adorned with mannequins wearing gorgeous lingerie. It looked like an underwear store, any way you sliced it.

What kind of grudge do they have against me? Kojou frowned, but the looks of interest coming over Yukina’s and Kanon’s faces showed they were intrigued. Apparently it wasn’t a total turnoff to the group.

“And hey, there’s a sale, too. I mean, we’d better have the right underwear for the field trip, don’t you think?”

“Hey, I think that one’ll look good on you, Yukina!” Nagisa announced. “You can let me pick yours, too, Kanon. I’ll do awesome coordinating. Oh, and Kojou, *you* stay put outside!”

“I wouldn’t go in if you begged me to!!”

Nagisa grabbed the hesitating girls and pulled them into the underwear store.

Watching the girls’ backs as they left, Kojou sighed, dead tired.

He always felt worn out from shopping with Nagisa, but she seemed even higher strung than usual. No doubt she was looking forward to the field trip just that much. Because, while he *did* find it hard to keep up with her, he knew Nagisa had another reason for being excited: Four years earlier, demons had gravely wounded her in an incident, resulting in prolonged hospitalization. This was her first trip abroad since her discharge—of course she was dancing on a cloud.

Hope nothing bad happens with her all full of herself like that, Kojou brooded. When he lifted his head, he noticed an unfamiliar man approaching.

He was wearing a pure white jacket; his tie and hat bore a red-and-white checkered pattern. His left hand was gripping a silver cane. By external appearance, he seemed about twenty years old, give or take, but he looked like he could be considerably older—or younger—than that.

Either way, the figure gave off the air of a stage magician. In fact, he stopped right in front of Kojou and tipped his hat by way of greeting.

“G’day.”

Kojou stood up and returned the greeting. “Same to you.”

On reflex, he’d fallen back into his old athletic club habit of always politely returning a greeting. Perhaps the man found Kojou’s reaction unexpected, since he narrowed his eyes but smiled in delight.

His eyes were frightfully red, like the color of fresh blood—

“That silver-haired girl just now. Pretty, isn’t she?”

“Well, yeah.”

Though the man’s suspiciously chummy attitude put Kojou on guard, he promptly agreed. He had no reason to say no.

“You seem to get along with her very well... She wouldn’t be your lover, by any chance?”

A misunderstanding would have been troublesome, so Kojou replied honestly. “No, just a junior at school. She’s my little sister’s friend.”

Kojou kept himself from saying any more than that. He was starting to sense a malevolent aura around this man. It was...the scent of blood.

“So who are you, anyway? You don’t look like you’re recruiting for the circus, so...?”

“Me? I am One Who Seeks the Truth.”

Kojou was momentarily at a loss. “...Huh?”

Abruptly, *something* from the man’s right arm whipped out like a snake.

It was glittering metal along its length, a viscous steel-colored liquid. It snaked around Kojou’s arm and began to invade Kojou’s very flesh. It felt like his skin was dissolving, giving him profound malaise, and yet, an oddly pleasant sensation—

But only a single layer of Kojou’s skin had been dissolved when the fluid suddenly seemed to boil and snap back. It exploded and dissipated, unable to withstand Kojou’s vast magical energy, much like being electrocuted after grabbing a live wire.

Kojou glared at his company, scowling as the strange sensation stuck to his flesh.

“What the hell was *that*?!”

Kojou *seriously* didn’t want to imagine what would’ve happened to him if he’d been an ordinary human being and that liquid had completely corroded his body; he was certain it would’ve been a disaster.

The man looked at his own right arm, scrutinizing it.

“Hmmm. You managed to stop it. I had an odd feeling about you earlier, but... You’re not human, are you? An unregistered demon... A vampire, yes? It would seem you’re not some kind of bodyguard dispatched by the Aldegian royal family, though. I wanted to kill you quietly without attracting attention, but—oh well!”

“Uh—?! ”

The man raised his right arm once more.

The silver liquid gushed from his fingertips. It transformed into a slender, sharp blade, slicing horizontally at Kojou with incredible force. Even with his vampiric reaction speed, Kojou couldn’t completely track the attack.

As he hit the dirt, a lamppost behind him was cut cleanly in half.

This was no mere liquid. It was liquid *metal*, with a weight comparable to quicksilver, re-formed into a high-density blade. Its own weight and centrifugal force made for a powerful weapon.

Kojou desperately evaded the man’s second attack as he countered, voice hard, “Wait... You’re here to kidnap Kanase...?! ”

The assailant knew Kanon’s relationship to the Aldegian royal family. The odds of him trying to kidnap her for ransom or use her as a political pawn were high. The point of invading Kojou’s flesh was simply to force him out of the way, so that the guy could approach Kanon without suspicion.

However, the man only laughed, plainly mocking the suggestion.

“Kidnap? You mean drag her off somewhere...? For a vampire with so much magical power, you sure focus on the most banal things! That girl’s not going

anywhere. I just thought she'd make a good offering."

"Offering...?!"

"What, you didn't know?"

The man spat on the ground, as if the ignorance offended him.

"Sounds like you don't know about the incident at Adelard's Abbey five years ago, either."

Fleeing the attacks, Kojou came to hide in the shadow of the building. "What're you talking about?!" he shouted back, irritated.

The offensive power of the man's steel blade was a menace, but he was no match for Kojou. If Kojou summoned a Beast Vassal, he could no doubt blow the guy away in an instant.

Beast Vassals were summoned beasts that dwelled in vampires' very own blood; such was their incredible might, even more so for the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire.

But that was precisely why Kojou couldn't use them: He didn't know what kind of damage would be done, unleashing their power in the middle of a city like this. One wrong move and Nagisa and the others, still nearby, could be caught in the crossfire.

Fortunately, the guests and staff at the terrace café had run for the hills as soon as the man had attacked—they were residents in a Demon Sanctuary. They were used to stuff like this.

Though he was grateful they hadn't attracted onlookers, Kojou had no doubt someone would call the authorities; the Island Guard would be on them in no time. He, an unregistered vampire, had no desire to tangle with the guardsmen... Not that he could actually do anything about it. Currently unable to launch a proper counterattack, all Kojou could do was sweat and wait for the cavalry to arrive.

"It's nothing you need concern yourself with. You'll die before knowing the truth!"

"Ugh—?!"

The steel blade lashed out, slicing apart a concrete wall. The fragments that fell blocked Kojou's avenue of escape.

He'd blundered in hiding behind a building. Kojou was now trapped in a narrow alley, with no way to evade the next attack.

The man's sword swung down at Kojou's head with the force of a guillotine—
—When suddenly the blade of a long spear, twinkling silver, intercepted. Tracing a beautiful arc, silver cut through steel like it was butter, momentarily saving Kojou from peril.

"Himeragi—?!" Kojou shouted.

She, the Watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, had realized he was in danger and rushed out of the store.

Yukina landed on the ground with her skirt aflutter. She adopted a combative stance, never averting her gaze from the mysterious assailant.

"Are you all right, senpai?" she asked.

Kojou exhaled weakly, looking drained. "Yeah, thanks. Saved my butt."

Without a word, the man in the red-and-white checkered outfit glared at his new adversary. His right arm had lost everything past its wrist, and the liquid blade Yukina had severed now fused with his own flesh.

"Senpai... Who is that?"

"Who knows," Kojou replied with a grunt. "He said he's 'the One Who Seeks the Truth.'"

Kojou thought it was a pretty stupid-sounding title, but hey, that was what the guy had called himself.

He thought Yukina would be upset, but instead, she readily accepted it. "A Seeker. I see..."

That she had taken it seriously made Kojou all the more nervous. He didn't know about any major jobs with that description, but—

Speaking languidly, the man squatted down. "A Schneewaltzer... Come to mention it, there was a rumor the Lion King Agency had sent a Sword Shaman

to monitor the Fourth Primogenitor, wasn't there?"

The severed lamppost had rolled to a stop right at his feet. It was a steel post about three or four meters in length and must have been heavy. Yet the instant the man's right arm touched it, the post melted and collapsed.

Before their eyes, its surface transformed into something like steel-colored blood. Then, as Kojou and Yukina watched, dumbfounded, the man's arm absorbed it.

"What the...?! His arm's...!"

Before their eyes, his right hand, severed only moments before, was restored. The man had reclaimed his lost body part by fusing with the metal post.

"Just as I thought," Yukina whispered, aghast. "An alchemist—!"

Kojou's breath hitched. Like any other Demon Sanctuary resident, Kojou of course knew that alchemists existed. They controlled the composition of all kinds of matter to produce solid gold. They were also considered blasphemers against God, those who sought the answer to the riddle of eternal life—and yet this one had immediately exposed his identity to Kojou.

"Well," said the alchemist, "even my odds are bad against the Fourth Primogenitor and a Sword Shaman. I suppose it's best to postpone eliminating Kanon Kanase till later..."

With this, he turned his back on the pair. It seemed he intended to flee.

"Hey! Hold it right there, Checkered Man—!"

"No, senpai! Don't—!"

Kojou rushed him in pursuit. It was too dangerous to let the man flee when they still had no idea who he really was.

"Whoa?!"

A mass of metal fell right before Kojou's eyes.

The alchemist had transformed one of the giant shade trees planted along the street into solid metal. Its countless branches became sharp thorns; every leaf turned into a blade. There was no way Kojou could ram into it and escape

unscathed. He hit the dirt and rolled, barely managing to avoid being crushed underneath.

When Kojou, now disheveled, rose to his feet, the alchemist was nowhere to be seen.

“Crap,” he grumbled, kicking the trunk of the steel tree that now obstructed his path. “What the hell is with that guy...?!”

Pain jolted through his foot from kicking a chunk of metal.

It appeared the alchemist could transform full-grown trees into steel with only a touch—though, no, surely it was well beyond just trees. He could probably freely manipulate the composition of any piece of solid matter.

Such a power would be absolutely heinous in the wrong hands.

The liquid-metal blade had made a frightening enough weapon, but that transmutation spell was a lot more dangerous. If Kojou’s own flesh and blood were turned into metal, there was no guarantee even he, an immortal and immutable vampire, could be revived. If the alchemist had used transmutation on him from the start, Kojou could have died the moment they met.

Lowering her spear, Yukina asked, “...That alchemist was after Kanase, wasn’t he?”

Kojou nodded, grimacing. “He said somethin’ about the incident five years ago at the convent, but he didn’t elaborate.”

“The convent...”

Tales of Kanon, the convent, and five years before flooded Kojou’s mind at the word. It was clear this was the lead that would bring them closer to an answer.

Five years earlier, the abbey where Kanon Kanase lived suffered a large number of casualties and shut down—perhaps the alchemist’s reason for approaching Kanon was directly related to that.

Put another way, the incident five years ago was their only lead as to who he really was.

Kojou slumped against a nearby wall and turned to face Yukina. “Anyway,

we'll worry about that later... Thanks, Yukina. You really helped there."

The area around the terrace café was a fine mess. Numerous decorative trees littered the ground; several storefronts were half-wrecked. It'd probably cost hundreds of millions of yen to fix. But they were fortunate that the destruction had been limited to that.

If Yukina hadn't arrived and the alchemist's attack had managed to kill Kojou, his Beast Vassals would have probably run amok and turned the surrounding area to ash. In the worst case, Itogami Island itself could have been done for.

Yukina, who of course understood all that, sighed softly in exhaustion. "I just did what is expected of me, senpai. I am your watcher, after all."

"Yeah, but still, thanks."

At Kojou's honest gratitude, Yukina hid her blushing face. "It's fine..."

Then Kojou realized something extremely important. His heart pounded faster, and sweat broke out over his entire body.

The situation was bad—very bad.

"R-right, so, um, Himeragi, what about Nagisa and Kanase...?"

"They're all right. Both went into changing rooms. If I hurry back, I don't think they'll even notice."

"Changing rooms... So you were in one, too...?"

"No, I was simply having the staff measure my sizes, so I hadn't gone in y—"

As Yukina was about to say *yet*, she gasped when she looked down at her own chest. Her school uniform shirt was still completely unbuttoned.

She'd no doubt flown right out of the underwear store in great haste when she'd sensed that Kojou was in combat. Her dazzlingly pale skin was a perfect match for her completely open shirt, visibly revealing part of her bra.

Letting go of an inaudible shout, Yukina squatted down on the spot. "Heeee?!"

She carefully pulled in her collar as she glared at Kojou resentfully.

"S-senpai...how long ago did you notice?!"

“N-notice what...?”

Kojou’s reply was as monotone as a robot’s. His instincts screamed that the only way he could overcome *this* crisis was to pretend he hadn’t seen a thing.

“Don’t tell me that ‘thanks’ from earlier was—”

“N-no! It’s not like I was thanking you for showing me something nice—!”

“It’s fine. I understand. You’re just filth.”

“No, you don’t get it! You’re not getting *any* of it—!”

Kojou desperately tried to plead his innocence, but Yukina, her cheeks puffed up, wouldn’t even look him in the eye. Even as she felt Kojou’s aura fluster behind her, Yukina murmured to herself in a tiny voice:

“This is why taking my eyes off you gives me anxiety! Seriously...!”

5

The next morning—

Kojou, arriving at school earlier than usual, made a beeline for the staff building. More precisely, he was headed to the highest floor, to the office of Natsuki Minamiya.

Incidentally, Yukina wasn’t with him because she’d refused to speak to him since the open blouse incident the day before. But that was all the better as far as Kojou was concerned: Yukina was on vacation starting today. He wanted her to go on the field trip with as few lingering concerns as possible.

Kojou opened the thick wooden door and peered into Natsuki’s room. “Sorry, Natsuki. There’s a little something I wanted to ask you—”

The next moment, Kojou stopped dead in his tracks and reflexively shielded his head. *Oh, man!*

Natsuki Minamiya, age twenty-six and Saikai Academy’s English teacher, had such a small figure that she looked like a little girl, despite which—no, *because* of which—she detested how the students treated her. They called her *Natsuki* instead of *Ms. Minamiya*. She was a violent teacher constantly dishing out

corporal punishment to the students who disrespected her, so it was only natural for Kojou to protect himself after the slipup.

For some reason, however, the day seemed to mock Kojou for his prudence: No matter how long he waited, the expected attack never came. Instead, what he heard from inside the room was a flat, highly composed voice:

“Good morning, Fourth Primogenitor.”

“...Astarte?”

Dressed in a maid outfit, the slender girl was standing near a window with a billowing curtain. As always, her skin looked almost transparent. Her large eyes were faintly blue, and her face was perfectly symmetrical. To Kojou, she seemed less like a living creature and more like a work of art. This was Astarte—a homunculus.

In the past, she had been created by a Lotharingian Armed Apostle and employed by him as a weapon, but she was now working at Saikai Academy under Natsuki’s guardianship. Wearing a maid outfit in spite of being on staff was purely a matter of Natsuki’s personal tastes.

Kojou looked around the room as he asked, “Huh, it’s just you here? Where’s Natsuki?”

Her office was extravagant, evident by a thick, luxurious carpet decorating the floor. However, there was no sight of its owner sitting on her beloved antique chair.

“Master is absent. Earlier, she left at the request of the police.”

“The police...?”

Astarte’s reply gave Kojou an ominous feeling.

The other hat Natsuki wore was a federal Attack Mage. The Demon Sanctuary’s educational institutions were required by law to employ a certain percentage of Attack Mage—qualified staff for the protection of the students.

However, Natsuki was also known as the Witch of the Void, and on top of that, a combat instructor for the Island Guard and one of Itogami Island’s most powerful people.

Kojou worried about the timing of police suddenly calling someone of Natsuki's level. He couldn't shake the feeling it had something to do with the ruckus at the terrace café the day before.

As Astarte watched Kojou go pale, she asked, "Are you concerned about something, Fourth Primogenitor?"

Kojou shook his head. "It's not really a *concern*, I just wanted to talk to her a bit. Private stuff."

"Understood. I would be happy to converse with you if you like."

"Ah... Are you? Well, there *is* something I kinda wanna know, but—"

"The answer is, 'Your romantic prospects are very strong this week. You would be wise to make a show of bringing the girl in your class home with you and make a move on her while the little watcher is away.'"

The homunculus began giving him strange advice with a serious look when Kojou forcefully stopped her: "Who said to dish out romance advice?!"

Astarte continued to gaze at Kojou with emotionless eyes. "I believe this is the sort of guidance sought by many schoolboys in the springtime of their youth?"

"Er, well, maybe that's what's on a lot of guys' minds, but um—how'd this turn into instigating a felony?!"

"Master believes most who seek the counsel of others already have their answer. Therefore, the person offering guidance need only provide a gentle nudge toward what the asker already wants to do."

"Well, I guess even Natsuki can say something civilized once in a while, but... Wait, how'd you conclude I wanna make moves on Asagi here?!"

"Meaning, that you would prefer to do so to another girl?"

Kojou was breathing heavily as he clutched his head. "That part ain't the problem here!!"

That Astarte didn't engage in sarcasm or jokes, but rather was dead serious 24-7, made her very hard to deal with.

"At any rate, please have some tea," she said.

Astarte brought a cup over from the wet bar's cabinet. Using a teapot, she poured black tea that had just finished brewing, making a rich, perfumed scent float up around them.

Kojou brought the cup to his lips. "This is good stuff," he stated in surprise.

Natsuki, notoriously picky about her black tea, entrusted Astarte with making hers, and it was shockingly tasty. Kojou wasn't a connoisseur, but this was in a different dimension than any other he'd previously tasted.

Even as she saw Kojou so moved, Astarte's expression remained largely neutral. However, he felt like the girl's blue eyes had a bit of an extra twinkle to them.

Having calmed down from drinking the tea, Kojou finally switched to what he actually wanted to talk about.

"Hey, Astarte... Homunculi are made with alchemy, right?"

Astarte remained expressionless as she nodded. "Affirmative. In modern times, homunculi creation is heavily influenced by biotechnology and medical science, but the basic theory is directly derived from alchemy nonetheless."

Kojou looked up at her as he asked, "Do you know what alchemists are after, then?"

Astarte, a product of alchemy herself, had a fundamental grasp of the science imprinted on her since before she'd even been born. Kojou thought he had a good chance of finding a clue from her—a clue about the alchemist in the checkered cap.

"Practitioners of alchemy operate on many different levels, but the ultimate goal of alchemy is to breach human limits and become closer to 'God.'"

Astarte narrowed her eyes, as if searching through old memories, even though her reply was casual.

"God? It's not to turn iron and lead to gold?"

"Transmutation is nothing more than a side effect of alchemists' moving closer to 'God,' for the guiding principle of alchemy is to transform all that is imperfect into a perfect existence."

Kojou recalled how the red-and-white alchemist had instantaneously remade trees into solid steel. “I see... If a man can turn into a god, turning lead to gold is child’s play, huh?”

Following alchemist logic, a living tree that would eventually perish must have seemed a less perfect being than a nigh-indestructible piece of metal.

“But how does all that stuff turn you into a deity...?”

“I cannot answer, for ‘God’ is a word with a vague definition. However, the past includes two examples of having achieved nearly eternal life while retaining a body of flesh and blood.”

The ease with which Astarte replied surprised Kojou. “‘Examples’?”

“You are one such example, Kojou Akatsuki. You were born as a human, yet you gained the vampiric powers of the Fourth Primogenitor, although that does put you on the opposite end of the spectrum from ‘God’—”

Kojou slumped his shoulders. “Well, that makes me sound like a dismal failure,” he muttered resentfully.

Certainly, vampires were immortal and un-aging, but the source of that power was a “negative” life force diametrically opposed to the blessings of God, making them unable to die and go to Heaven, be reincarnated, or find spiritual peace. It was like a disease that just made them keep on living. Even if they lived for thousands of years, it was utterly impossible for a vampire to evolve into a deity of light. If that was the goal, surely they were nothing more than incomplete failures.

“So what’s the other example?” Kojou asked.

“Wiseman’s Blood.”

Kojou had never heard of it before. “What the heck is that?”

Astarte slowly shook her head. “Details are unclear. However, Nina Adelard is said to have used the power of the Wiseman’s Blood, her own creation, to gain an immutable body with infinite magical power.”

Kojou’s breath caught.

“Adelard...?!”

In the back of his mind, he recalled that the alchemist had spoken this name the day before. *Adelard's Abbey*, where the incident had happened five years before—that was what he had said.

“The Great Alchemist of Yore. She is a person of legend. If she was still alive, she would be over two hundred and seventy years old by now, but...”

Astarte sank into silence. Apparently, that was all the knowledge that she'd been imprinted with. But Kojou had found his desperately sought clue.

The bell rang for classes to begin. However, Kojou remained silent, not moving a muscle. His head was all a jumble. He needed time to put the information in order.

“Here, have some tea.”

Astarte refilled Kojou's cup. The homunculus seated across from him really did seem to be enjoying herself a little—just a little—more than usual.

6

Asagi's mouth was stuffed full of pasta when she inclined her head a little and asked, “*Halelaid Halley...?*”

She was in the school cafeteria during lunch break. With hungry students thronging all around them, she and Kojou were sitting side by side at a narrow table.



“Ah... Come to think of it, it might’ve been called that. Isn’t that the haunted house in the back of the park?”

Kojou kept his voice low as he asked, “What’s a convent doing, being named after an alchemist?”

So the abbey Kanon Kanase had lived at really *had* been named for a great alchemist of ages past. An alchemist and a convent—it didn’t sit right with him at all.

But Asagi seemed to be paying it no special heed.

“Maybe that alchemist founded it? Or maybe it was the name of the abbess...?”

“Well, I mean, ain’t it weird for an alchemist to found a convent to begin with?”

“Not at all. Alchemists are strongly influenced by pagan magic, and a lot of spells get banned for being too dangerous. So many make heavy donations to kings and churches to avoid getting persecuted.”

Didn’t you read that in middle school history class?! she added in silent shock, but Kojou did not reply. He had a vague memory of having heard something like that; apparently it was beginner-level knowledge that was part of a Demon Sanctuary’s core curriculum.

“Guess money really does make the world go round...”

“Pretty much. Actually, royals and church officials hard up for money recruit alchemists themselves. It happens quite a bit.”

As Asagi said this, she reached toward a second plate with pasta piled on top. For such a slim girl, she was quite a glutton. Two servings of pasta were practically starvation rations by her standards. Sitting next to her, Kojou felt like he’d get full just from *watching*.

“There was a big incident at the place way back, right? You don’t know what caused it?” he asked.

“Yeah, I can’t remember that much. I mean, I was in elementary school then—they said it was dangerous, so I didn’t get too close to it.”

“Yeah... It’s five years ago after all...” Kojou slumped his shoulders, visibly deflated.

Five years ago, Kojou was in grade school and hadn’t even arrived on Itogami Island yet. Not many of his classmates would have even known about it at the time. Kojou had gotten his hopes up a bit for Asagi, who had lived her whole life in the Demon Sanctuary, but it looked like things wouldn’t be that easy.

“Ah?”

Asagi, fussing with her smartphone while eating one-handed, made a noise as she glared sullenly at the display. She was trying to look into the incident, but apparently it wasn’t going well.

“What?”

“My search isn’t showing any results... The data’s been erased?”

“It’s an old incident, so maybe there’s just no data for it?”

Asagi waved away the thought. “These are the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s archives. It records everything down to how many steamed meat buns were bought at convenience stores on the island on any given day.”

Kojou scratched his face, finding those words downright eerie. “Well, that kinda sucks. It’s like we’re being watched.”

“What’s the big deal?” *That’s an information society for you*, her look said.

“But then why is only this data missing?”

“Someone deleted it on purpose, I’m sure. If I checked the logs at the Gigafloat Management Corporation, I might find out who... But it might be best not to stick my nose in that far. Feels kinda dangerous.”

“Meaning, the Gigafloat Management Corporation might be the one pulling the strings here...?”

“Or it could be an even more dangerous group.”

That said, Asagi cut the power to her smartphone.

Only a few people close to her knew, but Asagi’s specialty was hacking. She possessed a genius level of skill to the point that the Gigafloat Management

Corporation's Department of Security paid especially high fees for her services. If Asagi said it was bad, no doubt it really was.

First the red-and-white alchemist from the day before, then the Management Corp's data revision—apparently, the incident at Adelard Abbey hid greater secrets behind it than he had expected.

Asagi pursed her lips as she voiced her complaints. "So why'd you call me over to talk about an incident several years ago, anyway? Didn't you have anything else to ask about? Like, ah, plans for tomorrow maybe—"

"Ah...," Kojou murmured as an afterthought. "Sorry, Asagi. Something's come up. Gotta go for a bit."

Dumbfounded, she watched Kojou stand up with his tray.

"Sorry, could you make up a good excuse for me missing afternoon classes?"

"Kojou, just a...! Hey, you, wait up!!"

Asagi wolfed down the remaining pasta on her plate and got on her feet. She caught up to Kojou before he reached the shoe locker at the entrance, with strides a gold medalist sprinter would be proud of.

"What are you followin' me for?!" he hissed.

"What about you, what do you think *you're* leaving school for?!"

Asagi pressed the point with a bloodcurdling glare. Kojou averted his eyes as he tried to find the words.

"I'm just going to the ruins of the abbey. There's something on my mind so I'm just gonna check it out."

Kojou rapid-fired his statement and immediately headed outside the campus building.

However, Asagi put on her shoes and followed right behind him. "What do you mean, something on your mind?"

"Er, well, um...cats."

"Huh? *Cats*?"

Asagi's mood worsened at this non sequitur. Now that she was having a hissy

fit, it was no longer possible to persuade her. Kojou had no doubt she'd keep her eyes on him until his objectives were complete, even if it killed her.

Well that's not so bad, Kojou thought.

Kojou had two objectives at the abbey. The first was to check out the scene of the incident. After all, even *if* five years had passed, he still might be able to find some sort of clue.

Cats, however, were his other objective.

In the past, Kanon had cared for abandoned kittens at the ruined abbey. At the time, Kojou and Nagisa had helped find new homes for all of them.

However, it had been several weeks since then. Given Kanon's personality, there was no guarantee she hadn't picked up more strays. That would be bad. After all, there was that alchemist, too.

If the red-and-white alchemist knew Kanon was going in and out of the ruined abbey again, he'd no doubt merrily attack her. Kojou wanted to prevent that at all costs—though at the moment he could only see whether any cats were there. If there were, he'd just have to take them somewhere other than the ruins.

One way or another, it was a low-risk operation. Asagi being in tow shouldn't cause a problem. With such thoughts on his mind, Kojou climbed a hill with a splendid view, when—

"Yeowch?!"

—An impact suddenly assailed Kojou's flank and sent his body flying. A moment later, a dull *thud* reverberated inside his recoiling skull.

It was an invisible impact that had come without any warning whatsoever, as if someone had sent a blunt object through space to smash against him.

Asagi hastily rushed to his side as he collapsed.

"K-Kojou?!"

She hadn't noticed the mysterious attack at all. She must have thought Kojou, walking normally, had merely tripped on some kind of vegetation.

“Stay back!” hissed Kojou, trying to keep Asagi at a distance. But his face froze over when he noticed a silhouette at the very edge of his vision.

“Asagi—!”

With Kojou suddenly pulling her by the hand, Asagi completely lost her balance.

“Eh?! Ehh?!”

Kojou held her down, her back against the ground, and put a hand over her mouth. As Asagi squirmed and tried to speak, Kojou roughly whispered into her ear, “Be quiet and don’t move!”

“W-we can’t... Not in a place like...”

Asagi’s words and movements offered little resistance. Her eyes were faintly tearful as she looked up at Kojou with tenderness.

However, Kojou didn’t pay even the slightest attention to her.

Bewildered by his lack of response, Asagi glared and grumbled, “.....Kojou?”

“What’s with those guys?”

“Eh?”

The young woman slowly turned her head and followed Kojou’s gaze.

It was a small, verdant, tree-filled park practically on Saikai Academy’s doorstep. She could see a small gray building there. That was the abbey Kojou and Asagi had been heading to.

And she could see men with guns and body armor surrounding the place. Judging from their equipment and their situational awareness, they were clearly well-trained combat personnel.

As the two students watched in bewilderment, they heard a quiet voice from behind say, “...Guardians from the Island Guard.”

The voice had a slight lisp, an oddly charismatic tone, and a mysteriously strong presence. When Kojou turned around, his eyes beheld the sight of a woman wearing an extravagant dress accessorized with a frilly parasol.

“N-Natsuki?!”

As Kojou ran his mouth, Natsuki Minamiya thrust her fan straight into his forehead. It didn't look like a very powerful attack, but Kojou made a *guoah* sound, groaning as his head snapped back.

Natsuki spoke with an air of sarcasm: "You have a lot of guts, Kojou Akatsuki, playing hooky and making moves on a classmate in a place like this. I thought you were clumsy about such matters, but I must revise my opinion of you...*critically*."

Apparently, it was an attack from her that had caused Kojou to trip. If she hadn't attacked, they'd have been discovered by the guards monitoring the abbey, no doubt leading to a troublesome investigation. He supposed she had helped them out...technically.

Not that it changed that he'd been caught skipping class by his homeroom teacher.

"Aiba, you really should pick someone better. This is why you're on track to be a bitchy lifelong virgin with nothing but good looks..."

"Ugh, just leave me alone," Asagi muttered weakly. "And I'm not bitchy..."

Apparently, even though it was an awful thing to say, even she couldn't completely refute it.

Kojou, letting Asagi go now that she had calmed down, quickly continued on. "Anyway, Natsuki, what's going on here? What's the Island Guard doing in a place like this?"

Natsuki snorted with disdain. "It's bad for you to clumsily sniff around, so I'll tell you. Don't tell anyone else, especially not the middle schoolers."

That said, she lashed out with her fan once more. There was a squishing sound as a small animal fell at her feet.

When Kojou looked closer, it was an origami paper squirrel. Complex spells and magical symbols were drawn on the sides of the paper, in Yukina's methodical handwriting. Apparently, her *shikigami* had been monitoring Kojou and Asagi from the moment they'd left the school.

Natsuki striking it down meant she didn't want Yukina to overhear what

would follow.

“You remember Kensei Kanase, yes?”

Natsuki’s abrupt question made Kojou recall the face of a gloomy-looking sorcerous engineer. “That’s Kanase’s dad, right? I heard he pled down and got a reduced sentence?”

“That’s right. As a suspect in the incident involving the Masked, he was sentenced to probation at a Management Corporation facility.”

Kojou had a bad feeling as he murmured, “Did something happen to the old man?”

Why was Natsuki bringing up Kanon’s dad in a place like this—?

“The day before yesterday, Kensei Kanase was attacked by someone. He’s alive, but heavily injured.”

“Attacked?!”

Kojou stood up in surprise. If Kensei Kanase had been attacked, and then the next day, his daughter had been targeted...there was no doubt the two were connected.

“...Did an alchemist with red-and-white checkered clothing do it?”

Natsuki raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You know Kou Amatsuka?”

“I didn’t know his name, but I met the guy yesterday. Seemed like he was after Kanase.”

“I see... Understood. I have Kanon Kanase under guard, but don’t let her know that Kensei was attacked. I want them to go on the field trip exactly as planned. It’s probably safer that way.”

I see, thought Kojou. “So that puts them off the island and out of harm’s way...”

Itogami Island was isolated, over three hundred kilometers south of the mainland and surrounded by deep water. Strict security checks were conducted at every airport and harbor. If Kanon escaped off the island, it was nigh impossible for the perpetrator to follow suit. It wasn’t a bad plan at all.

“At any rate, she won’t be allowed to see her father, Kensei Kanase, while he’s serving his sentence. Letting her know he’s been injured will only make her worry. Besides, her safety comes first here.”

“If that’s so, then I won’t tell her... But if the culprit ain’t caught by the time she comes back, aren’t we right where we started?”

The corner of Natsuki’s lips curled up in mild amusement as she looked at Kojou. “And what of it?”

“Isn’t there something I can do?” Kojou replied with rare eagerness. “What *should* I do?”

Natsuki chortled as she cleared her throat. Her smile afterward was wry.

Asagi clutched her head. *Aah, you idiot, why’d you have to—*

But it was already too late.

“I see, you want to be *helpful*?” Natsuki asked. “I was *just* thinking about how nice it would be for you two to take remedial lessons for three times the amount of class time you’ve skipped.”

“Not that!”

A pathetic look came over Kojou as he, too, bent over in dejection.

Asagi jabbed Kojou in the side and then looked up at the sky, sighing. The small earring in her left ear twinkled gently as it reflected the color of the sky.

7

After school that day, Kojou had finally managed to finish his supplemental lessons and was leaving campus when he found a young woman waiting for him at the gate. The sun, falling ever lower in the sky, shone vividly upon her cheeks—and the guitar case on her back.

Her almost too-perfect face was as beautiful as always, but her aloof, standoffish aura was even stronger than usual. Apparently she was still in a prickly mood.

What in the world’s going on? Maybe I should just pretend not to notice and

walk right past her. Hesitating, he was still pondering the idea half-seriously when the girl approached on her own, robbing him of any avenue of retreat.

Yukina's voice was calm and unemotional. "You are rather late today, senpai."

Kojou, a bit taken aback by the chill she was giving off, nodded shortly.

"Y-yeah. In the end, Natsuki dragged me back and made me do extra lesson work, so—"

"Extra lessons, was it...? All alone with Aiba, was it?"

"Well, I suppose *technically* it was all alone with her, but—" Noticing that Yukina's eyebrows were raised sullenly, Kojou quickly corrected himself. "Errr, she finished her part real quick and went off somewhere on her own. So for most of it I was alone by myself, yeah."

"*Is that so?*" Yukina demanded with a quiet exhale. "Incidentally, what were you two thinking when you skipped school to go to the abbey?"

"I was worried about cats and stuff. I mean, I figured it'd be dangerous if Kanon was keeping strays there again, since she might run into someone like Amatsuka—er, the alchemist from yesterday."

"And what were you going to do if you really had encountered someone?"

"Umm..."

Having never considered that, Kojou was at a loss for words. Now he felt like he understood what had the girl in such a sour mood.

Kou Amatsuka's ability to transmute matter made him an extremely dangerous opponent to fight. After all, he only needed one touch to transform his enemy into metal. If caught by an ambush, even Kojou would likely go down in one shot. And yet, he'd thoughtlessly taken Asagi, an ordinary person rather than an Attack Mage, to a place where such a dangerous man might be lurking —

"Sorry, Himeragi. I didn't think it through."

Kojou felt extremely guilty as he hung his head in shame. Yukina, on the other hand, looked like a day-care worker scolding a wayward preschooler. "No, you didn't. Reflect on this, please."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“If you were attacked again, it would have been Asagi that was put in greater danger.”

“Probably, yeah. Sorry.”

“And you mustn’t skip your classes and leave school like that.”

“Well, that’s true, too...”

“Also, you’ve been doting on Asagi a little too much lately, senpai. At lunch you were together the entire time, speaking with your faces extremely close like that—”

“Eh?!”

Kojou weakly objected to the turn of conversation. “Well, I couldn’t help *that*. The cafeteria was packed and that table was cramped...”

“Reflect! On! This! Please!”

“Err... Sorry.” Kojou, not entirely convinced, nonetheless succumbed to Yukina’s overbearing demeanor and lowered his head. He easily buckled to scolding.

“Goodness, you really mustn’t make me worry like that. The important thing is that you’re both safe and sound.”

Upon saying this, Yukina slumped her shoulders slightly. Kojou, who kept his head bowed, felt like her mood had improved just a little.

“I will be with Kanase during the field trip. So please behave, senpai. Do not poke your nose into anything you shouldn’t, even out of worry.”

Kojou’s face twitched. Still, he nodded and haltingly assured, “R...right. I’ll do that. Thanks.”

He’d meant to keep Yukina in the dark about the attack on Kensei Kanase. Like Kanon, Yukina would be away from Itogami Island for four days starting the next morning. Giving her unnecessary information would only worry her; they’d simply have to catch the alchemist without them, and before the girls got back.

Yukina, perceptive as always that *something* was off, admonished Kojou once

more. “Of course, you may not drink the blood of other girls while I’m away.”

“Got it. It’s all right. I promise. We can bet on it if you want.”

Kojou’s declaration was clear as day. It wasn’t like he had any plans to drink someone’s blood regardless, so even putting money on it wasn’t a problem. He went on to add, in all seriousness, “It’s been a while since you’ve had a break, so go have fun and don’t worry about other people, ’kay? And make sure Nagisa doesn’t fall for anything too crazy, please.”

His Watcher seemed to finally lower her guard. Yukina giggled a bit at the sight of Kojou’s genuine concern for his little sister.

“Understood,” she said. “Now, there’s one favor I’d like from you first, senpai.”

“Favor?”

“There’s somewhere I’d like to bring you.”

This request was a surprise. It wasn’t often that Yukina was the one asking Kojou for something.

She continued, “It might take a little time, though... Two, three hours at most.”

“I don’t really mind, but...where’re we going?”

“We’ll get off at the next station. It’s not a long walk from there.”

“R-right.”

Kojou followed Yukina’s directions and got off at a particularly busy monorail station.

Yukina confirmed their route on the station’s guide map and they made their way down a meandering lane. There were few people passing through, but the hilly road was filled with quiet tension nonetheless. Kojou’s face twitched as he continued to walk by Yukina’s side.

Lines of hotels surrounded the road Kojou and Yukina walked along. These weren’t places for travelers to lodge, though—they were the sort of hotels men and women visited for more amorous affairs.

“Himeragi, um, this street is...”

Yukina lowered her eyes as she spoke, voice stiff. “I’m sorry, senpai. I’m a little nervous, too. It’s my first time here.”

What’s with this all of a sudden, thought Kojou, completely beside himself. This was going *way* too fast. He wondered if it had something to do with her earlier admonition not to drink the blood of other girls.

The trigger for vampiric urges was lust. Put the opposite way, if one’s lust was satisfied, vampiric urges wouldn’t happen in the first place. Perhaps that was why Yukina was bringing Kojou to a place like this, to offer up her own body to satisfy his lust...?

“Himeragi, is bringing me here some kind of order from the Lion King Agency?”

Yukina replied in her usual business tone, “Yes. It was detailed in the message that arrived yesterday.”

So that’s what this is, Kojou thought, biting his lip.

“Um, you know, you don’t have to push it this far, I think. Or more like, this is something you should do when the time’s right, not all of a sudden? Yeah. You should have a little more regard for yourself here.”

Yukina sighed. “I realize that this is sudden, but it needs to be taken care of before I leave Itogami Island.”

“T-taken care of...?”

Kojou couldn’t conceal his confusion at Yukina’s casual attitude. Maybe she didn’t really mind this turn of developments, even if it was spurred on by external events?

Certainly, Kojou bore no distaste for the girl. Of course he found her charming. But he found it unpleasant that the Lion King Agency had ordered such a thing. And more than that, there was something extremely wrong with Yukina’s personality. Even if she *was* a nationally accredited surveillance specialist, she had no idea how deeply her own private life would be monitored from the day they established that kind of relationship.

I really should turn her down flat, thought Kojou, but the instant he hardened that resolve—

Yukina took hold of Kojou's hand, and cut him off.

"Senpai... I'm sorry, can you close your eyes for a moment?"

That was enough to empty Kojou's head of all thought. Yukina's hand was smaller, softer, and much nicer feeling than one would think. It wasn't like she was tightly gripping his hand, but he still lacked the strength to shake her off.

Kojou felt a throb and a metallic scent spreading within his mouth—*I might be a total goner at this rate*—but the moment Kojou despaired, he was struck by an unpleasant impact that felt like a quiet jolt.

"You can open your eyes now, senpai. We've arrived."

And just like that, Yukina let go of Kojou's hand.

Kojou was half out of it as he looked up at the building before him. It was like an air pocket within the hotel district, a little building built with bricks. The windows were old school—stained glass; there was a weathered wooden sign above the door. Apparently, *this* had been Yukina's actual destination.

Kojou was still somewhat confused as Yukina explained why she'd held his hand.

"There is a ward to drive people away. I led you in because it's possible that a primogenitor-class demon's magical energy might destroy the ward."

Kojou felt all his strength drain from him as he drooped forward. He was so embarrassed by his arbitrary assumptions he thought he'd die on the spot.

Eventually, Kojou glanced up at the store sign and asked, "What is this place? Some kind of antique shop...?"

Based on the storefront, it was an antique shop specializing in imported, old-school furniture. He wasn't sure what the demand was like in an ultra-modern Demon Sanctuary, but it seemed like Natsuki Minamiya's kind of place.

However, Yukina slowly shook her head at Kojou's words. Tension marked her face, but as she slid the guitar case off her back and drew the silver spear out, she smiled in a way that seemed just a little homesick.

“...This is the Lion King Agency.”



CHAPTER TWO THE PREMATURE BEREAVEMENT

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1

A cloud of black smoke wafted over the gas stove, giving off an ominous odor. Within the oil-filled frying pan, an amorphous mass fell apart, its original form unclear. Asagi's classmate, Yuuho Tanahara, was yelling at the top of her lungs:

"Asagi, the frying pan! It's burning! Burning!!"

"Eh?! Ah?!"

Asagi rushed to the stove. There she fought a losing battle, cooking chopsticks in hand, as the *thing* that had once been cooking ingredients jumped around and lit aflame.

"Daaah?! It's so hot!"

Coolly gazing at Asagi's descent into panic, Yuuho silently turned off the stove's flame. The fire in the pan finally went out. She took an ice tray out of the fridge and tossed it to Asagi.

"Here, ice. Cool off, would you?"

"Erm... Sorry, Tanahara. Thanks."

Asagi, dressed in an apron, remained seated on the floor with slumped shoulders.

Yuuho was not only a member of the home economics club but also the vice president, even though she was in her first year. Asagi had asked the girl to teach her how to cook. These were supposed to be simple, easy dishes that even a rank amateur couldn't mess up. *So what's up with all this?*

Yuuho gave her classmate a strained but oddly gentle smile as she spoke.

“Goodness. I was wondering what was up when you asked me out of the blue to teach you how to cook... You’re a bigger klutz than I expected.”

Asagi looked up at her and sullenly replied, “I can’t help it, I’m not used to any of this. And I mean, geez, what’s with this recipe, anyway? I totally did it by the book, didn’t I?! Why’s this stuff in a tablespoon of this and a heap of that? Put it in grams, for God’s sake!”

“Er, that’s kind of how cooking works... But that’s the clumsy bargaining of a spoiled girl... Mm, you really fit the type, don’t you...?”

Asagi didn’t realize her eyes were wavering as she played dumb.

“Wh...what are you talking about?”

Asagi hadn’t told Yuuho the real reason she asked to be taught how to cook. With Kojou’s little sister heading off on a trip, she wanted to force her way into his apartment and deliver him a home-cooked meal. It was an ambition she was sure was still secret.

Yet Yuuho replied, “Yeah, Akatsuki sure is a lucky dog, isn’t he?”

Apparently Yuuho had been onto her from the very beginning. With a practiced hand, she cleaned up the cooking implements strewn everywhere as she handed Asagi a bread bag.

“Well, let’s give up on the burnt home-cooked stuff and try a sandwich? Even you can handle cutting bread and stuffing some eggs between the slices. If you get beat up any more, it’ll affect your part-time job, too, won’t it?”

Asagi looked down at her two beat-up hands. She nodded and replied weakly, “Erm... I’ll do that. Thank you, Tanahara.”

Thanks to her unfamiliarity with cooking, Asagi’s fingers were all covered in Band-Aids. Certainly, any further damage would make it difficult for her to even type at a keyboard.

“You’re quite welcome!” Yuuho beamed, when she suddenly looked at Asagi’s reddened ears.

“Come to think of it, I’ve been wondering this for a while but... Asagi, what happened to your earring?”

“Earring?”

Asagi touched her earlobes and suddenly stopped. One of her earrings was missing. Only the left one was in place.

“Wh-wha—?!”

“Did you forget to put it on? Today was PE, though... Maybe you dropped it somewhere?”

Blood drained from Asagi’s face. She lost earrings a lot, and this one wasn’t even an expensive one. But *this* earring was *special*.

“Ah... At the park... When Kojou took me down...”

“Akatsuki...took you down...?”

Asagi’s voice went shrill as she backtracked.

“Eh?! No, no!! I only mean knocked down in a *physical* sense...”

But one look by Yuuho at Asagi’s blushing face made her decide she knew better as she began to clap.

“Congratulations. I’m so glad things are going better than I expected between you two...”

“I told you, it wasn’t *that*!!”

2

Standing still in front of the antique shop, Kojou asked, “A Lion King Agency branch office...?”

It was an old-style brick building, the likes of which were rarely seen on Itogami Island. But even though she’d said it was a facility connected to the Lion King Agency, it sure didn’t feel like that. It just looked like a behind-the-times shop dealing in odds and ends.

But Yukina replied with a firm nod.

“Yes, there’s no mistake. This is the office handling communication and support for members.”

“...Office, huh? I mean, it’s a federal agency, of course it’d have that much, but why does the sign say it’s an antique store, then?”

“Camouflage. Even if it *is* a government organization, it’s still a special agency.”

Her explanation carried weight. Certainly, they couldn’t just announce in grandiose fashion, *For All Your Espionage and Magical Anti-Terrorism Needs*. But if they called it an antique shop, it wouldn’t arouse suspicion even if people walked in and out carrying swords and spears.

“So it’s a front?” Kojou pressed.

“Yes. Also, it sells confiscated items and the like to pay for office operating expenses—”

“So it’s a normal business, too?! And when you say confiscated items, you don’t mean stuff that’s cursed or haunted, do you...?”

“It’s all right, we exorcise everything beforehand.”

“Hey!!!”

“That was a joke.”

Yukina said it with a dead serious look before breaking into a small, amused smile and an accompanying giggle. Kojou silently frowned. Per usual, he couldn’t tell if the young woman was actually joking.

But it was apparently true that the antique shop operated without fear of bankruptcy. It didn’t seem like it dealt with any kind of normal clientele, but—

“Don’t tell me your organization doesn’t have a budget...?”

“Erm... I wouldn’t know anything about that...”

Yukina evasively lowered her eyes as she put her hand on the antique shop’s door. The wooden door creaked as it opened, with the air carrying the whiff of dust that you only got from old buildings.

Simultaneously, a solemn doorbell rang, and a woman’s crisp voice said, “Welcome. What can I do for you today?”

“...Eh?!” Kojou exclaimed.

Like an old-fashioned teahouse, there was a young woman standing there to greet them. She was pretty, with a slender physique. She had a long ponytail that was a lighter brown, as if darker hair had sunlight passing through it. Her elegant, beautiful looks, like a cherry blossom in bloom, were very familiar to Kojou.

“Kirasaka?”

The employee greatly resembled one Sayaka Kirasaka, who bore the title of Shamanic War Dancer from the Lion King Agency. Indeed, she was the spitting image of the girl, but...

“No, you’re not... Who are you?”

It was only her outward appearance that was identical. The aura around her was not that of the Sayaka Kojou knew, whatsoever. There was no way *that* Sayaka would look at Kojou and have a polite, proprietary smile come over her face.



It was Yukina who answered Kojou's question. "This is Master Shike's *shikigami*. I believe she modeled it after Sayaka."

Yukina, however, seemed bewildered by the employee's appearance, too.

"No way that's a *shikigami*. I mean, she looks just like Kirasaka..." Kojou gazed at the face of the fake Sayaka in amazement. He'd seen Yukina's and Sayaka's *shikigami* a number of times to date; they were at the level of nicely done paper crafts, but no more than that. But the Sayaka in front of them was on a whole other level. You could look at her from close up and not think of her as anything but a living, breathing human being. He could sense the beating of her heart, the warmth of her flesh, and even the scent of her hair hovering around her.

"And yet, you could tell at a glance that it wasn't Sayaka, couldn't you?"

Yukina's tone was conversational, if a bit mystified, yet the subtext seemed to be reproachful somehow. Maybe that was just Kojou's guilt talking; after all, he'd drunk Sayaka's blood a second time when Yukina's back was turned.

Kojou quickly made an excuse to gloss over the guilt in his heart.

"Well, ah, the Sayaka I know is, you know, more of an idiot, stuff like that..."

Certainly, the charming, smiling, fake Sayaka was beautiful, but he didn't like the complete absence of a personality. He thought that the girl was far more attractive when she was shouting and wearing her emotions on her sleeve like... like usual.

"Plus," Kojou continued, "the real Kirasaka would fly into a violent rage if she saw me looking at her with *that* outfit on. She'd yell that she'd claw my eyeballs out or something."

"...That might well be so." Yukina sighed in sympathy, something heavy apparently on her mind.

He imagined that the Sayaka replica was *technically* wearing a store uniform. It had a short, flaring skirt and a heavy dose of cleavage. The tight waist actually made the swell of her breasts even more prominent. It was less the outfit for an antique-shop employee and more the sort of thing a waitresses wore at a maid

café. For all he knew, perhaps maids and antique shops were a surprisingly good fit.

“So what’s she wearing that outfit for, anyway? Drawing in customers?”

“No... There’s not really any point to that with an aversion ward up.” Yukina tilted her head as she spoke. Then, suddenly, she gave Kojou a frigid glare. “More importantly, you’ve been staring excessively at her chest since earlier. Your gaze is so indecent!”

“Wha—?! No way, I’m just wondering why the heck she’s wearing a getup like this, okay?!” Kojou refuted desperately.

It’s not that he’d *meant* to stare, but the way the outfit vividly accentuated her bust had apparently drawn in his gaze without him realizing.

Yukina stared at Kojou with a merciless, unemotional look.

“It’s creepier that you weren’t even trying to look. It’s *criminal*, in fact.”

“I wasn’t giving her *that* indecent a look! And it’s not even Kirasaka, she’s not even human, you know?”

Yukina covered her own chest as she suddenly said, “Do you really like the pillow types *that* much?”

Kojou coughed, hard. “N...no one said anything about that, okay?!”

“But you do like them, don’t you?”

“Well, I might...like them a little, but...” Kojou’s reply seemed to vanish into the ether. Yukina pursed her lips with a sullen sound.

The very next moment, a new female voice could be heard in the shop. The tone was boundlessly unenthusiastic, yet seemed as clear and beautiful as the sound of two gemstones touching.

“—Quite a ruckus you’re making. What is with you?”

Upon noticing the voice, Yukina swiftly bent down on one knee and lowered her head.

“Master...!”

There was no one standing where Yukina spoke—only a single black cat sitting

on a raised dancing platform. The cat had a beautifully smooth coat, and its eyes held a golden glint. Its slender collar had cat's-eye stones of the same color embedded in it.

Yukina reverentially greeted the cat. "It has been some time, Master. Yukina Himeragi, reporting."

The cat's eyes narrowed teasingly. "It has been a while, Yukina. It's not often that you're annoyed to the point of raising your voice like that."

"My humble apologies. I was careless."

"Not at all, I speak in praise."

The cat made a small, human-like cackle as it raised a front paw. Apparently, this meant that excessively formal greetings were unnecessary here.

"What of the spear?" the cat asked.

"It's right here."

Yukina offered Snowdrift Wolf to the Sayaka replica, who in turn carried it to the black cat.

Kojou seized the chance to ask Yukina in a whisper, "'Master'...? A cat?"

Yukina seemed quite tense as she whispered back into Kojou's ear, "It's a familiar. Master is no doubt at High God Forest even now."

"High God Forest?" Kojou hissed back in shock. "Isn't that in Kansai?! Seriously...?! How far is that from here, even?!"

The shortest route from Itogami Island to Honshu was around three hundred kilometers. The institution named High God Forest where Yukina and Sayaka had trained was several hundred kilometers farther still. Kojou had heard that physical distance was little barrier to a skilled sorcerer, but even so, he didn't think a practitioner with half-baked skill could have pulled off such a feat.

"So it's the person who's controlling the cat and the Sayaka look-alike that's your real master, then?" he asked, putting the pieces together.

"Yes. Her name is Yukari Endou."

"She's a big shot?"

Kojou's insolence made Yukina stiffen as she nodded. "To a fair extent, yes."

Yukina was a girl who'd stood up to a foreign princess and an aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire without the slightest timidity. For her to show this level of reverence, her mentor was either a serious big shot or a whimsical despot—or perhaps both. Apparently, she was a troublesome opponent any way you sliced it.

But no matter how high and mighty she was, Kojou couldn't think of her as anything but a cat.

The cat stared down at Yukina's spear as she spoke quite bluntly.

"I shall accept Snowdrift Wolf, for the time being. Your techniques are crude, but your blade skills are...all right. However, it concerns me that you are over-reliant on Spirit Sight. I have taught you, have I not? A Sword Shaman is a sword yet not a sword, a shaman yet not a shaman—only an amateur sees the future and then gets swept away by it."

"Yes, Master."

Yukina listened meekly and gratefully to the cat's lecture. No doubt it was a deep, serious matter to both, but it was a surreal scene for a third party to gaze upon.

That said, this Yukari Endou person apparently possessed a vast wealth of combat experience. She'd read the tendencies and flaws in her disciple from the scratches on her weapon and had given appropriate advice.

All right, I'll call the black cat Professor Kitty as proper respect, Kojou silently decided while this was going on.

Having finished its appraisal of Snowdrift Wolf, the black cat looked down at Yukina and curtly declared, "Very well. The spear is in my hands. From this moment forward, you are relieved as Watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor. It is good for you to have fun like a normal brat once in a while."

However, Yukina continued to silently gaze at her Master. Several times, her lips quivered as if she wanted to say something, finally gathering herself as she said, "...I must object, Master. Even if it is only for a few days, I remain concerned as to what might happen to senpai...er, the Fourth Primogenitor if I

take my eyes off him. Could you permit me to continue my duties as Watcher?"

"Oh-ho..."

The cat cackled in amusement and smiled. Ever a serious child, Yukina probably would never have voiced opposition to her Master's words in the past. The cat continued, "So this boy is the Fourth Primogenitor?"

Who's a "boy"? thought Kojou, frowning as he replied, "Looks like I am, technically."

Even if it was Yukina's mentor, he just couldn't bring himself to be deferential to a cat.

The cat didn't seem to especially mind, however. It continued speaking, in a very frank tone. "Sorry to call you over like this. I did want to meet and speak with you once, so that I could grant you some small measure of thanks."

"Thanks?"

The cat's mouth grinned widely. "For saving *Avrora*."

At that moment, Kojou felt like every drop of blood in his veins was flowing the wrong way. He remembered a small silhouette with the crimson sky behind her. She had hair so scarlet, it seemed enveloped by flames, and incandescent eyes. It felt vaguely like remembering a nightmare—until Kojou felt ferocious pain in his skull.

His breathing was fierce and ragged as he stalked closer to the cat. "You... know about her...?!"

Dizziness assailed Kojou next, and Yukina hurried to prop him up. The cat, gazing with amusement at how the two were pressed together, continued, "I do not know enough that it would make a story to tell. I merely had a slight connection to the matter. All the same, that *Sleeping Princess* was a tragic child. That is why I thank you for saving her. You need not be impatient, for you too will remember in time... Though I must say, winning over not only *Avrora*, but straitlaced Yukina, you are quite crafty for someone who looks like such a dimwit. Yes, indeed..."

"H-he has *not* won me over!" Yukina shrieked.

Kojou spontaneously added his own invective: “You mangy stray...”

He banished the girl’s image from his memory too late. Sweat unpleasantly drenched his entire body, but at least the headache had abated just a little.

“While I do not think you are brave enough to commit wicked deeds in the span of three or four days, I do have regard for my adorable pupil. I shall put a bell on your neck for the time being. If there is an acting watcher present, Yukina will have a bit more peace of mind, yes?”

The cat raised its right paw. The *shikigami* wearing a maid outfit had stepped down from the platform and approached Kojou and Yukina that very moment.

Kojou’s unease was written all over his face as he asked, “A bell...? Wait, you don’t mean you’re gonna have the Kirasaka look-alike cover for Yukina?”

The cat nodded, as if this were obvious.

“A familiar face is far more convenient, yes? I spent such tender loving care making her, so go ahead and take her out for a stroll. You can feel up her breasts, too. I won’t tell the real Kirasaka.”

“Like hell I will! And what happened to Kirasaka, anyway?! If anyone’s gonna sub in, why not the real thing?!”

“Sayaka is doing her penance. After all, she used Lustrous Scale for her personal use while off-duty, exhausting precious enchanted arrows in the process. Even if it is a slap on the wrist, she will remain at headquarters for a while, writing letters of apology or the like.”

“...Penance?”

I was wondering why I hadn’t seen her for a while. So that’s what happened.

Kojou felt a pang of guilt toward Sayaka. After all, the whole reason she’d used her Lion King Agency weapons was to save him (and others) from an incident he’d gotten her into.

“I understand why your *shikigami* looks like Kirasaka, then, but what’s with the maid outfit?”

The cat replied rather proudly. “Isn’t it obvious? A humiliation game for subordinates doing their penance. It works wonders, I tell you.”

When Yukina heard the words *humiliation game*, her shoulders trembled as if she was shivering. *Oh, I see*, thought Kojou, understanding now. She was so scared of her mentor because the lady had a personality *like that*.

The cat continued, “If you don’t like the maid outfit, how about some other kind of uniform? I take requests.”

“Um, requests...?”

“Or would you prefer I send a different Sword Shaman from High God Forest? Come to mention it, there are two spry girls who just graduated this year. One has a big bosom and the other small. Which do you prefer, Fourth Primogenitor?”

“...Eh?!”

You’re asking that here and now?! Kojou shuddered. He spared a glance, but Yukina was already glaring at him from the side. He could tell that making the wrong move here would lead to very *bad* things later on. However, he didn’t know what the proper answer should be.

There was a long, awkward silence as Kojou wiped the sweat from his brow.

What broke the silence was a sound from Kojou’s cell phone.

The name displayed on the lit-up LCD screen was ASAGI AIBA.

3

The alchemist—Kou Amatsuka—stood inside a small, half-ruined convent.

Within the chapel, the air smelled of smoke from a gunfight but only in faint traces. All around Amatsuka were countless cases of ammunition alongside carelessly abandoned submachine guns. The weapons were Island Guard standard-issue. However, there was no sign of the guardsmen that had borne them—only of pitilessly abandoned metallic sculptures bearing their resemblance.

Transmutation: a secret technique of high-end alchemy that allowed Amatsuka to transform living beings into metal with a mere touch. In spite of

their powerful anti-spell gear, the members of the Island Guard were no exception.

Amatsuka, on his own, had slaughtered the Island Guard “Guardians” protecting the abbey.

“Hmm.”

Having eliminated the obstacles in his path, Amatsuka toyed with his beloved cane as he gazed at an engraving embedded within one wall of the abbey. It was a metal relief, a large work of art some two or three tatami sheets thick.

The shape engraved on it was quite abstract, which made it difficult to understand what was being displayed. But in a sudden moment of clarity, he saw a lone woman take form. She was beautiful, with exotic features, in the bloom of her youth. For a moment, Amatsuka was seized by fondness as he gazed upon the relief.

The tranquility of the moment was broken when echoing footsteps signaled men barging in. Behind him entered three, carelessly trampling inside the building.

Amatsuka gracefully looked behind him, smiling. “Greetings, Senmu. Your arrival is earlier than I expected.”

The bald, middle-aged man nodded. “We are already past the promised hour... How long do you intend to make me wait, Amatsuka?”

The man named Senmu was not even a hundred and seventy centimeters in height, yet his combination of muscle mass and fat made his presence feel overwhelming, even stifling. He had the look of a shrewd, cutthroat businessman.

Amatsuka replied airily, “Ah-ha-ha, sorry about that. But even without the Island Guard riffraff, there was still the ward Kensei Kanase put up. Lifting a spell like that is not something you want to rush.”

Senmu seemed accustomed to Amatsuka’s extremely disrespectful demeanor, satisfying himself with a single, irritated snort. He shifted his eyes toward the relief and broke out in coarse laughter.

“Very well. At any rate, this is the real Wiseman’s Blood, is it?”

How rude. Amatsuka’s face twisted in distaste as he shook his head.

“Do you really think I could mistake the legacy left by my Master?”

Senmu ignored the look as he walked closer to the artwork. “It looks like an ordinary carving, though...”

“That’s because it remains asleep,” the alchemist said, taking up a serious demeanor. “In this state, it is a mere mass of metal. Kensei Kanase chose well. Certainly, this stands out far less than crude attempts to hide it altogether. But...”

He dipped a hand under his coat and brought out a transparent, round, crimson jewel. It was the gemstone he had plundered from Kensei Kanase’s lab.

Amatsuka walked over to the wall and gave the surface a light brush of his fingers. In that instant, the metal underwent a dramatic change.

“See? It has awakened.”

The surface shuddered and rippled as something like a tentacle shot out and wrapped around his hand, trying to pull the gemstone into itself. It looked like an amoeba reviving from a catatonic state—an amoeba made of glistening, lustrous metal that was as scarlet as blood.

Senmu scrutinized the gemstone in Amatsuka’s hand. “I see... So that’s the Hard Core?”

“Yes. It’s the magical catalyst created to control the highly self-propagating, amalgamated, liquid-metal life-form—Wiseman’s Blood.”

Amatsuka pulled the gemstone away from the carving before it was completely submerged. The crimson amoeba thrashed around in dismay several times before reverting to the solid metal relief once more. But it was now crystal clear to all present that this was no mere engraving.

It was highly likely that Kensei Kanase had shaped it into the form of a relief to disguise that it was actually a crimson liquid, a metallic life-form with a will of its own.

Of course, this was no product of the natural world. Only alchemy, the secret

art of rearranging the composition of matter, could produce something amorphous, eternal, and immutable, giving birth to a life contrary to all laws of nature—

If someone could transfer his own soul into such a medium, it would constitute the birth of a truly immortal, un-aging human being. It was the scarlet jewel known as the Hard Core that was the control unit able to make such a miracle possible.

“With one’s consciousness transferred to the Hard Core, the one merging with the Spirit Blood retains his or her own will. By replacing flesh and blood with quicksilver, a nigh-eternal ‘life’ is thus obtained. What my Master arrived at was the pinnacle of alchemy.”

Senmu looked like he might begin to drool at any moment as he touched the surface of the relief. In his eyes was a near-bottomless lust for power and vengeance.

“Immortality—and enough magical power to rival a vampiric Primogenitor—comes included. The perfect life-form... With power like that, I’d have the people at headquarters that kicked me off the board and sent me to this backwater kneeling at my feet. I’d have the family that owns it by the throat—”

“That does sound rather amusing. Here you go.”

Amatsuka, speaking as if it didn’t concern him, handed Senmu the Hard Core.

As the man’s eyes filled with suspicion, he discovered the sphere was heavier than it appeared. No doubt he thought the gift odd, all the more so because the Wiseman’s Blood was one of the ideals that all alchemists pursued. To the present day, only the Great Alchemist of Yore, Nina Adelard, had succeeded in its creation—

Surely this Amatsuka was not so generous a person as to hand over the jewel that some called the Pinnacle of Alchemy without a very good reason.

So Senmu asked, “This Hard Core... It’s a memento from your master, yes? You honestly don’t mind giving it to me?”

“Of course not. A man must uphold his promises.”

Yet that was Amatsuka's reply, spoken with a proud smile. And opening only the collar of his coat, he exposed a portion of his own chest, displaying the bizarre and frightening body beneath.

His right side didn't look human in any way. It was sickly, partially consumed by the lustrous, shining metal, half-eaten by the Wiseman's Blood—the same liquid-metal life-form that composed the carving in the wall.

In place of a heart, a strange stone was embedded in the center of his chest. It greatly resembled the Hard Core, but the stone's color was an impure black. It seemed warped and cracked; apparently, Amatsuka could maintain a human form thanks to that black stone.

"Even if I look like this, I'm still grateful to you. After all, you were the one that saved me when I should have died five years ago, Senmu. Thanks to that, I was able to build the Dummy Core—"

"Hmph. Good attitude, Amatsuka."

Senmu nodded, satisfied, as he lovingly caressed the crimson jewel.

He was an employee of a machinery manufacturer fairly well-known in Japan, though that was not his true title. An internal company scandal resulted in his being stripped of his position and downsized into a worthless post. And upon meeting Amatsuka, he decided he would use the Wiseman's Blood for his own revenge.

"Don't worry," the man added. "Your loyalty shall be richly rewarded. Soon I will have the entire corporation in my grasp!"

"I expect no less, Senmu. It's a good call for both of us."

His concerns spoken, Amatsuka moved away from the wall. With a silent wave of his cane, the two bodyguards with Senmu backed off. Now Senmu was the only one left standing before the relief.

"Hmm... I see now. This gap here?"

Senmu pushed the Hard Core into a crack roughly in the center of the relief. The change that resulted was instantaneous and dramatic: The copper-colored relief transformed into a crimson liquid that spilled down the wall. Vast

amounts poured into the cramped chapel, making it look like the altar was being drenched in blood.

Then, the quicksilver covering different surfaces transformed into a huge, crimson drop of water that wriggled like it was alive. It rushed to Senmu, possessor of the Hard Core, and began swirling its way up from his feet to cover more and more of his body.

Surrounded by the ghoulish Wiseman's Blood, Senmu laughed in delight.

"Oh, look at it move. Behold, this glossy blood! It's like the finest wine, is it not, Amatsuka!"

Even then, the crimson fluid continued to engulf his body, already consuming his entire chest.

But his bodyguards looked terrified.

"Senmu!"

"It's dangerous, please move back!"

However, the man glared at them and spat, vividly irritated, "What are you talking about? This is the main event!"

"Senmu!"

"Fwa-ha-ha... I feel it... I understand. So this is my body melting away—!"

He was abandoning his inferior human flesh to gain an immortal body of metal. The gargantuan magical energy flowing into him gave him an overwhelming sense of delight and omnipotence.

But his assimilation by the Wiseman's Blood stopped midway, in a manner he had never expected. One part of the liquid metal rose up, and a new human silhouette formed within the fluid.

"Nn?!"

The crimson liquid was taking the shape of a young woman. She appeared to be eighteen or nineteen years old, and her face largely resembled a statue of a foreign beauty.

The corners of Amatsuka's lips curled up in delight. "My, oh my..."

It was clear from his face he had been waiting for her to appear.

Senmu laughed sharply. “Oh, so *this* is the Great Alchemist, Nina Adelard!” he shouted.

There was no sign that he was perturbed by the sudden emergence of this obstacle.

The Wiseman’s Blood and the Hard Core were both creations of the Great Alchemist of Yore, Nina Adelard. It was natural to expect that the awakening of the Wiseman’s Blood would be accompanied by the awakening of its proper mistress.

Amatsuka gave the bodyguards a cool gaze as he explained, “Her consciousness, preserved by the Hard Core, has been awakened. If this continues, Nina Adelard will regain her body and revive in full. In other words, no one can obtain the Wiseman’s Blood until she is eliminated.”

The beautiful woman born within the metal had already taken a nearly perfect human form. Glossy black hair flowed down her back as crimson droplets scattered, revealing her rich, brown flesh.

For his part, Senmu’s expression changed to anguish.

“*Gaah...?!*”

The man’s body, having once nearly taken control of Wiseman’s Blood, was losing its physical integrity and breaking down. Now that its proper owner, Nina Adelard, had appeared, it had begun purging itself of the foreign object. Already losing his physical coherence, Senmu desperately pleaded for aid.

“My body is...being devoured... Amatsuka! Do something, Amatsuka!”

The alchemist smiled coldly and gave a single wave of the cane in his left hand. From somewhere came a crunching sound, like teeth biting down.

“Do not be concerned. It will be over soon—”

Senmu’s throat let out a scream before Amatsuka even finished speaking.

The man’s back, barely maintaining its original shape, recoiled as the liquid metal encroached farther. Black gemstones appeared all over his flesh—they were Dummy Cores that Amatsuka had constructed. The alchemist had

explained that they were necessary to control the Wiseman's Blood, and so had embedded them into Senmu's body. However, Amatsuka's true objective was nothing as small as control of the metal itself.

"I have been waiting for this moment, Master...for the moment you awakened the Wiseman's Blood. Without your Hard Core, the Spirit Blood would remain mere scrap metal. However, once merged with the Wiseman's Blood, you are immutable. Therefore, to steal the Spirit Blood, I must destroy you from within while you are not yet in a completely awakened state...like *this*."

Amatsuka made a high-pitched laugh as the Dummy Cores in Senmu's body split asunder, releasing the rituals engraved within. A deep black ichor flowed into the crimson liquid metal like poison pouring into a pond. The Dummy Cores, running amok, ripped Senmu's body apart.

"Aaaaargh, Amatsuka! You bastard—?!"

The bodyguards rushed to try to save their boss, but they, too, were consumed by the liquid metal and dissolved.

Only a portion of Senmu's upper torso remained as he asked weakly, "Why, Amatsuka...? Why did you betray me...? Did you want to monopolize the Spirit Blood for yourself?!"

Amatsuka laughed mockingly. "That's not it at all, Senmu. Quite the opposite."

Finally, the corruption of the Dummy Cores absorbed Nina Adelard's nearly awakened body as well. Every corner of her beautiful body blackened, cracked, and broke into tiny pieces.

"I am truly grateful to you, Senmu, so I shall grant you your desire. Your *body* shall live on forever as part of the Spirit Blood—!"

Amatsuka laughed like a guiltless adolescent as he turned his back on what was once Senmu.

Behind him, the jet-black Wiseman's Blood ominously wailed and began to violently thrash around like a wounded beast.

The evening sun's rays shone upon the road, which climbed to the top of the gentle hill. Next to it, Asagi continued walking up the urethane chip-covered footpath as she touched her beloved smartphone to her ear. Through the receiver, she heard Kojou's voice, unusually tense.

"—Asagi? Oh, great timing. You really bailed me out. Er... So, did something happen?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry to bug you all of a sudden."

Asagi was a little thrown off by just how polite Kojou was being. He made it sound like her phone call had given him the excuse he needed to dodge some kind of life-or-death crisis...

Well that's all fine, thought Asagi as she regained her senses. "I wanted to ask for a favor... Ah, did you get home by any chance?"

For a moment, there was an unnatural pause. It seemed Kojou was wondering whether or not it was a good idea to answer.

"Nah, I'm still out and about. I'm at a shop in West District Six."

"District Six... That's the love hotel district?!"

Asagi's cheek twitched. Of course she knew about the place; everyone living on Itogami Island knew about Island West District Six, even elementary school children. Not that Asagi had set foot in the place herself, of course—

"Don't tell me you...?!"

"I am not!! I'm at an antique shop! It's run by some acquaintance of Himeragi's."

Asagi tilted her head. "There's an antique shop in that area...?" she asked, mostly to herself.

It didn't sound like Kojou was lying. In fact, she thought she heard a cat meowing and someone speaking behind him. "Well, I don't know what's up with that, but it sounds like you're not exactly busy over there?" she finished.

“Not really. So what’s the favor?”

Kojou’s question was a carefree one. Meanwhile, Asagi cleared her throat. Hers wasn’t exactly the kind of thing she wanted to tell him...

“Hey, do you remember the earrings you got me for my birthday?”

“Ah...yeah, the blue ones you made me buy for you.”

“They’re not blue, they’re turquoise!!” Asagi replied sullenly. There was *meaning* behind the color.

“So what about them?”

Asagi strained to keep her voice cheerful as she confessed, “Sorry. Looks like I dropped one, ah-ha-ha-ha... It was probably when you wrestled me down in the park during lunch break—”

“Eh?!”

She felt like Kojou had frozen on the other end of the call. She added, “I’m looking for it right now, but I’m not sure I can find it on my own. I thought maybe you could lend me a hand looking for it before it gets dark?”

“Y-you idiot—!”

“Hah?!”

This time, Kojou’s shout over the phone made Asagi stiffen. She hadn’t expected Kojou to get angry about *that* part.

“What’s the big deal?!” she snapped back. I mean, it’s my fault for losing it, but you don’t have to put it like *that*—”

“Not that!! Never mind the damned earring!”

“Ah...?”

Snap! Kojou’s rude remark was the last straw for Asagi. “Don’t tell me *never mind!* That’s the one I had *you* buy for me—I mean, anyway, it’s special!!”

“I’m saying, the Island Guard guys are guarding the place! It’s dangerous around that convent! Get away from there before you get in trouble, now!”

“Eh?”

Asagi was thrown by how seriously bent out of shape Kojou sounded. Apparently, the earring wasn't what had him so nervous. He wasn't angry at her—he was *worried* about her. But wasn't that overreacting just a bit?

“...You don't need to be so serious about it,” she replied. “It's all right, it's not like I'm skipping class this time. Besides, the Island Guard being there makes it safer, right?”

“Just get away from there! I'll buy you jewelry later! As much as you want!!”

Kojou pleaded with her.

The words were clearly spoken in haste, but Asagi was not one to let such an opportunity slip by her. “...Really?”

“Yeah!”

“Not just earrings, but, like, a r-ring, too? It doesn't have to be expensive...”

“I'll get anything you want, so just—”

Asagi, sensing what was coming, pulled the smartphone away from her ear as Kojou yelled, “—*Go home ASAP!*”

“Yes, yes. I understand. I'll just do one last pass and head home.”

“Go back now!!” Kojou bellowed from the bottom of his gut.

Yes, yes, Asagi soothed, letting the words go in one ear and out the other. She didn't know what had him so worked up, but having him worry about her was far from unpleasant. He'd even promised to buy her a ring; that made her inclined to cut her search for the earring short like she'd promised.

It was the very next moment that a roar accompanied the ground shaking.

For a second, Asagi's body floated in the air, making her roll onto the footpath like she'd been tossed aside. The bag over her shoulder went flying, with the contents scattering around her.

“Asagi?! What was that sound—?!”

Apparently Kojou had heard it, too. His question sounded like he'd just gone pale.

But Asagi could not answer.

It wasn't that she didn't understand what had happened. It was that she lacked the words to explain it.

The abbey was collapsing, and in its place emerged an amorphous, wriggling, jet-black fluid resembling a single-celled organism. It was neither metal nor flesh, nor did it even possess a shape—how did one describe such a creature?

“I don't...know... What...is that thing...?! It's like...blood...? A quicksilver... woman?!”

Asagi bit back the pain in her body and staggered to her feet. As she did, the pitch-black liquid-body continued making bizarre sounds as it changed into a variety of shapes.

It took a shape evoking pathetic life-forms that had tried to evolve but failed. It was a fish out of water, a bird fallen to the ground, a grotesque beast, and a human being, all at once. If there existed such a thing as a chimera with a mix of multiple life-forms' DNA, perhaps it would resemble that.

Furthermore, the monster continued to grow in size. It fused indiscriminately with matter all around it to increase its own mass. If it had been the size of a compact car at first, it had already swelled to the size of a small truck.

As Asagi stood there, she heard a voice. *You must run*, it announced with pep.

“—Huh?”

A young man stood on the hill, looking down at Asagi. He wore gaudy red-and-white clothes like those of a stage magician. His laugh sounded innocent, but his eyes were so cold they made her shudder.

“Oh no,” he mocked. “I've been spotted. Oh well... You'll be gone in but a moment.”

The pitch-black monster roared. Its amorphous body seemed to unravel in thin, ribbon-like bands. By the time Asagi realized that these were not ribbons, but tentacles resembling giant, razor-sharp blades, it was too late.

“Ah?”

Asagi's body floated into the air, freed from the shackles of gravity. Rather belatedly, she heard the sound of the air cracking.

The tentacle that the black monster unleashed had mowed down Asagi's body like the sickle of the Grim Reaper.

No doubt the real target of the monster's attack was the young man in the white coat. Asagi had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the youth had mowed down the monster's tentacle with his own right hand, resulting in the massive severed limb striking Asagi, an innocent bystander, in the chest. And so, she fell.

Rolling faceup onto the ground, Asagi murmured in a daze, "No...way..."

She didn't feel any pain. Instead, she gazed in wonder at the sight of the evening sky—and how her own fresh blood matched its color. It was like watching beautiful rubies rain down around her.

"So it escaped," the young man in the white coat murmured. "That could have gone better... Oh well."

The pitch-black monster had already vanished from sight. Perhaps it had been frightened off by his counterattack? The young man departed as well, showing not the slightest interest in the girl on the hill, fallen and drenched in blood.

Asagi laughed sickly as, with the last of her strength, she wrung out the words:

"Sorry, Kojou... Looks like...I messed up..."

The smartphone was no longer in Asagi's hands, and so her words never reached him. She desperately reached out, but all that her fingertips touched was a fragment of a coldly glittering red stone...

5

The sun had nearly reached the western horizon by the time Kojou entered the deserted park.

He remembered getting on the monorail, but after that it was all a blur. He'd simply kept running and running until he arrived. He'd tried calling Asagi over and over during that time, but she hadn't picked up.

Kojou would soon become painfully aware of the reason why.

“What...is this...?”

The first thing he noticed was the change in the abbey.

The entrance to the chapel had been completely wrecked, with debris strewn all over the place. It looked like some giant monster had emerged from the inside, destroying everything on its way out of the building.

Also, there was no sign of the Island Guard members policing the property. Instead, there were only metal sculptures strewn about, lying sideways on the floor.

Kojou implicitly understood this to be the work of the alchemist. But he had no business with Amatsuka that moment. There was only one person he was looking for.

“Where’s Asagi...?”

Kojou was assailed by unease and despair as he desperately searched for any sign of his friend. Having known her for years, he was confident he could instantly pick her out of a large crowd, yet now he could sense no sign of her in an empty greenspace.

“Asagi! Asagi, where are you...?!”

Maybe Amatsuka took her with him? Kojou wondered. That was the worst scenario he could think of, and if that was the case, he’d do whatever it took to find the alchemist and get Asagi back.

Yes. He’d be able to get her back. After all, there wasn’t even a single reason why he’d kill Asagi, so—

“Asa...gi...”

But Kojou had known the truth from the start. His abominable vampiric powers had told him as much.

There was a faint scent mixed into the air. It was a scent he had been so close to that he hadn’t noticed it before: the scent of sweet, lovely blood.

The scent of *Asagi’s* blood.

“You’re...kidding me... Hey... Why is this...?”

A girl in a school uniform as scarlet as dusk was lying in a pool of blood to match.

The uniform had been dolled up right to the edge of what was allowed by school regulations and her hair was styled in a cheery, elegant way. With her eyes closed, when seen from the side like this, her real, serious personality shone through on her face.

She was truly beautiful, though she always carried a smarmy smirk. Even so, he wouldn’t see that smile again.

For Asagi Aiba...was dead.

“Hey... Don’t mess with me here... You wouldn’t end up like this, right?”

One of her things strewn on the ground was a cookbook she’d borrowed from the library. Several of her fingertips were atypically covered in Band-Aids. Even Kojou wasn’t dense enough to miss what she was doing with such uncharacteristic injuries.

Yet there was nothing more that Kojou could do for her. Not anymore.

Kojou was still standing there, dumbfounded, when Yukina called out to him.

“Senpai!”

She’d no doubt been chasing after him since the station.

She sounded out of breath. But when she noticed Asagi lying lifeless, Yukina’s face went pale.

“Asagi...?! Oh my God...”

Her firm voice was shaking. Even though she was a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, she was just an apprentice. She probably had little to no experience seeing people close to her pass away.

Kojou belatedly muttered, “It’s...my fault...”

Yukina looked up at him in surprise. “What?”

“It’s just like you told me... I got an innocent person involved because I brought her here without thinking...!”

“That’s...not...”

Yukina tried to refute him on the spot but swallowed her words when she saw Kojou’s eyes. His face was twisted in rage, his eyes glowing a crimson hue. The incredible surge of magical energy dispersing around him was making the man-made ground tremble beneath them.

His Beast Vassals were awakening—the beasts summoned from another world that dwelled in the blood of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, and served him. They were responding to Kojou’s anger, attempting to rampage beyond his control.

Yukina desperately rushed over to her classmate. “Please, hold on, senpai! Senpai—!”

But the explosive release of magical energy blocked her path. She couldn’t even stay standing, let alone go to his side.

Only Snowdrift Wolf could have opposed that outflow of magical energy. However, it no longer rested in her hands, having been sealed away.

The berserk magical energy further intensified, producing thunderbolts and shock waves in its wake. Yukina, assailed by the surge, ended up being saved by the Sayaka look-alike.

She appeared out of thin air, deployed a powerful defensive ward, and became Yukina’s shield, protecting her from what would have been fatal blows.

She was a creature of super-high-level magic wrought by Yukari Endou, her master and sorcerous genius of the Lion King Agency—yet protecting Yukina took up all her strength. Yukari herself, far away in High God Forest, had no way of stopping Kojou’s rampage.

The foundation of the man-made island trembled and cried out ominously as the cracks beneath Kojou’s feet continued to spread, no doubt from the power of his Beast Vassals, as yet unseen. If Kojou’s demonic power continued to rage unabated like this, Itogami Island’s destruction would only be a matter of time.

“Senpai, please, calm down! Get ahold of yourself! Do you want to let Nagisa die, too?!”

Her voice shouldn't have reached him, but Kojou, lost to anger, suddenly responded to her. Light returned to his eyes; the thunder and lightning broke off a moment later, the wind calming in its wake.

Kojou wobbled as he murmured brokenly, "Nagi...sa..."

He fell to the ground as Yukina rushed over to him. With a shock, Kojou realized Yukina was bleeding from her forehead—he'd hurt her.

"Himeragi...you're..."

"It's okay. Master's *shikigami* shielded me, so I'm all right..."

As Yukina spoke she looked over her shoulder, where the look-alike *shikigami* turned into countless white sheets of paper before their eyes. The ritual scrolls had run out of the energy with which they'd been imbued.

Tears flowed ceaselessly from Yukina's eyes as she whispered, "I'm all right... I'll always be at your side, senpai... So please, get ahold of yourself. Do it for Aiba! Don't let her tragedy be why you lose control and cause the end of everything..."

Her tears calmed Kojou a little.

Yet again, she had saved him. And she spoke the truth: He couldn't lose himself here. There were still things he had to do for Asagi's sake.

There had to be things left for him to do. Since he'd let Asagi die—

"Huh. I thought there was a little missing. So it fell down somewhere over here...?"

A cold, airy voice floated over to him, as if mocking Kojou's resolve. It came from a young male alchemist wearing a white coat. He wasn't wearing his characteristic checkered hat or carrying his cane, but Kojou wouldn't mistake the face anywhere. It was Kou Amatsuka.

Amatsuka, appearing from the shade of a few decorative trees along the road, leisurely walked toward Kojou and Yukina.

"I was right to double back. To think it would hide itself like this..."

However, his words were directed not to either of them, but to himself.

Amatsuka completely ignored Kojou, who was facing him with open hostility. Instead, he had eyes only for the blood-drenched Asagi. He seemed intent on taking her corpse.

“Stop right there, alchemist—!” Kojou moved in front of his fallen friend, blocking off the alchemist’s path. It was then that Amatsuka finally seemed to notice Kojou and Yukina’s existence. He silently shifted his gaze over them, exhaling in obvious tedium.

Kojou, barely suppressing the bloodlust in his tone, offered, “I’ll ask this once. Are you the one who killed Asagi?”

But Amatsuka only narrowed his eyes inquisitively. “And who is ‘Asagi’? Which one of the corpses lying around here is she?”

“Why, you...”

A high-frequency buzz enveloped Kojou’s right fist. The magical power leaking out was the same as a Beast Vassal’s, but it wasn’t out of control—Kojou was using his vampiric power of his own free will.

He could control this. He’d show everyone, so that Asagi’s death would not be in vain...so that he wouldn’t let anyone else die on his watch.

The alchemist sighed. “Get out of my way, Fourth Primogenitor—”

He raised his right arm without so much as a warning. His fingertips flowed into the shape of a whip, which he quickly used to attack. That much, Kojou had expected. But Amatsuka had not unleashed a single attack: His arm split off at the elbow into dozens of streams, each one attacking from a different angle, like autonomous snakes.

Even a vampire’s reaction speed was insufficient to evade them all. And what’s more, Amatsuka wielded the power of transmutation—the secret alchemical technique that could render an immortal vampire powerless in a single moment.

Kojou froze in the face of the unavoidable attack.

But Amatsuka was the one who was blown back: Yukina leaped in from a blind spot on his side and pounded him with a ferocious high kick.

“Roaring Thunder—!”

The young man’s thin frame was launched into the air by the Sword Shaman’s power-infused blow, enough to bring a stout beast man to his knees. The moment Kojou saw that, he, too, leaped off the ground.

“It’s over, Amatsuka!!”

Kojou’s right fist, surrounded by wild wind, thrust right through Amatsuka’s body.

He hadn’t held back at all. A mere human body couldn’t withstand a punch from full vampiric strength, let alone one augmented by the power of a Beast Vassal. The likely result was that he would be blown apart without a trace. Despite that, Kojou didn’t hold back. He *couldn’t*.

It wasn’t because Amatsuka had killed Asagi. It was that Kojou somehow understood from his demonic instincts that if he didn’t defeat Amatsuka with one blow, *Yukina would be the next to die*.

The alchemist’s body, bent into an unnatural shape, slammed into the footpath, gouging out the paved surface.

Even few demons could withstand that level of damage.

And yet, Amatsuka endured.

Kojou and Yukina watched as the alchemist slowly picked himself up. His chin had been shattered by Yukina’s kick; his torso had been caved in by Kojou’s punch. His spine appeared to be broken. No human should have been able to stand in that condition.

But Amatsuka wasn’t human.

He looked at his own skin, from the collar of his ripped coat on down.

“You two are such horrible people... I can’t maintain my proper form like this, can I...”

His skin was metal, covered in what looked like black rust. The onyx stone embedded in place of his heart had broken apart, crumbling down to his feet. Perhaps that had triggered the sudden warping of his contours.

His human shape collapsed, replaced by pitch-black ooze. He was now an amorphous mass of liquid metal.

Kojou stared at the creature that had been Amatsuka until a moment before. “What the heck is this guy...?”

“Don’t tell me...it’s Wiseman’s Blood...?” Yukina asked, horrified.

Kojou did a double take. Wiseman’s Blood was an immutable body with inexhaustible magical energy, the flesh of the perfect “God” that alchemists sought.

“—Senpai!”

Kojou was standing there, half-lost in disbelief, when Yukina sent him flying with a blow to his side. The next moment, a black beam rushed to the place Kojou had just been standing. The asphalt of the footpath was blown apart without a sound, deeply gouging the ground as if an earthquake had cracked it open.

It must have been an attack from Amatsuka, but it had materialized so fast he couldn’t understand what had happened. If not for Yukina’s Spirit Sight, gazing just an instant into the future, both would have been annihilated without a trace. Apparently, Amatsuka could no longer use transmutation now that he’d lost his human form, but instead, he’d gained a monstrous level of offensive power.

If the fight stretched on, Kojou and Yukina had little chance of winning.

Yukina looked back. “Senpai! He’s already—”

“Got it!”

Kojou nodded without hesitation. Amatsuka was now no longer an alchemist nor demon, nor even a person; he was a misshapen monster incapable of sentient thought. Kojou couldn’t even imagine how many people would die should he be allowed to live.

Kojou figured, as someone granted the stupidly huge power of the World’s Mightiest Vampire, he had a duty to wipe out a creature like this...

He raised his arms high as blood gushed out of them.

“C’mon over, Al-Meissa Mercury!!”

The blood shimmered like a mirage and changed into the form of a giant Beast Vassal. This was the third of the twelve summoned beasts that served the Fourth Primogenitor, dwelling in his own blood—a two-headed serpentine dragon covered in quicksilver scales.

The pitch-black ooze that had once been Amatsuka roared.

“Oo...oo... Oooooo...”

Giant tentacles stretched out, trying to impale the twin-headed dragon’s body. But the silver beast let it do no such thing; its snake-like body flowed like a river, opening its cavernous maw to swallow the attack whole. It was determined not to leave a single trace of the attack behind.

The third Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor was a Dimension Eater, able to consume any space and the dimension itself with it, erasing it from the world.

“Oooooooooooooooooo...!”

Even an amalgamated, self-propagating, immutable, regenerating body was powerless before the two-headed dragon’s attack. The black ooze, now certain of its own defeat, tried to split itself apart and flee. However,

“—Devour it, Al-Meissa Mercury!!”

The two giant heads descended, swallowing up all the pieces of the liquid body and annihilating them.

All that remained was the wrecked public park and the shattered pieces of a black jewel.

It took Kojou some effort to dispel the summoning, since the two-headed serpent seemed dismayed at not having gotten to rampage enough. Letting out a long sigh, Kojou looked down at the shattered gemstone that had been part of Amatsuka.

“Is it...over now...?”

Kojou stood still in the twilight as Yukina gazed without a word.

The misshapen alchemist was no more. But that was not the result Kojou had sought. In the end, they still had no idea what Amatsuka had been after.

However, she didn't think Kojou even wanted to know. Knowing would not bring Asagi's life back. Asagi had been killed, and was now gone forever—

That was when they heard a familiar voice.

“Ko...jou...?”

Kojou and Yukina, standing in silence, whipped their heads around. Atop the footpath, with debris scattered everywhere, a schoolgirl with gorgeous looks awkwardly rose to her feet.

“Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow... Whoa?! What the heck happened?!”

Asagi looked down at the sight of her ripped uniform and two bloodstained arms and let out a pathetic shriek. Meanwhile, Kojou and Yukina were in complete shock at this display of frivolity.

She shouldn't have even been alive. He hadn't needed to check for a pulse or breathing. He'd found her in a pool of blood, her body deeply sliced up. There was no way an ordinary person, a non-vampire, could come back from that condition...

“Asagi... It's you...?” Kojou nervously asked.

Asagi, looking up to see the doubt on Kojou's face, seemed somewhat amused as she smiled. She had that completely unsexy smirk on her face.

“Who else do I look like? Er, wait, what the heck?!”

As she stood up, Asagi finally noticed the horrid sight around her.

Kojou could understand where she was coming from. The convent's collapsed edifice, the wrecked park, the gouged-out footpath... She'd probably never believe that she had been part of that harrowing spectacle just moments before.

An involuntary smile came over Kojou's face as he murmured flatly, “What the heck's going on around here...?”

When Yukina noticed the look on his face, relief came over hers, too.

As Kojou raised his voice in laughter, a blood-drenched Asagi stared at him, mystified.



CHAPTER THREE
RETURN OF THE
ALCHEMIST

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1

It was a short time later when a large Island Guard unit swarmed the ruined abbey. Kojou and the others hid in the shadow of a vending machine as they waited for the convoy to pass by.

It wasn't out of any aversion to the Island Guard. The fight with Amatsuka had been legitimate self-defense, and Asagi was a mere victim of the incident.

That said, there was no doubt whatsoever that being found there would cause a great deal of trouble for both Kojou, an unregistered vampire, and Yukina, his watcher. Plus, Asagi had just come back to life; her whole body was still covered in blood. Had they been captured in that situation, Kojou didn't think they'd be released anytime soon. The only likely way out of it would be to bow his head to Natsuki and beg for her to clear things up.

Fortunately, their presence wasn't noticed; the three even managed to make it back onto school grounds. By then the city was enveloped in evening darkness, so Asagi's tattered clothing didn't stand out too much.

"So about that red-and-white checkered alchemist?" Kojou asked.

As they walked, Asagi was fussing over how dried blood was knotting up her hair. She replied, "Ah... That was an alchemist? I thought he was a washed-up actor or something. After that there was some kind of oozing monster that looked like quicksilver... I wonder where that ran off to?"

"Er, ah, maybe a vampire and his watcher passing through kicked its ass..."

"Huh?"

Asagi's skeptical reply completely threw Kojou off.

A faint sliver of doubt had crept into his head even as he furiously tried to think of a proper excuse. If he could take Asagi's words at face value, she believed that the ooze monster she'd seen and Amatsuka, defeated by Kojou, were completely separate—?

Seeing Kojou at a loss for words, Yukina tossed him a life preserver: "Things were like this when we arrived, so we don't know anything about the details."

"...That so. You'd think the Island Guard would be mopping things up right around now..."

As might well have been expected, Asagi readily accepted her explanation, because she had no idea Kojou had become a vampire. It wasn't that she was dense; Kojou's state of being was just so far-fetched. After all, a normal human being suddenly becoming a vampire primogenitor should have been completely impossible; Asagi's long friendship with Kojou probably gave her a blind spot where that change was concerned.

Kojou looked sidelong at Asagi's face as he asked, "More importantly, there's really nothing wrong with you?"

She had no large external injuries he could see. Even the cut on the tip of her finger had apparently healed over. That threw off Kojou and Yukina all the more, for they had been certain the fresh blood spatter all around Asagi was her own.

There ought to have been no way a vampire like Kojou could get the scent of her blood wrong. And yet—

"Of course there's something wrong with me!! Look, see here, it's not just my clothes, my bra's been cut right in t... I take that back, don't look!!"

Asagi, who had been showing off the damage to her own clothing, reached critical mass with great fanfare.

She sure *looked* like the usual Asagi. It wasn't how you'd think someone who'd died a little earlier would behave.

Feeling like an idiot for having worried, Kojou listlessly mumbled to himself, "She actually seems all right."

Yukina nodded in agreement. “It would seem so. But just to be safe, I think it would be best if she was examined at a hospital.”

“I think so, too, but how the heck would we explain this to a doctor?”

Asagi tapered her lips in clear dissatisfaction. “Hold on now. I can only imagine what a load of trouble that’d be. Maybe you two just saw wrong and I was never in any real danger to begin with?”

She had no concept of having just come back to life, so her desire to avoid annoyances was taking precedence. But Kojou was especially resolute.

“Well, you definitely blacked out, so it’s probably best to have a doc look at you. Post-concussion stuff can get nasty. I mean, how about I ask my mother to take a look?”

“...Oh yeah, that’s right, your mom’s over at the MAR lab...”

Asagi’s attitude softened just a little. She folded her arms, mulling it over.

“Well, it’d be better having her examine me than someone else. Besides, it’s been a while since I’ve seen Mimori.”

“Okay, let’s do that. I’ll take you as far as the lab.”

Having succeeded in persuading Asagi, Kojou exhaled in exhausted relief. Now they were almost at an intersection leading to the station.

As Kojou and Asagi waited for the lights to change, Yukina bowed her head in perfect politeness. “Well then, if you will excuse me, I must be on my way.”

“Going back to the antique shop?”

Yukina lowered her voice to a murmur so that Asagi couldn’t hear. “Yes. I must report to Master Shike and ask her to get in touch with the Island Guard. Also, there’s the small fact that the *shikigami* she lent us was wrecked.”

Sorry, offered Kojou as he waved to her. After all, the cause of the Sayaka look-alike *shikigami* being destroyed was that Kojou had lost control of himself, letting his demonic power run amok. Odds were pretty good that Yukina’s teacher would be miffed at having had her intricate *shikigami* ruined.

“Sorry, and thanks. I, um, hope she doesn’t pull any of that humiliation crap

on you.”

Yukina’s face twitched, and then she hastily shook her head. “I-I have no idea. She is rather, ah, taken to whims.”

Though Kojou had been the one to directly wreck the *shikigami*, Yukina might well have indirect responsibility put upon her. No doubt she was picturing herself wearing an embarrassing outfit at that very moment.

“Senpai... Um, are you all right?”

“Eh?”

“Senpai, if you hadn’t annihilated Kou Amatsuka...no, *that monster*, I would probably have been killed, so...”

Kojou looked at Yukina’s worried expression and quietly smiled back at her.

Even if it was legitimate self-defense, the fact remained that Kojou had killed Amatsuka. It was a bitter pill to swallow; Kojou’s heart felt as heavy as molten lead. No doubt Yukina had picked up on Kojou’s internal turmoil.

But if anything, Kojou was surprised at how calm he was about the whole thing.

“Yeah, I know. Don’t worry about it.” Kojou lightly set his hand on top of Yukina’s head.

For a moment, an image of a girl rose up from the back of his mind. *I see*, thought Kojou, suddenly understanding. She was a girl with rainbow-colored hair like a surging flame, and eyes like blazing fire. She was the girl Kojou had once consumed, taking the power of the Fourth Primogenitor from her.

This wasn’t the first time Kojou had killed someone. Maybe that explained his soberness.

As they watched Yukina go into the distance, Asagi seemed beside herself as she said, “...You know, it’s fine to go see Mimori, but don’t tell me you want to get on the monorail dressed like this? I’d better head home first.”

As Asagi stood still, Kojou looked at her and quietly murmured, “Ah, yeah. Got a point there.”

Kojou could hide her tattered uniform by giving her his jacket, but there was nothing he could do to hide her blood-drenched hair and skirt. Someone would absolutely call the police if she went on the monorail dressed like that.

Kojou looked up at the nearby road map. "It's a bit far, but how about walking to my place? Can at least get a change of clothes there."

Kojou's residence, located in Island South just like their school, would probably take about forty minutes by foot. Although annoying, it wasn't a great distance.

"Suppose that's the best option. Geez, why'd it have to go like this?" Asagi grumbled, messing with her right ear. Even though she'd almost died earlier, she was apparently preoccupied with her earring.

Watching her like that, Kojou sighed heavily.

"...What?"

"Well, um, I was just thinking I'm glad that you're alive."

As Kojou muttered and looked away, Asagi blinked rapidly, mystified. But then, an impetuous leer came over her face.

"Did you cry?"

"I did not."

"Sorry. I'll give you a hankie."

"I said I didn't cry."

Kojou's familiar reply made Asagi laugh aloud.

And so the two began walking to Kojou's house, the distance between them just the same as ever.

2

When Kojou arrived, Nagisa was waiting to greet him in an apron. She didn't even give Kojou time to say *I'm back* before rushing over and burying him in words.

“Welcome back, Kojou. You’re so late! Did you get the milk?”

“Whaddaya mean, milk? That’s news to me.”

“Eh...?! I texted you about it earlier!” Nagisa jabbed at him with her chopsticks.

Kojou reached into his pocket to check his message history, but the only thing that came out was a piece of scrap plastic that used to be a cell phone. Of course, Kojou was responsible for wrecking it—it’d bitten the dust from his magical energy.

How many phones have I gone through in the last six months? Kojou sank into depression as he counted in his head. His account balance, never high to begin with, just took another step toward zero.

“Geez, and this time of day you can get discount milk in some places. We’re having gratin tonight... What’ll I do? Maybe I shouldn’t have thrown that other stuff out earlier? But it was thirteen days past the expiration...”

“Oh man, that’s stretching it a bit too thin. Shouldn’t even leave that stuff in the fridge.”

Kojou rushed to stop his sister from seriously worrying about whether or not to consume expired dairy products. Nagisa still seemed a bit hung up on it when she noticed there was someone behind him.

“Ah, Yukina’s with you? Maybe Yukina has some milk she can spare?”

“Er, Yukina’s not the one with me...”

Now how am I gonna explain this? he wondered hesitantly, but Asagi shoved Kojou aside and barged into the living room.

“Good evening. Sorry to be all sudden like this.”

“Asagi? Whoa?! What happened to your clothes?!”

Nagisa’s eyes widened in shock as she beheld the pathetic state of Asagi’s outfit.

Asagi forced a somewhat amused smile. “Er... I was coming back from school when...”

“—She was trying to cook something awful, and the pot went ka-boom,” Kojou interjected from the side, trying to sound grave.

“What in the world?!” Nagisa asked.

Asagi grimaced. It was such a disgraceful excuse. “Kojou?! Now wait just a...”

“Look, I can’t tell Nagisa that you got attacked by a monster and stuff, so just deal!” Kojou hissed in a whisper.

Resentfully, she whispered back, “Well, you could’ve come up with a better excuse than— Erg, I’m gonna remember this, you know!!”

Even though she was a resident of a Demon Sanctuary, Nagisa had an acute fear of demons; in the past, during a major incident, she’d been gravely wounded and on death’s door from an encounter with them. Asagi, well aware of the circumstances, couldn’t make any strong objection to Kojou’s case.

Still, she had a look of annoyance on her face as Nagisa welcomed her in. “That so. You poor thing. It’s okay, come on in, take a shower!”

Kojou left Asagi to his little sister as he headed back to the entrance. “It’s fine if I go buy some milk now, right?”

But Nagisa hastily called Kojou back:

“Oh, wait. I really should go. I wanna buy some sweets to take on the field trip. If I let you do it, you won’t buy anything good, just potato chips that taste like peach yogurt and that junk.”

“What’s wrong with peach yogurt?!” Kojou objected, somewhat sullenly. But Nagisa easily blew off her brother’s rebuttal.

“Here you go, a bath towel and a Kojou jersey, both fresh. You can use the cosmetics on the right of the bathroom any way you like. You’re gonna eat here with us tonight, right? Well, later!”

With the towel and change of clothes still in hand, Asagi waved politely as she watched Nagisa go. Then, as if unable to contain herself any longer, she belted out laughing.

“Nagisa’s always such a cutie. I want her to be my little sister.”

“Eh?”

“Ah, I don’t mean... I didn’t mean as a sister-in-law, not yet...!”

As Asagi hastily tried to correct herself, Kojou waved his hand impatiently. “Whatever, just get in the shower already. You know where it is, right?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Asagi headed toward the bathroom, walking down the corridor like she knew her way around.

When she got there, she took great care to lock the changing room door and then looked at herself in the mirror.

“Whoa, this is *awful*.”

Asagi spontaneously clutched her head as she beheld the caked blood and mud on her face. When she thought of how she’d presented herself in front of Kojou and Yukina like this, she wanted to curse her own misfortune for that alone.

Still, it was clear that the first order of business would be stripping off her makeup and tattered garments.

Repurchasing was the only option for her bra and school uniform. However, not a single scratch remained on her body behind the spectacularly destroyed clothing. Certainly, those were miraculous odds. She couldn’t blame Kojou and Yukina for being surprised.

Thanks to Nagisa being such a clean freak, the Akatsuki residence bathroom under her dominion was in prim and proper condition.

Though she was a little apprehensive about using a washroom belonging to another family, washing all the grime off let her finally experience some relief. Picturing herself and Kojou meeting eye to eye after she got out of the bath, she decided to wash herself with extra care, just to be safe.

That was when Asagi’s fingertips felt odd, as if they’d touched a foreign object. It was a cold, metallic sensation.

“Eh...?”

Thinking it suspicious, Asagi looked herself over in the fogged-up mirror.

She immediately located the cause of the odd sensation. Between her breasts, a transparent red stone hung above her heart. It was a small, beautiful, multifaceted gemstone.

She thought it was simply on top of her skin, but it wasn't. The red gemstone was embedded in Asagi's chest as if it was a part of her own body—

“What...is this?”

In surprise, Asagi touched the stone. She didn't feel anything malevolent or frightening about it. It was simply embedded there. But the instant her thoughts turned toward it, Asagi's vision turned dark.

That was where her memory suddenly cut off and she sank into a deep, death-like sleep.

3

Meanwhile, Kojou was pouring coffee in the kitchen.

It wasn't the instant kind. He took the whole process fairly seriously and started with percolating some beans.

Kojou had begun drinking coffee relatively recently—after he'd become a vampire, in fact. Suddenly becoming a nocturnal creature made going to school in the middle of the day a tough lifestyle to maintain. He'd never have been able to manage it without relying on caffeine.

His ears picked up the sound of running water. Having a girl in your class taking a shower, separated from you only by a thin interior wall, was quite a situation by any objective measure.

Kojou tried not to think too much about it as he brought the cup to his lips.

“*Bwah?!*”

But he did a sudden spit take, spewing coffee all over the counter—for Asagi had just entered through the kitchen doorway.

Her hair was wet and worn down after taking a shower. Droplets flowed

down her face like beads of sweat.

But she wasn't wearing a single thing. Not underwear, not a towel, *nothing*—
She'd come out of the bathroom just like that, buck naked.

It was Kojou, not Asagi, who was thrown into a panic.

"A-Asagi?! Whaddaya think you're doing?!"

Her behavior was so far off the charts it didn't seem real. Thanks to that, his eyes were completely glued to her.

Asagi slowly lowered and raised her head as she gave Kojou, now frozen, a thorough once-over. "Hmm. A mere human...or not. A vampire? I see. If I may ask, is this your dwelling?"

"Wh-wh-what is all this, now...?!"

His secret suddenly exposed, Kojou fell into a complete panic. He had no idea how she might have figured him out.

"Er, um, Asagi, er, are you...okay?!"

"What is it that disturbs you so? There is no need to be frightened."

Asagi quietly approached him, clearly amused.

Though she always wore showy clothing to stand out, she naturally looked good, too. Big eater that she was, her body didn't show it; however, it *did* show off her good parts. Her smooth, white skin, which she took such good care of, was somewhat reddened, probably from the hot water. It was an exceedingly stimulating sight for poor Kojou.

Lust, bewilderment, vampiric urges, suspicion, and guilt collided together, completely saturating Kojou's brain capacity. All his worldly cravings leaked right out as fresh blood.

"Ugh...?!"



Kojou coughed once more, strongly spewing his nosebleed all around. As Kojou slouched forward, Asagi rushed over to his side in her bare feet.

“Hey, vampire?! What’s wrong? Hold it together!”

“Cl-clothes...”

“Mm?”

“Clothes! Clothes!!” the blood-drenched Kojou shouted. “Just put something on already—!”

No matter how confused he was, even he realized it by now: The girl before his eyes was *not* Asagi. She might have looked like her, but she was a completely different person.

“Ohh, I see. Apologies, it would seem my head was in the clouds upon waking.”

The girl who looked like Asagi apparently hadn’t even noticed she was naked.

Hmm. She looked around the area, finally reaching toward a flower vase resting on the kitchen table. The instant her hand touched it, the flower, a carnation, transformed into gleaming, pure white fabric. It was a glossy, silky fabric full of luster.

The young woman wrapped it around her body, fastening it with gold-colored studs that seemed to appear out of nowhere. The outfit was still pretty revealing, but at least it counted as being clothed.

She then announced rather proudly, “Now no obstacles remain.”

Dumbfounded, Kojou stared at her and asked, “What...did you do, just now...?”

“I simply used the contents of the vase to produce silk. I must note that manipulating organic matter is not my specialty, so I cannot produce anything with a complex structure.”

“...Transmutation?! You’re an alchemist?!”

As Kojou muttered in shock, the girl with the same face as Asagi gazed at him in amusement. “Why, does that surprise you? I am the scion of Hermes

Trismegistus and master of the Magnum Opus, Nina Adelard of Parmia. A trick like this is child's play to me."

"Nina Adelard...?!" Kojou nearly shouted the name to which she'd suddenly made claim. "But you were just plain ol' Asagi till a minute ago, weren't you?!"

"Ahh, now I understand. *Asagi* is this girl's name?" The woman taking Asagi's appearance put a hand on her bosom. Kojou raised his eyebrows as he beheld something there that glistened ruby red.

"That gemstone...!"

"This? This is the so-called Hard Core."

"Hard Core?"

"Indeed. It is the control module for the self-propagating, liquid-metal life-form known as Wiseman's Blood. It's essentially a ritual spell device for storing memories. Think of it as the physical form of my soul."

Soul, huh? Kojou murmured to himself. With that word, he finally felt he understood the situation.

"So you stuffed that into Asagi's body and hijacked it?"

"Hijacked? That is incorrect. This is symbiosis through fusion, nothing more."

"That's exactly what hijacking is, dammit!!"

Kojou's nosebleed had finally abated; he quickly wiped away the last remnants. Meanwhile, the woman calling herself Nina Adelard twisted her lips, sulking.

"Indeed. However, if not for me, this girl would have died as a result of the attack from the Wiseman's Blood."

"...It was you?!" Kojou hissed, shaken. "*You're* the one who brought Asagi back...?!"

Asagi being unharmed after sustaining mortal wounds was such an incomprehensible phenomenon that explaining it away as the work of the alchemist calling herself Nina Adelard made a lot more sense.

However, the woman countered with a simple shake of her head.

“Even the hidden arts of the alchemists cannot bring the dead back to life. All I did was heal her wounds. It was a gamble as to whether I was in time, but fortune was with the girl, and with me.”

“That so...” Kojou bit his lip and exhaled. So Asagi really *had* been one step from death; really *had* been saved at the last possible moment. Though, he wasn’t sure he could call her completely saved just yet—

“So you’re the one who made the Wiseman’s Blood, right? I heard you traded in your own body for that, to gain an immortal one.”

“...Do not compliment me so. Saying that to my face, are you trying to make me blush?”

The woman taking Asagi’s form scratched her cheek. She really did seem to be blushing.

Kojou raggedly bared his teeth. “That ain’t a *compliment*! I’m trying to ask why the Wiseman’s Blood attacked Asagi in the first place!”

“It’s the fault of the Dummy Core.”

“...Dummy Core?”

And what’s that, added Kojou with a look. But he gasped when he suddenly remembered:

“Wait, you mean the black rock in Amatsuka’s chest?”

“Oh, you know of him?”

“Come to think of it, he’s an alchemist, too. Who is he? Some friend of yours?” Kojou demanded like a lawyer cross-examining a witness. For some reason, she seemed at a loss as she folded her arms.

“Kou Amatsuka is my apprentice. No, former apprentice... I broke off ties with him long ago.”

“...Apprentice?”

“As the name implies, the Dummy Core is an imitation Hard Core. Perhaps it’s easier if I said it’s an *incomplete* Hard Core?”

“Well, when you put it that way, I suppose I get it...”

The gist was that the master, Nina Adelard, possessed the complete Hard Core, while her apprentice, Amatsuka, used an incomplete and pale imitation.

“The Dummy Core can control the Wiseman’s Blood, but its functions are incomplete. It doesn’t take much to fully lose control. Spirit Blood was driven into Amatsuka’s sealed Dummy Core to awaken it from its sleep, starting it before I, the proper control unit, could fully activate.”

“So it’s like your apprentice attacked when you were asleep and uploaded a computer virus before your security software kicked in...”

Kojou interpreted the situation with his own, more modern terms. Since Nina Adelard didn’t correct him, his version couldn’t have been that off the mark. Or perhaps she just didn’t know what a computer was.

“Then the monster Asagi saw was—”

The girl borrowing Asagi’s appearance readily agreed. “Indeed, ’twas the Wiseman’s Blood run amok. Kou Amatsuka employed five Dummy Cores. If the Nucleus is the core, the Spirit Blood is the body. What do you think would happen if you put several souls into one body?”

“It’d tear itself... Or I guess, it’d ‘run amok,’ huh?”

Kojou grimaced as he spoke. The woman sighed as she nodded.

“Both are correct. When Amatsuka tried to attack, the liquid metal body ran amok and this ‘Asagi’ was harmed as a result. I split myself off from the contaminated Spirit Blood and fled into her. Had I not done so, she would have perished, and I would have been trapped in a body I could not control.”

“So that’s how it is...” Finally grasping the entire situation, Kojou shook his head in annoyance.

Nina Adelard, the Great Alchemist of Yore, had her immortal body stolen via her apprentice’s betrayal, with Asagi having almost died as a result. And so, Nina had possessed Asagi as compensation for saving Asagi’s life.

He had no intention of heaping all the blame onto Nina. But he *did* think Nina bore at least *some* responsibility—

“Do not be concerned. I do not intend to harm this body in any way, and the

consciousness of 'Asagi' should awaken when I am asleep. I suppose the gaps in her memory shall be somewhat troublesome, however."

"You can't come out of her?"

A somewhat disconcerted expression came over the possessing spirit as she spoke. "It is difficult, for this Hard Core is not in its complete state, and I used up nearly all the Spirit Blood at my command to repair this girl's flesh and blood."

Kojou held on to faint hopes as he pointed at the silk fabric wrapped around her. "Can't you whip something up like how you made those clothes?"

"Just what do you think Wiseman's Blood is? The pinnacle of alchemy, this is." Nina's retort sounded a little wounded. "Indeed, I would require gold, silver, and certain rare metals of the same weight as this girl. In addition, nine hundred liters of mercury, and for fuel, some forty or fifty spiritualists, and I *might* manage, but—"

Kojou shouted on the spot. "Hey, that's crazy talk...!"

It was too high a price to pay just to create an ooze monster that went berserk at the drop of a hat.

"Now do you understand why I kept the creation of Wiseman's Blood a secret? The technique requires far too many sins for the mere purpose of acquiring immortality. I never sought to have a body like this."

"...Well, I can relate to that, a little."

For the first time, Kojou sympathized with the great alchemist before him. When it came to having obtained unwanted power in the form of an immortal, immutable body with enormous, nigh-uncontrollable magical energy, she and Kojou were in the same boat.

Kojou spoke while bowing his head before her.

"Any way you slice it, you did save Asagi, so I need to thank you for that."

"You are surprisingly conscientious for a vampire."

"It's got nothing to do with my being a vampire. And don't call me that. It's Kojou. Kojou Akatsuki."

“Very well, Kojou. You may call me Nina, then.” Nina giggled as she spoke, adding a soft, charming smile. “Moreover, even if creating new Wiseman’s Blood is out of the question, if we can capture it and stop its rampage, I promise I will leave Asagi immediately. You will help me in this?”

Kojou spoke without hesitation.

“If that’s the deal, count me in.”

But his expression immediately clouded over. If he was going to seriously work with Nina Adelard, there was something he really needed to tell her first.

“But I have to apologize to you for something.”

“What is it?”

“I killed Kou Amatsuka. He was your apprentice, right...? I’m sorry. After he turned into that monster, I didn’t have any choice but to defeat him.”

Kojou felt a heavy, dull throb in his chest as he confessed.

He’d unleashed the power of the Fourth Primogenitor to annihilate Amatsuka after he’d turned into a bizarre monster. Kojou didn’t regret that. Someone had to do it. But that meant he had erased the existence of Kou Amatsuka for all time, nonetheless. Whatever the reason, it did not diminish Kojou’s sin.

“Killed...? You killed him?”

But Nina countered Kojou’s words with a tone that sounded rather dubious. The expression on her face was not that of anger or sadness; she was simply perplexed. She continued, “He is still alive, you know?”

“...Eh?”

“The Dummy Core he created loses its functionality upon his death. The fact that the Dummy Core is still active means his main body is still alive.”

“Main body...?! Wait, you mean that he could split into more than one...?”

Kojou remembered how the black stone had been destroyed when Amatsuka transformed into the liquid metal monster. But what if, just as Nina had split her own Hard Core from the rampaging Spirit Blood, Amatsuka had split himself off from his own body—?

Then perhaps the Amatsuka Kojou had destroyed might have been just one piece split off from the whole.

Nina added bluntly, “If he transformed into a monster, then there can be no mistake, for the man named Kou Amatsuka clings tenaciously to his human form.”

I see, thought Kojou with a nod. Certainly, at the time Amatsuka had ranted about being unable to maintain his human form. Those words reflected the tenacity Nina was talking about.

“Hey, what’s his goal, anyway? Does he want the Wiseman’s Blood so he can make himself immortal?”

“I know not. Ask him yourself.”

Seeing Nina give a flippant shake of her head, Kojou raised a brow in irritation.

“You ditched him as your apprentice, didn’t you? Did that have something to do with this?”

Nina flicked a bit of hair away from her cheek. “It may well have. However, I cannot recall what happened. It would seem that having been forced awake has caused gaps in my memories. Well, I am sure I shall remember in time.”

Kojou murmured sullenly, “...Amnesia, huh?”

According to Astarte, Nina Adelard was over two hundred and seventy years old; it wasn’t exactly surprising that your memory started to go at that age. Perhaps her odd levels of calm and confidence were products of her age as well.

However, Kojou couldn’t reject the possibility that she knew Amatsuka’s objective and was hiding it from him on purpose.

As Kojou’s suspicions grew, the woman taking Asagi’s form looked back at him and laughed with a pleasant *oh-ho*—and it reminded Kojou that she was standing there with nothing but thin silk wrapped around her.

“Well, fine... For now, could you, uh, put on some real clothes?”

As Kojou spoke, he sniffed and wiped away a touch of nosebleed.

Kojou brought in the cordless phone receiver from his bedroom. He had to look up the number he was calling in the phone book.

It was an unexpectedly large amount of trouble to go through just because his cell phone had been wrecked. It definitely caused Kojou to reflect on how over-dependent he was on modern conveniences.

However, Kojou's labors were in vain, for all he received was a businesslike answering machine message before the connection was cut.

"Dammit, I can't get through!"

Kojou roughly tossed the receiver aside as he slumped onto his rear. He'd tried to call Natsuki Minamiya. It was imperative to find the Wiseman's Blood, still on the loose, and he wanted to talk to someone about how to deal with Asagi, too. Under the circumstances, Natsuki, with her Island Guard connections, was the only person he could count on. But no matter how many times he called, all he heard was the same answering machine message in a synthesized voice.

"Geez, why is it a time like *this* when she's not home?!"

The self-described Great Alchemist, wearing Asagi's face and sitting cross-legged on top of Kojou's bed, asked, "Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void... is it?"

She wore Kojou's middle school track jacket and a pair of short pants. It was an uncool bit of fashion the normal Asagi wouldn't be caught dead in, but that it suited her pretty nicely was a true testament to her ornate facial features.

"What, you know about her, Nina?"

"I have heard the rumors. Supposedly she is a witch of great skill that earned a name for herself in Europe. Though, from my perspective, she is still nothing more than a cheeky upstart."

"I bet most people look like rookies to you when you're two hundred and seventy years old. Well, Natsuki really might leave a mark that's remembered

after time like that passes...”

Kojou spoke with extreme bluntness as he remembered the sight of the small, little girl—like Natsuki.

“And this witch may have located the Spirit Blood?”

“Yeah. Well, there’s that, too, but...”

Nina narrowed her eyes in suspicion at Kojou’s vagaries. “Do you have some other business with her?”

“Yeah, school. It’s bad for Natsuki if arrangements aren’t made when Asagi’s absent from school.”

Nina blinked with a puzzled look. “I do not mind going to school and impersonating ‘Asagi.’”

She didn’t sound like she was joking.

“Even if you’re fine with it, that’s a big problem for me! And we don’t have time for that anyway... We’ve gotta get ahold of that berserker Wiseman’s Blood.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, that is true.”

Nina hit fist to palm as she spoke, lacking the slightest hint of tension. *Does she wanna do this or not?* Concern surged within Kojou, but a fervent knock and the sudden opening of the door interrupted his thoughts.

In poked Nagisa’s head as she said, “It’s fried gratin, Kojou! Asagi, come, too! Quick!”

Yeah, thanks, nodded Kojou, with all the calm he could muster as he shooed his little sister away.

“Look, Nina. Don’t talk more than you have to. Just shut up, listen, and pretend to be Asagi.”

Nina smiled with Asagi’s face. “I am well aware. Like wine, I have grown finer with age. Copying the speech styles of today’s youth is a trivial feat.”

She was full of confidence at least—not that she had any good reason for it.

“Everything you say sounds so antiquated, you know!”

Kojou was seized by even greater anxiety as he brought her out of the room.

Four plates had been set at the dining table; the well-browned cheese on top gave off a rich aroma that filled the entire room. As Nagisa came in carrying the large plate, Yukina was right beside her, wearing an apron just like she was.

“Er, Himeragi?”

“If you’ll pardon me, senpai.” Yukina was setting the utensils, nodding to Kojou and Nina as they noticed her. No doubt she’d returned after making her report to the Lion King Agency. That she was wearing normal clothes underneath meant she’d somehow escaped her own humiliation game. “And, Aiba, do take care.”

Yukina politely bowed her head at Asagi. Seeing this, Nina puffed out her generous chest.

“Ahh, you were the Sword Sh—!”

As Nina was speaking, Kojou brought his hand up to her face and pinched her nose. “Ah, mosquito!”

Nina recoiled. Tears in her eyes, she glared at Kojou, but he didn’t let go.

Yukina watched the intimate exchange between Kojou and Nina with some surprise. However, it seemed that even Yukina’s sharp intuition had not picked up on the crazy fact that a two-hundred-and-seventy-year-old Great Alchemist was in Asagi’s body.

Nagisa giggled as she tore off a bit of lettuce from the salad. “I met Yukina at the supermarket and brought her back with me. I wasn’t sure if I should say hello or not, though. She was deeply considering the candy counter.”

Yukina’s cheeks reddened and she lowered her eyes. “I-I mean, Ms. Sasasaki said we had to keep candy under five hundred yen in value...”

Kojou suddenly had an epiphany and asked, “...Himeragi, you’re actually pretty worked up about this trip, aren’t you?”

Surely Yukina, who’d spent her days at the Lion King Agency training from dawn to dusk, had next to no experience with school trips. The very fact she was trying to hide it no doubt meant she really had her hopes up.

For her part, Yukina rocked backward for once, a sure sign he'd hit the mark. "Eh?! No, I mean, worked up, not at—"

"What are you talking about...?" Nagisa cut in. "Of course you're worked up. It's a trip with everybody, time in the hot tub together, pajama parties, pillow fights..."

"P-pillow fights...?"

Yukina audibly quivered at Nagisa's tone.

"Oh yeah," Nagisa continued. "Then, since it's a long trip, we'll be trading love stories in the dead of night. Consider yourself forewarned."

"And lots of flowers? At the park with endangered plant species, on the afternoon of day three?"

Even as Yukina went off on a tangent, her eyes glittered with expectation. Kojou was half in shock, gazing at Yukina's radiant face from the side. "Heh, what, did you memorize the whole trip schedule or something?"

"No, I did not go that far. I simply remember from having looked at the trip guidebook every night."

The particularly blunt tone of Yukina's words made Kojou subconsciously avert his eyes. "Th-that so?"

There was no longer any room for doubt. Yukina apparently was *way* more worked up about the trip than Kojou had ever imagined.

"Man, I really can't say it," he murmured.

Yukina tilted her head with a mystified look. "Say what?"

Oh, nothing, replied Kojou with a smile.

No doubt Yukina thought that with Kou Amatsuka wiped out, there was no longer any danger from the Wiseman's Blood. There might be some small details to wrap up, but Kojou and the others had no need to personally intervene. Hence, she could enjoy her vacation secure in that thought. There was no way Kojou could turn around at that point and say to her, *Oh, by the way, Amatsuka's alive*.

Besides, Yukina couldn't use Snowdrift Wolf at the moment. Surely there was no point in putting her in unnecessary danger.

As Kojou dwelled on such matters, Nina quietly continued her meal beside him, pretending to be Asagi. Kojou was a little jealous of how she could be so carefree, but eating meant that she couldn't say anything outrageous. He was grateful to get through it without arousing Nagisa's suspicions.

But speaking of Nagisa—"Asagi, there's seconds if you want them."

"Indeed, I do. Your cooking is quite delicious. It has been some time since I have had such warm hospitality."

Just when Kojou let down his guard for a brief moment, Nina spoke with her own tone of voice on full display. A chill instantly went over Kojou, but if anything, Nagisa's smile grew even brighter.

"Oh, you make it sound like a big deal. You came for a bite not long ago when we gave Kanon her party for her hospital discharge. What's with that way of talking, anyway? Some kind of fad?"

Kojou hastily went along with the ride. "Y-yeah, exactly. It's all the rage in high school!"

For her part, Nina abruptly had a fond look on her face as she looked at Nagisa. "Kanon, you mean Kanon Kanase?"

"...Hey, Nina...! I mean, Asagi!"

Nina ignored Kojou's chiding whisper and asked, "Is Kanon doing well?"

That was when Kojou finally realized it. Kanon Kanase grew up at Adelard Abbey, so Nina knew who she was.

Nagisa spoke while stuffing her cheeks full of gratin. "She's still doing fine. If anything, she's more cheerful than ever lately. She seems to be getting along nicely with Astarte, too."

Upon hearing this, Nina narrowed her eyes a bit and whispered, "I see..."

The mass of sludge oozed through the air duct and plopped onto the floor.

The liquid-metal life-form was glossy and jet-black. It flowed onto the concrete floor, piling higher and higher until it finally took the shape of a man wearing a white coat. It was the shape of the alchemist known as Kou Amatsuka.

He was in an underground parking lot, situated beneath an apartment building in the residential district of Island West. The interior was lit with LED lights as countless as the stars. The railway cars were locally manufactured in the Demon Sanctuary, all high-priced prototypes.

The apartment building had a powerful anti-demonic ward spread over it, as well as cutting edge anti-crime devices, to protect it from intruders. However, this did not prevent an alchemist such as Amatsuka from breaking in. And now that he was already inside the ward, there was no longer anything to bar his progress.



The girl was on the top floor of the apartment building. There, she hung around idly, forgetting both her role and her crime.

It was not that he was jealous of this. But it was simply impossible not to hate her for it.

Such were the thoughts in Amatsuka's head as he walked toward the elevator. However, after taking several steps, yet not moving forward an inch, he stopped once more.

His physical body had been bound by golden chains that stretched out from thin air.

A voice came from a corner of the parking lot, accompanied by a small silhouette in an ornate black dress that seemed to materialize out of the blue. She had long, dark hair and pale skin, and even though the sun had already fallen, she carried a lace-rimmed parasol in her hands. The woman looked like an elaborate doll, all the more beautiful and frightening for it.

"Do you know who *lives* here, filthy burglar? If you do, you have quite some nerve."

The contours of Amatsuka's whole body melted away, allowing him to slip out of the golden chains.

"Ahh. So you are Natsuki Minamiya, the demon hunter..."

Even as she beheld the bizarre scene before her, the woman in the dress did not alter her expression whatsoever. "To think one could escape from Laeding, chains forged by the gods, in such a manner. Perhaps you should switch careers and become a stage magician? You might make a very good living at it, Kou Amatsuka."

"So I've heard."

Amatsuka's right hand stretched out like a whip, wrapping around one of Natsuki's slender ankles... Or it would have, had her form not shimmered like a mirage at that very moment, moving behind him. "Futile," she spat. "Physical transmutation cannot affect my body, alchemist."

"So it would seem." Amatsuka was not particularly perturbed as he slowly

turned around. Judging that a straight fight was not to his advantage, he reached out to the parking lot air duct with tentacles, but every last one was repelled with a tinny, high-pitched sound.

“I see... The barrier around the structure is not to prevent intrusion, but to keep captured prey from escaping. A wise decision.”

“The vengeful queen of Aldegia asked me to capture you, after all. I’d meant to haul you straight off to the prison barrier, but you’re just an offshoot, aren’t you?”

Once again, chains shot out from four directions, but this time they pierced Amatsuka’s body. Yet, there was no blood. The young man reverted to liquid form, freeing himself from the chains with ease.

“Are you intelligent enough to answer my question, at least? Why are you still after Kanon Kanase? Surely you stole what you needed from her father?”

“Because someone thinks that she’s in the way.”

“...What?”

For the first time, Natsuki’s expression wavered.

Aside from her un-Japanese silver hair and blue eyes, Kanon Kanase was merely a student, not standing out in any way. Her personality was reserved; she looked docile to the point of timidity. But she had a secret. The blood of the Aldegian royal family flowed through her veins, making her a powerful spirit medium since birth.

If judged by her potential power alone, her spiritual strength was top rank, even by Demon Sanctuary standards, enough that her body could accept divine energy from the higher planes.

Amatsuka touched his own chest as he spoke. “Besides, it is more than a little unfair that she be the only one to survive. This time, the tragic play from five years ago shall play until its conclusion.”

The center of his chest contained a black gemstone. This, he crushed with his bare hand.

“Why you...”

This time, Amatsuka's body completely lost all human shape, changing to that of a complete monster—an amorphous metallic life-form. From it spewed countless tentacles, bearing down on Natsuki, ready to rip her to shreds.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha. You got carried away with yourself, Witch of the Void! Hurting this doll's body will inflict considerable damage upon you, I'm sure. I'll break it here and now!”

The chains at Natsuki's command couldn't stop liquid-metal blades. Fully aware of this, Natsuki exhaled, gazing coldly down at the monster that was once Amatsuka.

What emerged from behind her, ripping through the fabric of space, was a giant hand enveloped by golden armor. It was her Guardian—a mechanical, demonic knight. The giant golden arm created a wall of shock waves that blew back the countless blades rushing toward her, sending Amatsuka's body flying along with them.

Natsuki's response was cold. “Hmph. Though I'd love to simply burn you in the fires of Hell, Hell is too good for a soulless shell. As it turns out, I was looking for a sample of Spirit Blood anyway.”

With one wave of a golden hand, the ground below what had been Amatsuka transformed into a bottomless swamp of void. The clump of liquid metal furiously changed shape, but it could not escape the pitch-black mire.

Natsuki was called the Witch of the Void because her specialty was spatial control. She had altered space itself to build an inescapable trap.

“—Astarte, I'll leave the rest to you.” Sounding bored, Natsuki called out to the homunculus girl waiting behind her.

Astarte walked forward, replying in a flat, mechanical voice, “*Accepted: Execute Rhododactylos.*”

As usual, she was wearing a maid outfit with the shoulders and back heavily exposed. From her pale, open back emerged a pair of giant, rainbow-colored wings. The wings changed into ghoulish, monstrous arms that thrust into the mass of liquid metal to pin it down.

The entire body of the monster that was once Amatsuka shuddered and

roared. “OOOOOOooooooo—!”

The liquid-metal life-form, presumably able to slip past any physical attack, could do nothing against the assault from the “weak and helpless” homunculus.

Astarte was the prototype for a man-made Beast Vassal symbiote, making her the world’s one and only homunculus able to summon a Beast Vassal. And the Beast Vassal she commanded drained the magical power and life energy from others.

Natsuki, sounding like she’d already lost interest in Amatsuka, murmured, “A self-propagating liquid-metal life-form, yes? Perhaps it treads surprisingly close to an immutable body, but it’s outmatched here.”

The surface of the metal lost its luster, cracking apart like rusting steel. Having been robbed of all its magical energy, it reverted to a simple lump of metal.

“Five years ago...was it?”

Natsuki picked up a piece of the smashed and discarded black gemstone. Sighing softly, she tipped her head back to regard the ceiling. The top floor of this building was Natsuki’s home, where she lived with a girl to whom she was the guardian—a certain Kanon Kanase, once known as the “Faux-Angel.”

6

In a corner of an abandoned warehouse, Kou Amatsuka seemed to stagger as he sat down. In one hand, he held a container with a fragment of the broken Dummy Core.

There was a single line of blood flowing from his human forehead. His real body, resonating with a fellow Dummy Core, had been hit by the resulting backlash.

“Ow-ow-ow... You’re as good as they say, Natsuki Minamiya...”

Rising slowly, Amatsuka spoke as if it wasn’t his problem. But in the pale moonlight, the side of his face looked white as a ghost’s.

The right side of Amatsuka’s body was a liquid-metal life-form almost

identical to the composition of Wiseman's Blood. By splitting off a piece of it and giving it a Dummy Core, he was able to produce clones of himself. But by the same token, making each clone literally meant losing a part of himself.

Though he could restore lost mass by fusing with other metal, it also meant diminishing the purity of the Spirit Blood. Repeated cloning had already pushed Amatsuka's body close to its limit.

"—Yeah, sorry. I wasn't able to get Kanon Kanase. My bad."

Amatsuka was speaking to someone, but there was no one else standing in the abandoned warehouse that was awaiting demolition. Rather, he was speaking to the silver cane in his hand, specifically a skull engraved into the handle.

"No need to worry. I have other ideas when it comes to fuel."

As Amatsuka spoke, he gave his right wrist several twists. It was the same piece the Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency had lopped off several days prior. Her spear, able to nullify magical energy, was more or less the mortal enemy of Wiseman's Blood, a sorcerous life-form. But put another way, without that spear, she was no threat to Amatsuka whatsoever.

"The Wiseman's Blood with the Dummy Core that got away should have begun to grow by now. It'll show itself sooner or later, no matter what I do."

Amatsuka glared at the grim skull engraving as he left the lonely building.

Perhaps he'd only imagined it, but he thought he'd faintly heard the skull laughing at him—

"I know. Just make sure you don't forget *your* promise."

That said, Amatsuka made his way back to the city once more. He had work to do—namely, destroying the one he had once called his mentor, and taking back what he'd lost five years before.

7

The next morning, around five AM, Kojou was in the apartment lobby seeing

his little sister and her classmate off as they went on their field trip.

His exhausted face was the product of not having slept a single wink the night before, having spent it all with Nina Adelard in search of Wiseman's Blood.

More accurately, "search" had meant going onto the roof to help Nina as she tried a variety of suspicious-looking scrying rituals, but that had tired him out nonetheless. Yukina seemed about to catch on several times along the way, forcing him to employ special effort to pull the wool over her eyes. Just imagining what she might do to him if she caught him alone, on the roof, with the woman wearing Asagi's face was frightening enough.

In the end, Nina hadn't been able to find any sign of the Wiseman's Blood, even after three AM. If her spells could be compared to a submarine's sonar, the Demon Sanctuary apparently put out too much "noise" for it to be effective.

So after Nina and Kojou dragged their tired bodies back to the apartment and Kojou thought he could finally get some sleep, Nagisa had come in to slap him awake.

Nagisa, wearing clothes for cool weather that looked out of place on tropical Itogami Island, buried Kojou and his bloodshot eyes in conversation.

"Understand, Kojou? When you go out, make sure the fires are out and the door is locked. Do your homework as soon as you get back from school. Also, there are side dishes in the fridge for today and tonight. Don't forget to take a bath and brush your teeth, and try to wake up on time so that you're not late for—"

"I feel like it was just yesterday that Himeragi was saying all this stuff..."

Man, do I look that flaky? wondered Kojou, frowning.

Yukina stood beside Nagisa, smiling broadly as she listened to the brother-sister exchange. In annoyance, Kojou replied, "Never mind me, you be careful out there. I mean, it's been a while since you were off the island."

"Oh, it'll be all right. Just wait for the souvenirs. Oh, wait, ick, I forgot something!"

Nagisa checked her pockets. "My wallet!" she shouted as she ran back inside.

With a loud patter of hasty footsteps, she hurried back to the elevator bank with liveliness you wouldn't expect from someone who had lived in a hospital a couple years before.

Kojou sighed with an exasperated look as he watched his little sister go into the elevator car.

"Restless, isn't she?"

Having something like this happen right before she left made him even more anxious about whether it would really be all right.

Nagisa had a lot of luggage with her, probably because she wasn't used to trips. In contrast, Yukina only had a single brown travel bag with her. Maybe it just felt like she had less with her because she wasn't carrying that black guitar case on her back like she always did. Yukina, wearing a somewhat large coat over her school uniform, appeared a little younger than usual.

Looking like that, Yukina seemed to hesitate as she called out to Kojou. "Ah, senpai. About the substitute watcher for while I'm away..."

Ah, thought Kojou, pressing a hand to his head with a groan. The ruckus with Nina Adelard had made him completely forget about that remaining concern.

"Right, I did break Professor Kitty's *shikigami* and all..."

"...Professor Kitty?"

Yukina did a double take.

"A-anyway," she continued after a moment, "the rituals for making a *shikigami* from scratch take too long. They'll be sending a replacement from High God Forest after all."

"So they're sending one straight from headquarters, huh? It's going to take some time, then?"

"Yes. The replacement will arrive this afternoon at the absolute earliest."

"This afternoon...huh?"

So I can move freely until then. Either way, they couldn't just sit on their hands with the Wiseman's Blood off its leash. If they could wrap things up

before the substitute watcher arrived, then—

Yukina's gaze sharpened, as if she could see Kojou hardening his resolve. "You seem rather excited about this somehow..."

As usual, she had razor-sharp intuition.

"Eh?! No, that's not it at all! I was just thinking, like, I could sleep till noon now, or something..."

"Senpai..."

Yukina glared at Kojou like she was staring at a high-maintenance little brother. "Please behave yourself while I'm gone. The alchemist is gone, so there should not be any direct danger, but I have a bad feeling about things somehow."

"G...got it. I'll be careful."

Her words gave Kojou a chill up his spine.

Yukina didn't know that Amatsuka was still alive. And yet, her Sword Shaman spiritual senses told her the danger still existed.

It was then that Nagisa, out of breath, arrived back and took Yukina by the hand. "—Sorry to make you wait. Let's go, Yukina. Later, Kojou! I'll be back soon!"

Kojou made a perfunctory wave to the pair before heading back to the apartment.

Yawning as he entered the elevator, Kojou was just arriving at the seventh floor when he realized he'd faintly heard a scream. It had come from room 704—Kojou's apartment.

"—Nina?!"

Kojou unlocked the front door and rushed into the apartment.

Nina ought to have been sleeping on the bed in his room; it'd taken quite a lot of effort to bring her in there without getting busted by Nagisa and Yukina. And there she was, kneeling on the bed, looking up at Kojou with tears in her eyes. The woman wearing Asagi's face spoke with a voice that was half-cheerful, half-

scared.

“K-Kojou...”

She was pressing down firmly on the bust of the T-shirt she was wearing in place of pajamas to hide her breasts from his gaze. It was rather adorable, exaggerated behavior from the self-described Great Alchemist. It was as if she was an ordinary high school g—

Kojou was seized by sudden concern and asked timidly, “Wait, you’re... Asagi?”

The body that looked like Asagi shuddered and nodded awkwardly.

“Wh...why was I sleeping in your bed...?!”

Kojou clutched his head. *That idiot... Why did she have to sleep at the worst possible time?!*

Nina had hijacked Asagi’s consciousness the night before. Asagi had been taking a shower at the time. And then the next moment, as far as she knew, she had woken up on top of Kojou’s bed...

No doubt, from Asagi’s point of view, there was only one possibility for what had happened to her.

Asagi’s voice quivered as she looked down at the disheveled bedsheets.

“Kojou...don’t tell me you...”

Bright morning sunbeams shone in through the window; a seagull cried out from somewhere.

Kojou desperately pleaded, “Wait, calm down, Asagi. Just listen to me! You have this all wrong!”

He could foresee Asagi flying into a complete rage now. Anyone would be angry at having been dragged off to bed while unconscious. Of course Asagi would be, too. However—

“H...huh...? Sorry, I just... This shouldn’t be happening...”

Kojou stared as a flood of tears began to fall from Asagi’s eyes. Asagi herself seemed surprised at how she couldn’t control her own emotions. This was a

first for her, yet she didn't remember a thing about it, which must have come as a great shock.

...Well, not that anything had actually happened to begin with, but regardless...

"No, you've got this all wrong!!"

Kojou desperately tried to find an explanation that might persuade her. Naturally, he came up with nothing. He couldn't exactly tell her that she'd almost died and as a result, her body had been taken over by an alchemist. Kojou, his mind going blank from trying to think up some excuse, suddenly turned toward the nearest wall and smacked his own face against it, hard. A dull *thud* echoed as the concrete structure shook; the impact sent Asagi into shock.

"K-Kojou...?!"

"Look, just believe me! I didn't do anything. You've got no reason to cry at all!"

"I-is that so?"

"If I'm lying, I'll treat you to an all-you-can-eat buffet."

"R-right."

"A lot of stuff happened and you got tired and slept, that's it. It'll pass soon."

"R-right... I, I understand. Wipe that blood already, your face looks scary...!"

Apparently shock therapy had fulfilled its purpose and brought Asagi back to normal operating condition. And what's more, she tentatively believed Kojou, too.

Oh, yeah I bet it does. After he nodded, he wiped off the blood that was liberally flowing from his sliced forehead. Cuts to the head tended to bleed a lot, but Kojou still did a double take as he looked at how it turned his towel bright red. It'd worked, but he'd overdone it. He was worried he might have cracked his skull, too.

Asagi looked up at Kojou as he brought the heavy bleeding under control, sighing a bit as she asked, "Hey, Kojou?"

Maybe because she was looking at Kojou with a tearful face, her shy expression seemed oddly adorable.

“What?”

“You...really didn’t do anything?”

Kojou was hastily rummaging in his closet for a spare towel as he said in a throwaway tone, “I told you already, no. I wasn’t exactly in any condition for that either.”

As he spoke, Asagi put her chin in her palms with an oddly sullen look. “That’s kind of depressing and annoying at the same time...”

Kojou didn’t quite catch the words Asagi had murmured and looked back at her with a towel pressed to his head.

“Ah?”

Asagi glared at Kojou before breaking out in an elegant smile. She bared her teeth with a teasing sound before quipping, “You klutz.”

The hell’s that for? Surprised, he was ready to retort off the cuff when, a moment later...

“—!”

Kojou’s entire body stiffened from an incredible pulse of magical energy it had detected.

A great explosive roar bellowed like a thunderclap, making Itogami Island’s artificial ground shake. Kojou rose back up from the ground like he’d been given a stern kick, pulling himself to the window to look outside.

At some point during that, Nina Adelard had awakened. With Asagi’s face and voice, she announced, “The Wiseman’s Blood is on the move...”

Kojou could say nothing. All he could do was gaze at the city, dumbfounded.

At the far corner of his vision, faint black smoke was rising up from a coastal area. Ground zero for the explosions was probably the harbor district in Island East, with its piers and airports serving as the entrance to Itogami Island.

It was also the location of the ferry Nagisa and Yukina were heading toward.

A young man was standing atop a giant crane, one that stood at the harbor's breakwater.

He wore a boy's uniform from Saikai Academy, and had his short, spiky hair combed back, with a pair of plain headphones over his ears. His mouth was full of small capsules.

Motoki Yaze bit down on the capsules with a hard crunch.

"So it's on the move..."

Looking down from the crane, there was no visible disturbance in the area. However, Yaze was a Hyper-Adapter—a natural psychic not reliant upon magic. With his hearing augmented by the drug he'd just taken, his range was acute enough to pick up the drop of a pin or the slightest difference in air pressure within a one-kilometer radius.

He could even detect the liquid-metal life-form wriggling its way through the man-made island's aqueducts...

Yaze drew up the pin microphone on his chest. "Hey... Can you hear me? Captain, the target's coming out of the aqueduct. Send Blue Team to B7. Send Green Team to B9. Have Second Company seal off the marine park, please."

He was communicating with the Island Guard's law enforcement unit, which had already deployed two companies' worth of manpower to the harbor area.

He heard the unit captain's voice through the osteopathic receiver, filled with naked anger.

"Roger that, Heimdall."

Of course, Yaze was not the target of his ire. The captain's hatred was directed toward the metallic life-form known as the Wiseman's Blood, and the alchemist who controlled it.

The Island Guard had already lost twelve members through the course of the incident. It was the worst number of fatalities caused by a single criminal all year. Even during massive, national-scale events such as the raid on Keystone

Gate and the Black Death Emperor Front terror incident, they had not suffered such losses.

Furthermore, this criminal was not a man fighting for faith and pride like the Lotharingian Armed Apostle or the Black Death Emperor Front. He was a filthy, rotten burglar who'd stolen a locked-away magical device to satisfy his own selfish greed. The captain was indignant that such a man had slaughtered his comrades.

That's not good, murmured Yaze to himself. High morale was a good thing, but losing your cool in the process was decidedly not. After all, this wasn't an opponent that could be overwhelmed with numbers alone.

"The target's a liquid-metal life-form. Don't get funny ideas about bullets bringing it down. Bide your time and wait for the Attack Mages to arrive."

Yaze dished out orders again, but this time there was no response. Yaze clicked his tongue a little. It wasn't a very good situation. He really had a bad feeling about it, in fact.

As Yaze scowled, he heard a sarcastic synthetic voice coming from his chest.

"Keh-keh... Wiseman's Blood on the loose, huh? This is getting pretty interesting."

It was the voice of the avatar of the five supercomputers that held all of Itogami Island's vital functions in its grip, the artificial intelligence Asagi had dubbed Mogwai. Apparently it had taken the liberty of eavesdropping on Yaze's radio conversation.

"Not at all," Yaze replied listlessly. "Maybe it'd be different somewhere else, but this is a Demon Sanctuary. We've got plenty of ways to neutralize even immutable self-propagating life-forms. We could chuck it into another dimension, smash it with Beast Vassal-level magical power..."

"So the big shot from the Warlord's Empire is sitting this one out because he's well aware of that?"

"...Probably. That's all the better from where I'm standing, but..."

As Yaze spoke, he glanced over at an elaborate ship floating on the surface of

the sea, caressed by the morning breeze. The name of that ship, moored on the shoreline of Itogami Harbor, was the *Oceanus Grave II*—the personal mega yacht of the Duke of Ardeal, Dimitrie Vattler.

Yaze had been quietly afraid that he, a well-known battle maniac, would display a personal interest in the Wiseman's Blood. But there had been no sign of Vattler making a move. No doubt he thought that a sorcerous life-form created through alchemy was not sufficient for his purposes.

"More importantly, Mogwai, you knew that the Wiseman's Blood was sealed away in the ruins of the abbey, didn't you?"

"Now that you mention it, I did."

To Yaze's pointed words, the artificial intelligence's reply was casual.

"So why didn't you tell Asagi? She almost died as a result."

Yaze clenched his teeth. Asagi had been his friend since elementary school. Not that they had an amorous relationship, but she was still his friend, as close to him as any sibling could be.

And she had one additional role to play—one most critical to the Demon Sanctuary.

"Keh-keh," laughed Mogwai, sounding terribly human. *"But she didn't die, did she?"*

Yaze's eyes faintly wavered. "You mean, you expected what happened, up to and including Nina Adelard bringing Asagi back to life?"

"Who's to say? You can say anything you want after the fact. Keh-keh..."

Yaze clicked his tongue in irritation. "What's your goal here?"

"Don't worry, Yaze, my boy," Mogwai said, rich with implication. *"That girl is my precious partner. She won't die as long as she's on this island."*

Yaze's entire body shuddered when he guessed the meaning of those words. The artificial intelligence had just stated that he truly would protect Asagi's life...*by any means necessary.*

"More importantly, the show's starting," Mogwai announced.

“Yeah.”

Yaze shifted his gaze down. The asphalt ground was rupturing as a glossy mass of liquid metal emerged from the aqueducts.

Itogami Harbor’s warehouses held large quantities of steel and precious metal brought in from outside the island. It wasn’t very hard to guess that a liquid-metal form desperate to feed on heavy metals would show up there.

The Wiseman’s Blood freely altered its own shape, changing the location of its center of gravity to roll forward. Its speed was not all that quick. Its quaking movements were erratic, like a drop of rain rolling down a glass panel. However, the metallic life-form that had emerged was about the size of a midsize truck. It probably had a mass of several hundred metric tons. The size and weight alone made it a menace.

The metallic life-form smashed with ease through the simple barricades the Island Guard had erected. Bullets, mines, gas, and electrical shocks—all failed to show any sign of affecting the amorphous opponent.

Yaze gazed at the remnants of wrecked magic circles and said with displeasure, “I expected physical attacks would be ineffective, but to think that ritual wards had no effect, either...”

“That’s because Spirit Blood, produced through alchemy, is more like a chimera or an Automata than a sorcerous life-form. You’re not dealing with a golem or a zombie here.”

The artificial intelligence spoke with the detached air of a spectator. Coldly, Yaze declared back at it, “If that’s the case, then we’ve still got a shot at this.”

There was already a unit deployed along the thing’s course. Instead of barricades, armored vehicles resembling water trucks barred its path. They were able to spit out water at dozens of standard atmospheres’ worth of pressure, but Yaze didn’t expect such a meager flow of water to affect an immutable metallic life-form.

However, the liquid fired from the barrels was so cold it kicked up an incredible amount of white vapor. Simultaneously, magic circles appeared on top of the street, trapping the metallic life-form in a net of extreme cold.

When Mogwai spoke again, its tone was one of admiration. *“I see. You’re freezing it to stop it from moving.”*

The lustrous, jet-black surface of the liquid metal was now covered in pure white snow. Its frozen body had lost its fluidity, making it unable to stretch its tentacles to attack.

Yaze casually explained, “It’s liquid nitrogen at -196 degrees Celsius combined with freezing spells. Even if alchemy put it together, it’s still metal in the end. Not even Wiseman’s Blood can ignore the laws of physics.”

At normal atmospheric pressures, mercury solidified at -38.83 degrees Celsius. He’d expected that Spirit Blood, possessing a body formed of the same liquid, had the same weakness.

“Well, that sure ended in a hurry,” Mogwai murmured in disappointment.

Even if they couldn’t destroy it, Wiseman’s Blood was harmless if you could keep it immobile. Indeed, it would serve the Demon Sanctuary well as a priceless research sample. All they had to do was hunt down Kou Amatsuka and the incident would be wrapped up.

“That’s just *fine*. I have regular classes waiting for me after all this. Besides, I don’t know how long Kojou will maintain his sanity taking care of Asagi.”

“Keh-keh, jealous, are we?”

“Oh, please,” muttered Yaze, shrugging his shoulders in response to the tease. “It’s not that. I’ve got my own arrangements. Though, I suppose I *will* be annoyed if he scores before I do with my sweetie...”

Yaze looked around to get off the crane. But the next moment, his extended hearing detected an odd set of footsteps. The left foot was flesh and blood, but the right footstep was metallic. And he was carrying a silver cane in his left hand —

The man, wearing a bizarre red-and-white checkered hat, was making his way toward the frozen metallic life-form.

“Don’t tell me he’s—?!”

“Kou Amatsuka?! A Dummy... No, the real one?!”

Mogwai whistled as its voice spiked. This was the sole apprentice of the Great Alchemist, Nina Adelard. He was also the criminal who had betrayed her to awaken the sealed Wiseman's Blood. The alchemist Kou Amatsuka, a wanted fugitive, was walking right under the Island Guard's noses.

Amatsuka ignored the bloodthirsty Island Guard unit and spoke to the frozen metallic life-form instead.

"Ahh, Senmu. You seem to be in good health. How does it feel to have the immortal body you desired?"

The next moment, the surface of the metallic life-form cracked, emitting a ghoulish roar that made the very air tremble.

"A...AMATSUKAAAAAAA—!"

"Ha-ha, this is quite something, Senmu. To think you'd remember me even after taking this form? I am honored."

A sadistic expression came over the young man as he laughed, taunting. In response, the dark shimmer of the metallic life-form grew more intense.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!"

As the metal form cracked apart, countless tentacles burst out from within. These turned into giant blades and began indiscriminately slashing apart the warehouses and buildings in the area.

Only the metallic life-form's surface had been chilled, apparently. The Wiseman's Blood created an internal cavity to insulate the interior, protecting the main body from freezing in much the same manner as a thermos.

Yaze desperately yelled into the microphone, "Captain, more liquid nitrogen! If you keep freezing it, you can hold it in place—!"

But the order never reached the Island Guard in the confusion. Instead, they turned toward Amatsuka and the metallic life-form, bathing them in a fusillade.

Having lost their comrades to the alchemist and the monster, fear and hatred had filled the armed guardsmen with a killing rage.

A madman's smile came over Amatsuka as countless bullets rained down upon them. "Ha...ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

A change took place as the Wiseman's Blood was bathed in gunfire. The glossy surface's glow intensified, turning scarlet like anger. The Spirit Blood, diluted due to the Dummy Core, was regaining its purity. It was as if it feasted on the anger and hatred of man—

Yaze, finally realizing the alchemist's goal, yelled,

“Crap—! Cease fire! Amatsuka's after the *bullets!*”

The Island Guard's Anti-Demon Unit employed high-purity electrum chips and Silver-Elysium-tipped bullets.

Both possessed properties that made them exceptional catalysts for use in alchemy.

The Wiseman's Blood was being hit by concentrated fire amounting to dozens—no, hundreds—of kilograms of bullets. That was more than enough raw resources for an alchemist to use top-level magic.

Amatsuka had caused numerous fatalities among the Island Guard and sent the Wiseman's Blood running amok. It was all to bring about this exact situation—all to gather the resources he needed for his alchemy.

Amatsuka continued to laugh loudly as he gripped the cane in his left hand like a spear.

“*Your blood*, as I promised! Now, return to life just as you desired, Wiseman!”

Then, he thrust it down into the Wiseman's Blood with all his might. The black gemstone in its way shattered, and the cane was pulled deep into the innards of the Spirit Blood.

Atop the gantry crane, Yaze leaned forward and muttered, “Wiseman...he says?! Don't tell me that thing's—!”

The ritual Amatsuka had performed brought about a lethal change in the Wiseman's Blood. The metallic-crimson life-form was enveloped by light as something emerged from within, like a hatchling breaking the shell of a warm egg—

“*This is bad! Run, Yaze, my boy!!*” Mogwai shouted in warning, its voice filled with uncharacteristic urgency.

“What?!”

Yaze lifted his face with a gasp.

But then—

A flash of light emitted by the Wiseman’s Blood silently swept across his field of vision.

There was an explosion. The enormous crane came crashing down like a log pile as flames enveloped the harbor district.



CHAPTER FOUR
THE SACRIFICIAL
VICTIMS

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THE SACRIFICIAL VICTIMS

1

She was right before Nagisa's eyes—eyes Nagisa had shut, because she and the girl were so close together their breath intertwined.

She was a girl with a serious expression and straight black hair dusting her shoulders. Long, wavy eyelashes extended beyond the rims of her glasses. Her lips were slightly pursed, with a glint shining from her glossy red lipstick.

She brought those lips closer to Nagisa's and closed her eyes, too...

And just as it seemed like their lips would press together—

“I-I can't...! I'm at my limit!”

—Nagisa shouted and broke away.

There was a satisfying snap as the candy stick suspended between their mouths cleaved in half.

Their friends, watching the display, went *ooh* in marvel and disappointment.

It was the first day of the middle school field trip. Nagisa and the other girl were playing the Pocky Game while their ferry was on its way to Tokyo Harbor. The game's purpose was to sit opposite each other with one crunchy chocolate-covered stick between two people, and see just how far you could nibble it down.

Nagisa sighed. “*Haah...* That was close. I almost had my first kiss stolen by the class rep.”

Nagisa rolled onto the floor, drained of strength. The black-haired girl with glasses coolly looked down at her.

“That goes for both of us.”

Her name was Sakura Koushima. Ever since she'd started living on Itogami Island during her fifth year of elementary school, she'd been selected class representative every year running, making her something of a class rep lifer. For someone who was a teacher's pet and looked completely serious at all times, she had a surprisingly easygoing personality, leading to exceptionally high support from her classmates.

Another classmate, Cindy, spoke as she shuffled a deck of cards she'd brought out. “I have to say, Yukina's a tough customer. You haven't lost even once, have you?”

“Cindy” was a Japanese girl born in Akita. Her family name was Shindou, a name she'd mangled out of stress when introducing herself, and the name Cindy had stuck ever since. Cindy, the class rep, and Yukina constituted Nagisa's group for the excursion.

Cindy shot Yukina a suspicious look. “You're not using probability-altering charms or magical devices, are you?”

Yukina swiftly shook her head. “...I-I'm just lucky...”

Of course, there was no way she'd use an extravagant charm against classmates when playing Old Maid. But she kept to herself how she'd subconsciously used her Sword Shaman Spirit Sight a number of times. After all, if she lost at Old Maid, she'd be on the receiving end of a cruel humiliation game. There was no place for mercy in the games schoolgirls played on a class trip.

Nagisa, having suffered three losses in a row, murmured ruefully as she looked over her hand. “You sure have quite a poker face, Yukina.”

Actually, Nagisa was the type to project whatever she was thinking onto her face, enough that you had to consciously convince yourself she wasn't doing it to just throw you off.

Nagisa breathed heavily through her nostrils as she tendered cards toward Yukina in a fan shape. “Here you go, Yukina. It's your turn.”

Yukina didn't even need her Spirit Sight; it was plain as day that Nagisa had a

joker mixed into her hand. Based on the movements of her big eyes, Yukina knew exactly where the joker was. She stretched a finger out toward the card next to the joker.

That was when Cindy asked in a nonchalant tone, “So, Yukina, how’ve things been with Nagisa’s brother lately?”



For a moment, the girl's question made Yukina's mind blank out. Thanks to that, she didn't realize her hand had gone astray until it was too late. She had made a fatal mistake.

"Aah..."

Yukina let out a small sound when she saw that she'd drawn the joker from Nagisa's hand.

The class representative did not fail to take notice, adjusting her glasses slightly as she said, "That threw her off."

Cindy captured the moment to snatch away Yukina's safe card. "I'll take that!"

Cindy discarded all her numbered cards, leaving her with two. Yukina had six, which was a fairly difficult situation to recover from.

Cindy, sensing weakness after Yukina's repeated victories, tenaciously pressed the attack.

"Kojou's changed a lot lately, hasn't he?"

Even though Yukina knew it was a trap, it was not a subject she could avoid. The girl was a current member of the basketball team, so she'd been Kojou's junior when he was in middle school. In other words, the girl knew things about Kojou that Yukina did not. And so, Yukina asked, "H-how so?"

"Hmm, I'd say he's back to how he was when he was playing basketball? He was kind of a scary person until not long ago."

"Akatsuki? Scary?" Yukina looked dubious. But Cindy had been completely serious.

As far as Yukina knew, Kojou didn't have an aggressive personality. He had the power of the World's Mightiest Vampire, but had no clue what to do with it, so he lived his days in languid idleness. That was why Yukina couldn't let him be. Even Yukina, his junior in years, considered him a guy who just needed to straighten himself out. Hearing him described as a scary person didn't resonate whatsoever.

So Yukina replied in all honesty. "I find that hard to imagine..."

Cindy made a pained smile as she narrowed her eyes. “Oh, I didn’t mean it like *that*. It’s like, he wasn’t hostile, more like, he was a hard guy to talk to? Plus, he was really beat-up here and there.”

Yukina raised her eyebrows. “When...was that?”

Cindy hummed and looked up at the ceiling as she sifted through her memory. “Spring break, Golden Week maybe, something like that? It was, like, right around when Nagisa went into the hospital for tests, so maybe it had something to do with that?”

“Spring break...”

Yukina let out a heavy sigh.

That was immediately after Kojou graduated from middle school—and about the time he obtained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. What could have happened to Kojou other than that to make him so hostile that his affable junior could barely raise a word to him...? It seemed worth looking into.

Cindy murmured to herself as she reached toward Yukina’s cards. “See, back when Akatsuki played ball, he was pretty full of himself when he was on the court, but outside of that he was spaced out, and that was a good mix. I think it’s good he’s like that again. That’s because you dragged him there, huh, Yukina?”

Yukina gave the girl a mystified look. “You watch him a lot, then?”

“Ah...? Er, I mean, we were in the same club. Akatsuki stood out a ton when he was in the middle school basketball club.”

This time, for whatever reason, it was Cindy’s turn to be thrown off. And when it was finally Yukina’s turn, she drew a joker from the deck, practically bringing tears to Cindy’s eyes. She protested, “Er, no, really, it’s not like that. I mean, he doesn’t just have you, he has Aiba, too. There’s no place for me in all that.”

As Cindy became flustered and panicked, Nagisa, waiting for her turn, chimed in. “Come to think of it, Kojou’s had kind words for you, Cindy.”

Cindy looked up, taken by surprise. “Ah? What’d he say?”

“He said you got back on defense fast and that you’re good at layups.”

“Ugh... He’s that kind of person, isn’t he?” Cindy moaned, shoulders slumped.

Yukina could only sympathize. Though neither meant any ill will whatsoever, they were a brother-and-sister wrecking ball in various ways.

“But earlier, you said there was something scary about Kojou...?” Nagisa countered.

Cindy replied in a peevish-sounding tone, “I just knew you were going to say that... He’s super-sweet with his little sister.”

Not at all. Nagisa shook her head.

“He is not. We’re always arguing, and just the day before yesterday, he went and ate all the ice cream on his own. It was my precious Dark Mont Blanc that I don’t buy more than once in a blue moon. I mean, that’s unbelievable. No one does that. I lectured him a ton and he went out and bought more and all...!”

Nagisa’s cheeks puffed up in a major bout of irritation.

The class rep murmured in exasperation, “See? Sweet.”

“What? Dark Mont Blanc?” Nagisa blinked and shook her head. “Not really, it’s kind of a bittersweet taste.”

Incidentally, Yukina was well aware of that incident. Since Kojou had suddenly left during the night, Yukina, his watcher, hurried off after him.

In the end, Kojou had to hit no less than four convenience stores before getting the right ice cream, making Yukina, who’d stuck with Kojou until the bitter end, the primary victim of the sibling argument.

It would soon be nine AM. The ferry, having set sail from Itogami Harbor at seven, would be stopping at Kamijo Island and Bikura Island, part of the Izu archipelago, and was expected to finally arrive at Tokyo Harbor’s Takeshiba Pier at eleven thirty.

One hundred and fifty-six middle school seniors were packed into the ship’s second-class, tatami-style quarters. They had been divvied up according to classroom and things like similar game interests and speaking styles for maximum fun during the voyage. Yet, despite all that, it was still somehow

mysterious that you could look at the blue sea stretching beyond the reinforced glass of the window and never, ever get bored.

Cindy asked, “What’s on our schedule for later, anyway?”

The class rep dutifully answered, “We’ll assemble in the hall at ten thirty, and we’ll watch an educational video before mealtime.”

“I wonder what dinner will be?” Nagisa wondered aloud. “Curry, maybe? I’d love to eat curry— Ah, Kanon!”

Nagisa, still looking like she was practically drooling at the thought, noticed her friend standing there, and waved.

Kanon Kanase, standing at the edge of the window, looked back with a flutter of her long, silver hair.

“Ah, Nagisa. Good morning to everyone.” Kanon gave them a reverential greeting as a large, black pair of binoculars hung down from her neck. Apparently it was a rental from the ferry company. “I got some binoculars. I heard you can see wild dolphins in this area.”

Kanon’s blue, gemstone-like eyes twinkled as she spoke. Kanon was an animal lover through and through. Normally a rather docile girl, wild animals made her display a dynamism you wouldn’t expect.

Nagisa’s expression brightened as she stood up. “Dolphins?! Wow, that’s great, I wanna see, too!”

Yukina and the others moved to the edge of the window.

“I’ve seen them before,” Cindy remarked. “It was right near here, come to think of it. Here’s a photo.”

Cindy got her cell phone out. The image displayed on-screen showed a ship with a pod of dolphins leaping out of the sea alongside it. It raised the girls’ hopes further.

However, several minutes passed without any sign of a dolphin showing its fins.

“No dolphins, huh,” Nagisa murmured, downhearted.

Cindy patted her back in consolation. “They’re not going to appear just like that, are they?”

“It’s a big ocean,” the class rep added in a detached tone.

But that moment, Kanon and Yukina gasped as they noticed something, shifting their gazes toward the stern of the ship. There was something silver glittering in the sea, floating between the gaps of the white wake left in the ferry’s path. Afterward, they had a funny feeling someone was watching them.

There was a metallic object at sail, reminiscent of a mini sub or a torpedo... However, it wriggled its giant body like a sea serpent and immediately sank back under the water.

“Huh, what was that?” Nagisa’s eyes went wide in confusion. “Was that a dolphin?”

It can’t be, Yukina muttered under her breath.

Beside her, Kanon bit down on her lip, as if she were afraid.

2

The dust and smoke given off by wrecked buildings hovered over the harbor like ominous morning mist.

Yaze sat sluggishly on the sloped roof of a lighthouse as he took in the view.

The enormous gantry crane that Yaze had been standing on but a brief time before had been bent over and severed near its foundation, and now lay pathetically on its side over the pier below. It was well beyond repair.

Yaze should have been in the same state. But a tiny silhouette wielding a black parasol had saved him.

Natsuki Minamiya, her extremely out-of-place frilly dress rustling in the breeze, asked, “Are you alive, Yaze?”

Out of thin air, she’d teleported in to rescue Yaze just in the nick of time before he would have crashed into the ground along with the crane.

“Yeah, somehow.”

Yaze sluggishly lifted up his face, using the headphones to comb down his disheveled hair. “Dammit, I really thought I was a goner that time... Thanks, Natsuki. Really saved my butt.”

The woman glowered in displeasure as she kicked Yaze’s back with a heel. “Don’t call your homeroom teacher by her given name. What is it with you and Akatsuki...? Just what do you think a homeroom teacher is?!”

Yaze raised both bloodstained arms above his head as he desperately pleaded for mercy. “Hey, wait—ow, I’m wounded here! I’m bleeding! I’m gushing!”

He might have been saved from a crash landing, but he’d still taken hits from fragments blown by the explosion, rendering Yaze wounded all over his body.

Natsuki ignored her pupil’s pleas as she looked over the state of the pier. Over ten of the giant warehouses standing on the ocean coastline had been wrecked and set aflame. The Island Guard unit that had surrounded the Wiseman’s Blood had been completely routed. Fortunately, fatalities had been few, but the guardsmen were in a heavily confused state and their gear thoroughly depleted.

It was all thanks to the strange skull that Kou Amatsuka had plunged into the Wiseman’s Blood. The mysterious beam that the skull emitted blew the Island Guard away in a single blow.

“Quite a sight,” Natsuki murmured in what sounded like pity.

Yaze scratched his head as he looked up at her. “Sorry, we screwed up. We misread Amatsuka’s goal.”

“The resurrection of Wiseman?”

“—You knew?” Yaze asked back in surprise.

Natsuki’s doll-like face was expressionless as she nodded gravely. “Kensei Kanase regained consciousness only a short time ago. Thanks to him, I know a variety of quite interesting things. The Aldegian Knights fed me some tips, too.”

Yaze’s lips twisted in displeasure. “I really would’ve appreciated hearing about all this beforehand...”

If they’d known Amatsuka’s goal was the resurrection of Wiseman, they would’ve been able to plan accordingly.

They certainly wouldn't have tried to riddle Amatsuka full of bullets made of precious metals and lend him a helping hand.

But Natsuki snorted coldly. "The investigative division told them loud and clear to leave it to the Attack Mages. I understand the anger over their fellow guardsmen having been killed, but—"

"Yeah... In the end, that was used against them and the casualty list just got longer, huh."

There we go. Yaze wiped blood from the corner of his mouth and rose to his feet.

"Natsuki, do you know what state the Island Guard is in, overall?"

"The chain of command is a real mess. It's all they can do to care for the wounded guardsmen. They requested reinforcements, but the garrison at Keystone Gate won't leave under these circumstances. They are relegated to calling up off-duty members until reserves arrive from the mainland."

Yaze scowled and sighed. "So losing half its strength means there's zero to spare."

"Well, either way, if Wiseman is anything like he's cracked up to be, the Island Guard's normal gear won't stand a chance. You could try calling up supernatural-augmented units and demon mercenaries working for private industry?"

"That would be nice. A certain snake charmer isn't guaranteed to play nice forever here."

Natsuki shot an annoyed glance at a single, elaborate ship—Dimitrie Vattler's *Oceanus Grave II*—still maintaining its silence.

Even if Vattler had displayed no interest in Amatsuka, there was no telling what his reaction would be if he learned that the Wiseman had emerged. They needed to find Amatsuka and bring matters to a close before that nuisance of a vampire made a bigger mess of things.

Yaze toyed with the headphones hanging from his neck as he ruefully confessed, "But it's gonna take a while before I can re-deploy my Soundscape."

Soundscape was a special field that Yaze could create through the use of his psychic powers as a so-called Hyper-Adaptor. There, he could keep track of all sound within the barrier with a precision rivaling the finest radars in existence. Yaze could even keep track of the movements of an amorphous metallic life-form such as the Wiseman's Blood.

However, Soundscape was so sensitive that it had a fatal weakness to loud sounds...such as explosions. Until the aftereffects of Amatsuka's attack completely disappeared, Yaze was unable to re-deploy the field—which meant that it would be several hours minimum before he could get back on Amatsuka's trail.

"You really are quite useless when push comes to shove," Natsuki declared, sounding disappointed. "You'll never get your hands on Shizuka like this."

"Oh, shut up! And how do you know about that, anyway?!"

"You and Akatsuki really are birds of a feather."

Yaze sounded rather crushed. "I feel like that's a horrible thing for a homeroom teacher to say here..."

Without warning, Natsuki snapped her fingers, causing the air before his eyes to ripple. She'd opened a teleportation gate.

"Fine. I'll take it from here. Get to school ASAP. You should still be able to make it in time."

"H-hey, Natsuki! Wait up! I'm begging you!"

Yaze hastily called for her to stop, but the witch didn't even look back as she stepped through the gate. She seemed to melt into thin air as she vanished.

Yaze was completely beside himself. He shook his head, clutching it as he hunched over.

The ocean breeze caressed Yaze's face as he remained on the sloped roof of the lighthouse, dozens of meters above the sea.

"How the hell am I supposed to get down from here...?!"

Around that time, Kojou Akatsuki was close to that very same pier. He'd come running when Nina had sensed the presence of the Wiseman's Blood.

However, the beast was already long gone. The Island Guard guardsmen had withdrawn as well, leaving only the wreckage of overwhelming destruction.

"What the hell is this?" Kojou exclaimed, gazing upon the scrap heap that had once been the warehouses and a wharf crane. "Did that amorphous blob do *all* this?"

It was damage sufficient to alter the topography of the harbor. It looked like a bombed-out city in the middle of a war. But the scars left by the buildings were clearly different than those caused by simple weapons of destruction such as bombs. The destroyed crane was smooth where it had been severed, as if mowed down by a giant, invisible blade. And the concrete walls of various warehouses had been melted by high temperatures, collapsing when no longer able to bear the structures' weight.

Nina Adelard, appearing as Asagi, whispered as she surveyed the destroyed buildings, "It's a heavy-metal particle-cannon attack."

Right now, she was wearing a reproduction of Asagi's school uniform. Obviously walking around in a tracksuit would have drawn too much attention, so Nina had used alchemy to recreate the school uniform, not a single thread askew.

"Particle cannon?"

Kojou was in shock as he asked. *Indeed*, replied Nina with a nod.

"It is a type of electron beam, so to speak."

"—A beam weapon?!"

Nina seemed mystified as she looked back at Kojou, who was still shocked, as she casually continued her explanation. "It's nothing as grand as you imagine. It's merely scattering a collection of particles into the atmosphere; the range is several kilometers at most. Even a direct hit can't achieve more than disintegration at the atomic level."

"That's plenty bad, isn't it?!"

Kojou took a deep breath, looking like his every hair was standing up.

It was a beam weapon capable of atomic disassembly of all matter within a half-kilometer radius. He couldn't even picture in his mind the damage a weapon like that could inflict if unleashed upon an urban area. In the worst case, Itogami Island could be destroyed in an instant.

"It can even use attacks like that?! So this is Amatsuka's doing?"

"No," Nina replied in a voice colder and harder than before. "This was the Wiseman."

It was a frail voice unsuited to her.

Kojou, perplexed, replied, "Who's that...?"

As he did, Nina's thin, pleasant smile seemed somehow mocking. "Have you not found it odd that the mass of liquid metal is called 'Wiseman's Blood' but have not wondered just who the Spirit Blood might belong to?"

"So the rightful owner of the Spirit Blood...is named Wiseman?!"

"Indeed."

Kojou subconsciously scowled as he watched Nina quietly nod.

"So who the hell is he?" he asked.

"Do you know the ultimate objective of alchemy?"

"Y-yeah... To get closer to God...right?" Kojou replied with what he'd learned from the homunculus girl.

Nina narrowed her eyes, looking satisfied. "Correct. However, he is nothing as extravagant as a higher-dimensional being. Rather, he is an artificial Perfect Man, created through alchemy."

"...And that's what they call the Wiseman, huh?"

I see, Kojou murmured to himself. Come to think of it, it wasn't all that crazy of an idea at all.

As far as alchemists were concerned, they already had the technology to create a "human being," in the form of a homunculus. If anything, it was natural for alchemists to aim to produce "God" next.

“So what did they actually make?”

“They succeeded...in a sense.”

Nina spoke as if it didn't concern her. Kojou was beside himself as he stared at her.

“That sounds like they failed on a lot of levels, you know.”

“It cannot be helped, for that is the truth. Alchemists wanted to create a perfect God, and naturally ended up with something *too perfect*.”

Kojou tilted his head as he asked, “...I don't get it. What's wrong with perfection?”

If that's what they wanted and that's what they got, there was nothing for them to be dissatisfied with, right—?

But Nina shook her head with a sarcastic laugh. “It is rather simple. A perfect individual being has no use for anyone but himself.”

“...Huh?”

“Living beings love and protect their own kind, for the survival of the species demands it. Indeed, humans naturally protect even those not of their own race, for they understand that not to do so invites their own destruction.”

“Instinct...huh?”

Nina's detached manner of speaking deflated Kojou. It was sad she could say something like that so bluntly.

“Well, that might be true,” he continued, “but, you know, isn't there a better way to put it or something?”

“Do not misunderstand, I am not criticizing. After all, life has its limits. Consequently, should a person not live life to the fullest, be it instinct or not?”

Nina gave off an impetuous laugh as she continued.

“Besides, this world's ‘ecosystem’ is the result of various species pooling their collective knowledge together in the interest of mutual survival. Put in that light, one cannot so easily declare love holds the world up, rather than instinct.”

Kojou's face grew graver as he realized what Nina was truly getting at.

“I see. Then the Wiseman...!”

Nina agreed with a nod. “The Wiseman requires neither food nor breath to live. Even if every living creature on Earth perished and this became a planet of death, he would mind not. To the contrary, ’tis all the better for him, because his sole fear is that other life-forms might evolve and a more ‘perfect’ being would emerge.”

Kojou covered his eyes with a hand.

“They sure made one messed-up thing...”

They had created a man-made “God” that desired the death of all living things other than itself so that it would have a monopoly on perfection. That made it the darkest of blights, something for which the word *evil* seemed inadequate.

“...So what’d they do with the Wiseman they’d created?” Kojou asked.

“The Wiseman, an immutable being, could not be destroyed, so they sealed him away. They extracted all his Spirit Blood to rob him of his power. That was two hundred and seventy years ago.”

“So the Wiseman’s Blood is the stuff pulled out of him back then...”

Kojou sighed listlessly as he finally grasped the situation. But he immediately realized that Nina’s explanation was still missing one crucial piece. “Hold on, Nina. So what’s with you? How can you control the Wiseman’s Blood?”

“I am the Wiseman’s jailer to prevent his resurrection. I was chosen because I just happened to be the alchemist with the greatest spiritual power at the time. If the immutable Wiseman was to be watched, his watcher needed to be immutable as well. Thus, my consciousness was transferred to the Hard Core and the Wiseman’s Blood placed under my care.”

“But that...that’s like you’re...”

The scapegoat, Kojou was about to say, but he swallowed down his words.

This was the truth of Nina Adelard—a lonely warden bound to the Spirit Blood for all eternity to stop the immutable Wiseman from reviving. He had little doubt the alchemists of the day dubbed her a “legendary alchemist” to reduce even slightly the burden of their sins.

Nor did he doubt Nina herself was painfully aware of her own position. Kojou remembered the lonely expression on her face when she had murmured, *I never sought to have a body like this.*

He didn't know what Nina, having been granted an immortal body she had not sought, was thinking when she arrived at the Demon Sanctuary and founded an abbey, but she'd no doubt gained a surrogate family in the process, letting her live her days in tranquility. At least, until the abbey was destroyed five years ago—

“Nina?”

After drifting into such thoughts for a bit, Kojou realized Nina was standing still a short distance away. It was a place where there'd no doubt been heavy combat. As she crouched forward, she was surrounded by fragments of destroyed vehicles and countless empty bullet casings. There were also faint traces of the Spirit Blood scattered about. The fragments, once frozen by the Island Guard's freezing attack, had thawed, and had begun to move once more.

However, it was not the Spirit Blood that Nina reached her hand out to, but to the human bones scattered everywhere.

Kojou went rigid with shock when he realized just how many there were.

“Those bones... They're not from Island Guard guardsmen, are they...? How could this happen...”

The bones weren't just from a few people. At a minimum, there were dozens of skeletons. In particular, there were a large number of small bones, like those of children. There was only one body that looked fresh, a large-framed adult male. Everything else looked like it'd been eaten away long ago.

“They are the children and nuns consumed by Amatsuka,” Nina explained. “I know little about the man. He was likely a decoy for the purpose of planting the Dummy Core into my body.”

Nina's eyes remained lowered in sadness as she rose back to her feet. Kojou did a double take at her words.

“Nuns...? You mean the people who lived at the abbey who died in the incident five years ago?”

Indeed, Nina muttered with a bitter smile.

“Five years ago, Amatsuka appeared before me and asked me to make him my apprentice. He had the Dummy Core with him. He said he wanted to study it, but my body was his sole objective from the beginning. He intended to steal the Wiseman’s Blood from me.”

Kojou nodded without a word. He had no intention of criticizing Nina for being deceived.

If the Dummy Core truly was able to control the Wiseman’s Blood, Nina could have freed herself from an eternity as a sacrificial lamb. To her, it must have been an irresistible temptation—

But even that fickle hope became just another part of Amatsuka’s plan to bring Wiseman back to life.

“But Amatsuka failed, huh?”

A pained smile flickered across the woman’s face.

“The Wiseman’s Blood went on a rampage when it escaped my control, slaughtering everyone at the abbey. Even Amatsuka had half his body consumed by it; he should have perished then and there. The rampage was stopped by Kanon Kanase, the girl with such rare spiritual power, and her father, Kensei Kanase, watching over Kanon from the shadows.”

“So the reason Amatsuka tried to take out Kanase and her old man is—”

“No doubt he sought to ensure father and daughter did not interfere with him a second time.”

A look of glacial anger came over Nina as she continued, “I always wondered how a man of Amatsuka’s level could have constructed the Dummy Core... But if the Wiseman had been controlling him from the very beginning, it all makes sense.”

“So Wiseman’s been using Amatsuka for his own resurrection...huh?”

Kojou remembered all the strange elements of Amatsuka’s behavior up to that point. Of course his actions had seemed inconsistent and illogical—Amatsuka hadn’t been doing them for his own benefit, but rather, to revive the

sealed-away Wiseman. That was the only thing dictating his actions, even at the cost of pieces of his own body—

And just as he thought that: “H-hey, Nina?!”

Kojou was completely thrown off at the sight of Nina undoing the tie on her school uniform’s collar.

In the first place, Nina was using Asagi’s body for this. From Kojou’s point of view, it was no different than seeing Asagi suddenly start stripping right before his eyes.

However, Nina murmured in a sober tone as she reached up to Asagi’s breasts.

“These fragments of Spirit Blood are beyond the Wiseman’s control... They are not sufficient to remake my own body, but...”

Then, she plucked out the scarlet jewel embedded in her chest.

“Nina?!”

In front of Kojou’s shocked eyes, Asagi’s body began to fall.

The gemstone that fell from her fingertips made a clear, crystalline sound as it rolled onto the ground.

4

The jumbo ferry *Phaeton* steadily continued its voyage.

Stops at the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Harbor carried numerous annoyances compared to other routes. They’d dropped off a large amount of freight, which had involved complex customs inspections and paperwork. Now that the lengthy formalities were complete, they were on their way home, and the crewmen on duty in the pilothouse were going about their tasks with a relaxed atmosphere.

The skies were clear and sported excellent visibility. The waves were comparatively gentle. The passengers aboard, being mostly high school students on a field trip, were somewhat boisterous, but nothing beyond what

they'd expected. Barring some sudden change in the weather, they'd arrive back at the mainland with few difficulties—or so they had all begun to think when they heard a guard cry out:

“Who the hell are you?!”

The other crewmen looked back.

Ferries with routes to Itogami Island were required to carry a minimum of four guards aboard. Many came from police SWAT teams or the Island Guard. They didn't carry firearms, but they were permitted to carry stun batons and bladed weapons. They were pros at rough methods with ample combat experience against demonic opponents. And it was precisely such men that were clearly terrified at that moment.

A slim man wearing a white coat had just walked into the pilothouse. However, the entry door to the pilothouse remained closed and firmly locked. The man had not opened the door to enter. Rather, he had oozed in from an air conditioning duct on the ceiling.

“Don't move. Stop right there—!”

The guards drew their weapons. The slender man coolly turned toward them and smiled.

“That's fine. Though it won't be me who stops—it will be you.”

“Wh—”

A guard wielding a stun baton tried to say something when he suddenly stopped moving—as did everything else. His entire body froze in place, changing to a color similar to rusting steel.

The alchemist, Kou Amatsuka, had reached out with his right, tentacle-like arm and transformed the guard into metal. He then transformed the two other guards into metal, and then the man at the pilot wheel, leaving only a single navigator left in the pilothouse.

The navigator's face went pale as he cried out, “Wait. Stop, this is—”

He didn't know the identity of the invader. But the sailor instinctively understood that the alchemist before his eyes was doing something more than

a simple boat hijacking. There was something far more frightening, more evil, about the man—

Kou Amatsuka smiled as he replied, “I know. This room’s full of the ship’s navigational instruments.”

That was when he turned the navigator into metal as well.

“That’s why I came to destroy it!”

Amatsuka swung his blade-like right arm around, laughing wildly. He sent the autopilot system flying off with a great hail of sparks. Next, he took out the radio and the radar, followed by the propulsion control system, turning them into pieces of junk that anyone could see were irreparable.

The previously running propulsion system shut down, perhaps due to some safety mechanism. As a result, *Phaeton* lost steam and turned into a drifting ship lost at sea.

Amatsuka grinned as he beheld that fact. But when he brought his outstretched right arm back to him, his expression darkened. His fingers, transformed into a blade, did not return to human form. The blade itself was cracked, with pieces falling off.

The liquid metal cells fused with his flesh and blood had already reached their limit.

“The degradation’s already progressed this far... Crap. The Sage works his people hard.”

Amatsuka breathed heavily as he pressed a hand to the Dummy Core embedded in his chest. He was unable to hide the look of impatience on his face.

“Well, fine. Just a little longer. Then you’ll return the other half of my body to me as promised, Wiseman!”

Amatsuka laughed like some kind of haunting spirit. He stared at the sea from the window of the pilothouse.

Here, already far from the shores of Itogami Island, there was no Fourth Primogenitor, nor any witch to oppose him. All he needed to do was provide

the “fuel.”

Yet to Amatsuka’s ears came a bizarre voice, with a bizarre laugh:

Ka-ka...

5

“—Yukina, where are you going?”

Seeing her quietly head back to their cabin, Nagisa called to her with a mystified expression.

The students on the Saikai Academy field trip were assembling in the ferry’s hall. They were scheduled to watch an educational video until dinnertime. It was a boring event as far as the students were concerned, but given that it was mandatory, it took a measure of courage to dare skip it. However, Yukina quickly said, “I forgot something. Go ahead, okay?”

Yukina ran off without waiting for Nagisa’s reply.

Upon returning to the empty cabin, Yukina pulled a long, slender bundle of fabric from the bottom of her traveling bag.

A pair of wrapped knives was inside. They were plain, practical weapons, with blades around twenty-five centimeters long and parachute cord wrapped around the handle. The silver glint of metal was their sole, faint resemblance to Snowdrift Wolf.

Yukina nestled the knives into the back of her uniform and put on her coat to hide them as best she could. She then left the cabin and headed straight for the bridge.

It wasn’t that she clearly felt something was wrong. But for some reason, she experienced deep unease. Her Sword Shaman intuition told her there was danger. It was as if the very ship itself was surrounded by some malevolent force.

As Yukina rushed up the stairs, she realized with shock that there was someone walking ahead of her.

“—Eh?!”

Heading toward the EMPLOYEES ONLY section of the ship was a schoolgirl in uniform with translucent, silver hair, looking worried as she surveyed the area. Yukina called out to her.

“Kanase?”

“Ah...” Kanon seemed frightened as she looked back.

It was not the reaction of someone spotted somewhere she ought not to be; rather, she seemed afraid of wrapping Yukina up in something. That behavior led Yukina to understand Kanon’s objective.

“...You too?”

Yukina’s question was vague, but Kanon correctly read the meaning of her words. She nodded weakly and looked straight back at Yukina with her pale blue eyes.

“It seems like something bad is surrounding the ship, so...”

I have to do something, Kanon was about to add, when Yukina stopped her with a smile.

“It’s all right. I’ll handle things from here, so could you tell Ms. Sasasaki about this?”

Kanon blinked with surprise when she saw Yukina draw a knife from her back. Finally, her eyes widened in understanding.

In the latter half of October, Kanon had seen Yukina fight as a Sword Shaman during the Faux-Angel incident. Even though she still didn’t know the finer details, she seemed to understand it was right to let Yukina handle it.

“Also, take this... It’s a protective charm.” Yukina showed her open hand to Kanon. Atop her palm was a silver-colored piece of origami shaped like a wolf. Kanon seemed doubtful as she took the origami from Yukina.

“Ah, wait!” Kanon called as Yukina began to rush up the stairs.

When Yukina stopped, Kanon looked up at her with an anxious expression as she continued to speak. She held her trembling hands together in front of her

chest. “I think I know this feeling. I’ve probably come across it before.”

“...Kanase, don’t tell me you know about the alchemist?” Yukina asked, puzzled.

Kanon was right there when the incident happened at Adelard Abbey five years prior. It wouldn’t be shocking if she’d met Amatsuka then. If so, she might know what Amatsuka had been after.

“Alchemist...?”

However, Kanon slowly shook her head.

“No, that is something far more frightening. I lost many dear friends to it. I do not want to see anything like that again... Yukina, please be careful...”

Yukina felt warmth swirling inside her chest as she listened to Kanon’s clumsy words. Kanon was worried about her. She was saying, *I don’t want to lose you*, and she was saying it because Yukina was her precious friend. Yukina, who’d only gone to the Demon Sanctuary because of her mission—

“Thank you, Kanon, sweetie. You be careful, too.”

Both nodded to each other before running separate ways.

Yukina leaped over the rope cordoning off the EMPLOYEES ONLY area and entered the bridge.

The hallway to the pilothouse was devoid of the crewmen or guards who ought to have been present. The creepy feeling prickling at her skin strengthened further.

When she reached the pilothouse, the door was still locked. But Yukina took a short breath and then spun around with a flutter of her skirt. With her high kick’s brute force, she broke down the door.

As the barricade flew open, the scene beyond it made Yukina’s expression frost over.

“This is...”

There was nothing left in the pilothouse but silence and despair.

Crewmen turned into metal sculptures lay fallen on the floor. Sparks spewed

from navigational devices. Even Yukina, not noted for her skill with machines, could plainly tell that the damage was fatal.

I have to let someone know about this, thought Yukina, but the moment she spun on her heels, a jolt of malice assaulted her from behind.

A whip-like liquid metal blade lashed out, but Yukina's knife swatted it down.

"Hiya." The upper body of the alchemist in the white coat revealed itself as it oozed down from the air conditioner duct. "Ah, it's you, Sword Shaman. What happened to your precious spear?"

A thin smile remained on his face as he flowed down onto the floor.

Yukina looked at him in shock. "Kou Amatsuka...?! How are... You should be dead...!"

Amatsuka laughed heartily. "That's right. The two of you killed me."

But Yukina immediately recovered from her shock when she realized that Amatsuka was unable to completely maintain his human form.

"Kou Amatsuka... You're..."

The edge of the young man's leer faltered.

"You really are a sharp one. Yes, what you see here is a clone. This body's much easier for moving around a ship, you see—!"

A new tentacle ripped its way out of his torso and wrapped around Yukina's knife. No doubt it meant to fuse with the knife to rob her of her weapon.

But it was Amatsuka's expression that twisted. His tentacle was unable to assimilate the knife, and was batted down by Yukina instead.

"That knife... It's made of enchanted meteoric iron? What a nuisance!"

Amatsuka ruefully spat out the statement as he collapsed backward. Amatsuka's entire body changed into viscous liquid-metal and proceeded to look like it was being sucked into the slit on the drainage pipe behind him.

"Sorry, but I'll deal with you later. There's a limit to how many clones I want destroyed!"

"Kou Amatsuka—!"

Dumbfounded, Yukina watched as Amatsuka vanished. She had no way to stop the alchemist with her current gear. She needed Snowdrift Wolf, able to nullify any kind of magical energy, but the demon-purging spear was not in Yukina's possession.

Surely Amatsuka was well aware of this, yet he hadn't even tried to finish her off. That was throwing her for a loop. Why would he just let her go like that—?

"It can't be...!" Yukina rushed out of the pilothouse, knife in hand.

In spite of being a Sword Shaman, there was a spirit medium stronger than Yukina aboard the ship. Yes—Amatsuka had been after Kanon Kanase from the beginning.

Yukina felt a chill up her spine. She might not be able to protect those precious to her. It was the first time in her life she had truly felt such a fear.

And this time, the boy who had always saved her was nowhere to be found.

Kojou Akatsuki wasn't there.

6

"They said the meeting place got changed."

At the entrance to the ship's hallway, Cindy and the class rep were waiting for Nagisa. Other student groups were there, too, starting to mill about restlessly.

"Oh? Why's that?" Nagisa asked.

Cindy shrugged her shoulders as she replied. "Dunno, but they're arguing about it a bit. All the crew are worked up for some reason."

Hmm, thought Nagisa, tilting her head. "Wonder what it is. A fire or something?"

"Geez, of course not. The siren's not on."

"Maybe we hit an iceberg?"

"No way. Since when do we get icebergs here? I mean, I'd love to see one!"

Cindy had meant to give Nagisa a serious answer, but she found the thought

so funny that her slender shoulders shook as she broke into laughter. *Hmm*, went Nagisa again, as she put a finger to her lips.

“This is a pain, though. If I don’t get word to Yukina somehow...”

“Yes. It’s so rare for that girl to forget something like this,” the class rep added in her usual clearheaded tone.

Yeah, nodded Nagisa in contemplation. “You two go ahead and take attendance, ’kay? I’ll wait here for her.”

“Understood. We’ll see you later.”

The class rep and Cindy waved as they walked off. Nagisa waved back before looking around the suddenly empty corridor. Normally, there’d be passengers about, on their way to the gift shop and the information counter, but those too were deserted. It seemed, just as Cindy had said, there was some kind of trouble happening on the ship.

Oh well, worrying doesn’t get you anywhere, Nagisa thought as she began to carelessly browse the souvenirs on the gift shop’s shelves. The Demon Sanctuary key holders and phone straps were all things you didn’t get a chance to see much of in daily life, within Itogami City itself. The rare sighting here accentuated the trip’s feeling of liberation—as well as stimulated her consumer impulses.

“Oh, this is neat. Maybe I should buy this?”

Without thinking, Nagisa grabbed up a key holder emblazoned with KOJO as soon as she set eyes upon it. It was an unusual brand to see on the shelves, and the name being very similar to *Kojou* made it super-rare. She couldn’t let something this valuable slip through her fingers.

“Ah, excuse me?”

Nagisa looked over her shoulder and raised a hand as she heard the cashier’s door open. She thought it was a shop employee. However, the slim man standing there was dressed up like a stage magician. The moment his eyes met Nagisa’s, he smiled cruelly and raised his right hand.

Then, with no forewarning, he brought his hand down, as if wiping mud from

his jacket.

“Nagisa! Get down—!” Yukina screamed.

Nagisa immediately dropped onto her butt, silver light scattering just above her head. The tentacle flying directly in front of Nagisa’s eyes was deflected by a knife.

“Y-Yukina?!”

Nagisa, not having any idea what was going on, was further thrown off by seeing Yukina grip an unsophisticated knife. But then she saw the man Yukina was squared off against and gaped, for the man’s contours crumbled away as he transformed into a monster with countless wavering appendages.

“Wh-what is that guy?!”

“Run! Quickly!!”

Yukina advanced to shield her. Nagisa was in the middle of a wide corridor—it would not be difficult to flee from the monster. However, Nagisa’s face was pale as she shook her head. She remained on her knees, rooted to the spot.

“Is it...a demon?!”

“Nagisa...!”

With horror, Yukina realized that her classmate was too panicked to move.

Nagisa had a phobia of demons. She was scared of them, in spite of residing in a Demon Sanctuary, to the point that she couldn’t even flee.

“Now, that’s rude. I’m quite human. You wound me...”

Amatsuka slowly approached the girl on the ground, as if to torment her further.

“N-no, stay away!” Nagisa’s voice trembled as she desperately tried to back away. But her slender arms had gone rigid, and merely flailed against the floor.

Yukina jabbed at the chimera-man as she searched for some line of retreat. There was no way she could fight him while shielding Nagisa. Her only option was to get Nagisa out of there—

But Yukina’s plan was smashed into tiny pieces by the emergence of a new

silhouette from a gap in the wall. A new Kou Amatsuka had emerged to seal off their retreat.

Yukina gazed in despair at the bizarre enemies, one ahead and one behind her.

“Two of them—?!”

Even with Snowdrift Wolf, Amatsuka was a powerful opponent she could not be certain of defeating. And fighting two at once, while simultaneously protecting Nagisa, was well beyond Yukina’s ability.

The two Amatsukas farther closed the distance—slowly, enjoying the girls’ despair.

“N-no! Kojou, save me! Kojou—!!” Nagisa curled up and screamed.

In that instant, incredible, barrier-breaking magical energy erupted from her entire body. The very air froze over as a white fog surrounded Nagisa, making snowflakes dance in the air like flower petals.

“What the—?!”

The second Amatsuka took a direct hit from the icy cold, his body freezing white as he fell over. He writhed and crawled on the floor, desperately trying to get away from Nagisa.

The first Amatsuka recoiled in terror and began to run. “What is she...?! What is this magical power...?! Shit!!”

Yukina stared agape as he fled. There was no opportunity to pursue him—because the change in Nagisa continued still. If the icy winds continued to swirl unabated, Yukina too was doomed.

“Nagisa—!”

Yukina, enduring the cold to the limit of her internal ritual power, desperately called out to her friend.

Nagisa, surrounded by arctic cold, calmly rose to her feet. However, the eyes that looked back at Yukina contained no shred of Nagisa. They didn’t even recognize Yukina’s existence. It was as if Nagisa had completely lost consciousness.

She was being possessed.

If the cold continued at that rate, no doubt the ship itself would be destroyed by it sooner or later. However, it was clear that this *other person* was not attacking anyone on purpose. She had merely appeared, probably emerging to save Nagisa from the crisis befalling her—

Yet that alone was spreading incredible destructiveness in all directions.

Yukina knew this phenomenon all too well: This was one of the twelve Beast Vassals that served the Fourth Primogenitor. Nagisa was displaying the same symptoms as when Kojou's Beast Vassals had slipped out of his control.

But the flow of destructive magical energy was interrupted by a woman speaking with an oddly bubbly voice.

“All right, that's enough—!”

The young woman who appeared, slicing the vortex of pure cold apart in the process, had red hair worn in a braided double bun and wore a Chinese-style dress. She vigorously darted her way toward Nagisa's flank and bopped the out-of-control girl on the head.

“Ms. Sasasaki?!”

Yukina stared aghast at the brute-force method her homeroom teacher had employed.

The red-headed woman, Misaki Sasasaki, was Yukina and Nagisa's homeroom teacher, and also the head instructor for the field trip. She was a federally certified Attack Mage and Natsuki Minamiya's junior at the academy as well. However, that even Natsuki had difficulty dealing with her spoke volumes about how not-normal Misaki was.

The being possessing Nagisa used the earthly girl's voice to ask Misaki, “You would interfere with me, monk—?”

It wasn't that “Nagisa's” rampage had ended. However, the “something” possessing her apparently recognized Misaki as someone worthy of dialogue.

Even as the cold wildly flapped about her, Misaki smiled as she replied. “Not at *aaall*. I mean, if you were serious, this whole ship would be a goner. But that

wouldn't do you any good either, would it?"

The being did not necessarily agree with the assessment, but the surge of magical energy scattering all about suddenly stopped.

"I see... Very well. I shall grant you a small measure of time..."

These words spoken, Nagisa closed her eyes. She fell to the ground like a marionette with her strings cut. It seemed the state of possession had lessened.

Yukina was still pale and breathing heavily. "Ms. Sasasaki... What was that just now...?"

Yukina's protective ward, created with ritual magic, was at its limits. Had Nagisa's rampage continued another thirty seconds or so, Yukina's entire body would have been frozen solid.

Misaki smiled wryly. "It'd violate student-teacher privacy to answer that."

The look on her face silently added, *We all have our circumstances here.*

Yukina silently sighed. Not knowing bothered her, but their attacker was the more pressing concern. "Concerning the alchemist named Kou Amatsuka—"

"I know. I ran into him before getting here, and Natsuki told me about him, too. The plan backfired... We didn't think he'd actually come after this ship."

Misaki's lips twisted as she spoke. As head teacher, she was responsible for all students' safety. No doubt the situation was affecting her even more than it was Yukina.

"The other students?"

"Shiromori is leading them to safer ground, but it's still aboard the ship. This isn't exactly someone a ward is going to stop, so it's not a good situation."

"Not at all..."

An anguished look came over Yukina. Unfortunately, Misaki was correct: Even if they got into the life rafts, escape was likely impossible. Amatsuka, able to alter the composition of his own body at will, could probably move just fine underwater. After all, even a comparatively heavy liquid-metal body would be plenty buoyant if he added a few internal air pockets.

Misaki audibly gritted her teeth. “To be honest, now that he’s split into more bodies and we don’t know where he might strike from, there’s not much I can do. Natsuki could probably manage if we at least knew what he was after...”

That was when she heard a girl’s gentle voice behind her—Kanon’s voice.

“I am most likely his target.”

“...Kanase?! Didn’t you take refuge with the others?”

Misaki lifted her face in shock. Kanon shook her head apologetically.

“I remember now, he’s the man who attacked everyone at the abbey. He said he needed powerful spirit mediums as fuel. That abbey had many in its care, you see.”

The blood drained from Yukina’s body. Amatsuka was an alchemist. There was only one thing that *fuel* could mean when coming from an alchemist’s lips.

“Fuel?! You don’t mean he intends to use you as an alchemical ingredient—?!”

“Yes. That is why the others will most likely be all right if they are not near me.”

Kanon’s words were gentle, but her face was one worn only by the determined. She turned her back on Yukina and Misaki and began running in the opposite direction of the students taking shelter.

Misaki, realizing Kanon’s intentions, yelled, “Kanase?! You’re using yourself as a decoy—?!” As she was carrying the unconscious Nagisa in her arms, she had no immediate means to stop her.

Yukina moved forward “Ms. Sasasaki, you care for Akatsuki. I’ll go after Kanase!”

“Ah...?! Wait, don’t you run off, too—!”

Yukina disregarded her teacher’s voice and headed toward the bow of the ship.

Kanon’s decision was likely correct. If Amatsuka was after a powerful spiritualist, he’d never overlook two top-class ones—one a part of the Aldegian

royal family, and the other a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. At the very least, the other students ought to be safe during the time Yukina and Kanon served as decoys.

But they could not continue to flee inside a cramped ship forever. Sooner or later, Amatsuka would catch up with them. They had to find a way to defeat him before that happened.

But what to do—?

7

Scarlet droplets gathered on the gemstone that had fallen to the ground. Defying gravity, they slowly rose and gradually took the shape of a human being. She had glossy black hair, brown skin, and ornate facial features that seemed very familiar—

The girl with the same face as Asagi made a satisfied murmur—but with Nina's voice.

"Indeed, well. This is how it is?"

Kojou stood in shock as he compared one Asagi to the other. For whatever reason, Nina had gathered together the Wiseman's Blood to restore herself but still looked like Asagi. Her clothes were even the same Saikai Academy uniform as before.

Looking between the twin faces, he felt like he was looking at a color-palette-swapped character in a fighting game. *I'm so glad the original Asagi's still out cold*, thought Kojou with a heavy sigh.

"So you're back up and at 'em, Nina? Ah... Why do you look like Asagi, though?" he asked.

Nina rotated both arms around, testing her range of motion as she spoke. "Suddenly altering the length of my arms and legs would throw my balance all off. Furthermore, there was not enough 'blood' to restore the full bounty of my proper body. It was all I could manage in her meager physique."

Kojou scowled and rebutted her for the sake of his fainted friend's honor.

“Hey, don’t say meager. Man, you’re rude... And, I mean, Asagi has better style anyway. I don’t know how glamorous you were before, but...”

As he spoke, Nina seemed to take that as a challenge. She *hmp*ed, proudly tossing her chin out to the side. “Indeed, I am incredible. How about I restore myself just a little, like...this?”

As Nina spoke, her breasts suddenly grew, nearly doubling in size. The shirt of her uniform bulged right up to the breaking point, sending one button popping out and flying.

Kojou, staring with surprise as Nina purposefully made her bust sway, asked, “...What was someone like *you* doing in a convent?”

Nina smiled warmly for once. “It was not that I had any use for a convent, *per se*. However, it was a convenient means of caring for spiritualists with nowhere else to go. I knew all too well that selfish alchemists and the like would view their kind as ideal fuel.”

“Nina...” Kojou stared at the dark-skinned girl in surprise.

She herself had been unhappily sacrificed because of her spiritual strength two hundred and seventy years earlier. That was why she was using the convent to protect those children under her own name—so that no one should have to suffer the same fate.

But the Wiseman and Amatsuka had conspired to crush her hopes under their feet.

Kojou silently clenched his fists. He was coming to realize that he felt a powerful anger toward the Wiseman, a remorseless, man-made god crushing all other living beings underfoot to protect its own existence. He was certain in his own mind that such a being could not be allowed to exist.

Kojou’s fists were still clenched when he heard a lisping voice from behind Nina.

“Oh, so you are Nina Adelard?”

It was Natsuki Minamiya, emerging from a ripple in thin air, wearing an elaborate dress that was very out of place. As was the rest of her; it was just like

her to show up at the oddest moments.

“Natsuki?!” Kojou blurted, earning him a silent pounding. Kojou, smacked hard in the face with her parasol, recoiled as he pressed his hands to his face. Then, Natsuki gave Nina—and her breasts—a sullen glare.

“Although I am wondering why the Great Alchemist of Yore has Aiba’s face and fake tits on her. Kojou Akatsuki. Is this a fetish of yours?”

“*No. Way.* And it’s not like this is the place to say that—”

Natsuki ignored Kojou and addressed Nina. “I have heard most of the story concerning Kou Amatsuka’s true nature from Kensei Kanase, and yours as well, Nina Adelard.”

Nina hummed and flippantly replied, “Let us leave troublesome talk for later, Natsuki. Please search for Amatsuka’s whereabouts first. The Wiseman he is attempting to resurrect is rather...bad. If we do not find him as soon as possible...”

Kojou picked up the still-unconscious Asagi. Natsuki gave a small snort.

“I agree we have no time for pleasantries. I know with virtual certainty where Amatsuka is. The ferry’s communications equipment has been destroyed, so I am thin on the details, but—”

Natsuki’s casually spoken words made Kojou’s face twitch. “Ferry...? Wait, what are you talking ab—you can’t mean?!”

Natsuki’s reply was blunt. “The ferry departing for Tokyo at seven this morning, with the Saikai Academy students aboard as scheduled.”

Kojou weakly shook his head. “No...way. Then Nagisa, Yukina, and the others...”

Nina interrupted sullenly, “They might...be the very reason why.”

“Wh...what?!”

“The production of the Wiseman required a vast amount of precious metals, and spiritualists as the fuel. Do you think it strange that the Wiseman has not arranged to regain his strength just after his resurrection?”

Kojou subconsciously shuddered. “I see. Kanase’s on that ferry, too...!”

At the very least, Amatsuka was well aware that Kanon was a top-class spiritualist, even by Itogami Island standards. On the one hand, she was an obstacle to the Wiseman’s resurrection, but on the other, the necessary fuel to bring the complete resurrection about.

And Nina gravely nodded as she added, “Amatsuka’s target may not be her alone. That Yukina girl is a superior spirit medium as well, yes?”

Kojou’s face twisted in impatience. “This is bad... Himeragi doesn’t have Snowdrift Wolf with her!”

Blows would do nothing against Amatsuka. Ritual magic probably wouldn’t work either. No matter how skilled a Sword Shaman she might be, Yukina had no way to defeat Amatsuka at present. It wasn’t even certain that she could defend herself—

Kojou rushed toward Natsuki, as if ready to grab her. “Natsuki, can you jump us as far as the ship?”

With an annoyed look, Natsuki used her parasol to brush him aside. “You would go to save her?”

“Damn right. Himeragi’s on that ship! And Nagisa, and a whole lot of other people I know!”

“I cannot. It is too far for me. Spatial control magic does not reduce the distance itself to zero; it reduces the transit time to zero. For each second of travel time saved, my body feels a burden equal to having traveled that distance on foot. I can leap a few kilometers at most.”

Kojou made a low, agonized groan. “Magic can’t do everything, I guess. Then get me a plane or a helicopter. That can fly me in close, right?”

“I cannot do that either.”

Natsuki’s indifferent tone sent Kojou into a frustrated growl as blood rushed to his head. “Well, why not?!”

“By treaty, the Island Guard does not possess an air force. It was established to maintain law and order within the Demon Sanctuary... More to the point, it is

to prevent coups. If the Island Guard were to join forces with the demons in Itogami City, it would present a grave threat to the government.”

“The hell is that all about?!”

The reasoning, albeit to a fault, sent Kojou into a rage without a target. At any rate, given there was no aircraft available with a far enough flight range, there wasn’t a whole lot he could do.

“Well, what about borrowing a civilian plane...?! Don’t tell me we can’t do that either?!”

“No, I came to you with that intention from the start. I’ve already arranged an aircraft. Or rather, a good samaritan kindly made a craft available.”

Natsuki’s unemotional explanation gave Kojou such a sense of relief that his knees almost gave out. He wouldn’t complain no matter how much of a bucket of bolts the plane was. If it could fly him to the ferry at max speed, he didn’t care if the thing crashed and burned after the fact.

Nina forcefully wedged herself into their conversation. “I am going with him. No complaints, Natsuki Minamiya?”

Natsuki nodded once and exhaled. “It sounds like a plan, Fake Tits. I was a bit nervous about the prospect of sending Akatsuki alone.”

“...Me, alone? What, you’re not coming along, Natsuki?” Kojou asked in a dubious tone.

Natsuki looked up at him and nodded frankly. “We’ll follow you by helicopter. It is not my preference, but I can’t think of anyone else besides the two of you who could endure flying in *that*.”

“What do you mean, flying in ‘*that*’...?”

The ominous ring of Natsuki’s word made Kojou hesitate instinctively. However, the woman made the air twist as she opened a gate, and seamlessly brushed Kojou off as she teleported the two.

Kojou felt an uneasy floating sensation for a moment, something like being seasick, before he appeared in an unfamiliar place. With one sweep of his head, he saw a runway built on top of a Gigafloat stretching before his eyes. A horde

of helicopters and tour planes was parked there. He was apparently right in the middle of Itogami Island's central airport.

But upon seeing one particular aircraft stationed in one particular spot, Kojou did a sudden double take.

"Huh...?!"

It was a shockingly huge craft. It was a ship built like a spindled balloon with a hull over five hundred meters long. The craft, large enough to carry a good couple-thousand people, was brimming with countless machine gun turrets. The hull's thick armored shell, built with a special alloy, made the words *flying fortress* seem apt.

It was an armored military airship. The glacier-like pearl blue armor was embellished with golden edges. And the hull was emblazoned with the image of a Valkyrie wielding a great sword.

Kojou knew that emblem. It was the emblem of a Northern Europe nation, the Kingdom of Aldegia.

8

"The hell? An...*airship*?"

Kojou looked up at the splendid vessel, a little beside himself as he spoke.

Gazing at the airship up close made its size seem beyond comprehension. Were it not hovering slightly off the ground, one would think of it as an ornate castle.

As the vampire stood rooted to the spot, he heard an amused, elegant voice from a speaker close by. He knew that voice, and its aristocratic tone that effortlessly projected class—

"This is the armored airship Böðvildr, the pride of the Kingdom of Aldegia."

"That voice...?! La Folia?!"

"I am pleased that you remember me. It has been a while, Kojou."

A large monitor hanging down from the airship displayed a beautiful, silver-

haired girl. She greatly resembled Kanon Kanase, but she bore an overwhelming majesty that Kanon simply didn't have.

Princess La Folia Rihavein wore a blazer with gold embroidery that resembled a ceremonial military uniform. She was the princess of the Kingdom of Aldegia —“The Second Coming of Freya.”

Even an image sent by satellite signal did little to diminish her presence. She was graced with an overwhelming aura that none but the finest artists could do justice to.

And just brushing against that aura made Kojou break out in a cold sweat.

Secretly, he had a very difficult time dealing with the wise and clever princess. She was a sharp cookie, and Kojou never knew what the hell she was thinking. In a different way than Natsuki, the world seemed to revolve around her.

And with La Folia attracting such attention, there were three people down from the ship standing in her shadow. It was a group of three women unfamiliar to him, wearing blazers like that of La Folia, but without embroidery as extravagant as the princess's. These were ordinary, practical military uniforms, and the women's short-cut silver hair added to the impression that they were competent soldiers.

“And you are—”

“I am Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina of the Aldegian Knights of the Second Coming. I protect Her Highness the Royal Sister by the command of Princess La Folia.”

“The Royal Sister?”

For a moment, Kojou wasn't sure who she was talking about, but he remembered after a little thought. Kanon Kanase was an illegitimate child of the former king of Aldegia. In other words, she was the half sister of the sitting king of Aldegia. That actually made her Princess La Folia's aunt.

“Protecting Kanon, huh? Wait, is that why you're here on the island...?”

The princess's voice lowered just a little. Apparently the airship's speaker was directional, meaning that Kojou and the others were the only ones hearing her

voice.

“Even if she has abandoned her place in the royal line of succession, Kanon is still a part of the Aldegian royal family. There was no guarantee someone would not emerge to use her position and capabilities for ill.”

Kojou raised an eyebrow. “Kanon hasn’t said one word about this, though?”

Even when Kanon was at school, there were no signs of a knight protecting her. It was the polar opposite of how Yukina hovered over Kojou’s life 24-7.

“Justina is a talented Interceptor Knight. She is there to quietly eliminate threats to Kanon from the shadows, not to interfere in her daily life. Justina’s family is Japanese and she is quite a big fan of ninjas.”

“...Ninjas?”

When Kojou shot Justina a dubious look, she calmly pressed both palms together before her. She lowered her head like one did when making an earnest request.

“Nin! The Japanese Ninja, faithfully serving her master, hiding in the shadows, seeking neither fame nor fortune, is the very essence of a knight. I have employed this mission as an opportunity to study further so that I may increase my mastery of chivalry.”

“R-right. Well, that’s great.”

Kojou, taken aback by the woman’s fervor, gave a vague, perfunctory reply. He belatedly noticed that La Folia’s image displayed on the monitor looked like she was striving hard not to laugh.

She set this up on purpose, didn’t she? Kojou finally realized. That scheming princess was no doubt having a blast at how seriously Justina was taking this... And who greeted people with *nin* in real life, anyway...?

Dragging things back to the subject at hand, Kojou asked, “You mean just like Amatsuka this time around...”

La Folia nodded. *“I grasped the situation rather early on. I was relying on Attack Mage Minamiya to protect Kanon because, unfortunately, we cannot intervene outside of the Demon Sanctuary.”*

These words spoken, the princess lowered her eyes in dismay. “*And so, Kojou, I wish to borrow your strength.*”

Kojou made a small *heh* and shot the princess a smile. “It’s me who’s borrowing yours here, I think?”

Minor personality quirks aside, La Folia’s desire to rescue Kanon was absolutely genuine. Kojou was truly grateful for her aid in his hour of need. Kojou followed up, “So we can ride on this airship till we get to Kanon and the others?”

“No. *Böðvildr* would take over fifteen minutes to arrive at their present coordinates. That is too slow, and we do not have a moment to spare... Therefore, you will use *this*.”

“*This...?*” Kojou murmured with a strong feeling of dread.

Just as he looked, the airship opened a weapon rack, from which a strange piece of equipment emerged. It was an armored box that greatly resembled a ship-borne missile launcher...

“When you say *this*, you don’t mean...the thing that’s sitting on that launcher?”

The princess stated with an aloof tone, “This is *Floaty*, a prototype aircraft of the Knights of the Second Coming.”

Kojou furiously ran his hands through his hair.

“Wait a minute. That doesn’t look like any plane to me! That’s a *cruise missile*!”

The princess smiled firmly as she declared, “It is a prototype aircraft. Normally, it is employed as an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, but we have removed the surveillance equipment so that we can cram...ah, board a person onto it. Its cruising speed is three thousand four hundred kilometers per hour. According to our calculations, it will impact, ah, arrive at its destination in one hundred and fifty seconds.”

“Impact?! You said *impact*, didn’t you?! You took it back, but you said *impact* on purpose!!”

Kojou's voice boomed in indignation. Three thousand four hundred kilometers per hour amounted to Mach 2.8. There weren't even many jet fighters that could reach that kind of speed. It was a straight-up supersonic cruise missile.

As Kojou wavered, Natsuki punted his back from behind, as if to spur him on. "Hurry up already, there's no time. Are you going to let the Princess's goodwill go to waste?"

"I think you're mistaking ill will for goodwill, dammit...!"

Kojou clenched his teeth in annoyance. Ignoring him, Nina fawned over the thing, saying, *Modern aircraft are simply incredible!* like an old woman. No doubt an immutable liquid metal life-form would hardly be inconvenienced by being crammed into the missile. Kojou apparently had no recourse but to harden his resolve.

At the very, very end, La Folia shot him an earnest look. "*Kanon is in your hands, Kojou.*"

Kojou gave her pale blue eyes a strained smile, but answered that gaze with a strong, silent nod. He turned and gave Asagi, whom he still had in his arms, to Natsuki.

"Okay then. Natsuki, sorry, but could you get her home?"

The woman took Asagi into her own arms, her beautiful face twisting in dismay. "Goodness. You have a lot of guts presenting your hooky partner to your teacher like this."

Afterward, Kojou walked toward the prototype aircraft. Riding in a missile wasn't his first choice, but it sure beat letting Yukina and the others die while he sat back and watched.

Then, just as Kojou was about to put his foot on the airship's gangplank, an unexpected voice called out to him. It was the voice of a cat—the familiar of Yukina's master that had been at the antique shop.

"Professor Kitty?!" Kojou shifted his gaze in the direction of the voice.

A girl wearing the face of Sayaka Kirasaka was getting out of the shuttle that

had brought her to the parking spot. She was wearing that ridiculously exposing maid outfit, with the black cat sitting on her shoulder—

And a black guitar case slung over her back.

“Oh, Professor Kitty, you fixed your *shikigami*, too? That was fast.” Kojou approached without warning and moved to touch the girl’s shoulder. But just as he did so, she shuddered and recoiled. As a result, Kojou’s hand slipped past its intended target, grabbing hold of the girl’s nearest breast instead.

“Hya?!”

“Eh?!”

Kojou immediately froze. The shriek, and the bounciness of her flesh, seemed too real to be a *shikigami*. The girl’s face seemed to grow redder with each passing moment. Indeed, with her eyebrows raised high, raw bloodlust and rage swirled within her eyes—

“H-how long are you going to touch me?! You molester! Pervert! Pervogenitor!”

With a windup, cross-body uppercut, she walloped Kojou’s chin, scrambling his brains. Kojou groaned in acute pain as he staggered backward. “Kirasaka?! Wait, you’re the real one?!”

“Something wrong with that?!”

Sayaka had tears in her eyes as she continued to pummel Kojou. He’d thought it was the *shikigami* that resembled Sayaka, but this time the real Sayaka was present.

So when Professor Kitty had declared that recreating the *shikigami* would take some time, what she meant by that was, instead of dispatching a *shikigami* from the mainland, she was sending the real thing instead. *You should’ve been more specific*, Kojou thought, as he glared at the cat.

But the black cat only glanced at the horseplay. “Oh, settle down, Sayaka. It didn’t hurt anything. Why get all worked up over just having your boobs fondled? You let him suck on them before, didn’t you?”

“I-I did not *let* him suck on them!”

“Hey, don’t say stuff that’s gonna get taken the wrong way, you stray!”

Both Sayaka and Kojou objected in an oddly similar fashion. Then, when Sayaka finally calmed down a bit and regained her senses to some degree, she slid the guitar case off her back and handed it to Kojou.

“Here you go.”

Kojou’s eyes shone as he felt the familiar weight of the case. “Snowdrift Wolf...!”

The black cat with the golden eyes stared at Kojou. “Please hand that to Yukina.”

Kojou silently nodded in reply, then shifted his attention. “Nina!”

“Just so.”

Kojou, taking the Great Alchemist of Yore with him, boarded the armored airship.

The cruise missile locked into the launcher was aimed at the blue, twinkling horizon. No doubt Yukina and the others were fighting that very moment on the ferry beyond that horizon.

Kojou crawled into the cramped warhead of the cruise missile.

“We’re counting on you, Justina!”

In apparent respect for Kojou, the silver-haired knight put her palms together, murmuring a single word in reply.

“*Nin!*”



CHAPTER FIVE THE UNDINE

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THE UNDINE

1

At the bow of the ferry, Kanon Kanase stood alone.

Behind her were the pale sky and the azure ocean, stretching as far as the eye could see. Her silver hair danced under the sun's gaze, turning nearly transparent.

It was a beautiful scene worthy of a painting, but Kanon had no time to appreciate it, for the alchemist in the white coat was standing on the deck, cornering her.

Amatsuka spread both arms and smiled innocently as he said, "Our game of tag is at an end."

He wore a checkered outfit that made him look like a stage magician. And his left hand was gripping a golden skull.

Kanon stepped backward as if trying to get away. However, her slender waist immediately bumped against the railing. There was nothing on the other side of the barrier save the ocean's surface. There was nowhere left to run.

Even so, the alchemist shook his head, gazing at the girl in obvious admiration.

"A wise decision. Here, none of the other passengers will be involved, and there is no way for me to conceal my approach. You can even leap down to the ocean and kill yourself if the mood strikes you. Well, not that it would do you any good."

Amatsuka's sneer was cruel.



“You are not the only fuel available—the Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency is here, and a few others as well. Your death will change nothing. Besides, once the Wiseman is resurrected, he’ll kill all of you anyway, so don’t hate me, okay?”

Amatsuka’s right hand changed into a silver blade.

A single swing would end Kanon’s life in an instant. However, Amatsuka had no intention of killing her just yet; his objective was to offer her as fuel to the Wiseman instead. She would be infused with his blood while still alive; once she became part of the liquid metal, all of her spiritual power would be extracted until she was reduced to a skeleton, just like the children at the convent long ago—

Kanon knew this full well, and yet, her eyes never wavered as she gazed at Amatsuka. It was as if she pitied him. “You still cannot remember, can you?” she asked, out of the blue.

Amatsuka’s expression trembled very slightly.

“...What?”

“I remember you. Also, I remember back when everyone at the abbey was killed.”

Kanon stared straight at Amatsuka. Her expression exhibited both determination and pity—but nothing else.

“You were a sad person,” she continued. “You didn’t realize that you had been deceived.”

“What are you talking about?” Amatsuka asked, prickling.

His voice was clearly shaken.

Kanon calmly brushed her hair off her cheek. Her gaze seemed to be cowing Amatsuka into silence.

“What did you want the Wiseman to do in exchange for his resurrection?”

“That’s obvious. I want to be human again. I want him to revive the half of my body that *he* ate! I wouldn’t do a single thing he says if not for that!”

Amatsuka ripped apart the collar of his white coat as he spoke. In so doing, he exposed to her how the quicksilver had ghoulishly subsumed the right side of his body.

Yet, even that did not make Kanon's expression waver. Gently, she asked, "Tell me this, then. Who are you...?"

"Ah?"

"If you were a human being before, surely you have memories of that time. When were you born? Where? What kind of life did you live...?"

When Kanon finished asking her questions, a brief pause settled between them.

Amatsuka made no reply. He *couldn't* reply. The very fact that he could not was backing him into a corner of his own. Indeed, he seemed to have to force his next words out.

"Shut up...Kanon Kanase..."

But the girl only shook her head. "The Wiseman shall not grant your wish, for you were never a human being to begin with. You are merely something the Wiseman created for the sake of his own resurrection—"

"SHUT UUUUUUP!!"

Amatsuka roared with rage. His bladed right arm thrust forward, aimed at Kanon's heart. It was a remorseless blow. Kanon made no move to evade it.

She was fully resigned to her own death—until a light suddenly flowed out from her chest. As she watched, it grew into a silver wolf that beat away Amatsuka's right arm.

"A *shikigami*—?!"

The tentacle branching off the alchemist's arm beat down on the silver wolf from every direction, ripping it to shreds. The *shikigami* Yukina had given to Kanon under the guise of a charm soon reverted to a paper cutout.

Amatsuka breathed raggedly as he lashed out with his whip-like arm to attack Kanon once more. But a new silhouette landed in front of Kanon and beat it away.

The silhouette—a girl—stood poised with a knife in each hand, shielding Kanon as she glared at Amatsuka.

“Yukina...,” Kanon breathed.

The girl sighed with relief when she saw Kanon was safe. “I’m glad I made it in time.”

The *shikigami* Yukina had given to Kanon under the guise of a charm had not been solely to protect her. It also functioned as a transmitter, informing the caster—Yukina—of Kanon’s location.

Amatsuka scratched at his forehead as he laughed roughly. “And so you interfere with me again, Sword Shaman... Oh well, it saves me the trouble of looking for you.”

A look of nervousness and fright came over Yukina’s eyes.

The metal deck swayed and melted away, and countless shadows emerged to surround Yukina and Kanon. They were all slender men wearing white coats—clones of Kou Amatsuka. Due to the unreasonable amount of division and growth, not a single one was able to maintain a perfect human form. But that only served to make them all the more frightening.

Amatsuka’s voice was triumphant. “Certainly those knives are troublesome, but I can fuse with anything I can get my hands on. You have no chance of victory, nor anywhere to run.”

She was forced to accept that he spoke the truth. They were backed into a corner of the deck with only the ocean behind them. Yukina and Kanon had nowhere to run, nor any weapon that could oppose the man.

They could yearn for rescue, but this was the middle of the sea. Surely there was no means of arriving all the way to the ship in the short time it would take Amatsuka to dispose of them.

Surely nothing so convenient existed in that world—

“Huh?!”

But the word Yukina let slip in her moment of crisis sounded dumbfounded, and oddly cute.

The corner of Yukina's vision was displaying an unbelievable sight.

"What in the...?"

Seeing Yukina's surprised gaze, Amatsuka looked behind him. Then he, too, saw it: a gray, flying object skimming the surface of the sea, a wake of steam trailing behind it. The weapon was pitiless, on a collision course mercilessly aimed right at the ferry—

"A cruise missile?! That's insane?!"

By the time he'd figured it out, it was too late. *Floaty*, prototype aircraft of the Kingdom of Aldegia, had a cruise speed of Mach 2.8. By the time it entered visible range, it had all but already arrived.

But they were not immediately assailed by the impact they expected.

The moment they thought the cruise missile would hit them dead-on, it transformed into silvery mist, grazing just past the ferry's hull. When the missile finally re-materialized, it slammed into the sea somewhere well-removed from the ferry, shattering into pieces and sinking. All that remained was the thick mist filling up their fields of vision—

Bathed in the powerful magical surge permeating the air, Yukina shouted: "That mist...?!" It can't be?!"

It was no ordinary mist enveloping the ferry. A giant, non-corporeal, shelled beast floated up amid the dense fog.

This was one of the twelve Beast Vassals that served the Fourth Primogenitor. The thick, destructive fog was the creation of Natra Cinereus, the Fourth Beast Vassal, able to transform any kind of solid matter into mist.

A dull *thud* reached their ears as the ferry's hull trembled like a leaf.

Then the sonic boom generated by the cruise missile assailed them a moment later.

When that impact faded away, there was a new silhouette appearing upon the deck of the ferry. The thick, silver particulate collected together and materialized into a teenage boy wearing a parka and a girl with bronzed skin in a school uniform.

The teenage boy was wobbly as he stood up, wiping the blood flowing down his forehead.

“—Ow... Aw, crap, screwed up the landing a bit...”

The girl stared at him, dumbfounded, and pronounced, “You are quite a careless man. I would be dead, ’twere I not immortal.”

“Couldn’t be helped, geez. We got spat out at thirty-four hundred kilometers per hour there. I thought we’d be pancakes.”

As Yukina stood rooted to the spot and stared, the teenage boy let out a ferocious laugh. “Well, thanks to all that, looks like we made it in time...!”

“Senpai...” Yukina seemed unable to believe the sight of Kojou Akatsuki in her wide-open eyes.

Then, wiping tears from their corners, she sprinted toward Kojou.

2

“Huh?!”

Yukina, half in tears, leaped right into Kojou’s chest.

With both hands, she was still firmly gripping the knife. The expression on Kojou’s face froze stiff when that sunk in.

“What on Earth were you thinking, senpai?! How could you do something so dangerous—!”

Yukina repeatedly slammed her fist against Kojou’s chest. The action itself was rather endearing, but her hand around the grip of a blade made the square blows quite painful.

Gbah! Kojou gasped as the air was forced out of his lungs, and he somehow managed to get ahold of Yukina’s wrist.

“Ain’t it obvious?! I came to save you and the others!!”

“I didn’t ask you to do any such thing!”

Kojou groaned as Yukina rejected his benevolence. It was a bit deflating.

“So then you put yourself in danger, too?!” she continued. “And what kind of person comes to the rescue charging in with a missile?!”

“Er... It’s not a missile, it’s apparently a prototype aircraft...technically.”

“Don’t tell me an easily disprovable lie like a little child!”

“Um, no, it ah, it really is an air—”

Yukina fiercely raised her eyebrows as she glared at Kojou. Kojou, thoroughly at a loss, looked up at the sky.

“Could you save your quarrels for later? Kanon seems quite beside herself.” From Nina’s tone of voice, her annoyance was clear as day.

Yukina gave the woman a guarded look. It wasn’t the first time they’d met, but it was the first time the two were properly exchanging words. “And this is...?”

“The great alchemist, Nina Adelard,” Kojou introduced. “She’s the proper owner, or caretaker you could say, of the Wiseman’s Blood.”

Indeed, nodded Nina, quite full of herself.

But Yukina was staring straight at the woman’s unnaturally large breasts.

“...Why does she look like Asagi? And what’s with that chest...?”

Upon hearing Yukina’s strangely sullen question, Kojou awkwardly replied, “There’s some pretty deep circumstances involved. Don’t worry about it.”

“Akatsuki!”

Kanon had let out a desperate shout.

Having recovered from the missile’s sonic boom, Amatsuka glared at Kojou and the others with a look of naked rage.

Kojou took the guitar case off his back and shoved it into Yukina’s hands. “Himeragi!”

Yukina’s eyes widened in surprise. “That case...!”

“Special delivery from Professor Kitty and Kirasaka.”

“From Master and Sayaka—?!”

As Kojou smiled back and nodded, Yukina drew her silver armament from the luggage. The blade slid out from the grip, its side blades deploying to the left and right. The spear had elongated into its familiar form.

All at once, the Amatsuka clones surrounding Kojou and the others launched their tentacle attacks en masse. The elongated strands poured in from all directions. However, Yukina no longer felt a need to be hasty. The outcome of the battle had been decided the moment Kojou had arrived with her spear.

“Snowdrift Wolf!”

As Yukina shouted its name, the silver spear emitted a pale glow. This was the radiance of the Divine Oscillation Effect, which nullified all magical energy and could rend any barrier.

With ease, she severed the metallic tentacles born from alchemy, returning them to their proper, original form—in other words, mere piles of metal.

Kojou summoned a Beast Vassal in turn:

“C’mon over, Al-Meissa Mercury!”

It was a two-headed dragon with flickering, quicksilver scales. This was the Dimension Eater, able to consume space from any dimension. It consumed one supposedly immutable Amatsuka clone after another, erasing them from the world.

Kojou pretended not to notice how parts of the deck were being consumed in the process. It was futile to hope for surgical control of the super-powered Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor. As long as the ship didn’t sink, it was good enough.

With all his clones soon lost, Amatsuka’s face twisted in abject humiliation. “Erg...!”

It was Nina who stepped before him. Desolately gazing down at the man she once called an apprentice, she declared in a cruel yet gentle voice: “Stop this, Kou Amatsuka. Hand over the Wiseman’s remains, now.”

Amatsuka gripped a golden skull as he let out a halting voice.

“Nina Adelard...”

Nina's gaze fell to his chest, and the black stone embedded within. "You gradually realized it, did you not? You are a homunculus created by vestiges of the Wiseman's Spirit Blood. He implanted your craving to 'restore' your humanity, but he is merely using you."

Amatsuka glared up at Nina with bitter hatred in his eyes. "So even you... would say such a thing, Master..."

However, Nina gently accepted Amatsuka's gaze. "It is not the body that decides whether someone is a person. It is whether you have a soul. Both I and the vampire there have lost our human bodies, yet we both struggle to live as *people*. There is no reason whatsoever for you to obey Wiseman."

"Reason... My reason... To obey..."

Drained of energy, Amatsuka let the golden skull fall from his hand. It made a dull metallic echo as it rolled onto the deck, rattling.

"Ka...ka-ka...ka-ka-ka-ka-ka..."

And then, the vibration began to emit a bizarre sound that resembled laughter.

Nina suspiciously raised an eyebrow. Amatsuka stared at the skull, completely dumbfounded.

Kojou and the others had no idea what was happening. All they sensed was the malevolent aura that accompanied the skull's eerie laughter.

Then, they clearly heard the skull speak of its own volition:

"Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka... It is too late, Imperfect Ones."

It was an eerie voice that seemed to be speaking directly into their minds.

"...Wiseman?!" Nina shouted, looking around the area in alarm.

Kojou kept the two-headed dragon materialized as he stepped in front of her, brushing her aside. "Nina, is that golden skull the Wiseman?! If so, I'll—"

Just when Kojou was going to order his Beast Vassal to attack, annihilating it and the very space with it, Kojou realized: The golden skull's open jaw was drawing in an incredible level of energy.

“—Regulus Aurum!”

Kojou summoned his Vassal on instinct. The giant lion, enveloped by lightning, materialized in front of Kojou and the others at around the same time the golden skull emitted a bright beam. It seared their vision white, and an explosion shook the entire ship.

The air distorted so fast and hard that it physically hurt; it was like being next to a lightning-bolt strike. However, Kojou and the others were unharmed. The damage to the ferry was also rather light—but only because the lightning lion had deflected the torrent of energy.

Yet, the raw power of the golden skull’s attack remained, evident from the heat and the stench of ozone fresh in the air.

“Senpai...! That’s...?!”

“The heavy metal particle cannon...?! Shit...!”

The golden skull’s attack was identical to the assault on the Itogami Island pier: a beam weapon that sucked in a vast amount of energy to spew out energized heavy metal particles. Since it wasn’t a magical attack, even Yukina’s spear couldn’t fend it off.

But fortunately, Kojou’s Regulus Aurum was a Beast Vassal that controlled vast amounts of electrical energy in its own right. The lightning lion had deflected and neutralized the particle beam with an electromagnetic field.

However, put another way, it took a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor to block the Wiseman’s attack. It was a monster entirely worthy of the man-made “God” moniker, but...

Like an afterthought, Nina let out a murmur:

“No...”

She shot Kojou a bewildered look. “No, Kojou. That is not the Wiseman! If that is the Wiseman, then where is the Wiseman’s Blood?!”

“—Aah?! ”

Kojou stared in shock at the little skull that had rolled onto the deck. It was just a skull; it was merely one piece of the Wiseman’s body. It didn’t have a

single piece of the living liquid metal that constituted the body of the man-made “God.”

Yukina shifted her gaze to her own feet. “It can’t be!”

Her focus was not at the damaged hull of the ferry, but farther beneath them

—

“The Wiseman targeted this ship not only because Kanon and I were on it, but because...!”

Nina let out a cry of horror. “*Seawater?!!*”

Seeing their reactions, Kojou belatedly remembered something. He’d heard it before from somewhere: The ocean’s water had precious metals like gold and uranium in it. Some said there were hundreds of thousands or even millions of tons in total, enough to build your own artificial island either way. That was why the Wiseman had set his sights upon the sea.

The precious metals in seawater amounted to trace levels; no technology existed to efficiently extract them, so they stayed in the ocean. But if the magical creature could make use of alchemy through a large enough amount of its energy—

Hiding in the bowels of the ship, it had probably assembled a rather large amount of precious metals in just the time since the ship had left Itogami Island. The Wiseman probably had more than enough raw resources to make a complete comeback.

“Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka— O World, become part of my perfection!”

Piercing through the ferry’s hull, a gigantic mass of Wiseman’s Blood rose from within the sea. It swallowed the golden skull that had fallen upon the deck and finally took a completely humanoid form: a giant, some six or seven meters in height—

“Like hell you wiiiiill!” yelled Kojou.

He commanded his Beast Vassal to attack right when the golden giant unleashed a beam of light—

And enveloped in the incredible explosion that followed, the hull of the ferry

was easily ripped into two.

3

“U...gh...”

Enveloped by soft, crimson fluid, Yukina finally regained consciousness.

Opening her eyes, she saw the raw edge of the wrecked hull alongside the blue sky. Apparently, she’d fallen into the ship from the edge and blacked out.

Debris bobbed all around, and the wrecked hull was still giving off considerable heat.

She’d only been out of it for two or three minutes since the explosion, which should have been a fairly short length of time.

And yet, the situation around her had completely changed.

About one-fourth of the ship had been torn away from the bow. The students taking shelter at the boat’s stern were likely safe for now, but the ship would inevitably sink.

Furthermore, the question of what had happened to the Wiseman tugged at her mind, as well as Kojou, who’d clashed with the creature head-on—

Yukina gasped and sat up. “Senpai—!”

Her five senses were operating normally, her body was virtually without a scratch, and she was still firmly gripping her silver spear. She’d fallen some seven or eight meters from the deck, but the crimson fluid had apparently served to cushion her fall.

Yukina was bewildered, until she realized just what the fluid was. “This is the Wiseman’s Blood...? Ah, Miss Nina?”

Likely, Nina had returned her own body to liquid metal the instant Kojou and the creature had clashed, in order to protect Yukina and the others. Yukina was safe as a result.

However, Nina made no reply to her call. That gave Yukina pause.

Also, Kanon was lying directly beside Yukina, unconscious. “Oh, Kanon?! I’m so relieved...”

Kanon had no notable external injuries. Like Yukina, she’d simply blacked out from the shock of the explosion. Confirming that there were no irregularities with Kanon’s breathing, Yukina put a hand to her chest in relief.

But the next moment, Yukina’s relief suddenly inverted to complete despair.

“Sen...pai?”

From behind, she saw Kojou, illuminated by the sun’s rays falling on the break in the deck. He hadn’t moved a muscle since releasing his Beast Vassal. His body had stopped, frozen like that—

“Senpai?! Senpai, get it together!”

Yukina rushed to his side—only to be shocked beyond words.

What she found there wasn’t Kojou. It was a lead statue that looked like him.

She didn’t even have to think about it; what had happened was all too clear. Kou Amatsuka had attacked Kojou, whose full attention was focused on the Wiseman, transmuting him. The immortal, immutable vampire primogenitor was neutralized, frozen in time as metal.

“N-no...”

Yukina fell at Kojou’s feet.

Several times, she had witnessed Kojou suffer mortal injuries firsthand. He’d revived from those like nothing had happened, all thanks to the bizarre regenerative ability that all primogenitors possessed. Even if a primogenitor suffered grievous wounds that would instantly slay even an Old Guard vampire, he or she wouldn’t die, for that was their curse: the curse of immortality, imparted by the gods themselves—

However, Kojou’s current situation was different. He hadn’t been killed. He’d simply been changed into an inanimate object. He couldn’t move; he couldn’t think—he was simply a mass of metal.

If he wasn’t dead, he couldn’t come back to life.

It was simple, even inane logic. But the very fact it was so simple meant there was no way to escape it. Kojou would live on forever...as a metal object.

“I won’t let that—”

Yukina bit her lip as she gripped the silver spear. Perhaps Snowdrift Wolf, able to nullify magic, could save Kojou from his present state. If the Divine Oscillation Effect injured Kojou’s body, Kojou would recover from that as he had done so before. If he returned to his flesh and blood, surely he could be saved.

But no matter how much Yukina pressed the glowing tip of her spear head against the statue, nothing changed.

“Why?!”

He remained in that state, an unmoving mass of lead. She detected no sign of revival.

Her hands lost all strength. The silver spear slid out of her grip and rolled to her feet.

As Yukina stood in disbelief, she heard a small, halting voice:

“...Once something has been transmuted to metal, there is no longer any active magical energy. Even if that spear can nullify magic, it cannot return him to his original form. What was once Kojou is now a thing shaped like Kojou, not a vampire.”

When Yukina slowly looked back, she saw Nina—but only her torso. The crimson gemstone in her chest was cracked; half of it was missing. So she, too, had been wounded by the Wiseman’s attack.

“...For a single moment, to save his friends, Kojou transformed the ship into mist, which allowed it to avoid a direct hit from the particle cannon. However, thanks to that, Kojou could not escape Amatsuka’s attack, which immediately followed.”

Having stated this, Nina’s body crumbled. Her liquid metal body had deteriorated beyond the point of being able to sustain a human shape.

“...My power was only sufficient to protect thee and Kanon. I am sor—”

With that, Nina’s words cut off. Her voice became inaudible.

Apparently, the Wiseman had finished collecting the fragments of its body that Kojou's attack had blown away. She was sure he'd be fully operational in minutes.

Yukina reached down to her spear. But she lacked the strength to pick it up again.

Either way, Yukina had no way to defend against the Wiseman's attacks. What could she do, left alone by herself like this?

And the ferry's hull had already been split in two. Left behind on the bow and cast onto a lower deck, she had no chance of reaching a lifeboat. Even if the Wiseman allowed her to escape, Yukina had no way to actually do so and survive—

“Eh...?”

In the midst of such thoughts, Yukina realized something was odd.

Yes. The ferry had been split into two pieces. Why, then, hadn't it sunk? Why did she feel like it hadn't even *begun* sinking?

Yukina stood up and looked out the ripped hull in utter disbelief.

“Ice?! The ocean's been frozen to support the ship...?!”

The seawater around the ferry had been frozen, forming ice that reached a diameter of several hundred meters in breadth. The ship was sitting on an iceberg.

It was freezing magic—but she'd never heard of any demon or sorcerer that could use it on such a scale.

No, there was exactly one exception—a Beast Vassal belonging to the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire.

As Yukina stood, astonished, she heard a familiar voice. A girl's voice...

“...A pathetic showing against that alchemist-made piece of scrap metal, *boy*.”

Yukina looked back. The speaker was Nagisa. But the inhumanly detached tone clearly belonged to another.

Nagisa, who seemed to have appeared out of thin air, approached Kojou in his

metal-transformed state. Her hair was undone, making her look far more adult than usual, giving off a loveliness that could make someone shiver.

“But I applaud you for protecting this girl to the bitter end.”

Nagisa’s slender fingertip touched Kojou’s immobile chin, and her lips curled up into a smile. “In honor of this, I shall grant you a small portion of my strength. Awaken, Sadalmelik—”

Then, Nagisa’s lips met Kojou’s.

Yukina forgot to blink as she stared. In shock, her breathing came to a halt. Apparently, even though Yukina was right beside her, the current Nagisa paid no heed at all.

After the kiss, which seemed indecently long to Yukina, Nagisa gently pulled back from Kojou. Then...

Kojou, frozen as metal until that very moment, instantly returned to flesh and blood.

“What?!” gasped Yukina.

Surely, deep down, she’d known from the start it would be so. Nagisa did not linger to watch Kojou revive; she turned her back to him and walked off. And Yukina had been unable to say a single word to stop her.

That was because a sudden, incredible surge of magical energy had begun, shaking the ship and making the very air tremble.

“S-senpai?!”

The power source was Kojou. Having regained his body of flesh and blood, he’d begun indiscriminately releasing an overwhelming, titanic surge of intense, destructive demonic power...

As she realized the cause of Kojou’s running amok, Yukina exclaimed:

“You don’t mean the Fourth Primogenitor’s blood has taken over...?!”

The “woman” possessing Nagisa had probably awakened a new Beast Vassal inside Kojou. But the Beast Vassal had flown into a rage at being so rudely awakened. It still hadn’t duly recognized Kojou as its host and master.

Overwhelmed by the explosive torrent of magical energy, Yukina cried out, “Senpai, you mustn’t! Wake up!!”

If Kojou didn’t get the Beast Vassal under control, Yukina couldn’t even picture the tragic results. If the current Kojou and the Wiseman duked it out that moment, it would surely mean more than the ferry’s destruction. In the worst case, even the Earth’s mantle, deep at the bottom of the sea, might be affected.

“Ugh...!” She didn’t have any time to hesitate. Yukina gripped Snowdrift Wolf and pointed the sharp, polished tip of the silver spear straight at Kojou’s heart.

The weapon ripped through even the incredible demonic power of the Fourth Primogenitor to reach Kojou’s very body.

“Senpai—!”

I’m sorry, Yukina prayed to herself, as she lashed out with her spear.

The torrent of titanic magical energy was instantly cut off. Taking advantage of the momentary opening, Yukina leaped to Kojou’s side. She wrapped her arms around him as he stood defenseless and pressed her lips to his. What then flowed into him was blood: Yukina’s own, after she’d bitten her own lip.

If Kojou’s power as a vampire had been thrown off-kilter, all it’d take was a little stimulation, arousing his vampiric urges, to throw it back in order. Yukina couldn’t think of any other way to awaken Kojou from having his mind overridden by his Beast Vassal. But if she could make Kojou’s lust win over his Beast Vassal’s anger...



“Wha...?!”

She’d anticipated it to some extent, but the change in Kojou was...dramatic.

Feeling herself roughly embraced, Yukina stopped breathing. With her defenseless, Kojou’s lips pressed against hers once more. It was a very, very long kiss, as if he was drinking the blood from Yukina’s lip down to the very last drop...

Yukina felt a soft shiver climb up her spine. After stiffening once, the strength drained from her body.

As if bewitched by Yukina’s scent, Kojou dove toward her neck.

“Ah...”

Yukina’s voice leaked out. As she arched backward, Kojou’s fangs pressed against her pale neck.

Yukina trembled in pain and fear. Even so, she moved her hands to Kojou’s back, the broadest smile she could muster coming over her as she whispered into his ear.

“Senpai... Please... Just, hurry...”

Taking her plea as an invitation, Kojou sank his fangs into Yukina’s flesh.

She fiercely shut her eyes. Until finally, a faint sigh escaped from her lips.

4

What Kojou saw upon regaining consciousness was a completely changed world.

The ferry’s hull had been ripped apart. The surface of the sea surrounding them was covered in ice. Remaining inside the ship was Nina’s Hard Core, smashed to pieces—

And for some reason, Yukina had collapsed against Kojou’s own chest as if she were having a dizzy spell.

“Himeragi...?!”

Kojou was in a fierce panic as he called her name into her ear. He didn't know why he was in this situation, but he'd vaguely put two and two together and figured out what he'd done.

After all, even then, the sensation of Yukina's bodily fluids remained deep in his throat. He felt strangely guilty about that for some reason.

He faintly recalled that his own demonic power had been knocked out of control, and, too, that he had gained mastery over a new Beast Vassal—

Yukina continued heavily leaning on Kojou as she gently opened her eyes.

"I'm...so glad you're back to normal, senpai..." Looking up at Kojou's rocked expression, she breathed a sigh of visible relief.

The sweet scent of her hair tickled Kojou's nostrils, further throwing him off. Pressed against his chest, Yukina's shoulders seemed unbelievably slender and delicate, like carelessly touching them with any strength at all would break them. But it was she who had halted Kojou's rampage.

Kojou cleared his throat and sighed aloud. "...Sorry. Looks like you had to save me again."

Yes, sighed Yukina, a teasing smile on her face. "You truly are an indecent vampire. However, this time it became our silver lining."

"Uhh..."

All Kojou could do was make a tiny murmur. Thanks to having no proper memory of the event, he couldn't refute what Yukina had said. But it was no time to worry about such things. The Wiseman was still alive. And even at that very moment, the passengers and crew of the ferry were in mortal danger.

"Oh, right...! Kanase?!"

Kojou posed the question to Yukina, still in his arms. The pair stayed like that until he heard a reserved voice speak up behind him.

"Excuse me... I'm over here."

As Kojou turned around, he saw Kanon, who for some reason was sitting in proper Japanese style, timidly waving her hand. The deep redness spotting her cheeks clearly indicated she had been a witness.

“Kanon...?!” Yukina exclaimed.

“K-Kanase?! Y-you...saw?” Kojou asked, his voice as shrill as Yukina’s.

It seemed that Kanon had watched Kojou drink Yukina’s blood. Though the cat was now very much out of the bag, Kojou, who was technically trying to conceal that he was a vampire, couldn’t hide how shaken he was.

However, Kanon’s reaction...differed somewhat from Kojou’s and Yukina’s expectations.

“That was...incredible. Yukina, you looked so...mature...”

Kanon’s words seemed embarrassed, yet tinged with a bit of awe.

Yukina’s eyes widened, even as her face twitched.

“N-no, that wasn’t anything of the sort at all.”

“It’s all right. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I said, it’s...!”

Nina Adelard, watching Yukina and Kanon bicker, shouted, “Leave the minor details for later! There’s no time. The Wiseman will soon complete his regeneration.”

Apparently, she’d assembled the last fragments of the Spirit Blood to somehow reassemble a portion of her body. In other words, Nina’s Hard Core was still functioning.

The next moment, a golden light flew above Kojou’s and the others’ heads. It was the Wiseman’s heavy-metal particle beam. However, Kojou wiped the attack out with a single flick of his right hand.

Kojou’s entire body was emitting incredible demonic power as he glared up at the Wiseman in the sky above them. Apparently, Kojou had gained new strength from taming a new Beast Vassal.

“Kanase,” Kojou asked Kanon in an unrushed voice, “can I leave Nina in your hands?”

The silver-haired girl smiled charmingly and nodded as she embraced Nina. She pulled Nina, still in mid-regeneration, over her lap.

Nina looked up at Kojou's back and raised a voice of concern. "Kojou... I..."

This was the Wiseman, a man-made "God" born from the darkest secrets of alchemy: Nina knew its terror only too well.

However, Kojou smiled impetuously, baring his fangs, as a malevolent aura spread about him.

"It's all right," he assured. "I'm gonna smash Golden Boy to pieces and end your two-hundred-and-seventy-year-old nightmare right here. From here on, this is *my* fight—!"

Alongside Kojou, the small silhouette seemingly nestled into his side walked forward. Poising her silver spear, Yukina stared above the ripped deck and declared:

"No, senpai. It's *ours*."

The target of Yukina's glare was Kou Amatsuka, standing with his body in tatters. Having lost his entire purpose, all that remained in his eyes was pure hatred for Kojou and the others.

And floating in the sky above them, the golden giant continued its dry crackle of laughter, as if mocking the whole world.

That was the signal that announced the start of the battle.

5

The Wiseman's body already stood dozens of meters tall. And though humanoid in nature, he had neither eyes nor ears. The glossy curves covering his entire body looked like something half-designed that had been left behind in a sculpting class. Yet even so, his silhouette, with a high ratio of gold in its makeup, felt strangely beautiful.

Spheres were embedded at various points in his body. They greatly resembled Nina's Hard Core, moving like eyes as they gazed coldly at all below.

And when his great, skeletal-like mouth opened, there was a vortex of golden light within, swirling like flames.

“Ka...ka-ka...ka-ka-ka... Fools! You defy me still, O Imperfect Ones?”

Charged particles scattered out from his laughing mouth—

But the lightning lion that Kojou summoned swatted down the particle beam.

“Shaddup, Sparky.”

In response, the Wiseman transformed one of his arms into a giant blade, slamming it down toward the hull of the half-wrecked ferry.

It was the incandescent bicorn that halted this attack. Emitting an explosive shock wave, it drove back the seemingly infinite tentacles coming from their massive nemesis.

“It’s not like I don’t have any sympathy. Here you were, made into a perfect being without a clue about anythin’, and then sealed away by having all your blood taken out from you. So your upbringing sucked. If it hadn’t, you’d have understood things a lot faster, but here you are, two hundred and seventy years later and just not getting it.”

The eyes all over the Wiseman’s body leered at Kojou.

“Ka...ka... You do not understand. The imperfect logic of imperfect beings cannot comprehend me.”

Kojou scoffed and laughed with mock pity. “Yeah, you can spit beams outta your mouth, and you have an indestructible body, but what’s that power ever done for ya? Did anyone accept you? Why didn’t you use all that ‘perfect’ power to help other people? You not being able to get somethin’ that *basic* is why those ‘imperfect’ beings sealed you up to begin with—!”

“Ka-ka... You fail to understand. I do not require acceptance, for I am the one and only perfect being!”

The Wiseman furiously shook his head like a baby throwing a tantrum.

“Oh, is that so? Then I’ll have to spank into you that you’re *not* the center of the world!” Eyes dyed crimson, Kojou glared at the golden giant. In addition, two new Beast Vassals emerged, their roars making the ice-covered ocean surface quake.

Upon the frozen surface of the sea, the Sword Shaman of the Lion King

Agency and Kou Amatsuka faced off.

His liquid-metal tentacles turned into the sharpest of blades and rushed at Yukina, nearly at supersonic speed. However, the silver spear traced a beautiful course, completely striking down the attack.

With their magical energy severed by Snowdrift Wolf, Amatsuka's sliced-apart tentacles reverted into simple metal fragments and clattered as they scattered all over the ice.

"You know you're just being used, yet you still want to fight?" Yukina asked quietly.

As it forced its destroyed tentacles to regenerate, a hollow smile came over the metallic life-form calling itself Kou Amatsuka.

"Sorry. I don't know what else there is for me anymore, so..."

Yukina stared at him just below his neck. "Kou Amatsuka... You're already..."

The black jewel embedded in his chest was heavily damaged and had lost much of its shape. Even the slightest movement caused fragments to break apart.

"I'm scared...I'll stop being me... Just who am I? Why was I born? What should I do?!"

Amatsuka's right arm burst apart along with his shout. The infinite fragments shot through the air and assailed Yukina like a grenade.

As she slipped through the attack, she shook her head. "I don't know. The search for those answers is what defines us as people!"

"...!"

Amatsuka's ceaseless attacks let up for a brief moment. Not letting that moment escape her, Yukina's lips formed a solemn chant.

"I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee."

The ritual energy welling up inside Yukina's flesh and blood amplified within Snowdrift Wolf. The dazzling light given off by the tip of her spear proceeded to make Amatsuka's body crumble to pieces.

“I see... I’m...”

As the pale light enveloped Amatsuka, the expression he gave off somehow seemed...soft.

There was no need for him to do the Wiseman’s bidding. There was no need for him to hurt a large number of people and sacrifice them to satisfy his desire for a human body... Because the moment he had truly wished to be human was the moment that he’d *become* human. If only he had realized—

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

Slipping past Amatsuka’s final attack, Yukina’s attack impaled his chest. This time, the damaged black gemstone completely shattered. In that instant, the being that had once been Amatsuka lost its shape, falling apart like a pile of sand. All that remained were fragments of the gemstone, its glow extinguished.

Yukina made a soft sigh before turning her face upward.

“Senpai...!”

Even then, the Fourth Primogenitor and Wiseman continued to do battle.

“—C’mon over, Regulus Aurum! Al-Nasl Minium!”

The lightning lion and the incandescent bicorn collided with the golden giant head-on. The impact split the sea and rendered the very air unstable. Had such combat taken place in an urban area, shocking levels of damage would have been inflicted on the surrounding neighborhood.

“Natra Cinereus! Al-Meissa Mercury!”

Kojou summoned all the Beast Vassals at his command to keep the Wiseman boxed in. The lightning lion neutralized the heavy particle beam cannon, while the bicorn and the shelled beast nullified the golden body’s physical attacks.

However, that was nowhere near enough to defeat him.

Only the two-headed dragon could do that, annihilating the golden life-form and overcoming its infinite multiplication by consuming it and the very space it occupied. But the Wiseman’s body had grown too large for the dragon to remove an effective chunk.

The amorphous creature freely transformed its golden body to flee from the two-headed dragon's maws. It was understandable; even Kojou couldn't conceive of what kind of damage would occur if it simply wolfed down the entire area's space. The ferry being sucked into a fracture in space might be the least of it.

"Ka...ka-ka... Why do you defy me, O Imperfect One...? Why do you reject becoming part of my perfect world?"

Using alchemy to extract precious metals from the seawater, the Wiseman's power increased to infinity. At this rate, he might very well swallow the entire world, erasing all existence other than himself. He'd probably spared the ferry because he still wanted to use Kanon and others as raw resources.

The Wiseman, able to fight four Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor on equal terms, looked very much up to the term *God*. Even so, Kojou's will to fight did not waver. Indeed, the enormous demonic energy emitted by Kojou only seemed to increase.

"I told ya already. You *ain't* perfect," Kojou laughed scornfully, taunting the golden giant. "Just like ya said, I'm imperfect. So if even I can beat you, you're even *less* than imperfect!"

The Wiseman's eyeballs turned and glared at Kojou all at once. Perhaps he'd only recognized the possibility just then. His exaggerated reaction suggested as much:

"Impossible... My perfection contains no such contradiction...!"

His nakedly enraged voice filled the air.

Kojou bluntly dismissed the tawdry pride for what it was. "What's your perfection worth if you've gotta wipe out everyone *inconvenient* to you to keep it safe?"

"Ka-ka... Silence!! I, the perfect being, command thee to be silent!!"

Kojou had nothing more to say. Instead, he simply raised his right arm toward the enraged golden Titan. Fresh blood gushed out of his arm, bathing it in a pale blue light of explosive magical force.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, heir to the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds—”

Emerging from within the beam was a new Beast Vassal, its body transparent like flowing water. Its upper half was a beautiful woman; its lower, a snake. Countless serpents ran down its form like hair.

It was a pale Undine—a sea monster.

“C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Eleven, Sadalmelik Albus—!”

The water spirit’s great serpentine body accelerated into an explosive torrent. Her talons, equipped with sharp claws, grabbed hold of the Wiseman’s head on both sides, dragging him headfirst into the sea.

The Fourth Primogenitor’s eleventh Beast Vassal was a Beast Vassal of water. The titanic volume of ocean water around them was her very own flesh and blood. Even Wiseman’s freely manipulable liquid-metal body could not escape the sea monster. Then—

“Ka-ka-ka...ka...ka... Impossible...! I am... My perfect body, it’s vanishing!!”

His body was dissolving, like a piece of metal bathed in a powerful acid—

But it wasn’t because Kojou’s Beast Vassal was destroying his foe—quite the opposite. His body, born from alchemy, was reverting to its original metallic form. Bit by bit, it was returning to the sea and land from whence it came, like an unborn infant reabsorbed by its mother’s womb—

“This is—regeneration—?!” Yukina exclaimed, as she gazed at the creature sinking into the sea. “A Beast Vassal invoking vampiric restoration, to restore —?!”

The eleventh Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, Sadalmelik Albus, was the Beast Vassal of regeneration and restoration. It could “heal” any being, returning it to its previous condition.

Watching the incredible sight from nearby, Yukina’s entire body shivered as the full force struck her.

“But that means...”

The sea monster was restoring it, but not to heal. It was as if time was being rolled back to what it had been before—before it had been born as a living

thing. Time flowed backward, from stout castle walls to earthworks, from dense cities to barren grasslands, from advanced culture to before prehistory—

The word *restore* was nowhere near sufficient to describe it. This was the destructive power to return all to the nothingness from whence it came.

In her own way, this beautiful sea monster, too, was a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—the living incarnation of calamity.

Finally reduced to nothing more than a skull, the Wiseman exclaimed: “*Ka... ka-ka...! I understand...! I understand now...*”

And then the golden skull itself dissolved into the pale blue water and vanished.

“That power...exists to fight...ka...”

Unable to utter a final word, his voice dissipated amidst the froth.

All that remained was the surface of the sea and a gentle breeze.

6

With the fight over, Kojou bent forward toward the hull of the wrecked ferry. Yukina approached him, spear in hand and steps heavy.

In spite of the immense toll the battle with the Wiseman had taken, the frozen sea surface remained intact. With a search-and-rescue ship no doubt soon to arrive, Yukina didn’t think those aboard the ferry remained in any danger.

They’d probably blame the ferry’s “accident” on a collision with an out-of-season iceberg. Those aboard who were unaware of the circumstances would no doubt accept that explanation. After all, there wasn’t a single person who’d believe it was the work of a single Beast Vassal.

Yukina pondered the identity of the one that had possessed Nagisa; however, the new Beast Vassal Kojou had tamed concerned her as well. Surely that power to cure was what had saved Kojou from being turned to metal. If she could regenerate others to the point of rolling back time itself, repairing Kojou’s

transmuted body must have been child's play.

The Beast Vassal of ice had known that from the start. That was why she'd awakened the sea monster.

But Yukina had no means with which to confirm "her" identity.

Besides, she had other things that came first.

"Senpai."

When Yukina called out to Kojou, he raised his languid-looking face. Somehow, he looked like he was groping in the dark; using that much power must have made even him exhausted.

"You okay, Himeragi?"

She pressed a hand to where he'd bitten her on the neck as she spoke. "I'm all right. The wound has already closed, so it's fine."

Kojou seemed relieved as his gaze drifted off—and then, he slowly sank down on the spot.

"...Senpai?!" Yukina rushed to his side. "Are you all right? Don't tell me it's aftereffects from being transmuted...?!"

"Ah, no, no. I'm just short on sleep." Kojou waved his hand, annoyed, and closed his eyes. He really did seem exhausted.

"Haven't slept properly since yesterday. Fine if I take a little nap here?"

"Well, that's a relief...somewhat." Yukina gave a small sigh and cradled his head over her knees. It was a picture-perfect lap pillow position. One could also say she was cradling his head in her hands.

"...Uh?"

Perhaps Kojou sensed that Yukina's behavior was somehow improper, because he suddenly looked up in concern.

But Yukina grinned back at him. "It's fine. Also, I happen to be *very* interested in what happened last night, especially how you got to know Nina Adelard and why she looks just like Aiba."

"Uhh?!"

Sweat trickled down Kojou's brow as he averted his eyes. Yukina seemed to take that as confirmation of her suspicion he'd done something behind her back.

Yukina imagined he'd been *trying* to be considerate, by not making her worry during her time off. She was glad for the sentiment, but the problem was that, as a result, the chaos had only grown.

In addition, he just didn't get it: No matter what the reason, Kojou doing things behind Yukina's back hurt her. In the first place, it wasn't *possible* for her not to worry about him, no matter the physical distance between them.

Kojou practically shouted as he forced a change in subject: "Er, that's... Oh yeah, what happened to Nina—?!"

The reply came from practically right beside them:

"I'm right here. You did well, Kojou. And you as well, Yukina."

Though Nina sounded in unexpectedly high spirits, she was still being carried around by Kanon even then. Kanon had used an inspection ladder to climb down from the tenuous ferry, and a tiny humanoid silhouette was riding on top of the chest of her uniform. The Nina that puffed her chest out as she spoke couldn't have been more than thirty centimeters tall, no bigger than a fairy. Kojou had never seen the woman's beautiful Asian face before, but he somehow felt like vestiges of Asagi's appearance still remained.

"You have my thanks. Your efforts have finally liberated me from a two-hundred-and-seventy-year-old burden."

"Nina... You're..."

"Indeed. Pay no mind, the remaining Spirit Blood simply couldn't maintain a humanoid form beyond this size. It will not prove any great hindrance to my life."

As she spoke, Nina patted the crimson jewel that remained embedded in her chest.

Well, it sure beats livin' as a blob of liquid metal, Kojou considered, staring.

"So what, you plan on going with Kanase then?"

Kanon's eyes turned into half-moons as she nodded in delight. "Yes, I'll speak to Ms. Minamiya about giving her a good, loving home."

The girl was really into raising small animals. *I am not a pet*, huffed the Great Alchemist of Yore, crossing her arms with a puff of her cheeks.

It was then that Nagisa emerged from the break in the hull and shouted, "Ehh?!"

Her hair was still worn loose, but Yukina didn't sense the frigid aura of the Beast Vassal that had possessed her. She was back to her usual, boisterous self.

"What is this?! Kojou?! What is Kojou doing here?! What happened to the ship?! You don't mean we really hit an iceberg?! And Yukina as a lap pillow?!"

"Nagisa...?!"

Yukina stood up in great haste. Apparently Nagisa really didn't remember anything during the time she had been possessed. His head rudely ejected from its resting place, Kojou's ears rang from the bang he sustained.

Nagisa looked up at the sky as she spoke. "Wow, what's that, an airship?! It's huuuuge!"

Indeed, there was a giant, armored airship floating close to sea level. Apparently, the Aldegian Knights had come to render assistance.

Kojou clutched the back of his head as he muttered, "Sorry, Himeragi, it's a shame, havin' this happen on your time off and all."

Yukina mixed a smile in with her nod. "Yes. However, this has only confirmed my suspicions."

This said, she firmly clenched her small fist.

Yukina's words, filled with determination, brought a look of unease over Kojou.

"Apparently, senpai, whenever I take my eyes off you for even the shortest time, you immediately stick your neck into danger and act *very* friendly with girls you don't know."

"Er, wait. Isn't that logic really messed up?!"

How'd it turn into that? Kojou objected, vigorously shaking his head.

However, Yukina's forthright eyes gave Kojou a look that brooked no argument. "Upon reflection, I must observe you even more strictly from now on."

After hearing the declaration, the vampire weakly looked up at the sky.

"...Gimme a break..."

The sigh of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire, trailed onto the sea breeze, and vanished.



OUTRO

OUTRO

“Mhmm...”

Exhaling as if she was singing, the woman in the white coat raised the stethoscope.

Though she was well into her thirties, she was a woman for whom the word *cute* fit her cherubic face more than *beautiful*. But she had *really* big breasts.

Her long hair was disheveled, the white coat she wore all wrinkled. Though she was reserved, she projected the aura of a very slothful adult.

“Okaaaay! Take a *deep* breath. Yes, yes, just like that.”

She put the stethoscope to Asagi’s chest as she spoke. *Mm, mm*, she said with an exaggerated nod, proceeding to look down the girl’s throat and examine her tongue. Finally, she ran her hands over Asagi’s entire body, groping her in the name of taking her vitals.

“No particular health proooblems. You seem to be growing quite nicely. Eighty-three, fifty-seven, eighty-two...”

“Eh?!”

Asagi twitched and froze at the accurate guess of her measurements. *You can’t let down your guard around this chick*, she thought, hastily covering her breasts with a towel.

They were not in a hospital, but rather, the Akatsuki residence’s living room.

The woman in the white coat was Mimori Akatsuki, Kojou and Nagisa’s mother. To Asagi, she was a familiar face going way back.

And Mimori was also an elite researcher at a lab for MAR—Magna Atraxia Research, a giant conglomerate. Not only did she hold a proper medical license; she was also one of the natural psychics known as Hyper-Adapters. She was a so-called “medical psychometer.”

Mimori smiled in obvious delight as she put the stethoscope away. “*Tee-hee*, I must say I’m surprised, though. I come back home for once and who do I find sleeping in Kojou’s bed? Oh, Asagi...”

Asagi narrowed her shoulders as she cringed. Even at that moment, Asagi didn’t actually remember *why* she had been sleeping in a place like that.

Actually, while Asagi was out cold, Natsuki Minamiya had pushed Kojou to bring her home, but little did she know that Kojou had taken that to mean bringing her to *Kojou’s* home.

Asagi put a finger to her own temple as she spoke in a faltering tone, “I’m sorry, my memory kind of breaks off right around yesterday evening—”

That was part of why Mimori had examined her, but as far as her behavior indicated, there was nothing particularly wrong with Asagi’s body.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure Kojou properly takes responsibility.”

“Er, no, um, it’s *really* not like that...”

She’s got this sooo wrong, lamented Asagi, uneasily shaking her head.

“Ahh, it really takes me back. Why, when I was your age, I had Kojou right here in my belly...”

Asagi, of course, raised her voice in surprise.

“Ehh, is that so?!”

She’d always thought Mimori was young for a mother of two; so that’s how it was. The simplest explanation carried the day.

Mhmm, mused Mimori as she walked toward the kitchen. “Want some lunch, Asagi?”

Asagi bobbed her head in agreement and thanks. She had no reason to hurry back home; it was late enough in the morning that she’d be written up for skipping class anyway. If she stayed put, Kojou would be getting back home soon enough. She had a pile of things she wanted to grill him about.

As Asagi’s thoughts drifted to such things, she belatedly set eyes on some documents strewn over the floor; they’d apparently fallen out of Mimori’s

medical bag. Without fanfare, Asagi picked them up and put them in order. Apparently it was some kind of patient report from the lab.

The project name listed at the top of the report was SLEEPING BEAUTY.

A color copy of a blurry photo displayed a girl lying inside a medical capsule.

She had rainbow-colored hair that resembled a vortex of flames—

“Aa...!”

—That was when she suddenly heard Mimori’s cry from the kitchen. Asagi stuffed the report back in the bag and hurried over to check on Mimori. “What happened?”

Asagi beheld the sight of Mimori slumped onto the floor, in front of the fridge. She looked up at Asagi with a forlorn expression born of a pitiless world.

“This is so cruel, Asagi. I’m starving here, and there’s no frozen pizza in the fridge...!”

“Ah, ah...”

Asagi scratched her face with a mildly conflicted look. She recalled that Kojou had complained that frozen pizza was the only dish in Mimori’s repertoire. She’d thought he *had* to be exaggerating. To think it was the gospel truth...

“...Asagi, are you any good at cooking?”

Mimori looked up at Asagi with eyes like those of an abandoned puppy.

Asagi thought about it a little: This was a pretty good chance to earn some brownie points with Kojou’s mom. Perhaps this was the time to demonstrate the fruits of her intensive training.

Asagi smiled triumphantly and reached for a nearby apron.

“Leave it to me!”



Evening was fast approaching when Kojou and the others made it back to the apartment complex.

Due to limited capacity, the armored airship had only taken actual wounded

aboard, so in the end, Kojou and the others were picked up by an old-fashioned fishing boat for a leisurely return to Itogami Island.

The one saving grace was they were allowed to eat the fresh fish the ship had caught. *Maybe it's a pretty small thing, but as rewards for saving the world go, could be worse*, Kojou thought.

Nagisa slumped against the wall of the elevator and heaved a great sigh. "I'm really worn out for some reason. The field trip's suspended, and the coat I saved up for is no good... But they said they'd compensate for the luggage at least."

Her voice was as energetic as usual, but the volume of words was just a little lower than normal. Knowing the field trip was canceled apparently got her down.

"Geez, with that big an accident, it's real lucky no one died. It was one step away from a huge disaster."

"Well, that's true, but... Ugh... Pillow tossing... Boy talk..."

Nagisa was slumping her shoulders as the elevator door opened before her.

Yukina led Nagisa by the hand into the corridor when she suddenly stopped. She raised an eyebrow as she guardedly looked all around.

"...Um, do you smell something odd?"

Prodded by Yukina, Nagisa gave the air a good sniff, like a puppy.

Kojou, too, noticed the faint burning smell wafting through the air. "Wow, you're right! Is it a fire?! Wait, smoke?!"

Nagisa shrieked as she pointed at the entrance to her and her brother's apartment. Black smoke was puffing out from the hallway-side vent like it was car exhaust.

"Why aren't the fire extinguishers working?!"

Kojou hastily ran toward the apartment. Meanwhile, Yukina pulled a fire extinguisher from its holder in the corridor. The very next moment, the front door to the Akatsuki residence burst open with great vigor, and a woman with a cherubic face, wearing a white gown, flew out of the room.

Kojou and Yukina were stopped cold by Mimori's unexpectedly calm state.

"Mhmm? Ah, Kojou, Nagisa, welcome back."

Though she seemed somewhat hurried, she didn't look like someone escaping the scene of a fire.

Nagisa stared at her mother's face, sounding a little bewildered. "...Mimori?"

For some reason, Mimori looked like she'd just been thrown a lifeline. "Sorry, it's in your hands now. An urgent job came up so I have to go. A very urgent job!"

Rapid-firing her lines, Mimori made a hasty beeline for the elevator.

Kojou and the others stared at his mother's back, dumbfounded.

"What the heck was that...?" Somewhat at a loss, Kojou turned toward his apartment.

At the very least, it wasn't on fire, but the fact remained that smoke mysteriously filled it. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the smoke seemed... ominous. The scent triggered instinctive terror within him.

Then, as Kojou entered the apartment, the sight of Asagi, in an apron, wielding a kitchen knife, greeted his eyes.

Asagi, who for some reason was holding the kitchen knife *backward*, blinked and asked, "Ah? Kojou? You're back early; weren't you at school?"

Kojou stood rooted to the spot, aghast. "A-Asagi?! Whaddaya think you're doing?!"

"What does it look like...? I'm cooking, *cooking*. You're just in time. Mimori asked me to make something for her, but she had to go, so there goes that plan. Hey, waste not, want not, right?"

"Um...!"

Kojou grimaced as he recalled how Mimori had returned to her workplace in a big hurry. No doubt, having whipped Asagi into a frenzy, she'd fled the scene like the irresponsible woman she was.

Realizing that Kojou had gone pale, Asagi smiled.

“Don’t worry. I said cooking, but it’s only sandwiches. Tanahara said you can’t mess up a sandwich. It’s just cutting bread and stuffing some ingredients inside.”

Kojou awkwardly nodded. “Th-that so...”

The strange black smoke filling the apartment made it hard not to assume that something had already gone wrong. Maybe that was why the sight of a high school girl in an apron wasn’t doing anything for him here.

Nagisa’s voice quivered, looking like she was smiling through tears. “W-wow, Kojou. Asagi’s homemade cooking. You lucky dog.”

Yukina, silently retreating a step, spoke with a businesslike voice lacking any shred of emotion. “Er, senpai. I shall take my leave, then...”



As Yukina started to turn around, Nagisa firmly gripped her slender wrist. “Oh, no you don’t, Yukina. Desertion before the enemy is a serious offense.”

“But,” Yukina earnestly objected, “if my physical condition is thrown off, it’ll hinder my mission as watcher...”

But Nagisa’s desperation was no less than her own. After all, the greater the number of victims, the less the burden was on each person, potentially reducing it to under a lethal dose.

Kojou, resigning himself with a *Well, fine*, walked into the kitchen filled with strange smoke.

After all, Kojou Akatsuki was the Fourth Primogenitor, an immortal vampire. It wasn’t like he was going to actually *die* from it— And so, another afternoon in the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island passed by.

The surface of the sea surrounding the man-made island, reflecting the rays of the sun, glittered like dazzling gold...

Afterword

I'm the sort of person who hates riding in vehicles I'm not driving, but for some reason, ships are the sole exception, and sometimes I really want to sail on one. I particularly like long-range ferries. For some reason, idly watching the ocean without a care in the world and heading to a distant land while doing nothing but lazily soaking in a hot bath—these are special pleasures. The shaking and the engine sounds are a bit of a bother, but they make you really feel like you're inside a gigantic machine. Oh, and I've heard you can cure seasickness by pouring cold water between your legs, but unfortunately, I have not tried this myself. Even if seasickness can be cured by such a method, I somehow felt like I'd lose something precious to me as a human being...

So *Strike the Blood* Vol. 6 has finally arrived.

Compared to the Harrowing Festival arc that ended last volume, I wanted an episode with a lot of slice-of-life elements, but I'm not sure I quite pulled it off. Personally, I had lots of fun with the middle school student stuff you wouldn't normally see in print. Also, ah, sorry for putting Asagi through the wringer, even more than usual. That said, if you had even a little fun with it, I'll be happy.

This was an alchemist story. I wrote in a previous volume that the abbey Kanon lived at had a Caduceus staff emblem on it, but I was like, boy, I need to explain what that was all about, and somehow the timing just...slipped for a while. There's a number of other dangling plotlines that I haven't resolved. Please be patient, I plan on writing those, too, bit by bit.

Also, I mentioned the comic version of *Strike the Blood* in the last volume, but luckily, the first *tankobon* is now on sale. Great work, Tate-sensei, and thank you very much. The reproduction remained faithful to the original while being even more evocative in its visual details. In particular, the girls were drawn extremely cute. The serialization in *Monthly Comic Dengeki Daioh* will continue, so please show that some love, too.

In addition, our illustrator, Manyako, did truly outstanding work for us once again. In spite of my requests being even less defined than ever (an amorphous ooze, so to speak), the new character designs are just as I imagined. And starting with the editor Yuzawa, I thank everyone involved in the production and distribution of this book from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, I also give most hearty thanks to all of you who have read this book.

I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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