







## Kotei Kobayashi Illustration by riichu



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The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess 8

Kotei Kobayashi

Translation by Sergio Avila Cover art by riichu

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HIKIKOMARI KYUUKETSUKI NO MONMON Vol. 8

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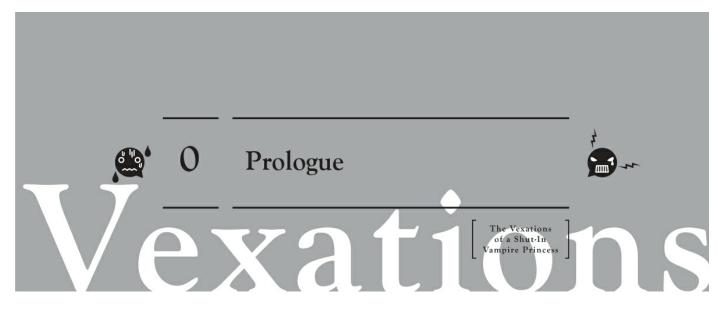
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Yen Newsletter



March 12. A little before the turmoil in the Enchanted Lands.

The Bloody Hall of the Mulnite Palace was decorated in a graceful manner unbefitting of its name.

Colorful mana lamps. Fancy tablecloths embellished with a variety of dishes.

And in front of it all, a sign that read HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!

"... That's the same one we used for your birthday, isn't it, Lady Komari?"

"Huh?! Shoot... You're right! Are you mad?"

"I'm not, but I do feel conflicted about all this. You didn't need to make it so luxurious..."

Birthday girl Vill fidgeted awkwardly in her seat.

You read that right—today, March 12, was the anniversary of the nutty maid's nativity.

I was throwing a party to celebrate and to thank her for having put together a birthday bash for me the previous month.

I'd attempted to set things up in secret to make it a surprise, but I hadn't been able to get past Vill's sharp senses; she'd caught whiff of it before I could even begin. A week before her birthday, she'd been going on about how she wanted her present to be "Lady Komari herself."

But now that the day was actually here, her bashfulness had gotten the better of her.

Every time someone came up to congratulate her, she only bowed with a tiny

"thanks." The Seventh Unit crazies had put on a seppuku show, and she'd just clapped with a blank stare on her face.

I couldn't deny she had always been one deadpan maid, but after suffering at her harassing hand for so long, I was deeply aware of the delicate changes she had been through.

"What's wrong, Vill? You were so excited about it just yesterday."

"I was hoping to have a birthday party alone with you. I wasn't prepared for so many attendees..."

"So I surprised you after all! Everyone's here for you, Vill!"

"I...I'm grateful for that... But..."

Vill swayed her head left and right like a pigeon, as though she were looking for someone.

"What? If you're looking for your friend Lolo, she's over there, stuffing her face with cake."

"No... It's just, I feel anxious. This is too great an honor for a humble maid. I would be content simply getting to fondle you as I slurped your blood."

"I'd seriously consider pressing charges if you did that."

Then I noticed something: Vill's cheeks were rosy.

No way, is she...?

"Are you actually self-conscious about everyone being here to celebrate you?"

"...I don't have a self-conscious bone in my body. I believe you know this to be true already."

Vill put on a cool front as she took a sip of tea.

But her ears betrayed her, turning redder and redder with every shout of "congratulations!" from the members of the Seventh Unit.

I figured this little maid wasn't used to being the center of attention.

I see, I see. Interesting.



"...What is it? I have no record of that smug look on your face in my Lady Komari data bank."

"Oh, it's nothing. Happy birthday, Vill. Just relax and enjoy it, will ya? Here, try this omelet rice. It's fantastic."

"There's no way my Lady Komari can be this smug. I'll give the omelet a try if you feed it to me, mouth to mouth."

"No."

"Spoon to mouth, then? I won't be able to enjoy the party otherwise."

What are you, a baby?

"No, Ms. Villhaze. It may be your birthday, but you shouldn't pester Ms. Komari like that."

Silver knockout beauty Sakuna Memoir made her entrance.

I'd invited plenty of people outside the Seventh Unit to the party.

"Make do with the present I've just given you."

"What is it, Sakuna?" I asked.

"A fluffy cushion that takes away all your fatigue when you sit on it."

Whaaa? I want one. No, I need one. I've accumulated more than enough fatigue for a billion lifetimes.

"Mm-hmm," Vill replied, disgruntled. "I am exceedingly grateful for your present, Lady Memoir. However, that has nothing to do with this."

"Why? What's wrong with the cushion, girl?" I asked.

"Nothing, but I want a gift from you, Lady Komari. Feed me now, please. Ahhh."

Vill leaned in toward me.

Oh, what am I to do with you? I gathered she needed the satisfaction of an act of deviance or two to get back in form. In other words, she just wanted to get over her shyness.

I'll indulge you just this once.

I grabbed a spoonful of omelet rice, transported it all the way to Vill, who was waiting with her mouth open like a chick for food, and... *Nom!* 

"Hey, Vill. Happy birthday."

Out of nowhere, I heard the voice of a man I didn't recognize.

"Blewugh?!" The omelet rice shot out of Vill's mouth and onto my clothes.

"Whoooa?! What's wrong?!"

"Cough, cough... Why...? What are you doing here, Grandfather?!"

"Grandfather?"

Vill's eyes widened as she stared past me.

I turned around to find a tall, old man. He was wearing a suit and a silk hat; the spitting image of a gentleman. A beaming smile adorned his face.

"Pleased to meet you, Commander Gandesblood. Thank you for always looking after Vill."

"Huh? Wait, so that means..."

"My name is Clovis Dodrens. I'm Villhaze's grandfather."

"Why are you here?!"

Vill jumped in front of me, red in the face.

My eyes almost popped out of their sockets. I had never seen such an unsicko expression from the sicko maid.

"I told you to keep out of my workplace! You're no longer a Crimson Lord! Go back to slacking off at home!"

"How could I not come to your birthday party? Hmm... I see, so you wear this every day? You make one fine maid."

"Wha... You... Bah...!" Vill babbled.

What's with you? I have no record of this in my Vill data bank.

"Lady Komari," she said, tears in her eyes, as she sidled up to me. "Could you explain this to me? Why is he here?"

"Because I thought I should invite him. He seems like a nice guy."

"How dare you, Lady Komari? I protest. I will express my dissent tonight by sneaking into your bed and fondling and groping—"

"No! Why?! I'm gonna tell your grampa!"

"?I"

She turned to stone.

Despair claimed her face. Her lips trembled as she pleaded with me.

"Could you...please not do that?"

"I will if I don't get to have my good night's sleep because of your fondling."

"Ummm, but, you see, he doesn't know I'm doing that sort of thing."

"? What do you mean?"

"That is to say...he is ignorant of my perverted deeds..."

So you agree! You're perverted!

How could he not know at this point, though? Pretty sure the newspapers already publish rumors of your deviancy.

I get it, though. Of course you'd feel embarrassed about showing your sicko side to your family. This kinda reminds me of Pitolina's whole deal... That said, I'm surprised to learn Vill has a shred of normalcy in her.

...Wait a second.

Doesn't this mean I've got dirt on her?

"Ha-ha-ha. I'm glad to see Vill is doing her job right."

"Of course. I am an adult vampire."

"Yes, you're already sixteen... How much you've grown. It feels like just yesterday that you were a timid little girl who couldn't sleep by herself. Oh, the nights you kept me up because you were scared of thunder."

"Enough reminiscing! You're sounding like an old man."

"What's the harm? There's no better time to reminisce than on your

birthday."

Clovis patted Vill's head.

That made her blood boil. "I'm going to the restroom," she announced, running away like the wind, red in the face.

Sakuna's jaw was on the floor.

My brain wasn't keeping up, either.

Not in a billion years could I have expected this... I'd never seen this side of Vill.

"Sorry, Commander. She's always been such a shy girl," Clovis said.

...Shy? Her? In this timeline, in this universe?

"But I'm glad to see she's doing well in the Seventh Unit. What do you think of her, Commander? I hope she's not troubling you."

"She's a good worker. I would've died a thousand times by this point if she weren't around."

"Really? That's great to hear."

His eyes shone bright and kind. Clovis really cared for his granddaughter.

I almost felt jealous.

The Gandesblood family rarely gathered all under one roof.

"She's so lucky to have met you. So much happened to her in school, and if it weren't for your help, it would have been her in trouble."

"No, no, it's always her helping me. I'm grateful."

"How charitable. Spoken like the world-unifying commander you are. I hope you continue to look after Vill. She only has the future to look forward to."

"The future? What do you mean?"

"Oh." Clovis blinked. "She hasn't told you? Then please forget I said anything."

"Hey... You're only making me more curious. Don't tell me she's been getting up to her perverted ways behind my back again."

"Perverted?"

"Ah, no, nothing! She's such a moral, virtuous maid!"

Those words couldn't possibly be further from the truth.

That said, I understood Vill's desire to keep up a good image. I made myself out to be a math wizard in front of my sister. I should help her keep her cover. Or so I thought, but...

"Ha-ha-ha. She really loves you so much. I'm glad things have been working out so far, but if she really annoys you, I'll be sure to give her a warning."

"..."

Vill... He knows...

Eh. I don't care either way.

And so concluded my first encounter with Vill's grandfather.

There had been many surprises...but I was going to oblige him in his request that I continue being Vill's friend. After all, it would be impossible for me to be commander without her.

There was something about our interaction that stuck out to me, though.

"She only has the future to look forward to." What had he meant by this?

Oh well, no use thinking too much about it. I can just ask Vill later.

I let the optimism take my mind as I savored the omelet rice.



"My goal is to destroy the Dark Cores and open the doors to the Netherworld. I'll take all the shut-ins in the world outside!" the Wicked God Slayer announced, like a child revealing her plans for mischief.

Winter. After the struggle in the Mulnite Empire had subsided.

Inverse Moon had been demolished during the Vampire Riots. Their captured forces had revealed the locations of the organization's hideouts, which the armies of the world had stamped out.

There were now only six operating members of Inverse Moon.

Spica, Fuyao, Tryphon, Cornelius, Amatsu, and a single servant.

The rest had been captured by the authorities, or had disappeared, or had been killed.

"The people of the Six Nations are ignorant." Spica spoke with grandeur from her throne. "They are content accepting the world as it appears to them. In the same way a frog in a well knows not the vastness of the ocean, or the insects that die in summer doubt the beauty of the snow, they only enjoy their momentary day-to-day existences, daring not take a step forward. That's adorably human of them, but also a bit pitiful, don't you think?"

"Are you just going to monologue at us?"

"Fuyao!" Tryphon yelled.

Fuyao didn't know why Tryphon was taking issue with her. Even Amatsu was just pretending to listen, while Cornelius was scribbling away at a manuscript on the table. Tryphon was the only one there paying attention to Her Highness's ravings.

"...I'm trying to make you aware of our circumstances. That would be the best for the future," Spica said.

"So what's Inverse Moon's goal, then?"

"Destroying the Dark Cores! I said that at the beginning." Spica smiled, red lollipop in her mouth. "Do you even know what they are? Cornelius."

"Huh? Well...they're special Divine Instruments that provide infinite mana to each race."

"That's only what they do on the surface! You see, in the distant past, far before I was born, the Dark Cores were artifacts constructed by the gods! The ultimate substances, capable of granting the wishes of anyone who sought them. Some people even say the Dark Cores created this very world."

Fuyao grabbed a piece of fried tofu from the table and thought.

To summarize, they're precious treasures with great power.

"The Dark Cores were originally spheres that shone bright like the stars. But they change shape according to the wishes they grant. Currently, they serve as the foundation of each nation, as the fools from six hundred years ago configured them that way. In accordance with their wish, the Dark Cores are used as tools of eternal recovery. The history books say the old fools wished on the Cores to bring peace, but the truth is far from that. They didn't want peace. They wanted to seal the doors to the Netherworld."

Fuyao was having trouble keeping up. She wasn't good with complicated stuff.

Tryphon, meanwhile, kept listening fervently.

"The Netherworld... Do you mean the realm where I fought Terakomari Gandesblood?"

"Yes, Tryphon. A realm with inverse moon phases. Six hundred years ago, there were doors to the Netherworld in each nation, but the old fools wished on the Dark Cores to seal them. That's why most people have forgotten about the Netherworld now."

Fuyao thought back to what had happened at the Mulnite Palace.

A crack had appeared in Terakomari's pendant, from which light had flowed and taken Gandesblood and Tryphon to a different realm. In other words, the crack in Mulnite's Dark Core had loosed the seal on that door to the Netherworld.

"So the Dark Core's current function is to seal the doors. The fact they emit infinite recovery mana is just a side effect. There's a logical explanation for this, but we can go over it some other time."

The confusion served as the trigger.

Cloing. As the "head" stopped thinking, the "tail" surfaced.

"So that means if we destroy the Dark Cores, we get to go back and forth from the Netherworld!"

"Yes! That's exactly what I want to do!"

"And what do you want to do in the Netherworld, Your Highness?" Amatsu asked, arms crossed.

Fuyao straightened her fox ears. Tryphon always talked about that Peace

Spirit committing treason.

"The Netherworld is a utopia. All shut-ins must live in peace over there."

"That's...abstract. We'll need a more detailed explanation if we want Fuyao to understand."

"Lord Amatsu? Are you trying to provoke me?"

"Don't argue, kids." Spica laughed. "This world—let's call it the Foreworld, provisionally—is full of suffering, don't you think? The strong walk around like they own the place, trampling on the weak as if they're flowers on the side of the road. Last year's Six Nations War is a good example. That is why I'm going to gather those with aptitude, the shut-ins, and take them to the Netherworld. There, I will create a utopia without conflict."

"I see. And the Dark Cores are getting in the way of your goal."

Fuyao looked at Amatsu. It didn't seem like any of this was new to him.

"There are six doors to the Netherworld, and six Dark Cores sealing them. By the way, a Dark Core's area of effect extends from the door as its epicenter, so it won't change if you move one around."

"So the doors are at the center of each nation?"

"Exactly. In Mulnite's palace and Aruka's former palace. There are other doors around the world, but they are only forced open through lightning or storms. They disappear after a while, too, so we can't rely on them."

"But you confined the Mulnite Empress to the Netherworld, correct? How did you accomplish that?"

"There was a blizzard during the attack, remember? The door opened, so I simply shoved her in."

"Hmm." Cornelius crossed her arms. "So destroying a Dark Core opens its respective door to the Netherworld. This calls for investigation."

"Destroying just one isn't enough. If we allow even one Dark Core to remain, others will use it for wrong. Especially those Star people..."

"...Nothing." Spica narrowed her eyes somberly.

"Your Highness," Amatsu said inexpressively. "Could you get to your point already? What do we gain by helping you?"

"Heh. Don't look at things like that, Amatsu. This is no ambition to be gauged by merits and demerits. This is a story of love."

Everyone but Tryphon was befuddled by her delirium once again.

"You'll find out. You all are Lunae because you have what is needed to empathize with my ideals. Regardless, Inverse Moon's true goal is to destroy the Dark Cores and build a utopia in the Netherworld. That's all I wanted to say today. Now let's have dinner."

Spica wrapped up the conversation, but Fuyao rose to her feet in a frenzy.

"Your Highness! I'm still confused. Couldn't you at least give us more details on the Netherworld?"

"Flowers wilt if you give them too much water."

This again. Fuyao was sure Spica's tendency to keep information to herself was exactly what had led Inverse Moon to crumble.

Still, Fuyao didn't point it out. Being an obedient vassal was the best way to stay alive.

She sat back down with a smile on her face.

"Roger! I will think about it myself."

"I'll just give you a hint."

Spica swayed the lollipop in her hand.

"Maybe you should go to your hometown in the Lapelico Kingdom. You might understand a bit of this world's mysteries there. Although I don't know where exactly your hometown is! Just bring souvenirs, all right?"

Fuyao Meteorite's hometown was in the backwaters of the Lapelico Kingdom.

It was a poor village on the top of a mountain range on the border, where beast-folk led pastoral lives. Its name was Lunar Village.

It no longer existed.

The town's demise had happened a few years back, on the day before the festival where they prayed to the god of harvest.

All the villagers had been preparing everything before noon. Fuyao remembered making rice cakes for the offering with her family.

Then a vampire had appeared and ruined everything.

Crimson Lord Yulinne Gandesblood.

Her flames had engulfed the village in an instant. Young Fuyao had been taken to the storehouse for protection and had hidden behind the wine barrels for the festival as she heard the village burn. By nightfall, she'd only been able to hear the chirping of birds.

Fuyao had come out of the storehouse and found her hometown devastated.

Burned fields. Houses turned to ashes. Piles of corpses.

Lunar Village had been one of the few rural settlements that was outside the range of a Dark Core. Her loved ones would not return. Her father, her mother, and her big brother were all dead, slain by the hand of Yulinne Gandesblood.

Ever since then, Fuyao had been stuck in a monochrome world.

No joy, no sadness—just day after day of mechanically swinging her sword.

The pursuit of strength was like an art.

Making blood spill and screams fly were acts of revolution that brought color to the world. The only way she could repaint her world was to take revenge. To obtain absolute strength.

No. This train of thought is poisonous.

A voice came from the bottom of her consciousness.

Her "tail" was a worrywart. The "head" responded as she crossed the snow.

I know. The past is a stimulating drug, but also a poison that eats away at my heart.

—Yes. Do not lose yourself to despair at the sight of Lunar Village.

Is there any reason to despair at this point? It should be nothing but ruins.

Fuyao had walked for three hours from the closest Gate.

The white of the snow was even stronger now; she shivered with every lick of the chilly breeze on her ears. Just as she'd begun losing her patience at the thought of the trip being for nothing, she realized something: The path was too easy to traverse.

A series of footsteps and wheel tracks had made a road through the snow.

This can't be right. There's nothing beyond here.

—Don't you feel the people there?

What do you mean...?

The "tail" didn't respond. Fuyao felt something was off and hurried on her way.

She ran, weaving through the barren trees until she reached a forked road with a sign she had no memory of: Lunar Village This Way.

Fuyao stepped into the wintry settlement.

It was unlike what she remembered.

But that was no surprise. Lunar Village had burned down.

"No way... They rebuilt it ...?"

There were a few thatch-roof houses here and there. Fuyao walked farther in, driven by confusion.

Then laughter shook her eardrums.

Some fox-eared children were throwing snowballs at one another on the frozen fields.

A sight so peaceful that one couldn't believe this place had once been host to a tragedy. Fuyao stood there at a loss.

The children continued their snowball fight for a while until they noticed the visitor and stopped. They stared blankly at the stranger.

Over there. My house was right in the middle of the village.

Fuyao turned around at the urging of the "tail."

Despite the cold, she couldn't stop sweating. But this wasn't the elation of facing a strong opponent or the despair of an overwhelming defeat. No, she was feeling pure and simple disgust.

"Here..."

There was a house near the town well; another detail that contradicted her memory.

She felt nauseous the moment she saw the name on the doorplate: Meteorite

Only Fuyao's clan used such a strange name.

Which meant even though they were supposed to be dead...

"Oh, is that a visitor?"

Fuyao clutched the hilt of her sword as she turned around.

She felt like she had slipped off a cliff.

Seeing that man made the old wound in her heart itch.

"...Brother?"

She felt like she had stepped into the world of the dead.

But upon further inspection, it wasn't him. His face didn't look like that. He just had a similar air about him.

"Who are you, little lady?"

"No...who are you...?"

"I live here. You're not from these parts, are you? Are you someone's relative? That's a pretty nice weapon you have there. Could it be you're with the royal army?"

The snow fell quietly. Lunar Village was turning whiter and whiter.

And yet Fuyao's world had turned oddly colorful.

She wanted to throw up. Nauseous, she cupped her hand over her mouth and fell to the ground.

The man rushed to help her up.

"Are you unwell? I should take you somewhere warmer..."

Fuyao didn't have the energy to push him away. Confusion, fear, and nostalgia filled her mind.

The "tail" groaned.

So that's how it is. This is reality. No question about it... My Lunar Village was destroyed. The shadow of Her Highness is devastating. I'm being toyed with by this nostalgic illusion. Dancing in the palm of the Wicked God Slayer's hand. Yes. A stimulant and a poison.

She could only hold back tears as she was shown to the Meteorite residence.

The sights of her birthplace, of her hometown, brought her back. They were different from her memory but still too similar. She could feel warmth and familiarity. Color was returning to her monochrome world.

I see.

Her Highness had shown her a choice.

"If you stop and live like a normal girl, your lust for revenge will fade away little by little. A lovely rosy tint will return to your world. Unlike the rest of us, you still have another path left.

"So what will you do?

"Will you keep the truth hidden and live happily in Lunar Village? Or will you face reality head-on and fight on my side? Choose whichever you want. I won't be mad."

For Her Highness to go out of her way to suggest I come here... Does that mean there's no value in the truth I'm looking for...?

Cloing. Cloing.

The world flipped.

Ever since the day Lunar Village had burned down, a noise like a *cloing* had echoed inside her head.

Tail and head. Good and evil. Enemy and ally. Lie and truth.

The sound of a biwa flipping it all.

₩

The door to the Netherworld opened.

I wanted more time to prepare, but there was no use crying over spilled milk.

There was too much to do.

Destroy Star Citadel. Seal the gateway. Build a utopia.

And reunite with the friend I had been separated from six hundred years prior.

"Let us meet again after 622 seasons have passed. Beside the heavenly jewel."

She was a medium, capable of seeing the future.

There was no doubt her words were the truth.

Soon, 622 seasons would have passed.

"Wait for me. Our wish will be granted soon."

I licked my blood candy while walking down the cobblestone streets of Jingshi.

I shall take outside all those lamenting inside their rooms.

Let us shut ourselves in a world without sadness.

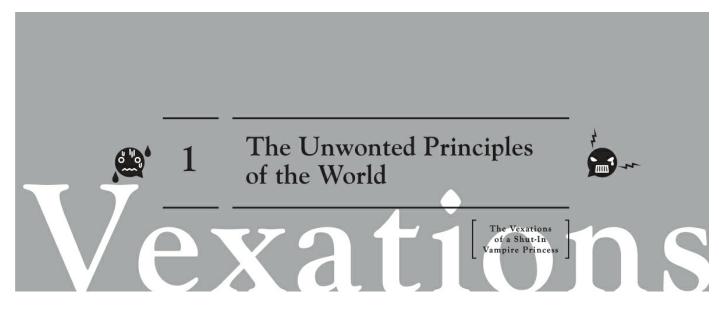
Terakomari would probably reproach me for being too pessimistic.

But I didn't know any other way of earning inner peace.

In fact, I was certain this was the best way.

And I will achieve it.

Even if I have to flip the world on its head in the process.



Six Nations News, March 24th Morning Edition

## DARK CORE BREAKDOWN: ALL IMMORTALS ARE PROHIBITED FROM GOING OUTSIDE

The government of the Enchanted Lands announced yesterday that their Dark Core has broken down. Reasons unknown. Chaos broke out all over the Enchanted Lands and the Dark Core Zone as Immortals lost the blessing of infinite recovery. In response, former Tianzi Yizhu Ailan instituted a curfew and declared a national state of emergency. A spatial calamity was also observed at the Zijingong during the time when the Dark Core is believed to have broken down. Multiple attendees of the coronation disappeared. Among the vanished are the new Tianzi, Her Majesty Terakomari Gandesblood, and her Empress, Her Majesty Lingzi Ailan, bringing tremendous turmoil to the Enchanted Lands' administration. The international community is facing the problem with gravitas and will hold a Six Nations Council in Jingshi. All Immortals are advised to stay at home until the government issues a new announcement. You will not be coming back if you die.



"Good morning, Lady Komari. It's a beautiful day."

My mind surfaced from the sea of slumber.

Huh? What was I doing?

I remember...going to the Enchanted Lands. Fighting Nerzanpi. Saving Lingzi's life.

Then there was the wedding and the coronation, and I was so lost already, and then...

"Still sleepy, are we? Allow me to join you, then. Lend me your cute little tummy as a pillow... Oh, the softness... Should I suck your blood while we're at it...?"

"WHOOOA?!"

I launched myself up and away from danger like a firework.

A girl couldn't stop to think for a second in Vill's presence, sheesh.

Even someone as magnanimous and composed as I couldn't help but get annoyed.

"Shoo! If you dare suck even one drop of my blood, I'm gonna demand a month of vacation in reparations!"

"Always a blessing to witness your hot and cold tendencies. However, I believe we have graver matters at hand right now...?"

"What could be graver than your perversion?"

I looked around as Vill urged.

We were in a thick woodland. The early spring breeze shook the treetops with a pleasant rustling of the leaves. It was then I realized I had been lying on the ground.

I brushed the leaves and dirt off my uniform.

"Uhhh, Vill. Where are we? Not a battlefield, like you usually have me wake up in, surely?"

"This is the Netherworld."

"...Excuse me??"

"The Willow Sword, the Dark Core of the Enchanted Lands, shattered to pieces. When the power contained within it was released, we were spirited away to the Netherworld. I surmise this is the same thing that happened back in the Mulnite Palace during the Vampire Riots. But in that case, your pendant..."

The memories came back to me in a torrent.

The crack on the Dark Core, the look of despair on Lingzi's face, the gushing flashes of light.

And the feeling of being sucked up as Vill and I were transported here.

This isn't the time to be sleeping on the ground!

"Bad news—there don't seem to be settlements nearby."

The leaves rustled behind me as Nelia Cunningham revealed herself.

Huh? Nelia? Why?

I tilted my head while she wiped the sweat off her forehead.

"We'd just get hungry staying here. We should move."

"I see. So we're sure this isn't the Enchanted Lands, then?" Vill asked.

"This isn't even our world. I think you were right; this is the Netherworld... Come on, Esther. Stop crying."

"Yes... No... I'm not crying..."

I looked behind Nelia in shock.

There stood the ponytailed vampire Esther.

Something was off about her. She was normally so bold, but now she looked like a kid who'd been left behind in a game of hide-and-seek.

Our eyes met. She looked at me like God had descended to hell.

"You're awake...!"

"Huh? Um, yeah. Morning."

"Commanderrrrrrr!!"

Esther rushed up to me.

She brought her wet eyes close to mine. What's with you, seriously? I can't imagine anything but the literal end of the world making you look like that...

"What should I do?! This wasn't in the Military Academy's curriculum!!"

"What is a 'curriculum'?"

"I don't know what you're supposed to do when you get transported to

another world!!"

"Don't worry about that, Esther. No one does."

"But Ms. Vill...! This wasn't in my schedule, either..."

"Can't you live without a manual?! A real soldier needs the flexibility to adapt!" Nelia said.

"I'm sorry..." Esther hung her head.

I had a dreadful feeling.

"...Are we really in another world?" I turned to Vill.

"Most likely. Look at the trees over there. Those are Arukan cedars, which were supposed to have gone extinct three hundred years ago. The Warblades eradicated them after excessive lumbering for their buildings."

"Wha...? So we're three hundred years in the past?"

"We don't know. But the Arukan cedars aren't the only strange thing here. Look at that flower over there—it's not in the encyclopedias. I would definitely like to take a sample, as a poison aficionado."

"Commander, look up. Are those...two suns?"

I looked up at the sky as Esther asked.

I scrunched up my face and narrowed my eyes at the light. There did seem to be two bright stars in the sky. But why? Had Mr. Sun found a girlfriend while I wasn't looking?

"No, it can't be. I must be seeing things."

"Yeah. You're tired, Esther."

"Yes... Of course!"

Esther ran away from reality.

I was only acting normal thanks to everyone being here with me; I'd be losing my mind if I were alone. I was worried sick about Lingzi and everyone else, though.

"Vill, is it just us four here?"

"Yes. Lady Lingzi and Lady Meihua are nowhere to be found. Although I'm sure they were bathed in the Dark Core's light at the same time as us..."

"There must be an element of randomness to the teleportation," Nelia said in bitter remembrance. "Esther and I were heading over to meet Komari when a light overtook us all of a sudden. It must've chosen people within its range at random and sent them to an arbitrary location. Maybe they're somewhere else in the Netherworld."

"That's terrible!" Esther blanched. "So we're...lost?"

"That's a good way to put it. We have no method of getting back."

"We can't use teleportation magic, either. I imagine the mana doesn't reach all the way there," Vill said.

"Eep!" Esther shrieked like a mouse before collapsing.

I looked after her while thinking about our situation.

This whole thing was incomprehensible. Throwing a tantrum wouldn't solve anything this time, that's for sure.

Stay calm, Terakomari Gandesblood.

Don't forget what happened in the Enchanted Lands.

My lack of consideration had cost me Lingzi once. I could've come up with a way to save her if I had thought harder about it—simply charging ahead without a plan hadn't solved anything.

I could not repeat the tragedy of the Matrimonial War.

I'm a scholarly intellectual. My hermit tendencies have brought me the utmost rationality: the ultimate brainpower.

There HAS to be a way for us to get out of this dilemma.

"Vill! Let me suck your blood!"

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"""Wha—???"""
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All three girls opened their eyes wide. I ignored them and put my hands on Vill's shoulders.

"You gotta see the future! Maybe that will tell us what to do!"

It was an excellent plan, if I did say so myself. Her *Core Implosion*, Pan... What was it again? Anyway, Vill's power was the key to getting us out of here.

Yet for some unfathomable reason, she fidgeted, red in the face.

Quit being so embarrassed! We have no time to lose!

"Hey!" Nelia cut in between us. "There's no need for you to do it. I'll do it."

"But you're a Warblade. Vampire blood won't be good for your tummy."

"Ugh... Then, Esther! You suck Villhaze's blood!"

"I could never! The Military Academy forbids sexual relationships!"

"You're not having sex, and this isn't the academy! You're a vampire! Do it!"

It had to be me after all.

I looked at Vill again. She seemed to have relaxed a little bit.

"...So we're using my Core Implosion to decide what to do, yes?"

"Yeah. Please get us out of this."

"Very well. In that case, there's something I must tell you first."

Her cheeks were still flushed as a serious expression came to her face.

"There are two variants of the ranges I can see with Pandora's Poison. The first variant lets me see the long-term future. The second lets me see the short-term future and use a time-lag attack, Future Bomb. What we need now is the former, but the problem is that I can only use it once every five or so days."

"You never mentioned that."

"I only measured it recently and forgot to tell you about it. I'm sorry."

I wasn't asking for an apology. It's my fault for not having the least interest in your power. I couldn't even remember what it was called... My ignorance is laughable at this point.

"No, I should've asked. I'll try to be more mindful going forward."

"That's wonderful to hear. I shall do the same, as well. Back on topic, I think

we must choose the moment to use Pandora's Poison very carefully."

"Gotcha. That makes sense."

"Also, I can only see *one point* in the future with it. I'm afraid it won't be as useful as you hope."

So it wasn't as omnipotent as I'd thought.

Still...we had to rely on her.

"Our first step will be huge. I think now's the time. Would you look at one week in the future?"

"I understand." Vill nodded. "Then allow me the time to prepare mentally. I'll need about three hours of meditation to coll— Aiiieee?!"

I ignored her silliness and bit her neck.

"Lady Komari...!" the maid screamed as I slurped her blood. My sight was dyed red. Core Implosion: *Blood Curse*... But my mind was calm like still water. Burning mana overflowed, but I kept myself in check.

I gently drew my mouth away from her skin.

Vill's eyes and face were beet red.

"What do you see?" I asked.

Nelia and Esther gulped behind us.

Vill remained silent for a while.

"Ahhh," she sighed. "Lady Komari..."

Her face turned from red to blue.

An air of dread. From the trembling of her fingers, I already had an idea of what she'd seen.

Vill hesitated for a moment before stating the unbelievable prophecy.

"In one week...you will die...by my side...like in deep slumber..."

A literal death sentence.

My lips trembled.

"Don't lie."

"I'm not."

"Tell me the truth."

"I just did."

The shock made my crimson mana subside.

My adventure in the Netherworld had gotten off to the most terrible of starts.



Our plan was set: don't die.

"Wait... That's the same plan as always."

"It's not the same. I believe the Dark Core doesn't reach us here, so death would be for real."

"What?! And now you're coming up with this story about me dying in seven days?"

We marched through the gloom across the Netherworld forest. Supposedly extinct Arukan cedars were everywhere.

According to Vill's prediction, I would die in a week. No details. Only that I would draw my last breath in peace by Vill's side.

The readings of Pandora's Poison weren't absolute, of course. The future could be changed through action. But...I still felt like there was a knife to my throat.

"You don't get it." Nelia chuckled. "Think of it the other way around. That means you won't die for at least a week, Komari. Less brooding and more walking. We'll come up with what to do next once we get out of this forest."

"Yeah... You're right..."

No, wait. But I just said the future could be changed. I can't be sure I'll be all right for one week. I could still die sooner than that.

"Lady Komari? What are you plucking?"

"Horsetail. I think we can have this for dinner..."

I held back the tears while grabbing an armful of horsetail.

Awww, why did this happen to me...? I was gonna have a snack party with Sakuna in the safety of my home tonight.

"You can't eat that raw. Esther, can you cook it with fire magic?"

"About that... It seems like there's something wrong with my magic," Esther replied with worry.

Around her floated the frightful Chain Metal, shivering as though it would fall at any moment.

"I can't control my weapon very well. What could this mean?"

"There's no mana supply from the Dark Core. I can't get my twin blades going, either," Nelia said.

"No, but mana should be all over nature. That's how we can still use magic outside the area of effect of our Dark Cores. But I can't feel anything here..."

Nelia frowned.

"...Mana normally comes from outside sources. We still have some in our bodies from our world, but we won't be able to use magic if we run out of it."

Forget about cooking the horsetail, we're cooked! That means we can't do anything but hide in the shadows like pill bugs if we come across any enemies.

"It's okay, Lady Komari." Vill rubbed her cheek against mine. *Stop.* "I will protect you. I fight with poison to begin with, not magic."

"Thanks, but please get off me. It's hot."

"Apologies. I just feel like you'll up and vanish if I don't stay so close to you..."
"...?"

Are you afraid of the prediction? Or just anxious about being in this weird place?

Either way, Vill was only a sixteen-year-old girl. Of course she'd be afraid.

"Don't worry." I patted her head. "I won't die. So ease up and follow me."

"Lady Komari...!" Vill wiped her eyes for some reason. "Ahhh, I can't believe it.

You've grown so much... It feels like only yesterday that you couldn't go to sleep without sucking on my thumb."

"I've never done that."

"I vow to remain at your side so long as I live. I'll cling to you like we're two kids in a trench coat."

"Geez, I show you the smallest bit of human decency and you take advantage of it! Get off me!"

You made me drop all the horsetail, darn it.

Just then, the wind blew, and the trees rustled. A strange butterfly fluttered in front of us.

"Wait." Nelia, leading the pack, came to a halt.

Vill kneaded my arm like flour as I stopped, too.

"... What's up? Should we go the other way?"

"No. Can't you hear that?"

A metallic ringing echoed.

"Waaah!" Esther shrieked and crouched down. She'd run out of mana to control Chain Metal. Now she could no longer swing her weapon around.

The sound.

I listened carefully.

The rustling of the trees. Something breaking.

And a scream.

"Someone's getting attacked!" Nelia grabbed the hilt of her sword and took off in a sprint.

"Let's go, Lady Komari." My maid pulled me behind her.

Esther followed us like a duckling heading after its parent.

We carefully made our way through the trees. I could hear the noise clearly now and feel the tension in the air. People were fighting.

"Stop." Nelia spread her arms.

We hid in the bushes and looked ahead.

"Wha ...?"

A carriage was turned over, leaning against a tree.

Right next to it sat a totally average girl. She sighed in pain with every move she made. Her shoulder was bleeding lightly.

Surrounding her was a group of men in anachronistic armor, like knights from a novel. But this wasn't fiction. They glared at the girl with murder in their eyes.

"That emblem on their armor... That's the Aruka Kingdom's." Nelia gasped, eyes wide.

The Aruka Kingdom? That's the country Nelia was the princess of, right? Does that mean we really have traveled back in time?

The moment the question popped into my mind, the wounded girl shouted: "Just try it if you can, you Arukan brutes!"

She looked younger than me. Her hair was blue like the sky.

"Kill me, and the Empire will take matters into their own hands! Do you want to throw your families to the fire, too?!"

The armored men kept inching closer.

"A-all right! You want money, then?! I'll pay you as much as you want, so just give up and go away for now! Then we'll both be at pea—"

One of the men threw a knife, which cut a smooth gash in the girl's cheek.

I almost screamed out. It was no lethal wound, but it had drawn blood. The girl went pale as she realized there was no chance for negotiations.

"S-stop! There's no point doing this! Please! Stay back!"

The armored men kept silent, but I could still tell they were intent on slaughtering their prey.

...What the heck? How did we come across such a disaster the moment we wandered into the Netherworld?

I looked at my friends with a pleading expression.

Nelia narrowed her eyes in thought. Vill was giving the blue girl a blank stare. Esther looked back at me with tears in her eyes.

"Commanderrrr! What do we do?! Are those army men? Wouldn't trying to help her incite a war? Intruding on a fight goes against the Imperial Military Law..."

"I don't give a crap about war or the law!"

I clenched my fist and took the leap of a lifetime.

I had no idea what was going on, but I couldn't allow violence to happen on my watch.

"You there! Why are you ganging up on a little—?"

The moment I stood up, my foot got caught on a tree root.

"Whoooa?!"

I tripped comically.

"Commander?!" "Komari?!" "Lady Komari!!" my friends shouted.

For the love of... This was my time to shine...

As the misery took over me, a silly sound effect echoed—whammo!

I hugged the ground while everyone looked at me.

u n

I couldn't lift my face from the sheer pain and embarrassment.

What the heck? I muster my courage, and all I get for it is a memory to cry over in bed?

I could only hope I really was in bed already and about to wake.

"Who are you?!"

The armored men broke their silence and unsheathed their swords as they looked at us. They lost no time in jumping us, as though they'd been ordered to take anyone down on sight.

Clearly, if I didn't stand up, the only sleep I would be getting was of the eternal variety.

That same moment, Nelia and Vill came back to themselves.

They ran low to the ground at the enemy before the knights could begin their attack in full.

"Diverse Divide." Nelia's eyes glowed scarlet.

A pink flash struck the man heading for me.

That was enough to send him flying away with a muffled scream.

Still, they had the numerical advantage. There were about a dozen left.

I figured I'd better join the fight and grabbed the nearest weapon I could find (a stick), but then Vill shouted as she spun her kunai in her hand.

"Don't worry, Lady Komari. We'll take care of them. You can stand back and watch."

"Do as Vill said! Go somewhere safe with Esther!" Nelia yelled.

That reminded me of my subordinate. Esther was mumbling to herself, "My Chain Metal..."

She couldn't fight like normal due to the lack of mana.

"Esther! Let's run away!"

"I—I can't! The Seventh Unit rules state that withdrawing merits the death penalty!"

"There's no such rule!"

"There is! Lieutenant Helders told me so!"

"That idiot's just duping the newbies!"

I had to remember to give him a stern talking-to later. That rule was over.

I pulled Esther by the hand and hid behind a rock.

A grand battle was taking place on the other side. Shrill screams echoed with every swing of Nelia's blades, and nasty vomits with every burst of Vill's poison smoke.

They could probably handle it by themselves, but I couldn't stay still. I also had the power to fight.

"Esther! Let me suck your blood!"

"Fweh?"

I put my hands on her shoulders and shouted:

"I don't wanna use my Core Implosion so frequently...but I can't just stand by while they fight! Please!"

"Wh...wha...? N-no!"

Esther looked away, red like a strawberry for whatever reason.

... Huh? What's with that reaction?

"I think you're strong enough as is, Commander!"

"Umm... I mean, yeah, but I can be even more powerful if I suck your blood!"

"No! I've never done that before..."

"Gah..." Enough wasting time! "This is an order! Let me suck your blood, Esther!"

"?!?!" Her whole body stiffened up like a nail.

I didn't like resorting to my authority, but lives were at stake here.

"Roger..." Esther saluted with a barely audible reply.

The duty to follow her superiors' orders had been engraved into her very core.

She shut her eyes tight. I locked on to her sweaty neck and slowly drew my face closer.

"Lady Komari, I told you to stand back and watch."

## ""Waaah?!""

Esther and I screamed in unison.

The maid had appeared out of the blue from a puff of dark mist.

"Vill?! And the enemy?! The battle?!"

"We already defeated them. Look." Vill pointed with her chin at the piles of unconscious armored men.

The girl was fine, too. She was clutching Vill's clothes while giving Esther and me a look of confusion.

"Th-thank goodness! So no one's hurt?"

"Not physically. To think you would cheat on me while I was fighting for my—for *our* lives. This cannot stand. I demand you suck me dry in apology."

"We don't have time for your jokes, Villhaze. The girl is hurt." Nelia approached while sheathing her swords.

Everyone looked at the girl hiding behind the maid.

"Um," Vill said timidly, "it's okay now. We've taken care of those men... Or do you want something from me?"

The sky-blue girl clung to Vill.

Hey, I get it. Those guys almost killed you a second ago.

"I-I'm sorry." She quickly took a step away from Vill, but her eyes stayed locked on the sicko maid.

It was like she had just met her Prince Charming... *Hmm? What's the meaning of this?* 

"Er, thank you for saving me... My name is Colette Lumiere. Could you tell me yours?" she said, introducing herself with a trembling voice.

Colette did not take her eyes off Vill. And she was *still* holding her hand. I had to stop myself from warning Colette not to touch Vill so much, lest the maid's degeneracy rub off on her.

Vill was unusually taken aback.

"My name is Villhaze. I am her—Lady Terakomari Gandesblood's—loyal servant."

"Villhaze... What a...wonderful name..." Colette's eyes shone bright.

She stared intently at Vill as her cheeks turned rosy.



...Hmm. I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

Not a life-threatening omen. The feeling that things would get troublesome in our interpersonal relationships.

In any case, it had only been two hours since we'd arrived at the Netherworld, and we'd met our first villager.



We treated Colette with the medicine and bandages in the carriage.

There really was no Dark Core in the Netherworld. The fact Colette was out and about with a first aid kit showed she wasn't expecting potential wounds to be magically healed.

"Now then, what should we ask first?"

We were still in the forest. We had tied the armored guys to the trees.

Everyone sat down in a relatively open space.

"Colette...was it? Who are you?"

"I'm just a passerby," the girl answered curtly.

I observed this Colette Lumiere girl.

Her youthful face was wrinkled in annoyance. She was between Vill and me in height, but I felt like she was younger than me. There was something about her that reminded me of my nefarious little sister, Lolocco.

She was still at Vill's side, staring at her constantly for some reason.

"Um, Lady Colette, could you please give me a rest from your gaze?"

"S-sorry." She looked away immediately.

Why is she doing that, though? Does Vill have something on her face?

I stared at my maid, too, looking for an answer. But then Vill flushed and said she'd fall for me if I kept looking at her, so I just looked at Nelia instead.

"So you're a Netherworld native. What do you know about the men in armor? Why are they wearing the Arukan emblem? And why were they attacking you?" Nelia asked.

"They're barbarians. They must've thought a girl traveling by herself was easy pickings."

"What do you mean, 'traveling'...? Didn't you say you were a passerby?"

"...What, is there a problem? How does that contradict what I said?"

"It's just, there's something fishy here." Nelia looked at the carriage.

It must have belonged to the men. It had Aruka's emblem on it.

But why was it tipped over? Colette couldn't have done that, could she?

"Are you accusing me of lying? There's something fishy about *you*. How do I know you're not trying to get me to lower my guard so you can attack me?"

"We wouldn't have saved you if we were, Lady Colette," Vill said.

"Aw..." Colette flinched and fidgeted before bowing. "I'm sorry."

Hmm? Did she just change personalities? Or am I imagining things?

"Okay, then. I'll say this to clear up any suspicion. We came here from another world. There's a lot we want to ask you," Nelia said.

"What? And you say I'm making stuff up?"

"It's true. We were transported to this forest all of a sudden," Vill said.

"R-really? Oh, that must've been terrible..."

Okay, I'm not going crazy. She's only being nice with Vill.

Nelia appeared to have noticed, too. She murmured something in Vill's ear.

The maid furrowed her brow for a second but then nodded right away and turned to Colette.

"Lady Colette, if it's not too much trouble, would you mind me asking a few questions?"

"Mmm..." She hesitated for a moment. "...Fine. I'll tell you what I can because you saved me."



"First, we want to know: Are we right to believe this is the Netherworld?"

Colette had said there was a town over west. She was guiding us through the forest to it.

We couldn't use the carriage since the horses had fled.

Colette swung a plant like a foxtail in hand as she tilted her head. Even her mannerisms were more childlike than mine. Naturally, as she had said, she was fourteen.

"The Netherworld? What's that? We're in the north of the state of Laotto."

"Laotto...? If I may ask, what country does it belong to?"

"The Aruka Kingdom, duh."

Nelia, guarding the rear, turned to the girl in surprise.

"...Wait, Colette, this is Aruka?"

"What? Aren't you a Warblade? How do you not know your own country?"

"I am the president of the Aruka Republic. The Aruka Kingdom doesn't exist anymore."

"That joke isn't funny. The Aruka Kingdom is doing just fine. Those armored guys were from Aruka, and it's their fault Mulnite's so messed up right now."

"Mulnite...?" Vill blinked. "So there's the Mulnite Empire, too?"

"Of course! That's my homeland... Um, if you'd like, I could take you there later, Vill."

Nelia crossed her arms.

"Aruka and Mulnite... What other countries are there? Do you know the Lapelico Kingdom or the Enchanted Lands?"

"You really don't know anything, huh? Fine, I'll tell you."

To summarize, Colette told us the following:

The Aruka Kingdom, the Mulnite Empire, and the Enchanted Lands existed in this world. Alongside those nations were others I wasn't familiar with, like the Najd Empire and the Toumor Republic. There were a total of, like, forty of them.

"And...you really can't use magic? There's no mana?" Esther asked with

exhaustion.

"Don't be stupid." Colette sighed. "There's no magic. That's all fairy tales."

Everyone was flabbergasted.

There really was no concept of mana or magic in the Netherworld.

Nelia sighed.

"...Oh well. It'll be a waste of mana, but we need you to believe us."

"What're you babbling about?"

"I'll show you magic. Elementary-level spell: Light Whirlwind."

Pink mana gathered at Nelia's fingertips. Then a whirlwind formed in the palm of her hand.

It was one of the most basic spells around, yet Colette reacted to it as if a bomb had just gone off, her jaw dropping.

"I'm not good at magic, since I'm a Warblade and all... But you get it now, right?"

Nelia clenched her fist, and the little tornado dissipated like the flame of a candle.

"Our world has magic in it. That should be proof we come from another world."

"Wh-what the...?! Wow!" Colette came up to Nelia in excitement. "That wasn't a trick, was it?! Do it again!"

"No. We have to save our mana for when we really need it."

"Awww... I wanna see more!"

"I said no."

Colette clung to Nelia like a child throwing a tantrum. The latter seemed to enjoy the attention and Colette's excitement over such a rudimentary spell.

"All right, all right." Colette nodded. "I'll admit it, Nelia. You all come from another world. No wonder you don't know anything about this country."

"Exactly. And I'd like you to tell us more about it."

"Yeah! I'll do it, and in exchange, you show me more magic!"

Nelia forced a smile.

Would I get to be friends with her, too, if I could use magic?

What if I do that little trick where you pluck your thumb off? Would Colette like it? No, she would slap me.

"Real magic! That's so amazing, Nelia. That's not one of those powers, is it?"

"What powers are you talking about?"

"You don't know about that? There's some people in this world who can use supernatural powers. We call 'em espers. Though I've never seen one in the flesh."

"Hmm? And how is that different from magic?"

"I think it's because their eyes shine red."

That had to be Core Implosion. It looked like Nelia, Vill, and Esther had realized this, too.

"I see." Vill stroked her chin and cocked her head. "There's Core Implosion despite there being no magic. Interesting."

"Huh? Wait, Core Implosion is supposed to be a superpower born from cutting the connection to a Dark Core, right? So what happens when there's no Dark Core? What if my superduperpower activates on its own...?" I asked.

"No, I would say it's the other way around. The connection to a Dark Core is cut *because* of Core Implosion. So I would imagine the lack of Dark Cores here has no bearing on the power... And if that's the case... Hmmm..."

"What are you two talking about?" Colette raised an eyebrow. "Whatever, just tell me more about magic. Do you think I can use it, too?"

"It would be difficult without mana. Even we can't use it much here in the Netherworld. I would rather ask you more about the powers."

Vill peered straight into Colette's eyes.

I'm also curious about the use of Core Implosion in the Netherworld.

"Is it a normal power? Can your average person use it?" Vill asked.

"No way. It's so rare that you're lucky if you get to see one of those abilities even once in your life. But as far as I know, most of the commanders of the Mulnite Empire are espers."

"Mulnite commanders? You mean me?" I asked.

"Why would I be talking about you?"

"I introduced myself earlier! I'm Terakomari Gandesblood."

"Why would a stupid little girl like you be a commander?"

"S-stupid...? Little girl...?"

How... How dare you!! There's things you shouldn't say, even if they're true!

I took a step forward to exact punishment on her—a merciless barrage of the tickles—when my maid stopped me. Aren't you supposed to be on my side?! I'll execute you, too! For treason!

"Also...they say it was an esper who created the world."

"Things got huge all of a sudden. Could you tell us more?"

"Of course!"

Colette was elated to answer Vill's questions.

I was the opposite of that because Vill had me in a Nelson.

"This realm was created six hundred years ago at the hand of the strongest vampire—the Scholar. She used her power to bring order to the world of chaos. Even now, she lives in the God Slayer Tower at the center of the world...or so they say. I don't believe it. There's no way someone can live for six hundred years."

"'Scholar'? See? She's talking about me," I said.

"Ha!" Colette snickered. "There's nothing scholarly about you, clearly. They teach this stuff in elementary school."

"I—I went to elementary school! I actually had some of the best grades in class, just so you know."

"Yeah, sure."

"Agh..."

Colette's attitude toward me was thornier than a rose.

I'd been hoping we could be friends at first...but I was beginning to dislike her myself, too.

"There, there, Lady Komari. You're a genius." Vill patted my head.

You're not winning me over with that cheap talk!

"Uhhh, Vill," Colette said with a cold stare. "Who is that girl anyway? Your friend?"

"She's my master."

"Hmm..." She stared at me so hard that I'd be Swiss cheese by now, if I were cheese.

It looked like she was jealous of me. Because she liked Vill, I guess...? But really? They'd met just a while ago.

Although I supposed it was only natural to be moved after being saved from death so gallantly.

Not to mention, I already knew a vampire who'd fallen in love within three seconds of meeting someone—my little sister.

"Back on topic," said Nelia, sweeping away my worries. "So the Netherworld has no Dark Cores and no magic. Instead, it has weird laws of physics and the Aruka Kingdom. We have to find a way to go back home ASAP."

"Yes. Within a week, before Lady Komari dies."

Everyone but Colette grew despondent.

The Netherworld. Powers. The Scholar. The Dark Core. Magic. The Aruka Kingdom. The prophecy of my death... And Colette Lumiere. There was so much to process, I felt like my head was a balloon about to burst.

But I couldn't let myself be defeated. I had to find a way.

"Commander, I can hear people in the distance," Esther whispered into my

ear.

Despite that, Colette still overheard her.

"Probably Arukan soldiers on patrol. This is their territory."

"Aren't they looking for you?"

"They capture any suspicious person. Vampires especially."

"Why?"

"Because there's a war going on between Aruka and Mulnite."

I gasped, but Colette didn't seem to care and continued.

"No, not just between them. There's conflict among multiple factions all around the world. They say it's been going on since waaay before I was born."

There were no Dark Cores in the Netherworld—no Dark Core Zone.

There could be no sports-war without it.

Which meant this was real warfare.

"The truth is that the Warblades kidnapped me. I seized a chance to run away, and that's when they attacked me."

"So you plan to go back to the Mulnite Empire?" Vill asked.

"Yeah. What about you?"

What could we even say?

I looked at Nelia.

"...How far is Mulnite from here?" she asked.

"At the very least, two weeks to the Imperial Capital."

Two weeks in a world at war... That was insane.

Only crazies like the Seventh Unit's berserkers would go on such a reckless trip.

To begin with, going to Mulnite didn't mean we'd be back in our world.

Then Colette got right into my face. She was staring at me for some reason.

"Wh-what's up? Is there something on my face?"

"I feel like you resemble the Hero of Twilight. You even share last names."

"The what? More new stuff?"

"The Hero of Twilight: Yulinne Gandesblood. The vampire based in Mulnite who's trying to stop the war."

My heart jumped out of my chest.

Memories surfaced from the snow.

The fight in the Mulnite Palace. The news I'd learned of in Frezier.

Right—Mom's fighting in the Netherworld.

And I'm in the Netherworld now. She's here.

"M-my mom!" I grabbed Colette's shoulders. "My mom is in Mulnite?!"

"Huh? Your mom? She should be in Mulnite... But wait, Yulinne's your mom? The Hero of Twilight?"

"Yes! She... What's she doing over in this Mulnite?!" Nelia stared at Colette with a serious look on her face, too.

"I don't know the details," the sky-blue girl said. "I just know she's doing what she can to stop the war. She's in the newspaper sometimes... They say she goes from battlefield to battlefield, suppressing armies."

I thought back to what the Shade, Kilty, had said in the hot springs resort town.

"The Netherworld is in strife thanks to one big fool.

"We know them as Yusei.

"And the one who is keeping Yusei in check is your mother, Yulinne."

Nelia placed her hand on my head.

"Komari, you said your mom brought you back to our world when you wandered into the Netherworld during the Vampire Riots, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Then we have to go to Mulnite. I'm sure she can tell us what to do."

Our course of action was decided.

We would travel to the Mulnite Empire while making sure I wouldn't die in a week, then reunite with my mother and find a way to go back to our world. The journey would most likely be far more arduous than I could imagine, but I still couldn't help but feel excited.

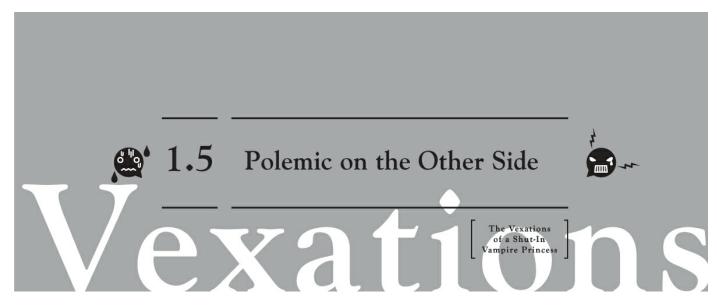
I would get to meet Mom.

Just the thought filled me with courage like a geyser.

"I'll invite you to my house once we reach Mulnite, Vill. You can hang out, too, Nelia, Esther. Hopefully Terakomari can find somewhere to stay."

*"…"* 

Although I was bursting with courage...I wasn't sure I'd manage to get along with this girl.



The Enchanted Lands, Jingshi.

Karla Amatsu furrowed her brow as she sat at an outdoor table.

She had hurried to Jingshi from the Heavenly Paradise after learning of the Dark Core's collapse.

And from what she had heard, a door to the Netherworld had opened, and multiple people had gone missing, among them her friends Terakomari Gandesblood and Nelia Cunningham. Actually, it sounded like she was the only one of the Six Valkyries who was still here.

It was too ridiculous to believe, but there had been multiple witnesses, and the door was open right beside her, to boot.

The phenomenon was right in the middle of the ruins of the Zijingong, which had been destroyed by a meteorite.

A circular hole in the air. About three Karlas tall.

It glowed white, preventing you from seeing anything inside.

Karla had already tried throwing a pebble at it. The rock had vanished into the door and hadn't fallen anywhere on the other side, so it must've been transported to the Netherworld.

She let out a huge sigh.

There was no time to mope around, but the shock of her friends disappearing was too great. Anxiety over their safety whirled inside her chest.

"Don't worry, Lady Karla. Terakomari Sensei must be all right."

Ninja-girl Koharu cheered her up with a pat on the shoulder.

Thankful for the consideration, Karla looked up at her servant.

"Yes. She wouldn't die so easily."

"By the way, Terakomari's fortune for today was dreadful. I asked the Osui Palace's Department of Divinities to read it for me, and the result was 'superterrible luck.' Apparently, there's a great chance of her spontaneously combusting just by walking outside."

"Could you please not ...?"

Better to not put stock in fortunes. What Karla needed to do right now was come up with a plan based on reality. Determined, she looked at her surroundings.

Distinguished individuals had convened at the roundtable.

The Mulnite Empress. The Polar Union's general secretary. Aruka's vice president. Lapelico's prince. And the Enchanted Lands' former Tianzi. A Six Nations Council was about to be held.

"Now then, let us talk about what our course of action will be," spoke the blond vampire sitting next to Karla.

Mulnite Empress Karen Helvetius.

Under normal circumstances, the former Tianzi would have been leading this meeting, but he was shaking in his seat. He was too overwhelmed by the shock of losing the Dark Core and his beloved daughter, and he kept mumbling to himself, "Lingzi... Lingzi..." So after drawing lots, they'd decided to let the Empress be the emcee.

"Mulnite hasn't delivered a statement regarding internal affairs after the Dark Core's collapse. That is the Enchanted Lands' problem. We're happy to help, but we have no intention of proactively involving ourselves. Any objections, former Tianzi Yizhu Ailan?"

"No... The ministers are discussing the matter elsewhere... But Lingzi! Where is Lingzi...? We need to find her...!"

"Exactly. That's the problem."

The Empress gave the door a cold glance as she continued.

"That portal must lead to another world, and we believe it appeared alongside the collapse of the Dark Core. Which would mean Terakomari Gandesblood and Lingzi Ailan were transported to the other side. We have to do something about it."

"Let's send a survey team over to the Netherworld right away!!"

A young man slammed the table as he stood up. A beast-folk with the head of a chicken—the prince of the Lapelico Kingdom.

"One of our precious commanders was also embroiled in this!! Losing Leona is a tremendous blow to our nation!! If none of you act, then I will go through that door alone!!"

"Calm down, Prince. You shouldn't act recklessly."

"How can I calm down?! Leona was going to have a dinner with me!! I won't let anyone ruin my schedule!! I'll put them in the grave!!"

"I have to agree...," said Aruka's vice president.

He was a timid-looking Warblade with a mustache. Karla had heard he'd been Nelia's guard back in the Aruka Kingdom days.

"Aruka is at a standstill without Lady Nelia. We agree with the prince."

"Right!! And what about you?! I'm ready to go to the Netherworld right this moment!! So?! You, from the Heavenly Paradise!! You've been staring at the door this whole time!!"

Karla jumped at being thrown the ball.

The chicken glared at her with fuming indignation.

"Whose side are you on?! Mine?! Or someone else's?!"

"No... I..."

She wanted to go find Komari and Nelia right this moment, but there were too many unknowns. Things could blow up in her face if she staged a rescue without a plan.

"... I think we need a bit more information before we act. Going in without

adequately preparing ourselves could be catastrophic."

"...!!" The chicken turned dark red like a grape.

I'm gonna have nightmares about this.

"You, the ninja!! I don't know much about you, but you're a fan of Terakomari Gandesblood, right?! Don't you wanna say a thing or two to your master?!"

"I can't, as her servant. By the way, Lady Karla hates emotional animals like you."

"Koharu! Shut up!"

"She said she's gonna make fried chicken out of you."

"I'm so sorry Mr. Chicken she doesn't mean it please forgive us."

"I AM NOT A CHICKEN!!"

The prince jumped at her with a cock-a-doodle-doo.

Karla shrieked and ran away. The fuming chicken scattered feathers everywhere as he gave chase. Karla nearly passed out from sheer terror, but she would die if she did, so she pushed herself to keep running.

"STOPPP!!"

"NOW YOU'VE RUFFLED MY FEATHERS!!"

The chicken rampaged. The Goddess fled. The vice president shivered. The general secretary grinned. The former Tianzi crouched under the table and mumbled, "Lingzi..."

And then, the Mulnite Empress...

"PIPE DOWN, Prince! Running after Karla won't solve anything."

...gave a thunderous shout.

"Aw..."

The chicken came to a halt under the pressure.

"...Egg on my face!! I admit I lost my cool...!!"

The chicken broke into a cold sweat as he returned to his seat.

Karla glanced at the Empress with a furrowed brow. She looked grimmer than ever. Perhaps she was the one most affected by Komari's disappearance.

The general secretary rested his head in his hand and asked a question.

"So, Your Majesty, what is your plan?"

"We have an expert coming. Let's ask for her opinion."

"An expert...?"



The wind blew.

The Empress looked behind her. As Karla waited with bated breath for whatever was going to happen, the clouds formed a shadow that rapidly grew three-dimensionally, taking human form.

Karla gasped. It was similar to the presence she'd felt at the Crimson Snow Hut in Frezier.

"Pipe down. How could you argue like kids at a time like this?"

The voice of a woman with a fuzzy echo came from the shadow, as though her words were being transmitted from another realm.

The Empress ignored the others' shocked faces and introduced her.

"This is Kilty Blanc. A little while ago, she showed up and told me she wanted to explain the situation to the council. She has much to tell us."

"Who is she, though? This doesn't seem like a magical phenomenon...," said the vice president of Aruka.

"She's from the Netherworld, apparently. I just met her, but I can confirm this, since she had intel only someone from there could... She also met Komari in the hot springs town of Frezier. You know about this, don't you, Karla?"

"Yes. I didn't meet her, but Ms. Komari explained things to me. But aren't you only able to appear in Frezier, Kilty?"

"The door opened," the shadow said. "Jingshi's connection to the Netherworld was restored after the Dark Core collapsed, allowing people like me to come and go."

"Pardon me saying this, but...you don't seem quite like a person."

"I didn't cross the door physically. I'm only sending my shadow to your side. My body is in the Netherworld."

Komari had told Karla that Kilty belonged to an unknown race called the Shades, who could send their shadows to other worlds.

A question popped into Karla's head.

"...But why don't you come in person now that the door is open?"

"Crossing that door would mean suicide."

Kilty looked at the door in the ruins of the Zijingong. The mysterious white light. Karla felt something ominous about its aura.

"Normally, it should be connected to a precise coordinate in the Netherworld, but I believe Terakomari, Nelia Cunningham, Leona Flatt, and Prohellya Butchersky were all sent to different locations. At the very least, they haven't shown up where they were supposed to. Basically, they're lost. And we don't even know if they're dead or alive."

"Wha ... ?!"

Chills ran down Karla's spine.

The shadow continued without compassion:

"That door is broken. The reason for this is clear—the meteorite that Terakomari Gandesblood summoned on Jingshi. Since ancient times, it's been said that the movements of the stars affect all creation. The impact of the meteorite must have warped the door. This means there's no guarantee anyone would be safe crossing it."

The image of her dear friends in great pain and distress came to mind.

Komari's case was particularly troublesome. Someone had to watch over her.

The previous Goddess had appeared in Karla's dreams and told her to support Komari.

"What're you getting at?! Are you saying we can't send a survey team?!" the chicken yelled.

"That's right. You could very well die if you crossed that door. You wouldn't want to send your people to their deaths, would you?"

"Agh...!! Leona...!!" The prince clenched his fists and hung his head.

Aruka's vice president raised his head as though he had just thought of a solution and looked at Karla.

"Lady Amatsu, I heard you have the power to turn back time."

"What ...?"

"Lady Nelia told me. Wouldn't you be able to fix the door that way?"

"Really?! Please, Heavenly Paradise girl!!"

The vice president and the chicken stared at her with hope in their eyes.

The general secretary also gave her a piercing, testing glance.

Koharu felt her master's fear and put her hand in her pocket as she glared back at them.

Karla lowered her gaze. The vice president and chicken aside...the Sapphire looked like he was after something deeper.

"Can you do it, Karla?" the Empress asked.

"Huh? Ah..."

There was a chance Waving Moment could fix things... But as she observed the door to the Netherworld, she began to have doubts.

Waving Moment could turn back the time of objects, but this wasn't exactly an object they were dealing with. It was more like a phenomenon.

Not to mention...it felt like it had been created through someone's formidable willpower.

It was a vivid cluster of desire. Simply looking at it gave her heartburn.

Was this door a product of Core Implosion...?

In any case, it didn't seem like Waving Moment could fix it.

"...I'm sorry. I don't think I can."

The mood turned glum.

They didn't know if the girls were even alive, and they had no way to go save them.

"Ahhh..." The former Tianzi crumpled in prayer. The Mulnite Empress furrowed her brow in thought. The chicken yelled, "I can't stand it!! I'm going!!" and charged toward the door before the guards stopped him. The shadow sighed.

"I'll send a survey team on this side. I understand you would like to do so

yourselves, but people from this world can't enter the Netherworld unless the door fixes itself or a new one appears naturally."

"That's not true."

A voice echoed, cold and sharp as the winter sky.

The general secretary of the Polar Union grinned.

"A door to the Netherworld opens when a Dark Core breaks. We simply have to repeat the process."

"What are you suggesting...?"

"There are still five complete Dark Cores." He called out behind him. "Pitolina."

A Sapphire girl revealed herself, a look of protest on her face.

"Put it on the table."

"But, General Secretary..."

"Don't worry about it. The proponent bears the responsibility."

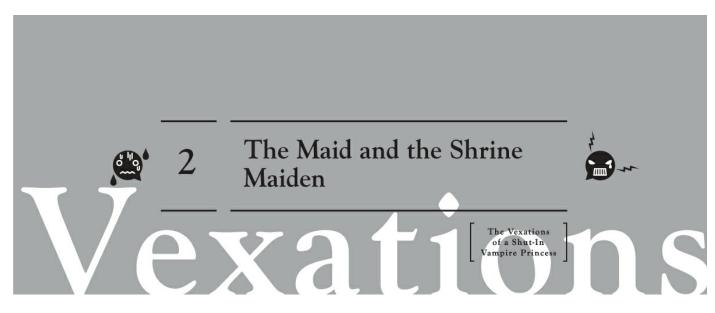
The Sapphire girl, Pitolina Shelepina, hesitated.

"Do it," the general secretary insisted. Pitolina gave in and took a small piano out of her pocket, placing it on the round table.

The luxurious item was shiny black. It had a spring on the back. *Is that a music box?* Karla wondered, but the truth was far from it.

The general secretary revealed the identity of the object like it was nothing.

"This is the Polar Union's Dark Core: the Harmonic Hoarfrost. Let's break it to open the door. It is no big loss if we can save Prohellya."



Here's what we've found out about the Netherworld:

- 1. It has no Dark Core, mana, or magic.
- 2. There's Aruka and Mulnite, and several dozens of other smaller countries.
  - 3. Said nations are split into factions and at war.
  - 4. My mom is fighting to stop it.
  - 5. We have to go to the Mulnite Empire to meet her.
  - 6. I'm going to die in six days (VERY IMPORTANT!)

"Vill! This fried shrimp is delicious! Try it!"

"Thank you, but I already have my share."

"Mine is bigger! Let's trade! Here!"

"Um...Lady Colette."

"Yes? Am I bothering you...?"

"It's no bother. Thank you."

Vill chomped down on the fried shrimp Colette held up with a fork.

Colette's face lit up like the sun, and then she even dared to ask that Vill do the same for her now and opened her mouth in expectation. Vill didn't seem annoyed as she fed Colette her shrimp.

My brain could take it no longer.

"What has been UP with you two this whole time?!?!?!"

My chair fell over as I stood up.

The other diners looked at me.

"Why do you have to feed each other?! You're not children!" I said.

"What's the problem? This is pretty normal..."

"It's not! Vill and I don't do that!"

"Hey, who's getting you something to eat here? If you don't like it, then you can go home."

"Ugh..."

I clenched my spoon and looked at the table.

The steaming-hot omelet rice called to me.

It had been one night since we'd wandered into the Netherworld, and Colette had been forced to take care of us the whole time.

We'd just gotten to a town last night, but obviously, she was the only one with money that could be used in this world. She'd needed to pay for our food and accommodations.

It was thanks to Colette Lumiere herself that I had gotten to have a good night's sleep in a warm bed and I could now enjoy this omelet rice.

But... But even so.

She was crossing a line. She wouldn't let *my* maid go. She ought to ask me for permission before touching my belongings!

"Could it be that you're jealous, Lady Komari?"

"Wha?! Never! Shoo, I'm busy eating my omelet rice."

"Allow me to feed you. Here, say ahhh."

Chomp. Nyom, nyom.

I ate the spoonful Vill offered.

We never do this... This is so embarrassing...

Colette glared daggers at me.

I knew it. She was after Vill. She wanted to take her away from me.

"...Colette, I would like to be your friend."

"No way! Who wants to be friends with a runt?"

"Ru..."

What did she just say?

Did she just call me the Ultimate Slur That Shall Shatter the Heavens?

No, no. I'm just hearing things. Even a girl as rude as her wouldn't dare to insult me to my face like that without considering the murderous consequen—

"Your ears clogged or something, runt? Just keep quiet and enjoy the omelet rice I've so kindly given you, kiddo."

"А...АаАа...ААААААААААААААААААААААНННННН!!!!!"

"Calm down, Lady Komari. You don't have to fight over me."

"Don't try to stop me, Vill! I'm fighting for my pride here! My anger's reached catastrophic levels! I gotta eat all Colette's fried shrimp or all hell will break loose!"

"Let me guess. You eat the foods they say help you grow taller all the time."

"АААААААААААННН!!"

"Keep quiet, Komari. The enemy might find us if you keep screaming like that." Nelia tapped my shoulder with a sigh.

"The commander is plenty big! In heart!" Esther said, purportedly in my defense. Her presence just barely kept me in check, as I had sworn on my honor as a Crimson Lord to not make a fool of myself before my subordinates.

"...I'm sorry. I'm sixteen, so I'm done with childish bickering."

I choked back my ire and sat back down.

Colette stuck her tongue out at me.

I had to keep myself from crying. I wasn't gonna let this jerk take Vill from me. And yet, the omelet rice she'd bought me was so good. I could only tremble in frustration.

"Now, Colette, let's begin our strategy meeting," Nelia said after a sip of coffee. "We want to go to the Mulnite Empire. To do that, the most important thing we'll need is money, right?"

"Yes... You can't do anything without it. I've also heard you need an ID to cross the checkpoint."

"Can't we just force our way through?"

"No, Ms. Vill! That's illegal!" Esther said.

"Yeah, and the punishment is the death penalty. I hear it's particularly bad in Aruka. They say they kill anyone who's suspicious on the spot."

"Well, we're definitely suspicious. Will we be okay?" Nelia asked.

"You're dead meat if they find out who you are. I doubt you entered the country through any official methods."

Esther's eyes spun around, and she began counting the beans on her plate.

Oh, I wanna escape reality, too. Let's draw with ketchup.

"So we really need money and IDs... By the way, how much is left in our funds?"

"Huh? Nothing."

"Hmm?"

"I used everything on the room and today's lunch."

"..."

Nelia pursed her lips.

"Don't worry!" Colette smiled. "We just gotta make more, right? I know the perfect place."



The Netherworld's townscape wasn't anywhere near as eccentric as I'd expected it to be.

It didn't look that different from our world's Aruka.

However, it wasn't only populated by Warblades.

I didn't see any weird people like Nerzanpi around, but there were Sapphires, Immortals, beast-folk, Peace Spirits...even some vampires, whose country Aruka was supposed to be at war with.

"This is Aruka, right? Why're there so many people other than Warblades?"

"This town is extraterritorial. It's a neutral place run by the guild, not the Arukan government. That's why we can be outside without issue."

"Hmmm..."

"We're here."

Colette had shown us to a big building in the center of town.

The sign seemed to read Mercenary Guild. The Netherworld's script was a bit different from ours, though, so I wasn't sure.

Colette hesitated for a moment before opening the door.

Immediately, peals of laughter struck my eardrums, and the smell of alcohol and food hit my nostrils.

"What is this place?" Esther furrowed her brow. We looked inside and saw some huge dudes having a merry old time.

I looked at Colette, hoping for an answer, but she hid behind Vill.

"Lady Colette? What's wrong? What is this bar?"

"This...this is the Mercenary Guild! They manage soldiers for hire here."

Mercenaries? Well, I guess these folks look the part...

"I see." Nelia clapped her hands together with a smile. "We can get an ID if we become mercenaries, right?"

"Y-yeah! They don't have enough people due to the war, so they're letting people without IDs register and take jobs."

"Why are you hiding, though?"

"Because...this place feels more like a 'no girls allowed' club than I expected."

I looked all over the guild.

Colette jumped at every shout from the heavily armed men inside.

I was already used to the Seventh Unit, though.

Oh no. Would a scholarly intellectual be afraid like her instead?

"Don't worry, Lady Colette. I'll protect you."

"Vill...! Thank you."

Colette rubbed her forehead on Vill's maid outfit.

I felt like my brain was going to explode.

What the hell are you doing right in front of me?!

"Easy, Komari. We both know Villhaze only has eyes for you."

"But...every time Vill says something nice to Colette, I feel like screaming and doing squats. What is this incomprehensible feeling?"

"Man, you're a lost cause, huh?" Nelia sighed.

Just then, I heard vulgar cheering.

The men in the guild were looking at us.

"Check this out, guys! We've got cute visitors!"

One dude who looked even nastier than the others approached us.

The Warblade man had a mohawk, and he was followed by more beefy men armed with hammers and clubs. They all looked like killers.

"Oop!" Esther shrieked before hiding behind me.

I get you, girl. I wanna run away myself.

Unfortunately, Vill's back was already occupied by Colette, so I had to stand in the front. Gosh darn it.

"You having a picnic? How about we join you?"

Shrill cackling and coarse whistling.

Nelia sighed and stepped forward.

"What do you want?"

"Ooh, scary. Relax, lady. We were just thinking we'd escort you so the animals over here won't eat you up."

"Aren't you the animals?"

"That hurts! There's no greater gentleman than me!"

A few of them blocked the entrance.

The guild dudes looked at us like we were prey.

Huh? What's going on here? Why are they like this?

"Lady Komari, would you allow me to shoot lethal gas at the mohawk man?"

"No?! They can't revive here, remember?!"

That said, we were already surrounded.

Maybe I'd guessed wrong. These guys, although similarly rambunctious, felt... different from the Seventh Unit.

"What're you here to ask for? We're Dragonhead, and we're earth rank. The strongest party 'round these parts. So what'll it be? Looting? Assassination? Escort? Just know we're not cheap."

"Don't touch me."

Nelia slapped Mohawk Man's hand away.

He took a step back with a whistle.

"Saucy lady."

"Piss off. We're not here to make a request."

"Oh? Then why are you?"

"To become mercenaries."

The mohawk man's eyes turned to dots, as if he'd just heard a bad joke.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!" They all laughed out loud.

"Come on! Don't make us laugh! You girls? Mercenaries? Sure, sure. Wanna get into our party, then? We'll take good care of ya."

"What a bunch of losers... Komari, tell 'em."

"Huh?"

Nelia pulled me before the mohawk.

They stared at me with confusion.

"And you are? Little babies should go shut themselves in their rooms and sleep. We're talking with the pink-haired girl."

...Mmm? Baby?

Did he just call me a baby? Even though I'm the same age as Nelia? What made him call me that?

I heard something crack by my side before I could even begin to pop my own vein.

Vill was sending a cold glare at Mohawk Man.

"...Sir Mohawk. This is one of the Seven Crimson Lords, Terakomari Gandesblood."

"One of the seven what now?"

"As she appears to be nervous at the moment, allow me to interpret for her: Stop looking for a butt whupping and beat it."

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

"Especially you, mohawk guy. I let you speak for two seconds, and you spit all that bull. Shut-in? Baby? I could turn you to dust with a swing of my pinky finger."

Hold on now. Why are you provoking them?

"Now scram, before my eyes turn red. If you wanna live. So Lady Komari says."

*"……"* 

I knew my maid was trying to stand up against them for my sake.

But that wasn't the way to do it. How could she make all those threats with a straight face? Well, there was no doubt she was a member of the Seventh Unit... As I threw myself into resignation and despair...

"Y-you little piece of shit!!"

...Mohawk Man yelled. The other men were also fuming. At the very least, they had enough sense to keep their weapons sheathed, but the mohawk man threw a straight punch with his full weight behind his right fist.

Esther babbled, "Awawawa!" It was over, I knew. I threw myself in front of Vill so she wouldn't get hurt, but then...

Cloing. A switch flipped.

"Wha ...?"

The punch didn't connect.

I opened my eyes in fear and saw the mohawk's fist frozen in place above. Even the other guys were motionless.

Vill, holding a kunai, furrowed her brow.

Then I noticed a gleam.

Is this...a thread? There's string set up around this place?

"No, no. Only insects bully the weak."

Cloing. Cloing. Cloing.

The switch kept on flipping intermittently.

It took me a while to realize it was the sound of a stringed instrument. Everyone turned to the back of the guild, where there was a Heavenly Paradise–style tatami room for whatever reason.

There sat a girl, both her eyes covered by a blindfold. She wore a hardcore-looking kimono, but she had a religious-like mystique about her. The *cloing* sounded with every movement of her hand. She was playing what appeared to be a biwa.



"Dead Maestro... You're here?" the mohawk guy mumbled in fear.

The so-called Dead Maestro smiled with rosy cheeks.

"Blocking people's way? Not an honorable thing to do. Let the girls do as they please. Enjoy their life as much as they can, that the world doesn't allow for much time..."

I was speechless.

Nelia, Vill, Esther, and Colette were also in a daze.

That girl. She wasn't normal. She couldn't be.



Anyway, we got to sign up with the Mercenary Guild.

There'd been no background check. We'd just had to tell them our names and races, and that was it. Colette was right; they were super lax.

A mercenary's job was to complete the requests brought to the guild. You'd receive payment upon completion. Your mercenary rank would also go up, but that wasn't important. We only needed money and the IDs.

"Congratulations, Lady Komari. We shall remember this day as the foundation of the Komari Club."

"The what?"

"That's the name of our party. It's here on our guild cards, too."

"What?!"

I looked down at my card in shock.

Next to my name was a line that read, Member of the Mercenary Group Komari Club.

... Why?! Are you trying to embarrass me?! I turned back to the reception desk to get it changed, but Vill immediately grabbed my arm.

"You're our leader, so it only makes sense for us to be the Komari Club. Don't you agree, Esther?"

"Y-yes! I think it's super cool!"

"Don't try to hype it up! I am NOT taking this name!" I said.

"Me neither!" Colette yelled. "Why is she the leader?! This weak little shrimp?!"

"I'm not a shrimp!!"

"At the very least, I can confirm she's not weak. Also, changing the name costs a hundred thousand nekopas, so I would advise against it. We'd end up with a single bean sprout for dinner tonight."

"What a scam!"

I hung my head.

Darn it... Why does she have to pick on me in the weirdest of ways...?

Oh well. We just need to avoid bringing up our name to other people, right?

I gave up and left the guild.

That cap and left the Bana.

The *cloing* sound of the biwa followed behind me.

"It's a wonderful name, the Komari Club. A perfect fit for your clear heart."

A graceful voice.

I turned around. It was the person who had saved us from the mohawk.

She was wearing a casual vestment, both hands in her pockets. She walked up to us. I could only imagine what color her eyes were since they were covered.

"Such a clear heart. I can hear a serene melody simply by being in your presence."

"Who are you? And what's with your getup?"

Colette... Do you have no manners?

The woman didn't seem to care, though.

"I am Tremolo Parcostella. I am better known by my alias, Dead Maestro. Some also call me the biwa bard."

Tremolo bowed, then took her hand out of her pocket for a handshake.

I shook it quickly. It was slender and delicate.

"Um...thank you for the help back there. I'm Terakomari Gandesblood. You

saved me from taking a beating."

"Oh no. I'm sure you would've been able to save yourself."

"No way. I'd have a cream puff for a face now if it weren't for you."

"That's right! Terakomari's a weakling below Vill's heels!"

My humility is not an invitation for you to belittle me, Colette. Unfortunately, I couldn't deny it.

"Hee-hee." Tremolo laughed, her face red. "I suppose this mundane world is not as sad as I thought if I've gotten to know someone as virtuous as you. Perhaps it was fate that we met this way, and what a wonderful fate it is. Let us meet again."

"Ah..."

She let go of my hand and turned to leave quietly.

...What a mysterious person.

The biwa bard... So, like, a musician? I kinda wanna listen to her songs...

"Lady Komari," Vill murmured with a serious look on her face. "Watch out. People who show up forebodingly like that commonly turn out to be crazy villains. Like Nerzanpi back in that restaurant in the Enchanted Lands."

"Don't be rude... She saved me."

Still, it couldn't hurt to be on the lookout.

My optimism had already put me through hell, after all.

\*

Dead Maestro Tremolo Parcostella walked down an alley with her hands in her pockets.

The voices of the girls she had just met echoed in her head.

Terakomari's warmth resonated deeply in her heart.

No wonder she had such strong willpower.

However, another problem had caught her attention.

She'd known everyone's names ever since she'd eavesdropped in the guild.

There was Terakomari, Nelia, Esther, Villhaze.

And Colette...Colette Lumiere.

"Good to know she's well. It was worth the effort going after the Arukan paddy wagon."

Tremolo produced a newspaper from her vestment.

The headline read, A RIFT BETWEEN ARUKA AND MULNITE. The world was only plunging further into turmoil.

Aruka had captured Colette.

And Tremolo had secretly saved her, leaving money for her travels.

She'd tailed the girl up to this point, but now that Colette was under that kind vampire's wing, there was no need to worry about her anymore. She had to focus on beginning her work to make the world a better place.

Just then, she felt someone's presence.

Multiple men showed up from the back alley—the mercenaries who'd been stationed at the guild, including the mohawk man who had argued with Terakomari.

"Dead Maestro, you gonna pay up for humiliating us?"

The mohawk man glared at her and unsheathed his weapon.

Ahhh. What a sad, mundane world.

So many people had suffered due to the conflict among countries. So many people had died untimely deaths.

It was far from the world Tremolo wished for—a world composed only of people with clean hearts.

"The price? Your life. We're stronger than you punks."

"That's right! Dragonhead rules the world!"

"Star Citadel's era is over."

Star Citadel. One of only thirteen moon-rank mercenary groups in the Netherworld.

And Tremolo Parcostella was a member.

Consequently, it was part of her daily routine to deal with mercenaries who were trying to take her life in an attempt to overthrow Star Citadel.

And this group's efforts were simply so...

"Ahhh... You fixate on the mundane? How shallow."

"Enough with your gibberish!! See you in hell!!"

"I shall destroy you, then. For the sake of Yusei."

"What?"

Cloing. Cloing.

She gently plucked the string. Just like that, the mohawk man was torn to shreds. His colleagues were aghast as they watched the pieces of his body fall to the ground, his blood splashing onto them. Immediately understanding they were outclassed, the mercenaries scurried away like cockroaches.

"Just when I was thinking there was still hope in the world... You simply can't expect much."

Tremolo plucked the string further.

Screams echoed. The men were shredded to bits, their blood and flesh dyeing the cobblestone.

Not one of them could get away.

For all those with sullied hearts had to die.

\*

"Dammit... I can't get this dirt off..."

I was wiping a giant window.

The cloth was already pitch-black. The children had scribbled all over the place.

It was our third day in the Netherworld—five more until my demise.

Our mercenary group, the Komari Club, was fire rank. The lowest.

Fire ranks could only get measly chores, such as putting on a maid outfit and

cleaning a fat cat's mansion. Like I was doing right now.

But what the heck? Is cleaning supposed to be this tiring?

My arms were twitching from carrying buckets everywhere. I was totally going to be in for a world of pain the next day. It was my first time working a job besides Crimson Lord, and I'd never expected maid work to be this tough. I'll try lending Vill a hand from now on.



Speaking of my maid, she and Nelia were taking care of some robbers. The maid job had only been open for three people, so Esther, Colette, and I had taken it.

"Oh, Ms. Gandesblood. Good job," said a nice old Warblade, the owner of this house and our employer. "Sorry it's such a big place."

"It's okay...sir. I pride myself on my perseverance."

"Ha-ha-ha. That's good to hear. The truth is, we're lacking in hands at our home. Would you like to be an official hire?"

"Huh? I...I'll have to think about it..."

"Oh, I won't force you. I know the world's been a mess lately. Aruka's army seems to be entering neutral territories. All my employees ran back to their homes in fear..."

The old man said the war between Mulnite and Aruka was growing more intense by the day.

The horrors of war reached even uninvolved towns, taxes ballooned to fund the conflict, and there were refugees all over the country... The Netherworld was even more dangerous than we'd thought.

"Your safety isn't guaranteed here. You run the moment you feel you're in danger, Ms. Gandesblood. Don't worry about the windows," said the old man before leaving.

I'm already in danger... of dying in five days.

I trembled with fear while resuming the window cleaning.

"Aaahhh, I'm pooped!" A yell came from the garden. "What the heck?! This is a million billion times more exhausting than I thought it would be!"

Colette Lumiere threw away the garden shears and sat down on the ground.

She'd been given the task of maintaining the garden. But the hedge she was working on looked just like Nelia did after waking up (she had terrible bedhead).

Uhhh, I feel like he'll ask us to pay him instead to compensate for the damages.

"You must endure it, Ms. Colette. We need to cooperate to get the money, so... What in the world?! You turned the hedge into a bird's nest?!" Esther shouted to the heavens as she arrived with materials in hand.

"Awww." Colette looked away. "It was a little slip of the hand. And I'm new to this..."

"Then you should've told us! Ahhh... We have to do something... I'll take care of this, so you go help the commander."

"Okaaay...," she grumbled before walking up to me.

"You're clumsier than I pegged you for."

"Shut up, runt. Not like you're doing any good at your job."

"I'm no runt, and I'm doing great, thank you very much! Our employer just dropped by to tell me I was doing a *good job*, even!"

"I'm sure he was just being courteous. Ugh... Why didn't I get to go with Vill...?"

Colette picked up the cloth on the ground and threw it in the bucket, then slammed the wet thing on the window.

"Hey! You gotta wring it first. And I already cleaned that spot."

"Huh? Really? Cleaning's pretty hard, huh?"

I sighed.

"Are you from a rich family? Like, you had maids do everything for you?"

"I guess you could say that. I was born a commoner, but after some twists and turns, the Lumiere family adopted me."

"Hmm? So they're a noble family?"

"Not noble... But they're from a special lineage of shrine maidens of the Mulnite Empire. They've been supporting the country with their fortune-telling and divination. The line is at least six hundred years old, but I don't know the details."

...There are no shrine maidens in my Mulnite Empire.

I felt like this bit had to be important and required further investigation, but Colette changed topics before I could ask more questions.

"Runt, do you like Vill?"

"Wha...?" I furrowed my brow before answering. "I guess you could say that..."

"How long have you been with her?"

"Ummm, the first time she barged into to my room was...April of last year? I actually knew her earlier from school, but, well... Why do you ask?"

"Hmmm."

Colette wrung the cloth as she shot me a fishy glance. I was far too dense to figure out what she could be thinking.

"You see," she spoke softly, "I had a childhood friend."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And her name was Villhaze."

My heart skipped a beat.

The name "Villhaze" wasn't that rare. It meant "heavenly jewel" in old Mulnite tongue, so it was pretty popular for girls.

"H-huh. What was your Vill like?"

"She was kind. And very introverted. She needed me to show her the way. She was my best friend... But we were separated after the war reached my village."

"Huh...?"

"I don't know what army it was, but they attacked my village, destroyed our homes, and made everyone go their separate ways. There was a thunderstorm that day, and a lot of people went missing, Vill included... I've been looking for her ever since..."

Colette pursed her lips as though in repentance.

I couldn't concentrate on cleaning the windows now. Not after being hit with

that anvil of a subject.

"...When did that happen?"

"About six years ago." Colette sighed and looked up at the blue sky. "I haven't found a single clue in all this time. It feels like the only explanation is that she was spirited away... So I was speechless when I met her in the forest."

"That Vill isn't your Vill."

"I know. Her personality is entirely different, as is her hair color, and her boobs are too big... And most importantly, she doesn't remember me."

"…"

"But you can understand how I would feel, right? You could explain the changes as her growing up, and...what if she lost her memory?"

I had never heard of such a possibility.

"No way... For starters, she has a family in my world."

"Of course. It couldn't be that easy."

Colette started whistling while wiping the window.

I felt a pang in my chest.

Could there be a possibility that Vill was Colette's childhood friend?

No... It couldn't be. Vill had her grampa on the other side.

"...So you're all clingy with her because she reminds you of your childhood friend?"

"That too, but I also simply like her."

"What do you like about her?"

"She saved me from those thugs! And she's so considerate... I've never met someone so kind. And that serene expression! She's so cool!"

"Nah... Sorry to break it to you, but she's a sicko."

"What? The only sicko here is you. Vill's dressed up like that to conform to your depraved tastes, isn't she?"

"WHAT?!"

"So I'll take her away from you before your sicko-ness rubs off on her! It'd be better for her to be my friend rather than your maid!"

"No! My family employs her!"

"Whatever. Only she gets to decide."

"Aw." I ate my words.

Spica had taken away my maid before... But it felt different this time. Spica had done it to push me to the limit, but Colette actually, personally wanted Vill for herself.

And I felt like...she had the will and power to make it a reality.

My idea was still unfounded, though.

Ultimately, I just couldn't shake my mysterious vexations while I wiped the windows.

...Just do me a favor and let me do this, okay? You're only making them dirtier.



Work was done for the day. Darkness and quiet enveloped the city as the sun set.

There were no mana lamps in this world without magic. Instead, the moon and stars shone terribly bright. Maybe it was an effect of having two suns.

Anyway, we had no money to go have fun outside at night.

I was fine focusing on resting up, so...

"Ahhh... I can feel the life circulating through my body..."

I let out a big sigh while sinking shoulder-deep into the hot water.

Nelia had suggested we go take a bath. The inn's bath was free. That'd come as godly news from the heavens after my excruciating workday, and there was no time to be self-conscious about getting naked in front of everyone else.

"An after-work bath is the best... I feel like a cicada shedding its old skin..."

"Lady Komari, allow me to further relax you by massaging your breasts."

"Not even a shred of creativity to your plots?!"

I ran away from the sicko maid and her skeevy hands.

I was surrounded by predators. My only safe space was by Esther's side.

"Um...Commander? Do you need anything...?"

"You're the most decent person in this place, so I'd rather be with you."

"Wh-what an honor! I'd be delighted to accompany you!"

She stiffened.

Hmm. Did I make her nervous? Maybe I should give her a relaxing massage.

"Now, then," Nelia said, interrupting my thoughts. "I guess we made a decent income today. We should be able to gather enough funds for our trip in three months."

"Three months?! I don't wanna wipe windows for three months!"

"You couldn't even if you wanted to, Lady Komari. Dead in five days, remember?"

"Agh..."

Right. I had a time limit.

Would I really get to meet Mom?

"This is a waste of time. Working as mercenaries won't get us back to our world. Let's leave town by dawn," Nelia said.

"Leave? Without any money?"

"I borrowed some from the guild. I showed them my swords and they salivated, so I put them in as a deposit."

"Wait, what?! Aren't those swords like treasure to you...?"

The pink girl chuckled.

"You're so sweet. But the thing is, I don't need to hand them over if I pay back the loan in time. There's nothing to worry about."

"I guess... But I'm so frustrated I can't do anything..."

"Just be my maid. My little-sister maid."

"No thank you."

When did I become your sister to begin with?

Anyway, it looked like our financial problems were dealt with.

I felt like we were only delaying the issue, but there was no use thinking about it right now.

I had to meet the Hero of Twilight ASAP.

...What'll happen once we get to Mulnite?

I'd be happy to see Mom. And (hopefully) go back home.

But there were still two sources of worry in my mind.

First: my forecasted demise.

Second: Colette's plot to take Vill away from me.

Clearly the former had to be solved at any cost, but I was fuzzy on the second one.

It was only a hunch, but I felt like we couldn't just leave Colette behind.

"Lady Komari? Is something the matter?"

Vill was staring at me.

I panicked and looked away.

"Nothing! I was just on high alert against your degeneracy."

"So you miss me. Don't worry, I'll make sure you don't feel lonely by sleeping in your bed tonight."

"Let me go! Esther, please! Block!"

"Fweh?! Commander?! U-um..."

"Esther? Do you intend on getting in the way of my and Lady Komari's relationship?"

"Not in the slightest! But I believe there is an issue as far as public order and morals are concerned... I don't think it's proper to do this in the public bath..."

"So you dare defy your superiors. I shall give you due punishment. Dance. Naked."

"My deepest apologies! Yes, ma'am!"

"Esther, noooo!! Don't dance!!"

Esther stood up to follow the orders, and I hastily tried to stop her, but Vill blocked me with a hug. Nelia simply laughed out loud. *Do you get that we're in a pickle in another world here?!* Yet despite my indignation, the unchanging aplomb of my friends also put me at ease.

Then someone stood up with a loud splash.

Colette puffed her cheeks as she glared at us.

"I'm leaving!"

Vill's eyes widened.

I had no idea what was going on as Colette trudged across the water and left the bath.

"Oops." Nelia chuckled. "She got jealous of Komari getting all of Villhaze's attention."



"Mmm..."

Vill furrowed her brow and stopped fondling my belly.

After a five-second pause, she slowly rose to her feet.

"...I'll go after her. Discord in the Komari Club could bring us trouble."

"Yeah, yeah. Go."

I felt oddly uneasy as I watched my naked maid leave.

What's she gonna say to her? An alarm rang in my head, telling me I shouldn't leave the two alone.

"You're such a worrywart, Komari." Nelia looked up at the ceiling. "You're upset about Villhaze giving another girl attention, aren't you? That's a waste of energy, honestly."

"No, I'm not. Vill can be friends with whomever she wants."

"I understand the desire to monopolize someone. I'd love to have you as my maid 24-7, too."

"Stop assuming you know how I feel! And I'll never be your maid!"

"I don't need to assume anything. It's written all over your face. Anyway, trying to get someone all for yourself is impossible. Even Gertrude has plenty of things she has to prioritize over her lady. A good monarch knows how to accept the circumstances while maintaining a good relationship."

"Ugh..."

Nelia had a point. I didn't have the right to control Vill's relationships.

She was also right in that I didn't need to control them.

I mean, I'd already confirmed it back during the Vampire Riots.

Vill had said my blood was sweet. That she'd be by my side forever.

If she'd been lying, then I was ready to freak out and dance naked.

"...You're right. A scholarly intellectual must be imperturbable."

"That's my Komari! You're the strongest vampire there is! And together we'll

rule the world! The slaughter champion can't be bested by such trifling matters."

"You should stop reading Six Nations News. It makes you stupid."

Nelia laughed out loud, even though I wasn't joking.

Anyway, it was best not to worry about Vill. A strong person was always calm and collected.

"Commanderrr," Esther said with tears in her eyes. "When should I stop dancing?"

"You've been dancing this whole time?!?!?!"

We're having a serious discussion over here, y'know? You take things too literally... But really, the blame is on the maid for knowingly taking advantage of your character like that.

Nelia and I panicked and tried to get Esther to stop.

As my sicko maid's superior, I had a duty to scold her.

That reminds me, Vill said something about sleeping in my bed.

Then punish her in bed I shall. Once she closes her eyes, I'll blow into her ear. I won't stop until she repents... So I got out of the bath, oddly excited.



"I am truly sorry, Lady Komari. I'll sleep with Lady Colette tonight."

"......Wha...??"

We'd gotten a room for two and another for three.

I had been getting ready to sleep while waiting for Vill in the three-person room, but once she'd arrived, she'd broken the news that she had other plans.

"I'm sorry for breaking our promise. I'll be in the two-person room with her."

"...Oh. I see... Sure. Yeah, not like we really promised. I never said yes. In fact, I'm glad I get to enjoy a good night's sleep by myself."

"Is that so? Good night, then."

"Yeah. Good night."

She closed the door.

I was at a loss for words as Vill's footsteps faded away.

...What? Why? She's sleeping with Colette? What about my plans to punish her for making Esther dance naked? Did my maid just abandon me?

"Commander, could you turn off the lights? We have to wake up early tomorrow."

"Uh..."

"Commander? Is something the matter?"

"WAAAAAAAH!!"

"EEEEEEEEEEEP?!"

I did a somersault on my bed. Or tried. I fell headfirst onto the carpet.

"An enemy attack?!" Esther stood up in shock.

I ignored her and flapped about like a fish.

"Why?! Why...? Why did she...?"

"Oh, I see. You're sad you don't get to sleep with Ms. Vill."

"I'm not sad!!" I glared daggers at Esther.

"I'm sorry, Commander. Of course you enjoy your solitude!" She bowed. I did not like that reaction, either.

"Esther, what do you think?"

"Me? About what?"

"About Colette. Isn't she too chummy with Vill?"

"Is she? Ah...but I do think something definitely happened between them. Otherwise, she wouldn't have abandoned you like that."

"She abandoned me?"

"Oh no! It was a poor choice of words. She only postponed you!"

I felt like I'd been hit on the head with a hammer.

So Vill was prioritizing Colette.

An odd feeling of restlessness budded within me. This was not just jealousy. I felt like Colette's innocent gaze had changed something in Vill.

Nelia had laughed at me for being such a worrywart, but I wouldn't deserve to be her lady if I didn't worry about this.

"Let's go, Esther! We can't stay put!"

"Huh? Go where?!"

"To their room! It's not fair they get to hang out all alone! We'll join them!"

"But it's already ten? That's lights-out time in the aca..."

"Stop being such a Goody Two-shoes for a second! Vampires are supposed to be nocturnal!"

"Wai... Commander?!"

I dragged Esther out of the room.

It was clear I'd have nightmares if I went to bed like this.

I had to check in on Vill and Colette if I wanted a good night's sleep.



Nelia Cunningham wandered down the alleys at night.

She had no destination in mind. She simply wanted to observe a city of the Netherworld and take a mental breather.

The blue night sky was bizarrely bright. The street gleamed with the lights of the moon and stars.

Nelia sighed as the breeze cooled her body.

"I've got to pull myself together."

The leader of the Komari Club was Komari. But the vampire princess was their last resort. Of course, she had the capability to be at the top, but she still had much to learn—Nelia had to pull her forward.

When she had gotten captured while under the effects of Nerzanpi's spell, Nelia had heard her mentor asking her to look after Komari.

It was very likely that had been a hallucination. Maybe her sense of duty had

manifested in the form of Yulinne.

Either way, she had to guide Komari.

Because she was her friend. Her savior. Her blood sister. And her comrade in arms for world domination.

The former Goddess had also asked her to take care of Komari. She had probably been insinuating there was a future where she disappeared. And indeed, now Pandora's Poison had foretold her death.

"I have to keep her in my sights. I shouldn't have gone outside."

Nelia was particularly worried about Komari, considering the girl's woes regarding Colette. Until now, Komari had been the center of attention. Always surrounded by people and fawned over. She had to be disconcerted about Colette flipping that dynamic on its head.

"Good evening."

Cloing. A switch flipped.

Nelia nearly let out a shriek, thinking she had come across a ghost.

That biwa bard was standing by a shop's signboard.

"Tremolo...right? What are you doing here?"

"Going for an evening walk, just like you. The stars are as beautiful as ever." Tremolo smiled rosily.

Nelia was just a little nervous. There was something unfathomable about this girl.

According to the employees at the guild, Tremolo Parcostella was a member of the moon-rank mercenary group Star Citadel. In other words, she was a skilled warrior.

"There's something I want to tell you about."

"What? You were waiting for me?"

"Yes." Tremolo's smile widened.

She produced a newspaper from her vestment and handed it over.

"This is part of tomorrow's morning issue. I have a connection with the publisher, so I borrowed it. There's something about you in here."

Suddenly, noise overtook the city.

Someone screamed from afar. The night sky turned white for a moment.

"...? What's with all that?"

"Human life is but a fruitless flower in this sad, mundane world. Conflict is routine."

"Don't tell me..."

"Keep calm. You'll understand once you've read the article."

Nelia fearfully looked down at the newspaper.

She read in silence for a few seconds, but no more. That was all she could take.

Panic seized her, and she turned around and ran.

"Farewell. This is all I can do for you."

"Thanks! And you should run while you can, too!"

Nelia clicked her tongue as she ran straight back to the inn.

They had gotten caught up in something unbelievable.

Was Komari all right? Was Colette all right?

She could hear the flames of war from afar.

From behind, the *cloing* of the biwa echoed.



The two-person room was empty.

Vill and Colette were nowhere to be found. Why? Did they escape by themselves? No way. Vill can't just leave me behind like that. I'm (Dad is) paying her for her job! I'm gonna sue her for salary theft if she doesn't come back. Got it?! Come back!

"C-calm down, Commander! You won't find her in the trash can! Or in the cups! There's no point inspecting every object in the room!"

"Uhhhhhh... Where did they go?!"

"Their things are still there, so I doubt they left. I can't think of anywhere inside the inn they would be, though... Maybe they're stargazing on the rooftop?"

"That's it! Let's go!"

How dare she go stargazing without her boss? I mean, I'm not trying to get in their way. It's just that, as the leader of the Komari Club, I have a duty to know where they are and what they're doing.

"Wait, Commander." Esther stopped me. "I—I think you should leave Ms. Vill alone."

I felt like my heart had fractured. I never would've thought Esther would say something like that.

"Wh-why...? Because we should go to sleep early for tomorrow...?"

"No, I didn't mean it that way... I'm just wary about her prediction."

Esther looked down at me with real anxiety on her face.

"Pandora's Poison showed that you die by her side, right? Then...wouldn't the best way to elude your death be to stay away from Vill?"

"Ah..."

"Maybe she's also reached the same conclusion."

I accepted it for a moment.

...But no.

I was going to die in five days. Not tonight.

"There's no one coming after me yet! We should be talking about what to do with her! So we gotta hurry to see her!"

"O-okay ...?"

I pulled Esther by the arm and ran upstairs.

I forced open the door to the rooftop, and the nocturnal spring breeze swept through my hair.

Stars filled the sky. Definitely a view that would make you want to go stargazing. Sakuna would probably be losing her mind right now if she were here.

I walked down the cobblestone rooftop and soon found someone.

My heart nearly exploded.

The two girls were sitting shoulder to shoulder, hugging their knees. Staring at the stars. Just then, Colette grabbed Vill's hand. They held hands warmly and heartily smiled at each other. The moving youthful moment infested my brain.

"Huh? What are they doing?"

"Commander?! Your face is blank!"

"You want me to smile at this?"

I stared at Vill and Colette's backs in despair.

I had never seen the maid chat intimately with anyone else. Something prickled at my chest. The seed of anxiety grew and grew until a black flower bloomed. Then a tsunami of incomprehensible emotions washed away my consciousness.

"U...uweh..."

"Huh? Uh...Commander?"

"Wah... WAAAAAAH!!"

"Commander?! Hold on!"

I did away with my shame and bolted over there. I had already forgotten what Nelia had told me. I felt like Colette would take Vill away from me if I didn't do something. But then, God decided I hadn't suffered enough already.

"Ah."

I tripped. My foot caught on a step, and I fell face-first onto the cobblestone.

This was the second face-plant I'd been through since coming to the Netherworld. The pain and shame were the least of my worries now, though. The two girls heard me and turned around with wide eyes.

"Lady Komari?"

"Terakomariii? What are you doing here?! It's time for the babies to go to sleep!"

Clearly "I was just passing by" wouldn't be a good excuse, but I was too proud to admit I'd come there to monitor them. The best course of action was obvious: play dead.

"You're eavesdropping? Just when I thought you couldn't be any nastier, you..." Colette walked up to me in anger.

Okay, I've come up with the perfect excuse. I'll tell them I was on my bed when I was teleported to the rooftop all of a sudden. So I raised my head.

"Huh?" Colette immediately looked to her side.

I followed her gaze. We were on the seventh floor, so you could see the whole town. A regular small city. There was one irregularity, though: The sky was getting brighter in the distance. It looked like a building was on fire.

The boom of an explosion followed.

Then thunderous cannon fire.

Then a siren. Colette shrieked and covered her ears. Was that an emergency alarm?

"This doesn't look good... The army is attacking," Vill said.

"The army?! But this is a neutral city under the control of the guild! Why would they...?" Colette shivered, pale in the face.

Earlier, that old Warblade had told us the city wasn't entirely safe. That Aruka's army was invading neutral territory, too.

"Is everyone okay?! Things took a turn for the terrible!"

Nelia sped into the scene like a bullet.

She then sighed in relief at the sight of us.

"Aruka's army is here. They're gonna kill us."

"All right, time to dive into bed and pray to God," I said.

"Huh? Commander...?"

"Er! I meant, it's time to fight back against Aruka!"

"We don't need you to bluff right now. Lady Cunningham, what do you think we should do?"

"Run." Nelia spared no words. "We're endangering the city. We should leave."

"Hmm? What do you mean?" I asked.

"They're after us."

Nelia spread the newspaper she held at her side.

I stared at it.

## SHRINE MAIDEN ON THE RUN – ARUKAN ARMY ON THE SEARCH

The shrine maiden offered by the Mulnite Empire to the Aruka Kingdom's inner palace for the sake of reconciliation, Colette Lumiere, escaped after an accident during transport. The Aruka Kingdom declared this an act of treason on the part of the Empire. Relationships between the two countries have soured even further. The Arukan Army has accelerated its process of invading nearby countries to approach the Imperial Capital of Mulnite. It has also announced its search for the "Komari Club," a fire-rank mercenary group who is believed to have taken the shrine maiden. His Majesty the King has demanded they be killed on the spot. It appears the flames of war are growing fiercer around the world. All innocent citizens are advised to be on the lookout.

"...What the heck??" I said.

"Colette was offered as a sacrifice to stop the war, but she didn't want that and ran away. Why would they do this to her...?" Vill asked.

The newspaper says why already.

Colette was a member of a famous shrine maiden lineage in the Netherworld Mulnite Empire.

She was of noble blood, valuable as a hostage.

Everyone stared at Colette.

She fidgeted in silence until Vill called her name, and then she raised her head. Colette's face was red for some reason.

"C-can you blame me?! I don't wanna be in a harem!"

She screamed from the bottom of her soul. As loud and as hard as her body allowed.

"They treat me like a tool! Me, an offering?! I just wanna live in peace in my hometown! And I hadn't found my childhood friend yet! Everything would've been over if they'd sent me to that stupid inner palace..."

Colette pulled the seams of her clothes and looked down.

Anxiety, guilt, and all sorts of other emotions appeared to be boiling within her.

"...The cart just toppled over by some sort of miracle... I thought the Scholar had saved me. How could I not take the opportunity? I didn't do anything wrong. But..."

Colette looked at us. Fear crossed her teary eyes.

"I put you in danger... I'm sorry."

Should she have told us from the very beginning? I wasn't so sure.

I understood how she felt. If she'd told us the army might go after her, Vill could have left her behind.

"Vill... I..."

"Lady Komari." Vill ignored Colette.

Her mind was made up. I didn't need to say anything.

Colette looked at me on the verge of tears.

I didn't hesitate.

"Don't worry, Colette. We're not gonna leave you here."

"Huh.....?"

"I am mad, though! This darn Netherworld is all messed up! There's two suns,

weird plants, and now Aruka wants to kill us...! But you're our friend! And our guide in this world! So let's run! Together!"

"So it's settled!" Nelia smiled.

"Roger that!" Esther saluted.

Colette was baffled for a moment before a smile came to her face, and she gave her thanks.

"You're nicer than I thought."

"Who do you think I am?" I responded.

"Lady Colette, Lady Komari is the most generous person in this whole universe. She already forgave me for my crimes of giving her bread rolls to Lady Lolocco in exchange for a photo of her naked in the bath when she was little."

"I didn't know about that! No way am I forgiving you for that!"

"Vill, why are you so fixated on Terakomari? Did she brainwash you? It's actually gross seeing this as a third party."

"Huh? It's...gross...?" Vill was shocked.

She deserved it. Maybe this would change her outlook so she'd become a prim and proper maid.

"What're you all blabbing about?! We have to run!"

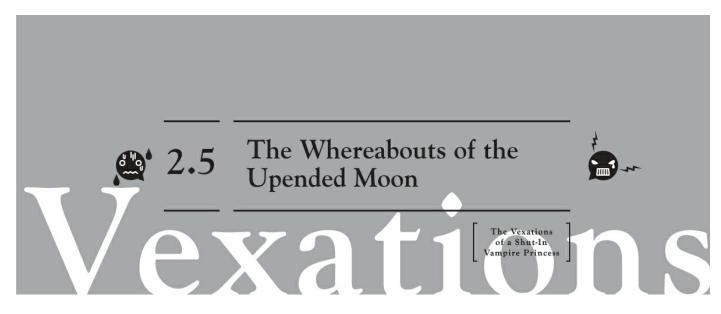
"Commander! We have to go back to our room to grab our belongings!"

Nelia and Esther urged us to leave the rooftop.

The turmoil in the city grew.

I felt bad about it, but it was better not to look back.

We had to focus on saving ourselves.



The Immortals were holed up in their homes, full of fear.

Although they prided themselves on their long life expectancy, they couldn't escape accidental death. And without the Dark Core, they could not revive.

Recovering the Dark Core was difficult in every sense of the word.

The best chance to do so was in Karla Amatsu's hands, yet Waving Moment was not powerful enough to affect willpower. She could heal bodily injuries with her Core Implosion, but she couldn't rewind people's memories or emotions. And the Dark Core was a Divine Instrument born from the people's wishes. She could have fixed it had it been only slightly damaged, but there was nothing she could do now that the willpower given to it had already dispersed.

The Ailan dynasty—or rather, the Gandesbloods—were pressed for a countermeasure. But they couldn't think of anything. Not until the girl with the special Core Implosion showed herself.

"Not a good movement of the stars. Life just doesn't go the way you want it to, eh?"

I sighed while walking down the streets of Jingshi.

The original plan had been to destroy all the Dark Cores before heading to the Netherworld, but those Star freaks' rampage had exceeded my expectations. I had to take care of things before my boxed garden went down the path of demise.

"Your Highness, where is this door?" Cornelius, walking beside me, asked with excitement.

Behind us, Amatsu and Tryphon also looked interested.

This felt so right.

Spica La Gemini had comrades following her.

"Right there. According to Fuyao's survey, the world leaders headed over to the Polar Union to search for the people who disappeared into the Netherworld. Apparently, they're going to force open a door by breaking the Dark Core."

"Wait, but why not just use Jingshi's door?"

"It broke after Terakomari's meteorite hit. The whole thing sounds very interesting... I heard you don't know where you'll end up if you cross it! Maybe you'll get crushed and die as soon as you step through."

"......And we're going to do that?"

"Of course!!"

I licked my blood candy and continued walking.

Soon, the ruins of the Zijingong palace came into view.

At the center of the wreck was a shining door.

Normally, there would be a tight security net around the portal, but at the moment, all the soldiers were knocked out on the ground. I couldn't help but smile. It was so like her that she'd left them alive.

"Fuyao! Good job!"

"Mm."

Foxgirl Fuyao Meteorite was sitting at a round table.

After hearing me call out to her, she timidly rose to her feet.

Judging by her lethargic expression, I must have been dealing with the "head."

"...Now we can go to the Netherworld, Your Highness."

"That's right. And you chose me... I'm so glad!"

"Hah." She looked away.



Cornelius, for her experiments. Tryphon, to serve me. Fuyao, to find her reason for being. Amatsu, to betray me. And I, to shut myself in. What a disjointed group. Laughable in comparison with those Star people. But our wills all pointed in a single direction.

"Let's go! To fulfill our ambitions!"

"Hold it. I don't wanna go if I could die...," said Cornelius.

"But that's part of the fun! Part of life!"

"No, get away fro— Amatsu, help meee! I'm gonna diiie!"

"Good. I'm going home," said Amatsu.

"You soulless bastard!"

"You're coming, too!" I told him.

I pulled Amatsu and Cornelius's arms and jumped into the door.

Fuyao and Tryphon followed shortly after.

Now, then... My Netherworld arc had gotten off to an earlier start than expected.

It was time for the climax of my story.

\*

Beneath Jingshi was an underground prison.

There, the government incarcerated the villains who had rebelled against the dynasty. Terakomari Gandesblood had once visited the place to face the evil grand chancellor Shikai Gudo.

In the deepest, most heavily guarded area of the prison was a tall woman.

Former Minister of Military Secrets Nerzanpi Rocha.

The Death Master, the very same woman who'd brought turmoil to the Enchanted Lands. She was wearing an all-black outfit, like always. It had been a few days since she'd been captured, and she was only allowed one cigarette per day—her mind was getting foggy.

"No joy from friends afar..."

No sign of Star Citadel coming to help.

Rather, they couldn't come to help, since everyone else was in the Netherworld.

Death Master Nerzanpi Rocha was in charge of gathering the Dark Cores.

Dead Maestro Tremolo Parcostella was setting the stage for destruction in the Netherworld.

Coffin Bearer Nefty Strawberry guarded Yusei.

And the aforementioned Yusei was their leader.

...We should've sent more people here.

Now that she thought about it, sending a single person to obtain six Dark Cores was ridiculous.

"Nothing to do but leave it in their hands. I'll bow out here... Hmm?"

Just then, Nerzanpi noticed the change.

In the candlelight, her shadow began squirming like an animal.

Shades could send their shadows across realms—this was how Nerzanpi had kept in contact with her comrades. But distance was a problem when using it. It was impossible for a Shade to freely control their shadow unless they were near the Netherworld—in the middle of the Dark Core Zone, for instance.

But Nerzanpi's shadow was active at this moment.

I see. It must be due to the door.

Then there was still something she could do.

Nerzanpi concentrated to get a grip on the situation in the Netherworld. There was conflict brewing on the other side. Huge emotions whirled violently, giving energy to Yusei.

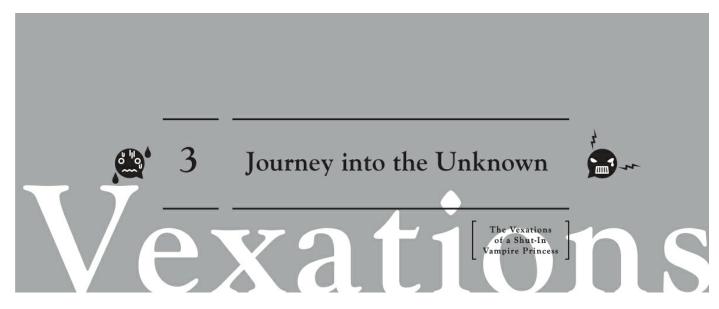
After a couple hours of invoking, the person she was looking for arrived.

The biwa bard dressed disheveled in casual vestment.

Nerzanpi quietly opened her mouth.

"Tremolo... The plan here failed. Kill the vampire Terakomari Gandesblood the

moment you see her."	



Sand as far as the eye could see.

The two suns scorched the golden land.

Sandy hills and valleys stretched out to the horizon, as though carved by the hands of giants. Inferior mirages blurred the sight. Simply looking ahead was driving me nuts.

"It's so hot... I'm gonna die... Isn't it only March...? This is too much for a homebody..."

"I'm parched. Lady Komari, would you mind letting me drink your sweat?"

"You're gross."

I didn't even have the energy to overreact.

Four days until my death.

We were riding camels across the desert.

Between the Aruka Kingdom and the Mulnite Empire lay the Curryd Empire, whose territory was mostly desert. Crossing this huge sand land was the shortest way to get to Mulnite.

By the way, we'd rented our camels at the entrance of the desert.

Vill and I were sharing one, Esther and Colette another, and Nelia had her own.

We'd been riding for so long already, yet the camels didn't look tired in the slightest. Still, I felt bad, so I gently patted its fuzzy hump.

"You're such a good girl, Charlotte... I wish I had your stamina..."

"Please don't name it. We have to give it back once we reach the other side."

"What's the problem?! She's our journey partner!"

What a heartless maid. And deranged—she was clinging to me even in this burning heat.

Colette glared at me with frustration from my side. We'd decided the pairs with a coin toss. She must've wanted to be with Vill. She wiped the sweat on her forehead onto Esther's back and asked, "Nelia, how long is it till Mulnite? There's no way we can reach it today, is there?"

"Why are you asking a girl from another world...? Anyway, according to the map, we do need to make a stop halfway. We'll stay at the Curryd Empire's capital."

The enemy forces were already on our heels.

Nelia said we'd messed up by showing our guild IDs at the checkpoint. There was a chance the officer had reported us. But it wasn't like we could have forced our way through. That would've gotten us captured and sent right back to the army.

In all likelihood, the leak about Colette being with the Komari Club had come from the guild. There must have been a spy in the place when we'd signed up.

I looked at the sky-blue girl.

Colette Lumiere was the Mulnite Empire's shrine maiden. A poor child at the whims of fate.

"What? Nobody told you staring is rude?"

"Sorry. I was just wondering about you since we have nothing else to do. You ran away with nothing but what you had on you...but we never really asked about your standing."

"Oh, that." Colette pouted awkwardly. "It's what the newspaper said. I am the Mulnite Empire's shrine maiden—or rather, the future shrine maiden. I was supposed to take over the position at the Imperial Capital once my predecessor retired."

"But they handed you over to Aruka?"

"The current shrine maiden predicted the war would end if they offered me to Aruka. What a piece of shit. Pretty sure she just made that up."

True or not, it was unfair either way.

"Hmm," Vill grunted while gripping Charlotte's reins. "Did she predict that with Core Implosion? Could it be you can do the same, Lady Colette?"

"Core Implosion? Ah, you mean the powers... Yeah. I better make it clear now: I'm an esper. I didn't bring it up because it's not really something you should be flaunting... Sorry."

"No need to apologize. But I'm surprised to learn you have superpowers."

"Well, I wouldn't have gotten chosen as shrine maiden if I didn't, would I? The Lumieres haven't birthed an esper worthy of the title lately. They took in me, a commoner of distant relation, and groomed me to take over just because I had some potential."

"Couldn't you find a way out if you predicted something else?" I asked.

"My power isn't prediction. It's worse. I didn't want it... I could've had a peaceful life if it weren't for this shrine maiden business."

Core Implosion had nothing to do with one's talent or efforts.

There had to be significance to the fact that Colette had awakened to her powers.

"...The truth is, my childhood friend was supposed to become the shrine maiden."

"Your childhood friend... You are referring to Villhaze, the girl with the same name as mine, correct?"

Colette had told Vill about this last night, along with Nelia and Esther. The girl had said it wasn't anything worth hiding.

"Vill...my childhood friend, that is, had an ability stronger than anything seen in the past hundred years. They said she would become the shrine maiden to guide Mulnite to prosperity...but the pressure drove her to tears all the time. I

lived in the neighborhood, so I would go to her place and comfort her in secret."

"You were best friends, then."

"Yeah. We even went on an adventure outside the village. Vill said she wanted to see the sea, so we filled our backpacks with snacks and left early in the morning. We came across bears, got bitten by bugs, and nearly fell off a cliff, but the sight of the sun setting into the ocean was worth it. She cried so much that time... Then the adults found us and gave us the scolding of a lifetime, which made me cry, too."

The mirage had vanished. In its stead came the image of Colette and "Vill" holding hands on their way to the ocean. "Vill" was timid, but spunky Colette pulled her forward. They overcame many obstacles across their journey... Then the image of "Vill" was replaced by my Vill, the maid I knew... I think my brain is evaporating from the heat.

"But our peaceful days didn't last long." Colette sighed. "There was a horrible battle. The village was burned down, and we ran away, but we lost sight of each other in the storm and never reunited. I've been looking for her ever since...day and night... I can't abandon my friend. But I can't find her... And they declared her dead."

"Dead? Why?"

"Because they can't look for her forever. I didn't accept it, but the villagers told me to give up. I could never... And then, I awakened to my ability."

Core Implosion was a power of the heart.

Strong desire birthed an ability to change the world.

"The power of séance, to pull over the souls of dead people. Maybe it was because I also believed, deep down, that Vill was dead... I used to try and call her, but it never worked. I was happy, since that meant she was still alive out there somewhere."

"…"

We were speechless.

This girl's love for "Vill" was too enormous for me to even imagine.

"And then, I became Vill's replacement as the next shrine maiden. But I can't do it. My power is far from the heights of hers, too..."

"What was 'Vill's' power?"

"She could see the future."

My heart skipped a beat.

Vill and Nelia looked at Colette in shock.

"But I don't know the details. There's a rule that says shrine maidens shouldn't use their powers willy-nilly, and she was so uptight about it that I never saw it. I asked her to tell my future many times, but she always refused."

*"…"* 

"Ahhh, maybe we could've stopped the disaster in the village with her powers... But no use crying over spilled milk. She was only following the rules, and I liked that upright side of her."

Colette's smile was weak.

I felt conflicted as the camel swayed across the desert.



We arrived at the capital of the Curryd Empire right before sunset.

A nice smell reached my nostrils the moment we went through the gates, and my tummy rumbled. According to Colette, the founder of the Curryd Empire had been a big curry fan. Curry had been designated the national dish by royal decree.

We walked through the disordered lines of sepia-colored buildings.

First, we had to return the camels.

We found the rental place, and I handed Charlotte's reins over to the person in charge. The camel trudged back to the stable...but halfway through, she looked back at me.

"Charlotte? What's wrong? You can rest for today."

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"I am not Charlotte."
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I looked up as though I'd heard the voice of God but found nothing but the beautiful dusk. Feeling as though I was dreaming, I lowered my gaze back to the camel and nearly blacked out as I confirmed the human voice had come from its mouth.

"You're the daughter of the Hero of Twilight? To think I would be meeting you here..."

"Everybody?! Are you seeing this?!?! Charlotte's talking?!?!?!" I shouted behind me.

The girls were already leaving in search of a restaurant. Only Vill turned around in confusion.

"What? Has the heat gotten to you, Lady Komari? Don't worry. I see a shop over there selling curry-flavored ice cream. Let's share a cone with intertwining tongues."

"Now's not the time. Just listen..."

"Vill! Let the runt be and let's get going."

Colette came over, locked arms with Vill (!), and pulled her away.

Nelia and Esther hadn't heard me to begin with. I fearfully turned back around to see the camel standing with poise.

"You're Terakomari Gandesblood, right?"

"Y-yes?! A-and you?!"

"I'm a secret agent of the mercenary group Full Moon. I disguise myself as a rental camel to keep an eye on the war. This is a huge coincidence... Or is it fate? You look so much like your mother..."

I looked at the guy holding Charlotte's reins.

Uhhh? Are you okay, dude? Your camel's talking?

<sup>&</sup>quot;Huh??"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I said I am not Charlotte."

Yet he stayed in place, just smiling. Clearly, he wasn't okay.

"Don't worry. He's also a member of Full Moon. My subordinate."

"How can I not worry? And how come you can talk?"

"I'm not just any camel. I'm a beast-folk. Of course I can talk."

How can I tell a regular camel from a beast-folk...?

What's up with you guys...?

"Erm... And you know me?"

"How couldn't I? Our boss is your mother, Yulinne Gandesblood."

"Huh? Yulinne... Mom?! You know my mom?!"

"Yes. Our moon-rank mercenary group, Full Moon, works around the world to quell the flames of war and pursue justice. And Lady Gandesblood is its leader."

"Wha ...?"

"Kilty told us you ended up here after you got caught up in the collapse of the Enchanted Lands' Dark Core. Apparently, there's a survey team being put together in your world... Glad to see you're okay. The boss has been worried about you, too."

Charlotte huffed in relief.

I'd turned into a mannequin trying to make sense of what I was hearing.

I heard Nelia shout in the distance, "Komariii! C'mon alreadyyy!"



Charlotte said she would send a pigeon to the boss in Mulnite, to tell Mom I was okay.

Moon-rank mercenary group Full Moon. They were doing all sorts of things around the world, apparently. Some of them fought sword in hand like my mom, and others went incognito to gather information like Charlotte.

The camel's news shook me to my core.

Getting confirmation that Mom was in the Imperial Capital particularly filled me with hope. Now I could focus on going to Mulnite without regret. The

emergency situation could hopefully be resolved so long as we reached the city.

However, not all the news was good.

"My colleagues say the Arukan Army is pursuing the Komari Club. I find it strange they would fixate on the shrine maiden to that extent...but the reality is they keep crushing neutral cities in their path. Your location was leaked after you went through the checkpoint, so they should be getting here tomorrow or the day after," Charlotte said.

"What do we do? We're going for dinner. Wanna come with, Charlotte?"

"No thank you. There's not much I can tell you, unfortunately. Just keep heading to the Imperial Capital. You should find a way to go back to your world once you meet the boss. Also, I'm not Charlotte."

"I see... And will I be riding you tomorrow, too, Charlotte?"

"If the schedule aligns. Also, I'm not Charlotte."

"Then what's your name?"

"Charles."

I said good-bye to Charlotte and joined the girls again.

His info gave a great sense of importance to our trip. We could definitely go back home if we reached the Imperial Capital—I valued the reassurance more than anything. *Finally, I can sleep soundly tonight.* 

That said, not all my anxieties were gone.

There were three main problems to solve.

One: Could we go back home?

Two: Would Colette take Vill away from me?

Three: How could I avoid my doom?

"... No progress on the last two."

"My goodness, Lady Komari, you look so down. Here, let me feed you a bite of curry—mouth to mouth."

"Dwaaah?! But yours is spicy! I can't eat that!!"

"That's the problem?" Nelia interjected.

We were having curry at a curry place in the Curryd Empire.

We were at a table for six outdoors. Dancers in striking outfits were putting on a show on the stage at the front. The sky was already dyed purple... And yet, as many people as ever were going here and there on the streets. They were having a great old time in sync with the music.

Esther looked around and nodded deeply.

"Interesting. It's not one species for each country in the Netherworld. I see vampires, Warblades...and lots more."

"There's way less monoethnic countries than not," Colette said while scooping a spoonful of curry. "Also, Vill...are you always like that?"

Everyone turned to look at Vill.

The sicko maid was holding a bottle of sauce, writing out "Lady Komari I  $\heartsuit$  U" on my curry. Could you not? Do you realize you could start a war by putting sauce on someone's dish without permission?

"...What could you possibly mean by that, Lady Colette?" Vill asked, coming to a halt.

"I mean being so clingy with Terakomari! I thought she was forcing you to do that at first, but now I'm doubting that."

"You're right, Colette. She's a sicko maid."

"You were right, Lady Colette. I am only following Lady Komari's orders."

"Stop lying!!"

"I can't trust you on this one, Vill." Colette stared at her.

"Aw..." Vill looked away. An odd reaction for her... I'd imagined she'd just go, "Yes, I'm a sicko, so what?"

"Oh well." Colette squeezed some mayonnaise (?!) onto her curry. "Pervert or not, I owe you my life."

"Excuse me, Lady Colette, but I am no pervert, and I'm sure the other three ladies present would agree. Right, ladies?"

"Oh, you are," said Nelia.

"Sicko," I said.

"Er..." Esther faltered, letting it slip she had her misgivings about the maid's behavior.

"I cannot believe this!" Vill cried crocodile tears.

If you wish to correct your ways, then look to Sakuna for some pointers. Now she is one unperverted girl.

"See?" Colette gave Vill a vacant stare. "If you don't want to be thought of as a pervert, then stop doing all that creepy stuff... Look at Terakomari. She doesn't like it."

"...I'm sorry, Lady Komari. I was inconsiderate."

"Huh? Ah."

Vill changed my plate with hers and carved the curry with her spoon to form the words, " $I \equiv U$  Lady Komari."

Just then, I felt a sandy, lukewarm breeze. I narrowed my eyes.

The darkness turned graver. The music grew passionate, and the dancers onstage moved with further intensity. They performed a series of somersaults, and the audience clapped and cheered. "Wow!" Nelia and Esther applauded, too.

I clapped on autopilot while looking at Vill and Colette.

It was the first time Vill had ever apologized for sexually harassing me.

Colette somehow had the power to turn the sicko maid sane.

The haze within me remained.

I was sure I wouldn't be able to sleep well tonight.



Night. I couldn't sleep, so I left my bed for the balcony.

The town was still merrymaking—I could hear a faint, enthusiastic melody in the distance. The Curryd Empire was the most jovial country I'd ever been to.

I lost myself in thought while gazing up at the starry sky.

The Netherworld, my mom...Colette.

Colette Lumiere was making a mess of my heart.

"Lady Komari, shouldn't you be sleeping already?"

Vill came up behind me, wearing the thin pajamas provided by the inn.

I looked away, embarrassed for whatever reason.

"... You should go to sleep. We gotta get up early tomorrow."

"Sadly, I'm missing my body pillow. I can't."

"You're calling me a body pillow now?"

"No, I meant the *chikuwa*-fish-cake-shaped pillow I normally use..."

*"……"* 

...Stupid. What? You idiot. Why...why are you saying normal things, you sicko maid? Now you're making it seem like I'm the one calling myself a body pillow.

The maid walked up to my side in silence. She squinted at the noisy capital of the Curryd Empire and pulled my brain out of tranquility.

"No signs of the enemy yet. We should get a good night's sleep while we can. There's a high probability that we'll have to fight them tomorrow."

"I don't wanna fight. I'll run."

"Keep your chin up. Esther will mutiny if she hears you whining."

"She would never..."

I glanced at the room. The girls were already sound asleep. Esther's posture was incredible, like a corpse in a coffin. Colette had her arms around Esther's neck and was snoring. Meanwhile, Nelia had her belly out and her feet on the pillow (yeah, she was backward). What's with you, girl? You better not catch a cold tomorrow...

So only Vill and I were still awake.

I brought it up as casually as I could.

"Vill, what do you think of Colette?"

"Excuse me?"

"Um, I mean, not that it matters that you'd be chummy with her. I don't care. In fact, I would be quite glad for you, as your friend."

Vill grinned.

...What's with that face? Are you making fun of me?

"Could it be you're jealous, Lady Komari? Worried that Lady Colette might take me away from you? Overflowing with love for your cute little maid?"

"No way! I just wanted to know, as your boss."

"Don't worry, Lady Komari. I am your maid and yours only. Even if the world were put on its head, I would never leave you— Hmm?"

Vill shot me an inquisitive glance.

I had no idea what my face looked like.

The mischievous look on her face disappeared, and she smiled with fascination.

"Goodness. This is graver than I thought... Don't worry, Lady Komari. There's nothing for you to torment yourself over."

"But..."

"Have you forgotten? It was you who saved me from the darkness. I've adored you ever since, and these feelings have only grown stronger as we've faced hardship after hardship together. I'm not going anywhere."

"..."

"Don't stare at me with such blatant suspicion... Look, I serve you because I was attracted to your sincere kindness. I want to watch you take over the world from the closest seat in the house."

"I'm not kind. And I'm not taking over the world."

"You never know what the future holds." Then she remembered. "Oh, that reminds me, your death foreseen by Pandora's Poison is inching closer—but

don't worry. I'll protect you as I always have."

"Really? But you saw me dead in your vision, right?"

"I've seen you dead about five or six times at this point."

"Seriously?!"

"But we always got through it, and it'll be the same this time. The problem is, I don't know how you're supposed to die..."

I had a bad feeling about this, but if Vill said things would be all right, then surely it would be.

We still had time before the *dead*line. There was no point screaming about not wanting to die at this moment, at least.

A smile escaped me. I would've cried and holed up in my room before, but... Yeah, I had gotten used to all this chaos, but more than anything, I had trust in my friends. This was what happiness was all about.

"...So I don't have to worry about anything, yeah?"

"Of course not. I love you more than anything in this universe. Let's get over this ordeal and get back to our Mulnite."

"...Yeah. Thanks."

The music had faded at some point. It was finally time for the city to sleep.

The maid gazed at me kindly.

I faltered for a moment before gently taking hold of her hand.

"Huh? Ummm, Lady Komari..."

"I'm counting on you. Now, I gotta get some sleep."

"Uh...y-yeah."

I let go of her hand and hurried back into the room.

I felt my heart racing for some reason. I wasn't actually sleepy. I was so wide awake that I'd have trouble getting to bed, but I didn't want to recognize I was feeling so overjoyed. I dived into bed, squeezed my eyes shut, and began counting sheep.

I could hear Villhaze whisper something from the balcony.

"Lady Komari is being...affectionate...? Is the world coming to an end...?"

I wasn't being affectionate. I was simply showing my subordinate I trust her.

...Still, I couldn't sleep because Vill was everything on my mind.

Colette's snoring stopped as she turned over next to Esther. Her eyes were wide with shock and confusion.



The next morning, we left before the sun was up.

Nelia had insisted "one more hourrr" and was stiff like a tortoise, and it had taken us an hour to wake her up, but that was within the margin of error.

Three days until my doom.

We had a day of walking ahead of us to reach the checkpoint to Mulnite. It was the same scorching, sunny hell as before. The enemy hadn't reached us yet. Nelia wondered aloud if they wouldn't invade Curryd territory.

Our march across the desert ended without trouble.

We got to the checkpoint before sunset and left the Curryd Empire by showing our guild IDs.

Now we were in Mulnite territory—Colette's homeland.

There was a small town near the checkpoint.

We took the camels to the rental shop.

By the way, Charlotte hadn't uttered a single word the whole way. No matter how many times I'd said, "Hey," "Say something," or, "It's a scorcher today, eh?" And everyone had treated me like a weirdo who made a habit of talking to camels. The humiliation.

I told everyone to wait for me outside while I said good-bye to Charlotte, then headed over to reception.

Maybe he just hadn't been able to talk in front of everyone because of some agreement or something.

"...Charlotte, why won't you talk to me?"

"My name's not Charlotte."

So now you're talking...

He huffed before continuing.

"By the way, I keep quiet to maintain confidentiality. I'm a secret agent posing as a rental camel. I can't let people know the truth willy-nilly."

"I figured. What would you have done if I'd told them you could talk, though?"

"Nothing. They'd have just thought you were crazy."

Of course they would.

"Now then, you've finished this leg of the journey. I work in the Curryd Empire, though, so I won't be accompanying you to Mulnite. I hope your trip is pleasant and fruitful."

"Thanks." I patted his head. "You gave me some hope, Charlotte. We'll go meet my mom... Now what are you going to do?"

"Keep on spying. We need to keep an eye on Star Citadel, not just Aruka."

"Star Citadel?"

"A moon-rank mercenary group. Right, I should tell you this. The Netherworld is in chaos due to international conflict, but we think Star Citadel is pulling the strings."

I felt something was off immediately. Normally I would've just said "Uh-huh," but after my failure at the Matrimonial War, my attentiveness had risen.

Star Citadel.

I've heard that name somewhere before... Right, at the end of the battle in the Enchanted Lands. Karla's brother showed up out of nowhere and said...

"What a terrible sight. Star Citadel knows no limits."

"Nerzanpi's? Her organization?"

Charlotte blinked his big eyes.

"Yes. Death Master Nerzanpi Rocha is a member of Star Citadel. But you've already defeated her. The problem right now is their leader, Yusei. Or maybe Dead Maestro Tremolo Parcostella is of higher priority right now, since she's on active duty. They're working behind the scenes to cause conflict in the Netherworld."

"Huh...?"

"We know her name and face, and yet her power still lets her freely carry out her evil deeds. Her aim is to cause fruitless dispute. She curries favor with international VIPs and points them toward war. She's cold and aggressive... If she finds you, she'll tear you apart on the spot."

I was shocked to hear that name.

Tremolo Parcostella. The biwa bard who'd helped me back at the first town.



A ravine stretched out beyond the borders of the Curryd Empire.

The desert came to a sudden end. It felt like stepping into another world, although that was to be expected, since the map already showed that the Curryd Empire's territory was only desert. The logic behind it was beyond me.

We walked down an uneven path.

The air was pretty chilly, probably because of the river.

We would've liked to stay the night near the checkpoint, but who knew when Aruka might attack. It would be best not to stay in one place. We could reach the ravine town by night walking, so we pressed on.

"I'm telling you, Charlotte said Tremolo's part of this evil mercenary group called Star Citadel. She's with Nerzanpi."

"But she saved us, right? Would you rather believe a weird talking camel?"

"Mm..."

Nelia and I were walking in the front.

I was telling her about Tremolo, but she wouldn't believe me. She was almost convincing me I was wrong instead. And yeah, I was having a hard time

believing that kind bard was really a murderer.

Vill and Colette weren't even listening. They were throwing riddles at each other in the back. Rearguard support Esther was clutching her hair, trying to figure out the answer to Colette's riddle: "What's a table that has legs but doesn't walk?"

"We don't know who we can trust. We don't even have a grip on the situation yet. Anyway, we have to get to the Imperial Capital first," Nelia said with a sigh.

Sure enough, there was no use ruminating on Tremolo.

Even if she was evil, there was nothing we could do about it right now.

"...Yeah. And I get to meet Mom, too."

"Exactly. It's like a dream come true." Nelia was happy to reunite with her mentor from the Aruka Kingdom days. "She tasked me with taking care of you. I want to show her how much you've grown. Not physically, sadly, but I'm sure she'll be shocked."

"What about you, Nelia?"

"Huh?"

"What are you going to do after you meet Mom...your mentor?"

"Well..." She smiled awkwardly. "I'll tell her I took Aruka back and became the president. I want her to check if I've made good on her teachings... Hopefully I won't get a scolding."

"Oh, you won't. I'm sure she'll be proud to see you now."

Nelia looked at me with confusion.

"I mean, why wouldn't she? You work so hard as the president, you defeated Nerzanpi's control technique back in the Enchanted Lands, and now you're leading us across the Netherworld. The Arukan soldiers would've killed us if it weren't for you."

"...S-stop it." She turned away, red in the face.

It was exciting to see her flustered for once. She adjusted her backpack and looked forward while fidgeting with her hair.

"I'm only doing what's natural. It's my job..."

"That's still amazing, I think. I can't even do my own job right. I wish I could have your assertiveness and leadership."

"Ah..."

Nelia was so embarrassed that she couldn't speak. How uncharacteristic of the wise Moonpeach Princess.

But as I kept staring at her, I noticed something.

"Wait, Nelia, don't tell me you're not used to receiving praise?"

"N-no!" She was so sincere; now this reaction was very like her. "I mean... there's no one around me who would..."

"Really? I'd think Gertrude would."

"That's different. Gertrude and Pascal are my maids. Getting praise from servants is part of the deal. But when someone who's my equal, a friend like you, does it...I get ticklish. You're going to have to take responsibility for making me feel like this."

Interesting, very interesting. Little Miss President has her own needs.

Now that I thought about it, I'd only caused trouble for Nelia. I had to return the favor for everything she'd done for me, and if praise was what she wanted, then praise I would give her. I put on a huge smile and put my hand on her peachy hair.

"You're such an admirable girl! Such a hard worker! I got to have some great food today thanks to you! Thank you, Nelia. Good girl. Good girl."

"Wha... Do... Don... Don't pat meeeee!!"

She shrieked like a dying cat and took a few steps back.

I was frozen with my hand in the air. Nelia glared at me, beet red.

What just happened? Were you always like this?

"You do it just like my mentor! You're supposed to be my little sister! How dare you?!"

"S-sister...? Since when have I been your little sister?!"

"I've been saying it forever now. That we're like sisters because you're my mentor's daughter."

"Wait, but I should be the older sister! I have a more mature psyche... Hey! Don't pat my head!"

"This is vengeance! You let yourself be patted, little sister! Good girl, good girl, good girl."

Absolutely zero reserve.

...Oh well. It feels nice, so I'll let her go on until she gets tired of it.

This also showed my magnanimity as her elder, letting my little sister do as she pleased... But then Vill got in between us, cheeks puffed.

"Stop flirting. We're almost there."

I looked ahead. The first Mulnite Empire town—tonight's lodging place—was right there.

"Wait a second, you phrased the riddle wrong!!" Esther yelled from behind.

"You just realized?! Wow, you're such a dummy." Colette laughed. Those two sure got along. Let's just pray they don't get into a fight.

"Let's go then, Lady Komari. We shall sleep together tonight," said Vill.

"Yeah, let's...go. I'll think about the rest."

"Oh? Is your affectionate phase over already?"

"I never had one! Let's go!"

The stars were beginning to shine in the sky.

We went down the hill toward the town.



However, our expectations were instantly betrayed.

It was a town, for sure. But there didn't seem to be anyone around. It was deserted no matter where we went, and there were cracks all over the streets and buildings. Ruins.

I looked at the items lined up under the eaves of a shop.

The rotten fruit and veggies stank. Didn't look like the place was in business.

"Eek!" Esther screamed in reaction to a swarm of flies. "U-um...Commander? Is this really the town...?"

"Well, it is a town, but it looks abandoned..."

"It must've been caught up in the war just a few days ago," Nelia said while looking at the map. "Back at the checkpoint, I heard Aruka's and other nations' armies were causing trouble in southern Mulnite... I should've asked more about it."

"What...? They just let the armies get in? What's the point of the checkpoints, then?"

Chills ran down my spine, and I looked around.

The stars above illuminated the ruined town. The soldiers must've looted the place. The doors of the houses were broken, as though people had forced their way in. I shuddered at the thought of stumbling across a corpse.

"...It's just like my village," Colette muttered. "They showed up out of nowhere and ruined our lives. They made so many people suffer...including me and Vill..."

"Lady Colette, perhaps I have no right to say anything, but there's nothing to gain by ruminating on it. Let's get some rest soon."

Vill rubbed Colette's back. The girl nodded with a pensive look on her face.

Where are we going to sleep, though? Should we just go inside an inn? I can already see Esther objecting and insisting we camp instead.

Just then, Nelia suggested something out of left field.

"How about we sleep under the stars, then? I just stole these sleeping bags from the shop over there."

"Huh? You stole them?"

"Oops! No, I meant to say I picked them up!"

Seems like we're going with the camping alternative.

Theft was still a crime like breaking and entering...but oh well. *Doesn't look like Esther heard Nelia anyway*.

And the Netherworld's starry sky was beautiful like a jewel box, so that was exciting.

As I'd been lamenting the gross reality of not being able to take a bath tonight, Esther found a waterfall on the outskirts of town. The town wasn't lacking in water resources, as it had been built right by the ravine. Upon closer inspection of the waterfall, there was even a dressing room next to the basin. Maybe the locals had used this place frequently.

We washed our clothes and bodies.

Vill threw herself naked at me, but that was nothing special to write about in detail. The only striking part about it was how she faltered upon receiving Colette's vacant gaze. So now you're regaining your sense of decency, sicko maid?

We gathered under the stars around a bonfire.

I stared at the crackling fire while munching on the fish Esther had caught for us (barehanded). It was nice and spicy when paired with the flavoring we'd bought in the Curryd Empire.

"Ah! I bought snacks, want some?"

Nelia produced multiple sweets from her backpack.

Chocolate, marshmallows, yokan, sukonbu... Colette shouted "Yaaay!" while thinking about what to pick. I turned to Nelia.

"Should we have bought all this? Won't we run out of money?"

"Snacking with friends is the best part of a trip! And besides, now that I think about it, I don't really need to pay back the debt. They can't even go after us after we go back to our world."

Oh, that's evil. Look at Esther. Poor girl's scowling.

"President Cunningham...that's illegal..."

"Hmmm? But we're not from the Netherworld. Do we have a duty to follow

the law here?"

"I think we do! I believe it should be common sense that we..."

"No, no. Listen, I heard in the Curryd Empire, you're required by law to eat curry rice once a day. But we don't have to because we're foreigners."

"Yes... Huh?"

"So that means we don't need to follow the law in the Netherworld. Just ignore that debt like it's nothing. Here, have a chocolate."

"Uh, but, hmm? Er... Huh??"

Esther chewed the chocolate with a frown. She must've been worn out from the trip, too. She wouldn't have let Nelia's chicanery win otherwise.

"Ah," Colette exclaimed. She stared at the candy in her hand with a furrowed brow.

"What is it? Do you not like strawberry?" Vill asked.

"This... This is the Scholar's favorite candy."

"I wouldn't say it's my favorite, but I do like it," I said.

"First, you're no scholar, you deluded weirdo. Second, I'm talking about the vampire who conquered the world six hundred years ago that I told you about."

Oh, right, she did mention that.

To think there were real scholarly intellectuals other than me out there.

"And you know what? This candy comes from my village," Colette bragged.

I was baffled. "Surely they make that anywhere?"

"The Scholar spread it far and wide. She loved this candy, so she ordered that they produce it all over the world. By the way, the original was for vampires and was made of blood and sugar. They make it strawberry flavored outside Mulnite."

Colette swayed the candy before Vill's eyes.

"You don't remember this, Vill? I had this a lot with my childhood friend."

Something wasn't right—there was an inquisitive look in Colette's eyes.

"They sell it in our world, too. And I've even made some before."

"Mm-hmm."

Colette looked up at the night sky with disappointment. I still couldn't quite tell what she was thinking.

In any case—who was this "Scholar"?

The only blood candy fan I knew of was Spica. Could it be that she was actually the Goddess who'd created the Netherworld? Yeah, right. Ha-ha-ha.

"Now, then." Nelia smiled as she grabbed a marshmallow. "What are we gonna play? The night is still young."

"You should hit the hay already. Maybe you won't sleep in for once if you do," I said.

"I have no set time for waking up. Which means I have never slept in."

"Bullcrap! We almost died thanks to your sleepyheadedness! You should learn a thing or two from Esther. Look, she's already out like a light."

"Already?! She didn't even brush her teeth, did she?!"

"We should let her rest. Meanwhile, we can indulge in the field trip classic: love stories. I'll start. I'm in love with Lady Komari," said Vill.

"You can't just say that without at least trying to set the mood!" I shouted.

And so the night went on.

Esther was sound asleep. Vill was going crazy seriously asking, "How can I win Lady Komari's heart?" to me. Colette puffed her cheeks in reaction, while I brushed off her dumb question. She switched to asking Nelia who she liked, and the Arukan girl turned red and shouted, "No one!" before shutting her lips tight.

It really felt like a field trip.

An exciting new experience for this shut-in vampire.

The fulfilling night went on. We snacked and chatted nonsense until the sleepiness struck us, and we squirmed into our sleeping bags.

It took only an hour for the weather to turn bad.

Dark, thick clouds covered the sky, obscuring the moonlight. I was staring at the stars from within my sleeping bag when I felt drops on my nose.

"Ow, that's cold! Girls! It's raining!"

Vill, Esther, and Colette didn't seem to notice, though.

Nelia was closest to me, so I tried rocking her awake. "So many... So many marshmallows..." and a mushy smile was her only reaction. This girl didn't wake up in the morning. I couldn't hope to get her up in the middle of the night.

But maybe the pouring rain could.

While I was kneading Nelia's face, the rain started coming down harder. Vill and Esther jolted awake, while Colette sat up sluggishly, going, "Whaaa...?" Nelia finally opened her eyes once the rain got into her mouth.

"Huh? Rain...? No... It's a lemon juice shower..."

"Wake up already! Let's move before we catch a cold!" I said.

"Commander! I got our things ready! Let's go, Ms. Colette."

"Good job, Esther. Lady Komari, let's take shelter inside that hou—"

Just then, thunder boomed.

The weather was really going to the dogs.

Zip! Vill stiffened like a wire.

"...Hmm? What's wrong, Vill?"

"N-no... N-n-n-noth-noth-nothing..."

The sky lit up.

"Eep!" Vill squeaked.

"There's clearly something wrong with you. Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm fine! I'm perfectly fine, don't worry! Let's move inside quick—"

The moment Vill forced herself to take a step forward...

## KRAKATOOM!!

...thunder fell with a sound that pierced the heavens.

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"EEEEK!!"
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"WHOOOA?!"

The shock was so huge, I felt like the thunder had struck and killed me.

I came back to my senses and found myself in the mud, pushed by the sicko maid.

Huh? Did she save me or something? Nope. Clearly the position didn't match the light and sound. I had just been tackled by my maid.

She buried her face in my chest, frozen solid.

"Vill...?"

"...It's nothing." She slowly raised her head.

Her expression was as cool as ever...but something was off. There was liquid flowing from her eyes, and I didn't think it was rain. The sky roared again, and she grimaced and started trembling. *Please don't shiver on top of me. You're heavy.* 

"L-La... La-Lady... Lady Komari... The thunder..."

"Oh... Right, you're scared of thunder, aren't you?"

"I'm not scared... I just never liked it."

KRAKOOM!! Thunder roared again.

"Eeeek!" Vill screamed like a little girl and clung to me.

The invincible sicko maid actually had one weakness: thunder. It was pretty serious, so even though I was on the constant lookout for something to hold over her, I'd never made fun of her for it. I couldn't do that to the poor girl.

"Komari! C'mere already!"

Nelia and the others had already taken refuge in the building.

I gently patted Vill's head.

"It's okay. There's nothing to be afraid of. I'm here with you."

"Excuse you, Lady Komari, but I'm not afraid. Nothing scares me. This is nothing more than a natural reflex, you see."

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"Okay. Let's go with them, yeah?"
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".....Okay."

I grabbed her hand and stood up.

We'd just taken a bath, and now we were all muddy.

I wanted to warm up by a bonfire again already...

Cloing.

"...Huh?"

Then I heard a familiar tone.

I turned around.

Someone was coming from the town entrance. No, not *one*. A whole group was running toward us—I could feel it.

"? Lady Komari? What's the matter?" Vill, clinging to me, cocked her head.

I had a sinking feeling about this.

There was no basis for it, but I sensed an ominous presence was approaching.

Then she revealed herself in the middle of the rain.

"Bonsoir. Nice weather we're having tonight, isn't it?"

A rosy smile. Blindfolded eyes. Both hands in the pockets of her vestment and a musical instrument I wasn't very familiar with on her back.

The Dead Maestro—Tremolo Parcostella.

One of the members of Star Citadel, moon-rank mercenary group.

And according to Charlotte, the villain of the century.

"Tremolo... Why are you here?"

"Lady Nerzanpi sent me a notice. I did not realize at all...that Terakomari Gandesblood would try to stop us from achieving our dreams," she said in an oddly clear voice.

She really was an enemy. She'd only helped me because she hadn't known about me.

Nelia and Esther realized something was wrong and ran up to us.

"What do you want? Must be something important for you to cross the desert all the way here," I said.

"Hee-hee." Tremolo smiled gracefully. "I didn't cross the desert. You can get to Mulnite without touching the Curryd Empire by taking the way around the Toumor Republic... And I imagine the Arukans would rather avoid the fatigue, too."

"What do you mean ...?"

"I'm not here to kill you. Indiscriminate murder goes against my precepts. I just fulfilled my duty telling by them the location of the Komari Club." Tremolo looked behind.

I could hear a swarm of footsteps. Vill and I gulped. Soon, groups of armored men emerged from behind the rain curtain. Way more than we'd fought last time. I couldn't count them since it was dark, but they looked over one hundred strong.

Nelia gripped the hilts of her twin swords.

"We couldn't have worse luck... They're already here."

"Hee-hee. Don't think you're safe just because you reached Mulnite. There is no safe place in the Netherworld... And here I feel the beginning of a new conflict."

The armored soldiers inched ever closer. They were clearly here to kill us.

I hid Vill, still trembling from the thunder, behind my back and yelled:

"H-hold on! Why do we have to fight right now?! It's already the middle of the night!"

"Now that's funny. Unfortunately, there is no rest for their ire. The shrine maiden escaped from the Arukan government, and she stole treasure from the court. They said they have to kill her to uphold their honor. Unbelievably vulgar, in my opinion."

"What ...?! Treasure?! What did you do, Colette?!"

"Nothing!!" Colette screamed as she ran out of the building. "I don't know what she's talking about! I could barely escape with my life!"

"I wonder. From what I heard, several national treasures disappeared from the palace."

"What...?"

Colette didn't seem to be lying.

The cart hadn't had anything inside that seemed like a treasure.

I immediately saw through Tremolo Parcostella's cruelty.

She'd probably come up with that story to anger Aruka.

Nelia unsheathed her blades. Vill also held up her kunai, though trembling. Esther gripped the Chain Metal with anxiety.

Tremolo put on a grim smile.

"My job ends here. Now then, soldiers of Aruka. Do your best."



The armored soldiers roared as they charged at us.

"This is ridiculous! I'm the president of Aruka!"

Nelia swung her swords to launch the first enemy away.

The grating ringing of metal on metal echoed.

Our field trip had turned into a bloodbath in the blink of an eye.

Vill and Esther squared off bravely with the enemy. The Arukan soldiers weren't that high level...but there were too many of them, and they kept on coming. As soon as they took one down, another appeared, so quickly it was clear we'd be against the wall sooner rather than later.

"Lady Komari! Stay ba— AAAH?!"

Thunder roared again, and Vill went rigid, tears in her eyes.

One of our foes seized the opening to charge at her with a sword held high.

"Ms. Vill!"

"Gah!"

Esther launched Chain Metal to take the guy down by a hair's breadth.

I sighed in relief. She was finally fighting at full power. Esther shot a glare at the Arukan soldiers and yelled: "You're supposed to be people of the Netherworld! You have a duty to follow the law of the Netherworld! I did some research at the library in the Curryd Empire, and it said assaulting someone out of the blue is illegal in this world! Which means I have the right to self-defense!"

She couldn't control Chain Metal as easily as normal due to the lack of mana, but even without it, Esther was plenty strong. The lethal blade tore through the air as it laid waste to the ruined town. The soldiers' screams echoed as they fell one after the other.

I clenched my fists as I watched my friends fight valiantly.

Yeah. Don't just stand back and watch. Everyone's giving their all to fight, and you're here shivering? Don't be pathetic. So I looked around attentively.

Vill, Esther, and Nelia were all busy.

Dammit... Too late now, but maybe I should keep some blood in a bottle to carry with me everywhere. Why didn't I think of that sooner? Dumb stupid idiot.

"Colette!"

It was then that I found the sky-blue girl hiding behind a barrel.

There was no time to hesitate. I ran across the buzzing battlefield toward Colette. She shrieked at the sight of someone approaching.

"Stop! Don't kill me! I just want to go back home!"

"Relax! It's me, Terakomari! Let me drink your blood!"

"Terakomari?! Wait, blood?! What're you saying at a time like this?!"

"I get superpowers when I drink blood! It's called Core Implosion... What you here call just 'powers'!"

"No, no, no, no! Go away! The soldiers are gonna find me!"

"Stop being stubborn! Are you gonna let Vill get hurt?!"

Colette gasped.

She really changed when it came to Vill. I didn't have the time to get her to consent. I had to suck her blood while she was still taken aback. So I reached out to her and...couldn't do it.

"Huh...?"

Liquid spurted out of Colette's shoulder before I could get to it.

It was so dark I didn't know what it was at first. I felt a soaking sensation on my hands different from that of the rain. It wasn't until the smell hit me that I realized it was blood.

"Wha... Colette?!"

She collapsed on the spot.

A sword had run through the barrel from behind.

An accident. It had gouged her shoulder. What terrible luck...

"So it's not just the shrine maiden. How futile."

Cloing. Cloing. The sound of the biwa accompanied the rain.

Tremolo Parcostella was standing behind us.

She didn't attack. She only watched the battle with sadness on her face.

I followed her gaze to my friends.

A blade was buried in Esther's side. Chain Metal was on the ground. The reddish-brown vampire rookie was about to collapse.

Nelia faltered for a moment when she saw that. The soldiers flicked her twin swords away, leaving a pink trail behind as they flew into the distance. Her eyes grew wide as an enemy kick nailed her midsection.

Thunder shook the night sky again, paralyzing Vill before she could aid Nelia.

The armored group shouted with glee as they cut in.

"It's over, Terakomari." Tremolo giggled. "And so, even more sadness envelops the mundane world."

Despair bubbled up inside me—and I vaporized it.

There was no way it could end like this. I was going to meet my mom and go back to my world. I couldn't let these idiots who incited war for no reason go scot-free.

I glared at the biwa bard.

"...You're wrong, Tremolo. Today is not my death date."

"Excuse me?"

I licked the blood on my hand—Colette's blood.

The change was immediate.

The world was dyed crimson. The nonexistent mana in this world exploded. A violent impulse I could never get used to bloomed within me.

Core Implosion: Blood Curse.

I flew fast enough to blow away the blustering rain and wind.

The Arukans fell to their behinds in fear.

Yes. You stay there. There is one way, and one way alone, for you all to survive. Abandon conflict and share the table with everyone. Now...

"...Die."



The sky was white by the time I came to my senses. The rain was still pouring, though, so it wasn't that bright.

The ruined town had been destroyed beyond recognition. Clearly, I had blown it away with magic.

Arukan soldiers were down all over.

Tremolo was knocked out, bruised all over, arms and legs splayed over the gardener shop. Surely she wouldn't launch another surprise attack now.

"Ugh..."

Sharp pain ran through my left ankle. There was a straight gash on it.

I must've gotten injured while using the Blood Curse—but I didn't care about

my own pain.

I looked at my fallen allies.

Colette was unconscious. The wound on her shoulder didn't look too deep.

Esther seemed in grave shape, though. She was pale in the face, shaking from the stab wound she'd taken to the stomach. This wouldn't have happened if I had done my job... I felt so bad for her and so bad about myself that I couldn't stop the tears from flowing.

"I'm sorry, girls..."

"Komari. We have to get out of here. Now." Nelia wiped the blood from her nose as she walked up to me.

She'd gotten her face smashed against a wall, but apparently, it wasn't that big of a deal. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Back to the checkpoint?"

"It would be quicker to move ahead. The next town isn't so far away," Vill said while looking at the map.

She was the only one who'd gotten out of this battle unscathed.

"I'll carry Esther. You take Colette," Nelia said.

"W-wait. I'll carry her. I can't let you do everything..."

Nelia smiled kindly and said, "But you're also wounded. We have to help each other... But, well, if it turns out I really can't do it, I'll leave her to you."

"Yeah..."

We gave the wounded first aid and left the ruined city.

Sadness coiled in my chest.

I'd hurt my friends. How could I face Mom now? But...I couldn't waste time brooding.

The only path left was forward.

We marched under the rain wearing raincoats.

We didn't speak more than was necessary. The soldiers had slapped us out of

the field trip mood, and Vill and Nelia were dead serious now.

My foot hurt more and more.

But that was nothing compared with Colette's and Esther's pain.

I gritted my teeth and continued marching on.

*""* 

How many hours had we walked in the rain?

The urge to give up on everything grew bigger and bigger within me.

I wanted to go back home to my Mulnite. I wanted to shut myself in my room and laze around in bed. I wanted to read. I wanted to write. Alone.

"Lady Komari, are you all right?" Vill asked with worry.

She had a look of understanding in her eyes, and the simple sight of her gaze made all the vexations in my heart poof away. It was always this maid who pulled me out of my room.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I'm okay. Thanks to you."

"Yes...? But I didn't do anything."

"Maybe... But you did."

"...If you say so." She looked back ahead with confusion.

I'd been able to get back outside thanks to her. All my experiences up to this point proved it. I just had to avoid dwelling on my negative thoughts.

Then the light came. I looked up at the sky in surprise. Clear sunlight was streaming through the gaps in the clouds. The rain had subsided, too. Them clouds must've gotten tired.

"Whoa!" Nelia exclaimed. "It finally stopped! I'm gonna cut you down if you start again, you hear me?!"

"Cut down who?"

"Oh, look, Lady Komari. There's the signboard for the next town." Vill pointed at a shabby sign ahead.

I was still unfamiliar with the characters, but it looked like it said, Lumiere Village

AHEAD.

...Hmm? Lumiere? Wait, isn't that Colette's last name?

"That's weird." Nelia cocked her head. "The map says Joule Village. And we shouldn't have gotten there so quickly..."

We followed the sign across the woodland.

There were a ton of little shrines alongside the path. Inside them were humanoid stone statues dressed in red clothing, like a shrine maiden's... Was this a local religious practice or something?

Then I noticed Vill seemed uneasy.

"What's wrong? Are you cold?"

"No... It might be my imagination..."

Soon, the view cleared, revealing a small village.

Smoke was streaming from the chimneys of the stone houses. It was noon after all.

My first thought was, Thank goodness. We're finally here, and it's not in ruins.

Now we could all take a rest.

"Komari! Villhaze! Let's get someone, quick!"

"Yeah! Let's go, Vill—Vill?"

She was reacting very differently from us.

She was frozen in place, her eyes wide. A Netherworld butterfly I felt like I'd seen before flew right by her nose, but her jade eyes were set on the village.

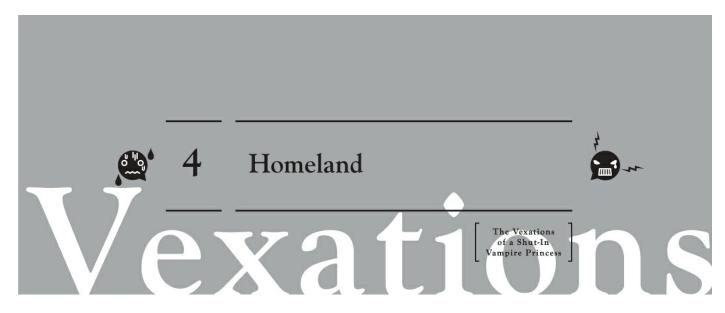
"What's wrong? Are you too tired to walk?"

"...No, it's nothing. I just had a little déjà vu."

I had a bad feeling about this.

But if she said it was nothing, then I trusted her.

I blinked hard a couple times to banish my anxiety and pulled Vill by the hand to follow behind Nelia.



Two days until my death.

Lumiere Village was small, with a population of only about five hundred.

We were rushed to a clinic, the place where wounds and illnesses were treated.

There were plenty of doctors like Dr. Kuya in the Netherworld since there was no Dark Core here.

Colette and Esther woke up soon enough.

The doctor, a middle-aged man with glasses, said they would be fine, but Esther's wound was deep, and she would need to be hospitalized for one week.

"Please forgive me! I heard it's a rule in the Seventh Unit that those who lose in battle are to be killed! Sh-should I prepare myself for death...?"

"No way! There's no such rule!"

Dang Yohann and/or Caostel, getting weird ideas into her head.

Now they deserved punishment—I wasn't making snacks for them anymore.

And next to us...

"Ahhh, Colette! You're back!" "Thank goodness you're okay!" "She doesn't look okay! Look at those wounds!" "Aruka's gotta pay for this!" "You rest for now. We'll contact the chief back in the Imperial Capital."

...a lot of villagers gathered around Colette's bed.

Isn't this too enormous a coincidence?

Yep—we were in Colette Lumiere's hometown.

It was a secret garden, absent from any map, hidden so the shrine maiden could be brought up without interference. We'd just so happened to stumble upon it after losing our way.

The news of the next shrine maiden's return soon made the rounds all over the community. Villagers came in droves without rest to give their own version of "Thank goodness."

Colette was almost getting crushed under the attention, but she seemed to like it.

It was the first time I'd seen her smile from the bottom of her heart.

It was an arduous journey, after all...

"So that's unexpected," Nelia said while feeding Esther an apple. "We just so happened to wander into Colette's hometown... But it's a fortunate coincidence. The villagers' happiness is infectious, don't you think?"

"I feel like we're being left out. But, eh, it's okay."

I held an apple slice to Esther's mouth as I looked around.

The villagers only cared about Colette. Among them was an old guy crying tears of joy.

"Lady Colette sure is popular. Perhaps to be expected of the next shrine maiden?"

Vill shoved an apple slice into Esther's mouth while tilting her head.

"But that's weird, isn't it? Why would they send their precious little shrine maiden as an offering? I don't think the villagers would have agreed to that..."

Nelia stabbed another slice of apple with a toothpick. Esther gulped at the sight of that and screamed, "Sorry, but I'm already full!" Yeah, we probably fed her too much. I scarfed down the slice of apple I was going to give to her.

Then a man left the group of villagers and approached us.

It was the vice-chief of the village, the same person who'd shown us to the clinic.

"Thank you so much, ladies of the Komari Club." He bowed with a wide smile. "As the next shrine maiden, Colette is a treasure of Lumiere Village and the Mulnite Empire at large. Thank you for guarding her all the way here."

"Oh, no, I didn't do anything..." I bowed back with nervousness.

"Oh, but you did!" He shook his head. "We owe the Komari Club. We'll hold a welcome party with the entire village today, so please make yourselves at home. I shall receive you in the chief's stead."

"He isn't here?" Vill asked.

"Well, no." He smiled awkwardly. "The chief couple are the shrine maiden's guardians, so they're staying in the Imperial Capital. In fact, they spend less time here than there in general."

"The chief couple... Does that mean Lady Colette's parents?"

"Indeed. Or, well, she was adopted, so they aren't her parents by blood... In any case, what bad luck they weren't around for their daughter's return."

"Hmm." Vill grabbed her chin and stared at Colette.

...? What's going on here? There's something off with the sicko maid...

Eh, whatever. I'll just enjoy the welcome party. Hope they have some good Netherworld food.



The trip from Lumiere Village to the Imperial Capital would take about a week.

We should have left right away, but we stayed for a while because of Esther's injury. Nelia said the Arukan forces wouldn't follow us here since we'd beaten them at the ravine.

We forced down our sense of urgency and focused on resting from the long journey.

And so, we were on our way to the assembly hall for a welcome party.

Esther alone had to stay in the clinic. Poor thing. I'll bring you some food later.

"Vill, this is my hometown! Great place, right?"

"Yes, it seems wonderful."

"Wanna stay here forever? They're not very lax about immigration, but I'm sure they'd welcome you! Let's make Esther stay, too."

"Uhhh."

"Hey, don't you remember that watermill? My childhood friend and I had lunch together there all the time..."

"It's my first time here."

"Right. Ah, look! That's the village's only school!"

Colette kept talking to Vill as we trod the muddy path.

I stared at her from behind. She was in terribly high spirits about being back in her hometown...but there was something else about her, too.

Now that I thought about it, she'd changed after we'd left the Curryd Empire. She'd started being more inquisitive with Vill.

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I had a bad feeling about it.

"Hey, Colette, could you show us some nice sightseeing spots?" I cut into the conversation.

"Huh?" She groaned while turning around. "What do you wanna do that for?"

"Well, since we're here, we might as well go sightseeing, right?"

"Right behind that stable there's a famous public toilet. It's so amazing that it's registered as a world heritage site. Go check it out while Vill and I go to the party."

"There's no way a toilet is a world heritage site..."

"Heh. You'll go through hell soon. I'm simply suggesting you relieve yourself beforehand so you won't wet your pants."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh well. I couldn't expect a little kid to understand."

Wh-what's wrong with her? Why's she so mean to me? And what's she mean by hell? Also, I'm no kid!

I was still baffled by the time we arrived at the assembly hall in the center of the village.

There were lots of tables set up in the huge yard, adorned with food of all shapes and colors. Seemed like it would be stand-up style.

"Ohhh, Colette! And the ladies of the Komari Club!"

Holding a plate of meat, the vice-chief walked up to us with a full smile on his face the moment he saw us.

Just then, the entire venue was filled with applause.

"Welcome back!" "Thank you for saving the shrine maiden!" "Let's party!" Their cheers echoed under the red sky. Tons of villagers had gathered at the assembly hall.

I got a bit bashful and looked at Colette.

She waved both her hands with pride.

... Yeah, no need to be embarrassed. Just do what she's doing.

"Please, make yourselves at home. We hope you can tell us about what's happened on your way here. But first, a toast, to Colette's return and the Komari Club's feats!"

The vice-chief declared the start of the party.

Everyone raised their glasses and said, "Cheers!" I also grabbed a cup from the nearest table in a hurry.

The merry dinner went on.

The villagers beat drums for entertainment and dyed the hall in festive colors. I grabbed a spoonful of veggie-filled omelet rice while staring intently at Colette and Vill.

"... Everyone in the village likes her, huh?"

"Well, obviously. She's the next shrine maiden," said Nelia before sipping her glass of milk.

Colette was in the middle of the venue, surrounded by villagers. She grinned bashfully every time someone said something like, "It's so good to see you

well," or, "Now the village will be at peace."

"I sent a bird at noon, so I'm sure the chief will hear soon. It'll be a pleasant surprise."

"But is it okay? Wasn't I supposed to be an offering to stop the war?"

"Who cares?! No one agreed with that decision. I can't believe the current shrine maiden. Adoptive or not, you're still her niece..."

"Well, well. Let's not talk about the shrine maiden. We should celebrate Colette's return instead."

"Yeah! Thank goodness!"

"How did you escape? I'm sure the Arukan soldiers must be plenty violent."

"Well, I... It was thanks to Villhaze!" Colette grabbed Vill's arm beside her.

The maid was pushed to the center of the villagers.

"Um, Lady Colette..."

"She saved me! Vill's so amazing. She took down the soldiers like it was nothing! And she also cared for me all along the journey!"

"Vill? Did you say Villhaze...?"

The villagers furrowed their brows and stared at her, but they soon laughed it off.

...? What's with that reaction?

"I see, I see. We must thank the Komari Club. Hey, Ms. Gandesblood! How about you come eat over here?!"

"No, no. It was Vill who saved me, not that runt."

"Ha-ha-ha. You got into an argument? You should make friends."

"Hey! Don't pat my head! I'm not a kid! Okay, I'll be honest! It's not like I didn't have fun on my journey with Terakomari, but I'm sure you'll all hate her once I tell you this!"

The drums echoed.

Colette took a deep breath. She stared at Vill's face, then glared daggers and

pointed at me.

"Terakomari groomed my childhood friend Vill into a pervert!!"

.....

...Wha...?

What the hell is she saying?

"Villhaze of the Komari Club was supposed to be the next shrine maiden! Villhaze Lumiere!"

Disquiet swept through the villagers.

"Colette...," the vice-chief said awkwardly. "Villhaze is dead. We've been through this. She won't be coming back..."

"But she's right here. Can't you see her? Her hair, her aura, and her boobs are different, but her face is the same."

"Don't be ridiculous, Colette..."

"I have proof! This Vill has the power to see the future! Just like the shrine maiden Vill!"

The villagers stared at Vill.

What's going on here? I wasn't expecting things to go like this...

I was taken aback, and Colette shot me a glare boiling with anger.

"I heard at the Curryd Empire inn that Vill has the power to see the future. Pandora's Poison, you called it. And you hid that from me, you jerk."

"No, I just didn't see any reason to tell you..."

"My Vill was the only one in the world capable of seeing the future. I told you my Vill had that power... Shouldn't you have connected the dots? Couldn't you have told me about Pandora's Poison if you thought this Vill and my Vill could be the same person? Or do you lack the humanity to do that?"

Back when I'd crossed the desert on Charlotte, I had in fact kept quiet about this common point between both Vills.

"Her hair color can be easily explained. Either she dyed it, or it lost its color

from stress. Vill went missing that stormy day because she was sent to another world. She forgot all about her childhood friend and her hometown and ended up as that girl's maid."

"Hold on! Vill has a grandfather named Clovis! And I'm sure she has memories of her childhood..."

"That's all a sham! Esther said...that you have a friend who can alter people's memories! You used them to brainwash Vill!"

There was much to correct, but my mind couldn't keep up. I was overwhelmed by Colette's menacing glare.

The villagers were beginning to look at me with suspicion. If Vill really was Colette's childhood friend—Villhaze Lumiere—then this was huge news for them. Because Villhaze Lumiere had been their legitimate next shrine maiden.

I clutched my hair as I thought about how I could clear up the misunderstanding, when...

"My memories have not been altered."

...Vill stated that coolly.

I looked at my maid like she was my savior.

"Y-yeah! Tell 'em, Vill!"

"That simply cannot be. This may come as a shock, but the truth is, I don't have memories of my childhood."

Huh?

"Shock" was putting it lightly.

"What do you mean, Vill?! You don't have memories of ...?"

"I never mentioned it since it was no big deal. I mean, you have similar circumstances, right? You don't remember a lot of what happened before that, if I recall correctly."

"That's true, but..."

"No way! Then she's really got to be my Vill!" Colette shouted, clinging to my maid. "I'll make you remember! I'm sure you'll get your memories back if I tell

you about our time together! Like, um, like when we went to the festival..."

"No, I am not Villhaze Lumiere."

Her voice was cold, as though she were pushing Colette off a cliff.

Colette's eyes grew wide, and her gaze hardened.

"D-don't say that! We're gonna live together again!"

"Even if I once was Villhaze Lumiere, I am her no longer. I am Lady Komari's loyal servant. I have a mission to complete. I cannot live with you."

"What mission?!"

"World domination."

"""

Vill, please. You're creeping everyone out.

"...I see, my explanation was lacking. Lady Komari and I will unite the world. She wishes to create a peaceful world without conflict, and I want to support her. I can't return your feelings, Lady Colette."

"Cool your head! Give up that ridiculous mission! You're my childhood friend! You're Uncle and Aunt's daughter! And...you're the next shrine maiden!"

"I give up all of that. Farewell."

Vill left the venue.

Colette ran behind her, but the vice-chief held her back by the shoulder.

"What?! Let me go!"

"Stop it. She isn't the Vill you knew."

*"*...!*"* 

The rest of the villagers seemed to think the same.

"Yeah, it's not her." "The real one was more timid." "She's no longer here." None of them saw her as her Vill. And to top it off, they laughed it off. "Colette sure had me going for a second!"

The party resumed.

Everyone forgot about the Vills and went back to enjoying themselves.

I had conflicting feelings about this. I thought I ought to go after Vill regardless, but then, I felt tempestuous hostility.

I turned around in fear. Colette was glaring at me with tears in her eyes.

"It's all... It's all your fault..."

"Huh? Wh-what is...?"

"I finally found Vill! We were going to go back to our lives!"

"Calm down, Colette. Just be glad you're back home, yes?" the vice-chief said. "Look, here's one of your favorite pa— Gwoagh?!"

Collette slammed the back of her fist into the vice-chief's face as he tried to appease her.

Clenching her fist harder, Colette didn't so much as glance at him as he squatted in pain.

"It's all your fault, Terakomari! Give me Vill back!"

"I can't do—"

"Give...HER...BAAACK!!"

"Whoooa?!"

Colette spun her arm around as she charged at me.

She drove her fist into my omelet rice, splattering ketchup all around.

I was frozen in fear. I had no chance to evade as Colette tackled me, and we grappled with each other like we were hugging.

"C-Colette! Relax! Fighting won't solve anything!"

"Yes it will! I'm going to make you cry and take Vill back!"

Colette clung to my hips and pushed me.

She...she wants to throw me on my head?!

"Stop it! You're wounded! You're gonna hurt yourself more!"

"I don't care! Besides, you're also hurt!"

"Ohhh! They're playing sumo!" the elders cheered. The drummer girl onstage began beating faster in sync with the battle. The still sensible villagers tried to stop Colette, but no one could overpower her.

The venue had turned into a sumo ring in the blink of an eye.

An old guy took up the role of referee and yelled, "You're still in, you're still in!" What's wrong with you?!

"I...I've been looking for Vill this whole time! I lost sleep over her! And you! What's that about world domination?! Don't you feel bad about dragging her into your nonsense?!"

"I'm not trying to conquer the world! Vill made that up!"

"I gave my life to her! Ever since the day of the thunderstorm...I've never made any other friends! Never hung out with anyone else! Because I was looking for her!"

As I tried to push back against her, agitation struck me.

I could deeply empathize with Colette.

If I were in her place, I would've sumo'd her the same way...

"Ah!"

She sank.

Her foot caught in the mud, and she tripped.

I panicked and tried to hold her up, but it was already too late.

The sky-blue girl face-planted into the ground.

Splash.

I practically saw the sound effect.

The venue went quiet. The old referee, the drummer, the injured vice-chief, Nelia (watching from the back), and everyone else froze like statues.

I anxiously held my hand out to Colette, but before I could touch her, she shot her head up.

Her face was too muddy for me to decipher her expression.

After a while, she parted her lips.

"Bw."

"'Bw'...?"

"BWUUUUUHHHHH!!"

Huge tears fell from her eyes, and she wailed in anguish.

My eyes darted left and right as I looked for what to say to her.

Soon, she wiped the tears with her sleeve, stood up, and ran away while screaming, "DROP DEAD, MOROOON!!"

Everyone in the venue was frozen for a while, until the vice-chief came back to his senses and ran after her, saying "Wait up, Colette!"

Nelia sighed. "What are we going to do with her?"

I thought back to Colette's crying face and stayed locked in place.

I wondered if she was hurt. That'd been a pretty bad fall...

And so, the welcome party came to an awkward close.

 $\stackrel{\wedge}{\nabla}$ 

The next evening, Nelia and I were roaming around the village.

The only thing roaming around my head was Colette, though.

She had shut herself in after what had happened last evening. She'd been so insistent Vill was her childhood friend, only for that very person to deny it. Anyone in her situation would feel bummed out.

And now Vill was heading to the Lumiere residence to try and cheer her up.

For some reason, I was feeling vexed.

I felt like I shouldn't leave the two of them alone.

The revelation from the previous day, that Vill didn't have memories of her childhood, haunted me like a ghost.

I was sure she hadn't been lying. That also explained Clovis's comment about Vill "only having the future to look forward to."

I didn't think my Vill was Villhaze Lumiere.

But I couldn't help but ponder the possibility.

Thinking back on it now, there were too many signs.

They shared a name. Colette said her face resembled hers. And she had the power to see the future.

These were probably coincidences, but the problem was we couldn't say for sure either way based on what we knew at the moment.

Colette was sure my maid was her Vill. She didn't seem like she'd give up, so I could easily see her asking her to live together again.

And if the Lumiere couple back in the Imperial Capital caught wind of this, they would definitely do something. They could very well end up forcing my Vill to be Colette's Vill, no matter what the truth was.

And then I would have to say good-bye to her.

Good...bye...

...

"What's wrong, Komari? You don't look too good."

"Nothing." I slapped myself upon hearing Nelia's comment.

The abundant rural vista stretched out to the horizon.

It was a calm village, fitting for one that was hidden. The streets were covered in mud after last night's downpour. The puddles glowed beautifully under the sunset.

"Nelia, who do you think Vill is?"

"That's a philosophical question... I don't think you need to dwell on it too much. Whatever happened in her past, there's no way she would leave you."

"My brain tells me that's true, but I have a bad feeling about this."

"How about we have Sakuna kill Vill, then? She could probably take a look at her lost memories."

The image of Sakuna gleefully murdering Vill came to mind.

...Huh? Wait, that's weird. Why can I picture that so easily? Sakuna's a serene, prim, and proper girl...

"N-no way! Dying hurts!"

"It does. Anyway, people's hearts don't change that easily. You just stand proud."

Nelia and I sat down on a bench beneath the shadow of a tree.

The cold, damp feel of the rain welcomed my butt, but I didn't care.

Nelia took some snacks out of her backpack. She handed me a bag of marshmallows.

"Cheer up." She smiled. "Put yourself at ease with something sweet."

"Huh? But if I eat this now, I won't have room for dinner later..."

"Stop being such a good girl! Just eat it!"

Nelia shoved a marshmallow into my mouth.

The pillowy sweetness fluffed my brain.

"...You're right. This calms me down. Now I'm back to being a clear-minded scholarly intellectual."

"You're never clear-minded unless you use Core Implosion."

Nelia wolfed down the marshmallows.

Does food just pass through her or something?

"Core Implosion is a power of the heart. It only resides in those who wish to achieve something... Villhaze evolved her power for you, right? There's no way Colette will be able to steal her from you."

"Mmm. That is true, but..."

"You're worrying about this all by yourself, and that's not the way Terakomari Gandesblood does things. You taught me back in the Enchanted Lands how important it is to consider people's feelings. And how we should understand each other through words and actions."

People were going here and there on the town streets.

Lumiere Village was a surprisingly busy place.



"You reached into the haze to pull me out. I got out of Nerzanpi's spell thanks to you. You're really amazing, Komari. You're just like my mentor."

"What are you talking about? She's way taller."

"Nice derailment. What I meant to say is you have nothing to worry about. And if you're still preoccupied, then talk things out with Vill and Colette."

"...Yeah, you're right."

I felt like talking with Nelia had cleared the fog over my mind.

She always helped me out.

"Thanks. You got me back to my senses. It pains me to admit this, but...you really are more like the older sister."

"R-really?" The president's cheeks went rosy. "Then I'll hire you as my maid. You shall call me Sis."

"Huh? No way."

"Please don't look at me with such disgust." She sighed in disappointment.

Nelia took out another bag of snacks from her backpack. She kicked her feet (the bench was pretty tall) and popped a red candy into her mouth.

The sight of that gave me a pang of conscience.

"All right... Thanks, Sis."

"?!"

Nelia's candy fell from her mouth. *Don't waste food!* I quickly tried to pick it up, but then her creepily contented grin caught my attention.

"Heh... Hee-hee...! That sounds so good. Yes. You're my little sister."

"What's gotten into you? You're creeping me out with that smile..."

"You're so small and cute. Here, let your big sister feed you lots of candy."

"Huh? Hey... No, that's too many! And get your hand off me!"

Nope. Being the little sister was no good.

Clearly I was born to be the big sister.

"What will be our plan moving forward?" Esther asked while flipping cards on the bed.

We were playing a game of memory. Any foe was like a newborn baby before the power of my scholarly memory—and yet, she'd been getting three-pair combos every turn. Ahhh, I already had that one in my sights!

"Are we still going to the Imperial Capital? Will we be leaving tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. You're not healed up yet."

"I-I'm sorry! I'm just a burden delaying our trip...!"

"Delays don't matter. You focus on recovering."

"I'm sorry," Esther said again and again while flipping the cards.

She landed a five-pair combo. Try holding back a little if you're really sorry...

"Ummm... I'll obviously follow you anywhere, but what will happen to Colette? Is she staying here?"

"I'd imagine. This is her home, after all."

"But...if that's the case, I can see her trying to make Vill stay."

"Mmm..."

Their relationship was complicated.

Despite what Vill had said last evening, wouldn't it be better if she tried seeing more eye to eye with Colette? At the very least, shouldn't she stay in the village until it became clear whether she was Villhaze Lumiere or not?

"I don't...I don't understand..."

"What don't you understand?"

"Vill. She said she'd come with me, but I feel like she should think about this more carefully."

"I've already thought very carefully about it, and this is my conclusion, because I love you so much, Lady Komari."

"But when I think about how Colette— WHAAA?!" I shrieked as someone

hugged me from behind out of the blue.

The sicko maid had materialized behind me out of nowhere. How long have you been there?! I never heard you come in! Are you a ninja or something?!

"Hello, Ms. Vill. Is your conversation with Colette over?"

"Yes. We've talked things out."

I turned around in surprise.

"Huh? And she yielded?"

"No. I ran away."

I don't think that counts as talking things out...

"I also looked around the village in an attempt to find something from my origins, but I couldn't remember anything. And there's no need to remember anything, for I know who I am: Lady Komari's maid."

"R-really...?"

"Even if I really were Villhaze Lumiere, it doesn't matter. Chicks are always meant to leave the nest."

Vill had a point. And that gave me relief.

But Colette was still a problem.

How would she feel if Vill left the village with me?

The maid seemed to see through my worries.

"You're such a difficult woman." She sighed. "Ascertaining my identity is impossible at present. That's nothing you need to worry about."

"I know that, but when I think about Colette... I mean, in her eyes, I'm a pervert who snatched you away from her. She's gonna sumo wrestle me again."

"So you don't want to take responsibility for stealing me away?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

"So you're troubled because of me... Very well, I shall overcome your indecisiveness myself by snatching you away instead."

Vill grabbed my hand and slowly lifted it up.

What? Is she gonna read my palm or something? My silly expectations were shattered in an instant. All of a sudden, she bit my wrist.

Chomp.

"AIIIEEEE!!"

"AIIIEEEE?!" Esther screamed along with me.

I couldn't keep up with Vill's bizarre behavior. My body heated up with her every sip of my blood.

"Stop it!! Your sicko behavior is going to rub off on Esther and Sakuna!"

"Ms. Vill, the blood is spilling from your mouth! Allow me to wipe it!"

"Thank you for the meal."

Vill finally let go of my hand. Esther wiped her grinning lips.

Sucking blood signified trust between vampires.

Basically, she was telling me to leave everything to her.

She was plotting to smash all the vexations in my heart.

...But that wasn't fair.

"I'm the one who hurt Lady Colette. Don't worry about it, and let's continue our journey. I shall return to the inn for the time be—"

"Wait!"

I grabbed Vill's wrist as she tried to leave.

Surprise overtook her jade eyes.

"It should be me taking you away from Colette! I can't let you bear all the responsibility!"

"Huh? Um..."

"Stay still! I'll make us even."

I bit her fingertip before she could respond.

"Aiiie?!" Esther screamed again in embarrassment.

Blood came out of Vill's tension-paralyzed finger. "Why're you sucking my finger?! Age regression?!" she spouted.

I licked the crimson liquid.

The Blood Curse activated, and a storm of mana brewed.

It didn't matter. I could control it somewhat already...

...but this opened Pandora's box.

"No, really, hold on, Lady Komari. Pandora's Poison..."

Then I remembered.

It had already been six days since Vill had used Core Implosion.

Which meant she could see the future again.

Vill's eyes turned red.

Her gaze went out of focus. She wasn't looking at me, but the future.

Her shoulders quivered.

"The future...hasn't changed..."

"Huh...?"

"We defeated the Arukan soldiers and Tremolo Parcostella...but nothing changed. Tomorrow, you'll fall into an eternal slumber on my lap, Lady Komari."

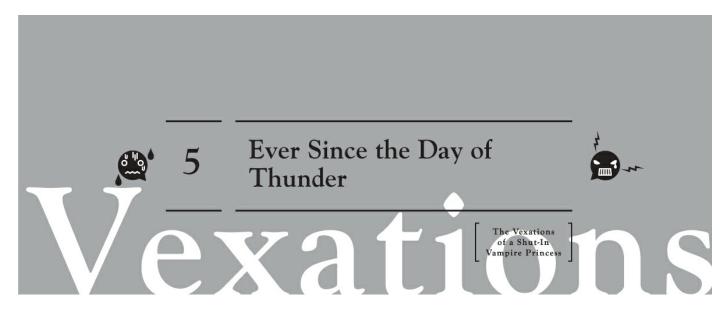
"......You've got to be shitting me."

"I am not."

Just when I'd made up my resolve...

One day until my death.

Apparently, I really couldn't be with Vill.



Two days after the party.

Colette Lumiere witnessed something most bizarre.

Her childhood friend Villhaze was sitting before the watermill, looking up at the sky.

Her whole body was limp, and it looked as though her soul had escaped her from her mouth. She looked so disturbed that Colette hesitated to say anything for a moment.

"Wh-what's wrong? Did Terakomari do something to you?"

"A...Aaa...AaaAaaAaaah..."

Vill turned her head like the creaking of a machine.

Colette was slightly creeped out. Her dejection was too freaky.

"Umm...wanna get something to eat together? They're making hamburgers at my house... Wait! Stay away from the waterway! The water's too high!"

"Aaaah!! Aaaah!!"

Confused, Colette stopped Vill.

"What happened?! Did Terakomari sexually harass you again?!"

"No, no... Lady Komari... Lady Komari!! She left me behind and headed to the Imperial Capital...!!"

Colette blinked.

She'd left her? That perverted, Vill-loving vampire?

No, for starters, she wasn't in Lumiere Village anymore? Her head filled with a barrage of questions.

"I found this letter in her room. Look..."

Teary-eyed, Vill took a piece of paper out of her pocket.

Colette's heart raced as she read through it.

Vill,

I'm leaving with Nelia. Take care of Esther. Tell Colette and the villagers I said good-bye.

What? Did they get into an argument?

"I understand how she feels... She would die if she stayed with me. But besides that, I fear she doesn't like me anymore."

"Why? Did you do something to her?"

"I sucked her blood without permission."

Colette nearly fainted.

This girl had climbed the stairs of adulthood outside her knowledge.

Now she felt like she had been left behind.

"W-well, obviously that would make her hate you! That's basically sexual abuse!"

"And that's why I can't run after her. And, well, she also left me in charge of Esther. She's basically ordering me to stay put in Lumiere."

"I see..."

"Aaaah... AAAHHH!! How could I have done that to my Lady...? I'm a failure of a maid... I have no choice but to streak around the village in atonement."

"Don't do that! Did her perversion infect you?!"

Colette fought to keep her from undressing.

After they grappled for a while, Vill calmed down. She sat on the stone paving and hugged her knees. Then she let out a huge sigh, expulsing the last speck of happiness from her lungs.

Seeing Vill sad made Colette sad.

But on the other hand, this was a happy accident.

Terakomari was a huge help. She hadn't abandoned Colette to get away from the Arukan Army.

But she was also her enemy—a threat to her peace.

And she'd made her face-plant into the mud.

Good riddance.

Colette smirked internally as she placed her hand on Vill's shoulder.

"It's okay, Vill! You've got me!"

"Lady Colette..."

Vill wiped her tears and turned around.

Her bearing was just like it had been when she'd been a kid.

"...Yeah. I'll stay in the village for a while."

Colette gave her a huge smile.

It would be so easy to tie her down to Lumiere.

Now all she had to do was find proof this was her Vill.



"Haaaah..."

I clutched my head while walking the roads of the Netherworld.

"C'mon." Nelia turned around with a tired look on her face. "You chose this. Stop moping."

"I know, but still..."

"Vill predicted you'd die if you were with her. We don't know how. You had no choice but to leave her."

"I know, but still...!!"

All my anxieties about Vill flooded my head.

We'd departed Lumiere early in the morning. I'd left a letter for Vill, and after failing to wake Nelia up with any force of shaking, I'd roused her by pinching her nose. Then I'd scolded Esther for practicing with a wooden sword in her hospital room, informed her of the situation, and Nelia and I had gotten our stuff together to leave.

We weren't going all the way to the Imperial Capital.

We were just moving to the neighboring village to avoid my doom.

I'd left the place without notice because I felt bad for Colette. It was a good opportunity to let Vill actually talk with her (maybe) childhood friend... Although it'd be trouble if they found out she really was her Vill as a result.

"Dammit, that maid distresses me even when she's not around..."

"It's okay. No matter what happens, your sis is here to take care of everything."

"Thanks, but you're not my sister."

Anyway, there was no use worrying about it. I just needed to focus on walking.

"Now, then," Nelia said while looking up at the sky adorned by two suns. "We should hurry up... I wonder if my mentor is doing well. You think she remembers me?"

"You think she'd forget about you? There's not many people as memorable as you."

"Hee-hee. I hope so."

Just then, Nelia noticed something.

Her emerald gaze turned beyond the mountains—far into the sky.

I followed it.

There was a huge tower in the distance.

"That's...probably the God Slayer Tower, isn't it?"

"Huh? Oh, the thing Colette mentioned."

The name reminded me of the "Wicked God Slayer."

What was that terrorist girl up to now?

"The map says so. And it looks like it's registered as a world heritage site in the Netherworld."

I peeked at the map in Nelia's hands.

Next to a depiction of the tower were the words World Heritage Site!! in a fancy font.

Uh, this map...is full of cute drawings of animals and local specialties? It's a map for kids. This is what we've been using for our journey this whole time?

"It says it's not open to the public. Shame."

"Hey, the God Slayer Tower is supposed to be at the center of the world, right?"

"The map does say this is the middle of the Netherworld. Maybe the upsidedown city we saw through during the netherscreening at the Crimson Snow Hut in Frezier is around here."

I felt like that place had some secrets.

Unfortunately, we had so little to go on that even my bright, intellectual, scholarly mind couldn't figure it out.

I stared at the fuzzy silhouette of the tower in the blue sky.

It looked about a hundred times taller than the Mulnite Palace. Its walls were white. It was plain in shape. I couldn't see any windows from here... Was it properly ventilated? Could you even breathe inside?

"Anyway, enough with the details. Let's move."

"Yeah."

We resumed our trek to the next village.

Then I heard something crumbling behind me.

"...?"

I felt intermittent earthquakes.

Cloing. Cloing. A familiar melody echoed in my ears.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Nelia turned around.

I didn't know what exactly was happening, but there was one thing I could say for certain: Something was going on in the direction of Lumiere Village.

☆ (Going back a bit)

"Terrible news, Ms. Vill!"

The Lumiere residence dining hall.

Vill had been eating bread and listening to Colette's incessant small talk when the door had slammed open.

She turned around in shock to find the newbie of the Seventh Unit, Esther Claire, with tears in her eyes.

She was in a hospital gown, and her hair was down instead of in her usual ponytail. Naturally, as she should have been in the clinic right now.

"Esther? What's wrong? What about your injury?"

"That doesn't matter right now! We're under attack!"

"Huh?" Colette froze.

Esther clutched her belly in pain as she continued.

"We didn't wipe out the Arukan Army... The attack back there was a trap. Tremolo Parcostella...is going to destroy the village...!"

Then came an explosion, followed by the war cry of an army.

The Arukans were rampaging indiscriminately.

"Is it my fault...? Because I ran away..."

"No. I'll go take a look."

"Ah, Vill!"

Vill brushed off Colette and left the mansion.

"I'll go with you." Esther followed her. They had no idea what was going on—they had to get a grasp of situation before anything else.

To cut to the chase: it wasn't good.

The Arukan Army had launched a surprise attack. The watchtower at the center of the village was red with flames and loudly crumbling. A house three doors down blew up like something from a cartoon. Cannons fired.

The villagers ran around in confusion as the Arukans slashed at them without mercy.

Blood spurted and splashed all over. Innocent people were deprived of their

lives with startling ease.

"Aaaaaah... It's over... It's horrible...!"

Esther clutched her Chain Metal with trembling hands.

There was no Dark Core in this world. Anyone who was killed wouldn't come back.

"Ms. Vill, we have to stop them..."

"No, not stop them. We have to evacuate."

They were up against thousands. Vill's kunai couldn't hope to stop them.

The assembly hall two doors down blew up next.

Vill grabbed on to Esther and pushed her down to the ground. More cannon fire. The battle intensified as they waited for the blasts to die down.

"The clinic... The clinic's gone already... There were other people hospitalized there, but the bomb came all of a sudden. I happened to be outside, which saved me, but the other patients were all over the place..."

"Then we have to find them."

"N-no, I mean...they were torn to pieces, all over the place..."

Esther was shaking and couldn't speak clearly.

Vill forced down her emotions. She had to be grateful that at least she was alive.

Regardless, they had to find a place to hide and get in contact with Komari... No, that wasn't right.

This had to be the start of the tragedy Pandora's Poison had predicted.

Komari had a high chance of dying in this battle.

They had to run on their own.

"This is...just like six years ago..."

Colette was standing by the door.

The village bigwigs ran up to them, asking, "Are you okay, Colette?!" They

sighed and stopped upon seeing their precious future shrine maiden was alive and well.

"Let's go now. They're going to destroy Lumiere...!"

"It's useless, the garrison can't stop them! We have to call the Imperial Capital!"

"Tsk... C'mon, Colette, don't just stand there!"

The vice-chief grabbed Colette's arm and pulled her, but she stayed in place, pale in the face, blabbering.

"Six years ago...a lot of people died. My real mom and dad... Vill went missing... The tragedy is repeating itself..."

"Colette... Your parents..."

"They were killed. That's why I only had Vill."

Vill didn't know what to say. Was that part of why she was obsessed with her childhood friend?

"What do we do, Vill...? I don't want the same thing to happen again...!"

"It won't be the same."

Cloing.

A switch flipped.

Chills. A girl carrying a biwa emerged from the other side of the flames. Her hands were in the pockets of her strange vestment, and she was smiling coyly.

The Dead Maestro, Tremolo Parcostella.

Member of moon-rank mercenary group Star Citadel.

"It will not be the same. It cannot be the same, Colette Lumiere. This tragedy is a result of fate. Karma. Your just deserts."

Colette shivered.

Vill held up her kunai and stood in front of her.

"Tremolo Parcostella. I thought Lady Komari left you incapacitated."

"That was a double. I put my clothes on a soldier who'd been knocked out. This distinctive outfit is very convenient at times like these... People think it's me at a simple glance and don't look discerningly."

She was sly. Or rather, they had been careless.

But there was no use crying over spilled milk.

"...What are you after?"

"Star Citadel's wish is the extinction of mankind. I was appointed to cause fruitless conflict as the first step toward that end."

Tremolo's cheeks turned rosy as her grin widened.

"Colette Lumiere, did you think you were free after escaping Aruka? The truth is, you never left the palm of the bard's hand. The hometown you rediscovered was only my pinky finger. I'll let you in on something: I led you on by attacking the wagon you were being transported in."

"What...? Do you want me to thank you or something...?"

"No, it should be me thanking you. So many people suffered because of your escape. Arukans, Mulnitites, even people from other countries... They all found themselves in disaster because you escaped. And now your sins have caught up to you."

"N-no... I..."

"It's wonderful how much you care for your childhood friend, but what about the people dying here? Surely they resent your return to the village."

All strength left Colette's body.

Tremolo used a similar method as Nerzanpi Rocha—no wonder they were colleagues.

However, she wasn't saying this as a ploy to trap her enemy. The proof was in the innocent smile adorning her face.

"Don't worry. I've called for reinforcements from Mulnite."

"Huh...?"

"So many people will die once Aruka and Mulnite clash. That will increase the

total sadness in the world."

"..."

Her ideology was unfathomable.

She was orders of magnitude more broken than any terrorist from Inverse Moon.

This woman did what she did with the sole purpose of causing conflict. No amount of death could sway her from her aims. To think there were people like her in this world.

"You won't get away with this, you bandit!" the vice-chief yelled, stepping forward. "The Mulnite Empire will end your ridiculous plans!"

"That would also be amusing. I welcome any and all conflict."

"Enough babbling! Arrest her now and throw her to the army—"

Cloing. Cloing.

The sound of string.

That very instant, blood sputtered from the vice-chief's chest.

"Don't move. I wouldn't want to break my precepts..."

The incomprehensible warning went in Vill's ear and out the other.

The vice-chief plummeted to the ground. Colette and the villagers shrieked in terror. Esther fell to her behind.

Vill's thoughts derailed entirely; how could they react now?

A groan escaped her lips at the sight of the vice-chief panting in pain.

The village was in a state of panic.

Buildings were being destroyed and people were being slain.

Her possible hometown was being obliterated.

A roar.

Cannon fire blasted away the Lumiere residence.

Vill went to the ground as she felt her thoughts rebooting.

She couldn't just sit back and tremble.

Komari wouldn't falter here. Her infinite kindness would have driven her to face the enemy.

Vill tightened her grip on her kunai and rose to her feet.

"...I won't let you harm any more villagers. Your rampage ends here and now."

"No! Stop!" Colette cried, holding on to her.

But Vill had to stop this demonic girl.

Komari and Nelia weren't there. There was no one else to rely on.

"Brave. But reckless," said Tremolo.

"I can see the future. Your defeat is set in stone."

"I see your knees trembling. A childish, clumsy lie." Tremolo smirked.

She was right: Vill's heart was filled with fear. Her expertise wasn't in battle. And she was up against the worst-possible foe, one who slashed people mysteriously, without magic or Core Implosion. She did not hesitate in the slightest to take lives. Who wouldn't be scared?

"Don't do it! Run!" the villagers shouted.

They were worried for her. She had to answer their feelings.

For that was what Terakomari Gandesblood would do.

Cloing.

The sound of something bending.

With that as her signal, Vill kicked off the ground. Something slashed into the spot she had been standing on, and the ground cracked grandly. The next instant, Esther got to her feet and carried Colette away. Tremolo really did have a technique that allowed her to cut anything from afar.

"You're surprisingly fast."

Cloing.

Another bending sound.

Vill threw her kunai in a flash. It flew in a straight line before it was slammed down halfway to her target. Something had slashed through it.

Cloing, cloing.

All this time, she had thought that was the sound of a biwa.

That was partly correct, but not entirely.

Vill took three kunais out of her pocket and threw them all at once. They changed direction before reaching Tremolo. Then Vill saw it: Something glowed under the sunlight as the kunais were slashed down.

Threads.

Tremolo was using nearly transparent threads to slash her enemies.

How she did so was still an open question.

The threads only attacked when her hands were in her pockets. Perhaps she was manipulating them from her vestment.

"You've noticed. Took you long enough."

"Let's see how fast you are!"

Vill couldn't use poison because she was downwind.

She only had her physical strength to rely on. Vill slashed the thread coming from her side by a hair's breadth and charged at the enemy. She threw a kunai to block Tremolo's movement, and the biwa bard stepped back a little.

Vill seized the opportunity to leap at her—but it was a trap.

There was a bump in the ground. A thread had sliced off a bit of earth.

Her foot caught, and she stumbled forward.

"This is the Myogo String, a Divine Instrument fabricated from Mandala minerals from the Toumor Republic. It materializes as I imbue it with my willpower, and when I apply force, it can cut through any material."

Vill didn't listen to her smug explanation.

The ground was getting closer.

No-not the ground. A whirl of murderous threads by her feet was

approaching. Like a spiderweb waiting to capture its prey.

She couldn't dodge.

Sweat covered her back.

A sticky sense of despair budded within her half-dead mind, when...

"Vill! Don't be reckless!"

Someone propped her up.

Colette had grabbed Vill's arm, desperation twisting her face. She pulled her back, and they tumbled onto the ground.

Vill opened her eyes to find the sky-blue girl in tears before her.

"No! Please, don't! Don't fight! Let's run! Together!"

"Lady Colette..."

"I'll protect you this time! Please!"

"It's no use."

Cloing.

The sound of a string bending.

Blood spurted from Colette's shoulder.

People didn't scream once their pain passed a certain point.

Colette's right arm spun in the air. Was this a nightmare? No, it was reality.

The moment her bloody arm landed on the table in the Lumiere house, Colette fell to her side.

"Colette...!!"

All color left Vill's face as she crawled up to her.

The sky-blue girl looked up at the heavens in wonder.

The blood dampened the ground in a pool that was growing larger and larger.

The villagers were speechless. Vill couldn't say anything, either.

"A...aah..."

"Don't worry. I won't slash her heart. There's a better, more effective moment to kill the next shrine maiden... But this is a problem. She might die from blood loss at this rate," the murderer said in annoyance. "Oh well. That would also be amusing. Now, then. It's your turn, Villhaze."

Another house exploded in the distance.

"Ahhh," Colette sighed in resignation. "Am I going to...die...?"

"Colette...! No..."

The moment Vill looked down at her grief-stricken face, an awful headache struck her.

The sealed memories came back little by little.

Rain, wind, and thunder.

Burning houses and screams.

A girl pulling her by the hand across the forest.

Crimson mana enshrouding the whole world.

No, I can't remember.

The important bits were fuzzy, and she didn't know what it meant. But that didn't matter.

An innocent girl was dying before her eyes.

A girl who cared for her a lot, who might have been her childhood friend.

The moment Villhaze recognized this, she shuddered.

It was her fault... This girl was going to die because of her.



Colette Lumiere had lost her parents in the war.

The only one who'd been left was her childhood friend, timid Villhaze.

She could still remember it clearly. The day when they'd run hand in hand across the stormy forest. Ruffians were coming after Vill, the next shrine maiden. They were monsters who would kill people as though plucking flowers.

Tears smeared Colette's face as she pulled Vill by the hand.

Her parents had been torn in half before her eyes. Their last words had been, "Run." And it was the only thing she could do.

But she couldn't leave Vill behind.

Her fearful childhood friend would be killed just like her parents if she did.

Colette forced down her sadness and ran.

She refused to look back at the burning village and screamed: "I'm going to protect you. You're the only one I have left."

Vill cried voicelessly.

They had to survive.

But fate was a cruel mistress.

The downpour caused a landslide.

The heavy lightning turned their vision white. Intermittent earthquakes rocked the whole world.

And the next thing she knew, Vill had disappeared.

"Vill... Where are you?"

She couldn't find her no matter how hard she looked.

Colette Lumiere had lost everything.

She hadn't been able to protect her childhood friend. Ever since that day, Colette had lived in the middle of a storm. In the pain of being ripped away from her loved ones. In the grief of being unable to find her wish. And now—the same tragedy was repeating itself.

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"Colette! Colette ...!!"
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"Vill...?"

Vill's crying face was right before her.

Right. They cut off my arm.

Her senses were so dull that she didn't feel the pain. She would probably die here.

"Colette... Ahhh, what do I do ...?"

Vill had stopped using "Lady" before her name.

Had she remembered they were childhood friends?

In any case, Colette wasn't in the right place mentally to feel glad about it.

"This takes me back."

The demon laughed in the distance.

Tremolo Parcostella spoke with glee.

"I had this village sacrificed six years ago, too. But this isn't like that time. The quality of this sadness is far more wonderful. I'm glad I didn't wipe it out back then."

Colette felt her heart break and tears spill from her eyes.

How could Tremolo be so awful?

All her sadness stemmed from her—from Star Citadel.

It was so frustrating, but she couldn't do anything about it.

Her childhood friend, Vill, was too shocked and sad to move.

"Let's put an end to the opening song. You shall be the spark for a new conflict."

Tremolo slowly walked forward.

It was just like back then.

She wouldn't be able to protect Vill again.

Cloing. Cloing.

The eerie sound of the string echoed in unison with the villagers' screams and the noise of the crumbling earth. No matter how hard she struggled, her body wouldn't respond. Would this nightmare take everything from her again?

But just as she was about to be swallowed by despair, a golden light poured from the heavens.

She felt something in her right arm. Her wound was covered in gold. Her bleeding had stopped. And a warm, golden glow enveloped her. A shining kindness pouring down from above.

Tremolo sneered as she looked up at the sky.

Colette followed her gaze.

For a moment, she thought it was God.

But upon closer inspection, that clearly wasn't the case.

Against the background of the suns appeared a vampire shrouded in golden energy.

And a Warblade enveloped in pink light, overflowing with hostility.

"Lady Komari... Why...?" Vill muttered, as though she were hallucinating.

Terakomari Gandesblood and Nelia Cunningham.

They had returned to Lumiere Village.

And wearing a power so tremendous it was beyond Colette's comprehension, at that.

"Sorry, Colette."

Terakomari looked at her and moved her little mouth.

"Thanks for protecting Vill."

Colette didn't understand what she'd said, yet the tears wouldn't cease.

"Leave the rest to me. I'll stop her."

Countless golden blades spun around her.

Each and every one pointed at the murderer—Tremolo Parcostella.

Alarmed, the biwa bard took both hands out of her pockets.

Her fingertips were wrapped in stacks of threads.

"So this is the famous Blood Curse. I can see how Lady Nerzanpi was defeated."

"Die. For real this time."

Terakomari raised her hand.

The golden swords launched themselves at Tremolo.

The threads of the Myogo String that she'd set up over the village were cut down, coming apart with *cloing* after *cloing*.

Colette watched the fierce battle as though it were all a dream.

For some reason, her heart felt full.

The vampire whom she'd looked down on, whom she'd called a runt, was capable of all this. Right now, she looked as brave and gallant as the Hero of Twilight.



Pandora's Poison had said Komari would die today.

She'd left Lumiere to avoid that fate, only to somehow be pulled back to Villhaze's side. And with the Blood Curse activated.

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"Lady Komari..."

"Vill. Hide."

"But..."

"Hide."
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Komari set off her mana to cut Tremolo's threads. With every explosion, the unleashed Myogo Strings slashed the surrounding rubble like butter.

Nelia charged at Tremolo with Diverse Divide enabled.

She attempted to drive her glowing pink swords into her foe's vestment, but Tremolo twirled out of reach like a piece of paper. The swords instead cut a nearby tree in half.

This light-speed exchange of offense and defense repeated in a loop.

There was a real possibility that the bystanders could get injured in the wake of the intense battle.

Vill took Colette, the vice-chief, and the villagers behind the Lumiere residence's ruins. This would likely be a safe place for the time being.

"Vill...are you okay...?" Colette huffed and puffed in pain.

She should've been worrying about herself instead of others.

Her injury was covered by gold. At the very least, she wouldn't die of blood loss now. Komari's Core Implosion had saved her life.

However, her right arm wouldn't come back.

She had suffered a great injury, and it was all Vill's fault. How could she atone for this?

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"I'm okay. It doesn't hurt."

"Colette..."
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"I mean, you faced Tremolo to protect me, so I did what I could to protect you. This wound is nothing. You don't need to worry about it."

Colette patted Vill's head with her left hand.

The kindness tugged at her heartstrings.

Tears came out. Maybe she'd been too cold with her possible childhood friend. She cared so much for her, yet Vill hadn't looked her way and had only thought about herself.

Vill thawed her frozen cheeks into a smile.

"...Thank you, Colette. You saved me."

"Yeah. And now I'm okay, too..."

"Yes. Everything will be fine now that Lady Komari's here."

It wasn't fine at all.

The future as foretold by Pandora's Poison hadn't changed.

She could only hope that Komari's strong willpower would allow her to bend fate.

"Vill..." Colette called her name with teary eyes. "Do you remember now? Let's live together in Lumiere again."

"Colette."

Vill grabbed the girl's trembling hand, cold and pale.

"I might be an ingrate of a childhood friend. If that's correct, I'll say this: I'm sorry for disregarding you up to now. I care about you."

Like repentance.

She had thought her raison d'être was to serve Terakomari Gandesblood. That nothing else mattered, so long as she was of use to her.

But that was wrong.

She, too, had a childhood friend, and a family. Or at least the possibility of it.

"Thank you, Vill... You finally remember. Now let's run. I don't care what happens, so long as you and the villagers are fine..."

"No. I can't run."

Then Vill released Colette's hand.

She opened her eyes wide, as though condemning her betrayal.

"Wh-why? Are you hurt? Are you unable to move ...?!"

"I am not Villhaze Lumiere. I'm Villhaze from the Komari Unit."

"But..."

"And because I care about you, I must fight alongside Lady Komari."

This world was full of evil.

Tremolo Parcostella was only the tip of the iceberg. There were droves more people out there who would gladly destroy the peace and happiness of others.

Komari was fighting to stop those fools.

From the very beginning, there had only been one thing Vill could do to protect Colette and the village.

To support the greatest hero of the generation (in development), Terakomari Gandesblood, on her road to dominance.

And so...

"...I have to go put a stop to that murderer."

"Wait! Why do you need to fight?! You've always been such a scaredy-cat! You never argued with anyone! And... And now...!"

"Stop, Colette." The vice-chief scowled.

So he was alive.

Vill noticed his injury had also been covered in gold.

"I understand how you feel, but it's no use asking anymore. She'll be fine now that Ms. Gandesblood and Ms. Cunningham are here."

"But...!"

"Take a good look. That's Villhaze. Not the Vill you knew."

She looked at the maid like a child lost in the darkness. After staring at her

head-on, she covered her mouth and gasped in realization. Of what, Vill didn't know.

Colette closed her eyes in mourning and said:

"You've...grown a lot. Unlike me."

Vill nodded.

"Once I've finished my job, let's share a meal. Please wait until then."

She clutched her kunai and turned around.

The battle in Lumiere Village was growing in intensity.

She had to join as quickly as possible. Together, the Komari Club could defeat any evil, no matter how impossi— "...?"

Chills ran down Vill's spine, and she looked up at the sky.

She had a bad feeling.

Beyond the two suns beginning to set, hidden in the shadows of the clouds, was the glow of an ominous star.



Terakomari Gandesblood was as amazing as the report had said.

Not only in her pure combat prowess, but also in her conviction and sense of duty.

It was as strong as the ambition hidden within Tremolo Parcostella's chest—a willpower so bright, it could surpass hers.

Golden blades shot at her.

Tremolo pulled the strings she'd set up on the houses to dodge.

A shock wave. The swords of massacre rained down where she had been standing. A hellish hill of blades replaced the gouged earth of the village. The soldiers of Aruka screamed and ran away.

"Now who's destroying the village?"

Cloing.

She pulled the thread. Going by Terakomari's position, pulling string number

496, which she'd put on the Arukan cedar by the stable, would do the trick. Before it could slice her neck, however, a pink sweep cut the string.

The Arukan cedar bent with a high-pitched timbre.

Tremolo staggered, and the peach Warblade rushed at her.

Nelia Cunningham.

You couldn't help but turn all your attention to the leader of the Komari Club, but this girl also held insurmountable power. She could not be underestimated. Nerzanpi had said she possessed the power to cut anything in half, but...

"I see, a power of altruism. How wonderful."

"I didn't ask for your thoughts!"

Nelia swung her blades.

Tremolo unraveled the Myogo String.

"Cheeky tricks!"

"Then how about this?" Tremolo pulled her middle finger.

She pulled string number 222, which was connected to Lumiere's famous face rock, and the giant stone was launched like a ball.

Nelia's eyes grew wide as she pulled up her swords, but it was too late. Tremolo did not waste the opportunity. She immediately pulled number 68.

The thread acted in tandem with number 884, and killer cutters launched from all directions.

"|"

Dead Maestro Tremolo Parcostella had the strongest combat ability out of everyone in Star Citadel.

All who had faced her had ended up as lumps of meat almost without exception.

Her only weakness was that preparing her ability took time and effort.

She had to set the Myogo Strings beforehand to fight at her peak.

That said, doing this was no difficult feat with enough caution.

Tremolo had tailed the Komari Club and arrived at Lumiere Village.

While the villagers were throwing a party, she'd gotten the Arukan soldiers to set up the strings.

Meanwhile, she had been pulling the villagers' attention by dressing up as the drummer.

The vice-chief's dog had found her out and pursued her, but that had been no great issue.

She was fully prepared.

Tremolo's "fingers" extended from trees to houses, rocks, steps, fields, chimneys—every inch of the village.

They were all in the palm of the Dead Maestro's hand.

Her foes' defeat had been set in stone the moment they'd fled to Lumiere Village.

"Please die, and let us pray you reincarnate as a human again in the next life."

"No."

But Tremolo's projections were off the mark.

Golden bloodlust whipped up a storm.

The next instant, every obstacle approaching Nelia was blown away.

Terakomari's swarm of blades destroyed them all.

"Wha...?!"

"Thanks, Komari!" Nelia shouted as she charged toward Tremolo.

Tremolo pulled the strings in a flurry.

Number 389...was already cut.

So she had to use number 403 and number 404.

Cloing. Cloing. A musical melody echoed in the village.

Bing! Bing! Tremolo's unraveling attacks reverberated with every swing of Nelia's blades.

Terakomari took care of all the strikes she couldn't.

The endless storm of swords emanated golden mana, and with every shot, Nelia inched closer to Tremolo.

These girls could see it—the breathing of the Myogo Strings that was normally invisible to others.

People with high-level combat training could detect Tremolo's willpower. For that reason, she would have a tough time defeating, say, Nerzanpi and Nefty.

And Terakomari and Nelia were already on their level.

Perhaps it was to be expected.

They had thwarted Nerzanpi's plot.

These stalwarts were already foiling Star Citadel's efforts.

"Hee-hee. You're stronger than I thought."

She pulled the strings again as fast as she could.

But it was all for naught.

Nelia and Terakomari had cut through every single one.

Then a series of wails echoed.

The threads, having lost their targets, sliced the Arukan soldiers.

Nelia stepped beyond the victims and pushed forward.

Cloing. Cloing. The movements of the pink girl's body inside the murderous melody of the spiderweb resembled an elegant dance.

The fantastical sight stole Tremolo's attention for a moment, and then she realized...

"I finally caught up to you. Now die."

... Nelia Cunningham was already right in front of her face.

Heat came to Tremolo's cheeks. Being under the gaze of a young girl up close was positively ticklish.

"No."

She pulled number 60, set for escape.

Although Tremolo prided herself in her combat prowess, no thread user could overcome their weakness at fighting in close quarters.

Better to distance herself and regain the advantage.

But the moment she let the string pull her away...

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"Eep!"
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...it snapped. The inertia sent her rolling on the ground, and the biwa on her back was blown away.

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"Huh...?"
```

Then she felt the threads leave her fingers.

Golden hostility filled the air.

Terakomari, floating above the ground, rained swords down on Lumiere. The Myogo Strings were cut with every gouge of the earth. Tremolo's plans were in tatters.

```
"Ahhh... How could it be...? My 1,080 Myogo Strings..."
```

"You lose."

She heard someone take a step forward.

Nelia Cunningham glared at her with swords held high.

"Stay still. You'll tell us everything about Star Citadel."

"Not happening."

Tremolo produced a bundle of Myogo Strings from her pocket. Controlling them with some mana would allow her some resistance—but again, her scheme collapsed.

```
Clasp.
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"?"

Someone grabbed her right wrist.

Tremolo looked behind with suspicion.

There stood a girl with burning ire in her eyes—Villhaze.

"I finally caught you. It's time for you to pay."

"My, my, if it isn't Villhaze..."

Blegh!

Blood spurted from her mouth.

"Huh...?"

The dark-red liquid dripped.

Tremolo panted in pain as she collapsed. A strange sensation welled up from her stomach. A burning pain shot up from its pit.

This... This feeling.

It can't be...

"Villhaze! Tell me before using poison!" Terakomari said.

"You're upwind, don't worry. Now, Tremolo Parcostella. Karma finally caught up to you, eh?"

Of course. Poison.

Karma—payback for all her misdeeds.

Tremolo clutched her chest and looked around.

Behind her was Villhaze, holding a kunai. Before her was Nelia Cunningham, glaring daggers at her. Overhead was Terakomari Gandesblood, surrounded by spinning blades.

The poison was constricting her movements.

The Arukan soldiers seemed to have been wiped out by the blade storm.

The villagers were watching the golden sky in fear.

Everyone in Lumiere had damned Tremolo.

Sadness filled the place.

"It's over." Terakomari held up her hand.

Nelia Cunningham and Villhaze evacuated the villagers. The attack that would

slay the biwa bard was about to commence.

It was time for her to reap what she'd sown.

Still, there was passion in Tremolo.

An intense willpower to accomplish Star Citadel's goal of wiping out mankind.

"I have one more left."

Tremolo raised her right index finger.

Around her first joint shone a Myogo String.

"My last spider's thread. This shall take you down."

Bing.

Her lifeline was cut in an instant. Without a moment's delay, a golden sword dug into the rubble behind her. No mercy.

"Give up."

"Hee-hee. I won't."

Yet that mercilessness would cost Terakomari her life.

Screams permeated the world out of the blue.

Trees rustled and houses collapsed.

"What's happening?!" Both villagers and Arukan soldiers stood frozen in shock.

"? What did you do?"

"You don't get it? That last string was *Lumiere's* lifeline. This village is done for. And you cut the last thread supporting it."

Disturbance carved a line in Terakomari's intrepid expression.

Soon cracks ran across the ground of Lumiere.

The earth caved in with thunderous destruction. The rivers overflowed and rampaged like dragons as the banks collapsed, flooding everywhere. Rubble pushed villagers and soldiers into the current. Earth and heavens wailed as the curtains of tragedy rose.

Tremolo pushed her poisoned body to the limit to leap.

She stood on the roof of a brick house with relatively low damage and placed her biwa on her back again.

She had split the ground of Lumiere into blocks with the Myogo String.

The reason nobody had noticed was very simple: She'd linked them back with strings. Once the threads holding the blocks together were cut, collapse was inevitable.

"Now then, Ms. Terakomari. I am honored to have your full attention, but should you be wasting time on me, with the lives of the villagers at stake?"

"..."

Terakomari remained silent in the air, but it didn't take long for her to react.

She pulled back the golden mana and flashed around the village with the speed of a star.

Tremolo took a knife out of her vestment's pocket.

There were plenty of openings.

公

My sense of omnipotence began to fade.

The urgency of the situation banished my clear judgment.

I flew all over the village pretty much subconsciously. Below me were the people embroiled in the floods. I hurried to them, pulled them up, and took them to safety. As I kept repeating that, despair budded in my heart.

I couldn't do it all by myself.

The flood, the caving ground, the collapsing houses...

There were too many people to save.

"Th-this can't..."

Vill. Esther. Colette. Nelia. Were my friends okay? I couldn't tell from here. I wanted to be with them. But I had to save those in need.

Then I saw a small child holding on to a tree.

The torrent was almost pushing it over to the ground.

I moved on autopilot. Golden mana scattered around as I dived like a swallow.

"Ugh!"

Then a blow hit my side.

The mana faded away. The despair took over. A knife had flown from who knows where and dug into my belly.

I couldn't fly anymore.

The Blood Curse was disabled, and I tailspun into the ground.

I nearly blacked out from crashing into the ground. The silver lining was that I'd fallen onto a relatively high spot instead of the maelstrom of the flood and landslide. But it hurt so bad that it didn't matter.

Blood spurted uncontrollably from my wound.

I ground my teeth to withstand it. There were a lot of people in this village in worse shape than me.

"You're tough. No wonder you're a threat to Star Citadel."

The voice came from in front of me.

Panting, I looked up.

There stood Tremolo Parcostella, knife in hand.

She smiled bashfully and took a slow step forward, ready to finish me off.

"You... Didn't Vill's...poison hit...you...?"

"I recovered. That poison wasn't made for Elegists."

What did that even mean? Either way, the fact was that she was healed.

I sat up to try and run, but all strength left my muscles, and I fell back down.

My head was hazy. The pain began to dull. I had already sustained a few wounds, but this one was critical.

"Now, let's have some fun."

Cloing. Cloing. The sound of the biwa echoed in the village.

Tremolo inched closer with elated steps.

"Time to take revenge for Lady Nerzanpi."

Ah, so I'm going to die here.

As I gave up on life...

"Lady Komari!!"

...I saw a blue-haired girl coming up from the horizon of my fuzzy sight.



Colette propped up Villhaze as the latter scrambled forward.

She'd hit her right ankle defending Colette during the landslide.

No pain could stop her now, though. For her beloved lady had fallen on a hill of the flooded village.

"Lady Komari!"

She yelled and cried on her way to Komari. The girl lay on the ground in pain. Her belly was gouged, and she'd lost a dangerous amount of blood.

"Vill..."

"Don't speak, Lady Komari. I'll stop the bleeding..."

"...Thank goodness. You and Colette...are okay. What about the kid...? And... Nelia and Esther...?"

Colette gasped.

Vill grabbed Komari's hand, trembling with anger.

She wanted to yell at her, "Why are you putting other people first right now?!"

She was too indifferent to her own pain. Vill had to heal her.

But...she didn't have the faintest idea what to do.

There was no Dark Core. Komari's injuries would take a while to heal.

"Vill! Terakomari's going pale...," Colette shrieked.

Komari had lost consciousness.

Her face was discolored like dried glass, and her breathing was thin.

Vill realized the awful truth—this was the same future she'd seen with Pandora's Poison.

"She died like in deep slumber. Now Star Citadel has one less obstacle in its path."

She heard a nasty giggle.

Tremolo Parcostella stood there, hands in her pockets.

"Eek!" Colette stepped back in fear. "Sh-she's crazy! Let's take Terakomari and run!"

"B-but Lady Komari is..."

"Her doom is set. Here ends her long journey. And Villhaze, now it's your turn."

Tremolo approached with knife in hand.

She had to fight. But she couldn't leave Komari. And could she even take on Tremolo with her foot like this? No, she had to stop Komari's bleeding ASAP. But then Tremolo would kill her. She wouldn't be able to protect Colette, either. What could she do?

Cloing.

"Don't move. I'm not good with blades."

A shadow dropped.

The murderer was right in front of her.

The knife fell with a snakelike movement.

Vill sat frozen in place, paralyzed by the prediction that Komari would die. Her heart beat hard and loud, but it didn't drown out Colette's scream. Everything that had happened up to now flashed before her eyes.

"There you are! So you're Star Citadel's underling!"

She heard a familiar voice from above.

Then something fell before her eyes at tremendous speed.

Dirt was kicked up, and dust filled the air. Colette tipped over with a scream, and Vill closed her eyes and looked away on reflex.

She couldn't keep up. What was going on? Vill felt an ominous aura and looked up. She wouldn't stop shaking. The thorny, wicked presence encroached upon the whole world. Further darkness enveloped Lumiere Village.

Vill wrung out her voice, shaking:



"Why are you...?"

She never could've imagined her showing up.

A girl stood in front of Vill, as though defending her.

And most shockingly of all, she stopped Tremolo's knife with the tip of her index finger.

"Who...?" muttered Colette.

"Ahhh...," Tremolo whimpered.

"For God's sake!" the girl roared. "How dare you mess up my miniature garden?! Lumiere Village was one of the cornerstones of the Netherworld! And you...you botched it like this! You're gonna PAY!"

The vampire's blond pigtails shone like the sun.

She was wearing the outfit of her alias, Pope Julius VI, a vestment adorned with many upside-down moon icons.

Spica La Gemini.

Inverse Moon's boss stood with her back to Vill.

"You... Yusei mentioned you..."

"It's Spica La Gemina! And what's your name?"

The knife broke.

Tremolo shivered and took a couple steps back.

Spica threw the broken half of the dagger and stepped forward with a sigh.

"C'mon, don't be scared. Tell me your name. I did. Were you not taught to do the same in return? How are we supposed to be friends, then?!"

"R-right. My name is Tremolo Parcos—"

Spica plowed her fist into Tremolo's face.

The biwa bard was helplessly blown away.

She spun around in the air a few times before she smashed back first into the rubble.

Smoke. Vill couldn't keep up. Colette also seemed baffled.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-la! You fell for it! No way I would want to be friends with you."

Spica took a lollipop out of her pocket and put it in her mouth.

She walked leisurely, as if in the middle of a flower field, over to Tremolo.

She then grabbed her by the collar, yanking her up from the dust cloud. With the coldness of the surface of the moon, Spica made her demand.

"Tell me where Yusei is."

"I... There's no... I can't tell you that..."

"Do you have a death wish?"

"I don't know. Coffin Bearer Nefty Strawberry is Yusei's bodyguard."

"Then where is she?"

"G-give me some time. I'll remember..."

Anyone could have seen that Tremolo had no hope of defeating her.

Spica pressed her to speak, nearly strangling her to death.

What was she after? Had she come to save them? Even though she had been their enemy up to now? Why was she there in the first place? The vortex of questions paralyzed Vill.

"I remember. There's a note with the address in my pocket."

"Really? Show me."

"Yes. It's here."

Tremolo took her hand out of her pocket, but it didn't have a note in it—instead, there was a black orb the size of a baseball.

"! You..."

"Good-bye. It's a draw for today."

Tremolo smashed the orb on the ground.

Puff! Purple smoke appeared.

Cloing. Cloing. The sound of a string echoed.

Spica got into a coughing fit while Tremolo cut through the smoke and flew beyond the sky. She'd had an escape thread left, and she'd disappeared into the mountains before anyone could process it.

The wind soon cleared the smoke.

All that remained were a few drops of blood that had leaked from the biwa bard's mouth.

Spica swayed her crimson candy and sighed.

"That's not fair! Don't you agree, Villhaze?"

"Uh..."

Vill was confused as to why she was talking to her.

Spica La Gemini, the Wicked God Slayer, turned around and walked up to them with a smile on her face.

Vill's limbs trembled with fear, but she had to stand up. She had to protect Komari. So she grabbed her kunai.

"What? Do I look like your enemy?"

"..."

"Bingo! You're wrong if you think I'm here to save your life. Down we go," she said as she crouched down.

Before Vill could ask what she would do, Spica lifted Komari's body from the ground and carried her on her back. Vill's vision turned red with anger the moment she saw the blood dripping from her side.

"She's light. Still a kid, huh?"

"Wha... What are you doing?! Let her go!"

Vill tried to grab her, but the pain in her foot made her stumble.

She slipped face-first onto the ground, getting covered in mud. No matter how hard she tried to stand back up, she was too tired and hurt to do so.

"Don't worry! I won't kill her yet. I can use the Blood Curse to kill Star Citadel."

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"Spica La Gemini... You..."
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"You should stay here with your childhood friend. My colleagues are rescuing the villagers. Nelia Cunningham and that reddish-brown Goody Two-shoes are okay, too. Also, the Mulnite Imperial Army should arrive any moment now. Just stay put, and you'll live."

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"I won't let you... Put Lady Komari...down..."
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"She'll die if I do. That okay with you?"

Vill gulped.

She had no way of saving her.

"You keep your head down like that, lamenting your impotence! I'll make good use of Terakomari."

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"W-wait...!"
```

Spica did not listen.

She walked past by the paralyzed Vill and Colette and hummed on her way to the village's exit. Vill mustered all her strength in an attempt to prevent Spica from escaping, but her feet caught, and she stumbled again. She had no energy left.

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"Lady Komari..."
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She had vowed to always be by her side as her maid.

She had resolved herself to support Komari's goal of conquering the world.

And yet, it had all come to a close so soon.

And so unfathomably.

Why was Spica here? Why was she taking Komari?

None of it made sense.

Then Colette's voice trembled in shock.

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"The Scholar...?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Huh?"

Maybe she had misheard.

But before Vill could ask her to repeat herself, Colette shook her head.

"No. It's useless... You can't beat her..."

"..."

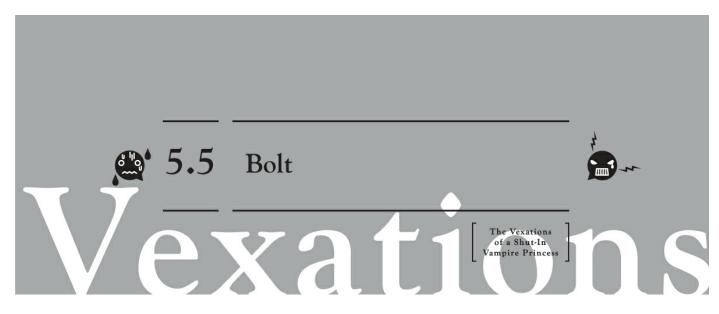
Lumiere Village was in shambles.

However, the flood had receded, and the ground had stopped caving in.

The wicked aura was gone, and gentle light filtered through the clouds. The sound of a marching army came from the distance. Perhaps Mulnite's soldiers were arriving.

But none of that gave her solace.

Vill watched on in confusion as her lady was taken away, gritting her teeth at her powerlessness.



The conflict in the Netherworld plunged further into chaos.

It marked the beginning of a story surrounding a colossal wish.

The war didn't stop because each side had things they could not yield over. Someone hurt, someone was hurt, someone killed, someone was killed—so went the tragic chain of war.

The key was in a heart of sympathy.

Yet it felt as though the day the people would remember would never come.



The Netherworld: the Polar Union.

A motley crew showed up out of nowhere in the palace plaza, as though they had teleported there with magic—and there was no magic in this world. The guards on duty were frightened by the sudden appearance.

There were about twenty of them.

No uniformity in race, age, or gender.

But they shared one will: the strong desire to take back their lost comrades.

"So this is the Netherworld. The sky is still blue, I see."

A bell rang.

At the head of the group stood a girl in Eastern clothing: Karla Amatsu.

"Let's get this started. First, we need to get a handle on the situation," she said calmly.

"Yeah. I wonder where Madam Author might be..."

Beside her stood an anxious girl in ninja clothing: Koharu Minenaga.

"I'm sure Terakomari's okay." Karla smiled to encourage her. "She's strong. You said so yourself, remember?"

"I'm just worried I won't get to read the sequel to her novel."

"Is that really what you're worried about...?"

"Just kidding," Koharu said with a straight face.

Her trembling hand betrayed her anxiety. It was only natural; although Karla had said Komari would be okay on reflex, there was no guarantee.

"Let's move, Ms. Karla."

"Yeah, let - Eep?!"

Crimson Lord Sakuna Memoir, the super-pretty former terrorist obsessed with Komari, stood next to Karla.

Karla flinched the moment she saw the darkness in her eyes.

Those were the eyes of a killer.

"She must be in trouble. I have to help her."

"Y-yes! So let's set our plan! Let's find a place to sit down..."

"I was going to have a tea party with her that day. We were going to chat all night. Why did this happen? Why is God so mean to her? He'll pay. They'll all pay. I have to find her."

"Koharu, help meee!! Sakuna's gone mad!!"

"She's never been not mad."

"Ah-ha-ha... You're in my way? I'll get rid of anything in my way. I'll freeze you and pluck out your memories."

"Calm down, Ms. Sakuna! Who are you even talking to—? Hmm?"

Just then, Karla felt someone's presence and looked ahead.

Soldiers in armor showed up in droves. Clearly not with friendly intentions.

Tension and hostility filled the frigid palace.

"...Um, who are they?"

"Remember we're basically breaking and entering. Wouldn't be weird for the guards to attack us," Koharu said.

It's over.

Karla turned back to the soldiers in a flurry.

"E-excuse me! We're not suspicious characters! Please let us talk it ou—"

"Don't waste your breath. I'll get rid of them," Sakuna said.

"Please don't, Sakuna! I don't think there's a Dark Core here, is there?! It would be awful if someone ended up getting hurt.

"Let me go! I have to get to Ms. Komari...!"

"I know, I know, but please just put away your staff! You're going to start a war! You too, Koharu, put that kunai away!"

Karla put Sakuna in a nelson before she could rush at the guards.

Things weren't looking good. They might die before finding Komari.

And so began their search.

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The Netherworld had changed completely.

It was far from the utopia I was going for. The sky was red, and tragic battles were being waged all over. Sad energy filled the air. Simply taking a breath made my throat itch.

The root of it was obvious.

Star Citadel.

Nothing would improve until I put a stop to them.

And to accomplish that, I'd do anything.

I turned around and returned to the building, a storehouse in a nameless village razed by the army of an odd country named the Toumor Republic.

In the middle of the room was a shabby bed.

A girl, crying, clung to it.

"How's Terakomari doing, Lingzi Ailan?"

The girl, Lingzi Ailan, turned around quickly.

Green hair and a frilly dress like a peacock.

"I—I…"

Lingzi stuttered as she spoke.

She seemed to be scared, even though there was no vampire as magnanimous as I was.

"I-it's the first time I've...used the Late Monarch's Guidance for something other...than the Dark Core. But I...think she'll...be okay... Still, it's only...first aid... I have to keep my hand on hers, or the Late Monarch's Guidance will break off."

"All you have to do is keep her alive for now. Just hang in there until Cornelius gets here, okay? And hey, she's looking better now."

Core Implosion was a power of the heart.

Lingzi's wish to save Terakomari had affected the world.

I took a blood candy out of my pocket and stared at Komari's resting face.

The greatest hero of the generation who would change the world.

Now that I was getting a good look at her, she really did seem too small.

A baby in the eyes of someone who'd lived for six hundred years... And yet the willpower and kindness inside her were so big and strong, they paralleled mine.

"I made sure to rescue you, Terakomari. Don't die on me, okay?"

A smile escaped me.

I looked down at the little vampire princess and spoke to her gently.

"You want to change the world, right? You can't let Star Citadel get away with this, right? Then get back up and be of use! Spica La Gemini welcomes you with open arms, Terakomari Gandesblood!"

## **Afterword**

Hello. Kotei Kobayashi here.

This is the eighth volume.

Terakomari and friends are sent to another world! Now what?!

That's what the book is about. Indeed, it would be a pain to get thrown into another world all of a sudden... And I've experienced pain before. So anyway, I hope you'll enjoy following Komari's journey.

Now for some special thanks.

To riichu, for giving life to all these cute characters.

Ryo Hiiragi, for coming up with a wonderful *Vexations*-like design.

Yoten Sugiura, for giving me so much advice.

Everyone involved in the publication and selling of this book.

And all my readers for holding it in your hands.

My biggest thanks to all of you!

Volume 9 will continue to take place in the Netherworld.

I hope to see you there.

(I'll also make use of this space for some advertising...) riichu began a manga adaptation of *The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess* in *Monthly Big GanGan*! I've read up to chapter four as I'm writing this afterword, and it's the most wonderful adaptation I could have hoped for, full of Komari antics. The Seventh Unit feels so alive, and it even made me, the original author, laugh out loud. I hear you can read a sample on the official site, so please give it a try!

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