



Kotei Kobayashi Illustration by riichu



Copyright

The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess 6

Kotei Kobayashi

Translation by Sergio Avila Cover art by riichu

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

HIKIKOMARI KYUUKETSUKI NO MONMON Vol. 6

Copyright © 2021 Kotei Kobayashi

Illustrations copyright © 2021 riichu

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at <u>yenpress.com</u>

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: February 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch Designed by Yen Press Design: Jane Sohn Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kobayashi, Kotei, author. | riichu, illustrator. | Lund, Evie, translator. | Avila, Sergio, translator.

Title: The vexations of a shut-in vampire princess / Kotei Kobayashi; illustration by riichu; v1: translation by Evie Lund; v. 2: translation by Sergio Avila.

Other titles: Hikikomari kyuuketsuki no monmon. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY: Yen On, 2022-Identifiers: LCCN 2021058967 | ISBN 9781975339494 (v. 1; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339517 (v. 2; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339531 (v. 3; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339555 (v. 4; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975372606 (v. 5; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975379643 (v. 6; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Vampires—Fiction. | Princesses—Fiction. | Humorous stories. | LCGFT: Vampire fiction. | Fantasy fiction. | Humorous fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.7 .K676 2022 | DDC 741.5/952—dc23/eng/20220107

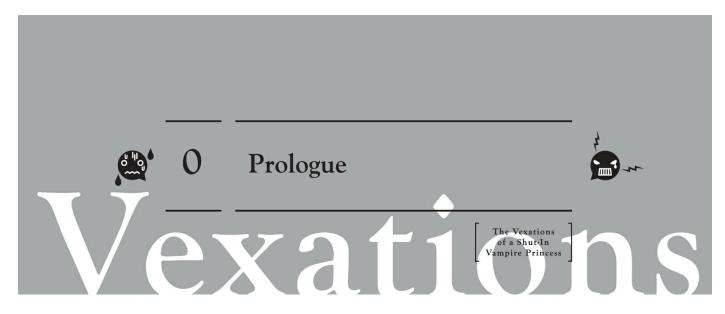
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021058967

ISBNs: 978-1-97537964-3 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7965-0 (ebook)

E3-20240124-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover
<u>Insert</u>
<u>Title Page</u>
Copyright
<u>0: Prologue</u>
0.5: The Shadow of a Star and a Piece of the Moon
1: The Seventh Unit's Biggest Fan
1.5: Distant Memories
2: Relaxing at the Hot Springs
2.5: Lingzi Ailan and the Vampires
3: Serial Murder Mystery
4: The Black Assassin and the Gift from the Netherworld
4.5: Death Master
<u>0: Epilogue</u>
Afterword
Yen Newsletter



Somewhere in the Dark Core Zone stood a castle where the previous Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise had turned to dust.

The place was in ruins and had clearly been deserted for a long time. It was the perfect spot to hold a private conversation.

"Well, then. Looks like everyone's here." An elegant voice echoed in the room.

It belonged to a Warblade clad in Aruka's military uniform, her pink hair tied up in pigtails—Nelia Cunningham. She looked at the other people sitting at the round table, a content smile on her face.

"We're here to do what I told you in the letters. We must be prepared for the upcoming eighteenth of February."

"Nelia, may I ask something?"

A bell chimed.

Across from Nelia sat a girl in Eastern clothing—Karla Amatsu, the Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise and (self-proclaimed) strongest person in the universe.

"What is it? I'm not serving you green tea."

"I also love black tea, so don't worry. That's not the issue. But what's with this meeting? I had to interrupt my very important duties to come here because you said it was urgent."

"You've still got bedhead. You sure you were working?"

"Why wouldn't I? I'm the busiest person in the Heavenly Paradise."

"She was taking a nap. Slacking off, basically," Karla's ninja chimed in.

"Koharu?! Don't tell her the truth!! As Goddess, I won't let you humiliate our nation in front of foreign powers!"

"At least you realize you're embarrassing."

Nelia heaved a sigh.

"You're hopeless, girl. I can tell you didn't even read the letter if you're asking those questions now. Villhaze, please explain to this creampuff head what day February eighteenth is."

"I don't like you giving me orders, but okay." The blue-haired girl in maid attire stood up.

Special lieutenant of the Mulnite Imperial Army's Seventh Unit, Villhaze. Her expression was as cool as ever, but a hint of passion shined in her eyes as she explained the significance of the date to Karla.

"February eighteenth is a day of fortune for humanity as a whole. Good omens shall bless the whole world over the moment it arrives. The birds will sing, the flowers will bloom, and the fish in the ocean will dance and jump, giving fishermen a haul like they've never seen before. The clouds in the sky will part, and warm sunlight will shine down upo—"

"Oh, for crying out loud! To make a long story short, February eighteenth is Komari's birthday!"

"Seriously?!" Karla yelled in shock.

"Seriously!" Nelia crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "We're here to talk about what to do for Komari's birthday. According to Villhaze, she hasn't had a birthday party in a while, so we should make it a big celebration!"

"That's correct. Her birthday was ignored before I was assigned as her maid. Perhaps understandably so, considering her circumstances."

"I see. So you want us all to get together and put on a big event." Karla sipped her black tea, tenderly narrowing her eyes. "That's a great idea. It should also be worthwhile for strengthening our international bonds."

Karla had replied calmly, but inside, she was overcome with excitement.

Komari was the only person who understood her, and she owed the girl her life. She immediately decided to make the best sweets she could for her friend.

"Everyone should think up a present to give her. But where should we throw the party...?" Nelia asked.

"We will be holding it at the Mulnite Empire," Villhaze asserted plainly. "It couldn't be anywhere else. Lady Komari is a Mulnite vampire."

"You don't get it, Villhaze. She barely goes out, so we should bring her to Aruka. I could throw a birthday bash there that would make her shed tears of joy."

"I hear that Aruka's Metropolis is a dangerous place. Lady Komari would be too scared to go somewhere like that."

"Are you hearing yourself, vampire? The number of murders in the Metropolis is basically null compared to the Imperial Capital. It's only a hundred a day."

"You realize 'null' means 'zero'?"

"Zero, a hundred, same difference! First of all, why would anyone think to attack Komari? She's the hero who saved the world! I'll station some guards at the venue, too, so it'll be fine."

"I can't trust you. Don't you agree, Lady Memoir?"

"Huh?" muttered the silver vampire sitting beside Villhaze—Sakuna Memoir, one of the Seven Crimson Lords. "Yeah. I agree with Ms. Villhaze. I think Mulnite would be the best."

"Let's hold a vote, then! Who thinks Komari's party should be in Mulnite?!"

A pair of hands rose. Villhaze's and Sakuna's.

"Who thinks it should be in Aruka?!"

Nelia shot her hand to the heavens. By herself. Her maid was dozing off beside her.

"Gertrude! Wake up, for pity's sake!"

"Fweh?! Whatever it was, I'm so sorry I did it, Lady Nelia!"



Gertrude raised her hand after getting slapped on the head. Now it was two against two. Nelia stared at the two observers.

"Karla, whose side are you on?"

"No one's. I would rather avoid conflict, so I propose we split the difference and hold the celebration in the Heavenly Paradise. We have more than enough space in the Osui Palace for everyone."

"……"

And so, conflict began.

Karla wasn't as insistent as Nelia or Villhaze, of course. She only proposed the Heavenly Paradise after coming to the objective conclusion that it was better to propose a middle ground than having the other two fight each other.

But her suggestion only added fuel to the fire.

"You think I don't have space?!" Nelia shouted. "Mulnite has the most space, actually," Villhaze argued. "Isn't the Mulnite Palace still being rebuilt after what happened recently?!" Nelia countered. "Lady Karla agrees." "I think it's better when compared to Aruka's bad public safety." "Lady Karla agrees." "I can take down anyone who dares lay a finger on her!" "Lady Karla says Aruka and Mulnite both suck, so let's do it in the Heavenly Paradise." "Hey, I did not say that!"

The conversation went nowhere. It was proof of how much they all cared for Terakomari Gandesblood. But it was also a waste of time. Nelia grew impatient and stood up, sending her chair to the floor.

"Fine, then! Let's decide this like soldiers—with war!"

"Wait a second, Ms. Nelia! I will not participate in such things! I'm no longer an Imperial Saber! I'm Goddess!" "...said Karla calmly, but inside, she was overcome with excitement."

"Stop pretending to be the narration, Koharu!"

"Very well, then. Let's go home and prepare for battle right away. Come to think of it, we've never properly duked it out. I'm sure Lady Komari will be elated," said Villhaze. She would never! Karla thought.

Unfortunately, no one with common sense was present. Thinking to ensure her own safety at the very least, Karla raised her hip to flee, but then...

"I-if I may! I have an idea!"

The girl who had stayed quiet until that point spoke up.

Everyone turned to look at her.

She rose to her feet, shivering with nerves. The amber-eyed vampire was clad in the uniform of the Mulnite Imperial Army, and her brown hair was tied up in a ponytail.

She did a salute with a trembling hand and spoke falteringly: "War is the thing Commander Gandesblood hates the most! So... I, um... I think we should take the literal middle...and hold the party in the Dark Core Zone, if I may be so bold to suggest!"

Nelia and Karla looked at each other.

Everyone had the same look on their face: Who was this, again?

Villhaze, however, crossed her arms and nodded.

"I see. There would be no reason to fight in that case. I think we should take her up on the suggestion. What do you think, Lady Cunningham?"

"Huh? I guess it makes sense. It's the safest bet."

"That's it, then. Thank you for your help, Esther."

"Thank you!" Esther bowed, her face reddened.

From the impeccable shape of her uniform, it was clear that she was a new recruit.

Nelia grabbed a biscuit and observed the unfamiliar vampire.

"By the way, who is she? Your new subordinate, Villhaze?"

"Apologies for the delay in introducing myself! My name is..."

The vampire fumblingly introduced herself.

All the while the plan progressed in secret.



I stared at the paper in despair.

You know how fish can swim without having to learn? How birds soar the skies with ease once they grow up? In similar fashion, I was born with a rare scholarly intellect and thus held the natural capacity to write stories of the highest literary merit... Or so I thought.



"I can't write..."

The pen stayed in my hand. Frozen.

Try as I might to move it, only cat and panda doodles came out.

The reason for this was plain as day—the pressure I was under.

My tummy hurt at the mere thought of my writing going out into the world.

I was working on a revamped version of *Twilight Triangle*. The publisher had given me some advice, and I was to revise some of the plot and text.

Their suggestion? "Make it more heart pounding."

"Heart pounding"? What the hell does that mean? Okay, let's think about the last time my heart pounded. During war the other day, Mellaconcey's magic explosions hit Bellius's squadron by accident, and then things devolved into a free-for-all. Dog vs rapper vs chimpanzee. My heart was pounding so fast I thought it would give out. But I don't think the publisher meant it like that. I realized my heart had never pounded in the ordinary sense.

"Dammit... My lack of experience has reared its ugly head..."

"What sort of experience are you lacking?"

"Romantic experience, what else? I can't write things out of my butt, or the readers'll think there's something wrong."

"Don't you worry. Your romantic partner is right here—me."

"Huh? WHOAAA?!"

I got put in a headlock out of nowhere and screamed for dear life.

The sicko maid had hugged my neck from behind.

"So, with your permission, I'll suck your blood now. That will get your heart pounding."

"Stop it! What if I get all anemic?!"

"Too bad." She shrugged. "I thought we'd gotten closer after we sucked each other's blood during the crisis at the end of the year. But I see you're as cold as ever, Lady Komari."

"Th-there were extenuating circumstances back then."

"But that doesn't change the fact that we defeated our enemies with the power of love, does it?"

I thought back to the turmoil of December of last year. Vill and I had activated Core Implosion and fought the terrorists attempting to take over the Mulnite Empire.

Honestly, I couldn't believe it, but neither could I get away with claiming it was a meteorite this time. Why? Because I actually remembered shooting a beam at Tryphon.

In any case, yes, it happened only because Vill was there with me.

But it was not the power of love.

"...I'll concede the fact we fought together. But I'm not drinking your blood ever again."

"Is that so. Objectively speaking, though, I think this is grounds for us having a romantic relationship, so I've been telling everyone who will listen that we're going out."

"Why would you do that?!"

"Our union has made it into the papers, too. Please take a look."

I snatched the newspaper out of Vill's hands at the speed of sound.

It read as follows:

GIRLS IN PASSIONATE LOVE?! LIEUTENANT VILLHAZE SPEAKS: "LADY KOMARI AND I ARE GIRLFRIENDS NOW."

Mulnite Imperial Army Lieutenant Villhaze stated during a press conference held in the Imperial Capital on the thirtieth that she's started going steady with Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood. "We've sucked each other's blood, just so you know," Lieutenant Villhaze commented with joy. Commander Gandesblood's interpersonal relationships have been getting more and more complex of late, and experts have heatedly debated about who the Commander might end up with. The Lieutenant's confession, which comes like a bolt out of the blue, has shocked them all. "Peak"; "Finally, proof that God exists"; "The

first pairing's always the best," they state, as they shiver with joy. On the other hand, Crimson Lord Sakuna Memoir reacted quite differently to the announcement, remarking, "What? There's no way she's telling the truth," as she sharpened a knife with a smile on her face. We expect and hope things will get dirty.

"...What the hell?"

"It's the news. Facts on paper."

"It's all made up!"

I slammed the rag onto the floor.

There was so much wrong with this that my brain couldn't keep up. Why was Vill holding a press conference? Why was she saying all that without telling me? Why was Sakuna sharpening a knife?

"Are things clear now, Lady Komari? The world recognizes our relationship."

"This is messed up on so many levels! I'm just gonna use this paper to clean windows! I'm fed up with all the fake news, stupid..."

"Fake news, indeed. Fake fake news."

"Excuse me?" I gave Vill a blank stare.

"The truth is, I was just wondering how you would react if a story like that made its way to the press. You looked surprisingly happy about it, so how about I get them to actually publish it this time around?"

"You gotta get your eyes checked! And stop wasting your time with these games..."

Exhaustion hit me like a tsunami.

I would never understand the things that went through my maid's head. But getting pranked was better than Vill actually having Six Nations News publish lies, at least. Perhaps there was a shred of common sense in her.

"The bit about Lady Memoir sharpening her knife was true, though."

"Wha—? Don't scare me."

"I told her jokingly that you and I were going out, and for a moment, the

terrorist inside took hold of her."

"..."

Sakuna had also been mystifying me lately. She was supposed to be an innocent pretty girl...

"Anyways, as I was saying," Vill said, moving away from the uneasy topic. "You have a partner right here. Me. Just take your flirting with me as inspiration for your novel. Problem solved."

"I have no recollection of ever flirting with you. But that's not the issue. I mean, besides coming up with the plot and everything, I just can't write."

"You're working too hard. I think a little rest outside might help you."

That made sense. Maybe being cooped up in my room all the time was clouding my thoughts. Just as I was accepting her assessment of this, a creepy smile came to her face, and she said: "By the way, Lady Komari. I have something to tell you."

"...Hold on. I'm getting a bad feeling about this. It's Sunday, I'll have you know."

"No, it's good news. The truth is..."

"No, don't tell me! It's the chimpanzee again, isn't it?!"

"It's not the chimpanzee. Take a look at this."

She gave me a piece of paper.

It was a sort of...invitation?

Two nights and three days at the Frezier Hot Springs.

"I won this at the lottery when I went for tonight's groceries."

I froze in the face of the unexpected information.

And here I'd thought that Vill would only ever bring me fake news and death threats.

"What do you think? How about we take some days off around the middle of February and go there together?"

"Days off?! What does that mean?!"

"Vacation. Holiday."

The world had gone crazy.

Something was fishy. Had this maid ever brought me genuine good news? Had she really won the lottery? Wasn't that too convenient?

"...Vill. They don't call them hot springs because they're, like, literal flame baths or something, right?"

"Do I look that mean to you?"

"The other day you told me we were going to the zoo, and you took me to battle with the giraffes."

"I'm being honest this time. It's just a simple, relaxing trip. Frezier Hot Springs is a popular tourist spot. The baths are highly regarded for their relaxing properties; they say all your weariness evaporates the moment you get in the water."

"…"

"And the place has lots of tasty food, too. They've got hot spring eggs, somen noodles, daifuku sweets, tempura, manju... I even heard they have hot-spring omelet rice."

Now I was overjoyed.

Not in my wildest dreams did I think I would be able to take some days off and go to the hot springs.

A warm bath is perfect for relaxing the body and mind. Yes, let's unwind and get those creative juices flowing. Yes, let's recharge batteries with a scrumptious feast.

"...I see. Perhaps the trip might be worth taking into consideration to improve my writing efficiency."

"So we'll go together?"

"Yeah. You won it, so I'd feel bad if you didn't get to go. If you insist, then sure, why not?"

"Thank you. I'll get the reservations for mid-February, then."

"Okay."

Oooh, now I'm getting excited.

How long has it been since I last went on a trip? I mean, I go to the Dark Core Zone pretty frequently, but it's always a hellish journey where I pray to the gods to let me come back home alive. It's been a while since I last went on a peaceful outing. Actually, isn't it the first time?

Hey, I should put together a schedule. We gotta pick out the places we wanna visit. Oh, and I'll take all my favorite snacks... I don't think a bag of cookies will last for three days and two nights.

In the highest of spirits, I looked down at the invitation Vill gave me.

On it was a picture of the hot springs town.

"Hmm...?"

I was hit by a feeling of déjà vu.

My memories from before I became a shut-in were riddled with holes like insect bites, but in this case, a hazy vision of the past came to mind. I feel like... I've gone here with my family before.

"Lady Komari? Is something the matter?"

Vill's voice brought me back to reality. I decided it was best not to think about it, since I couldn't remember the details.

More importantly, I had to get our schedule down. First things first: I am eating that omelet rice.

"Nothing. I'm looking forward to it!"

"Good to know. But before going to the hot springs, you'll have to do some work."

"I know...... Wait, what?"

"Yes. I also got this."

She handed me another piece of paper.

A letter. It said:

I'M COMING FOR YOU.

"It seems the chimpanzee is coming to visit."

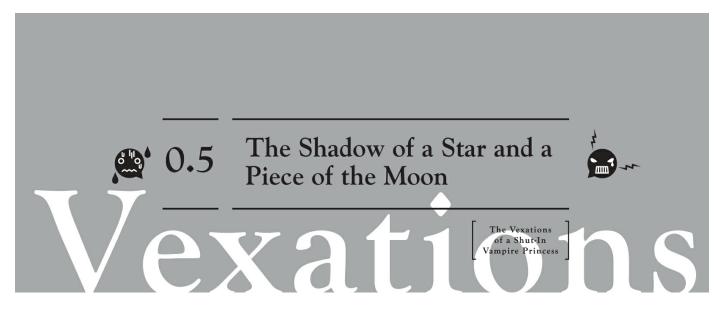
"I knew you had a letter from that damn primate!!"

"He's woken up from hibernation. Surely it won't take more than a flick of your pinky finger to kill a drowsy monkey."

"Actually, I was just thinking about hibernating myself, so if you could please take care of thi— Don't pull meee!!"

Vill dragged me out to the battlefield.

There was no time to think about the hot springs. I was too worried about surviving one more day.



There was a woman in black standing atop a hill.

Summer. Early afternoon. Three days had passed since the end of the conflict that shook the world—the Six Nations War.

Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood had saved this city from being overrun by the Warblades. Other towns in the Dark Core Zone had no such luck.

The war was over. No citizen had lost their life here. It was all thanks to Terakomari Gandesblood. The vampire princess had saved countless people all around the world.

The girl wished to become like her. Perhaps saving lives would be difficult, but at least she could visit places and help people out.

After her parents gave her the okay to go outside, she hurried bravely to her secret base. The place that showed her what dreams were made of. A hill on the outskirts of the city.

Once every few years, a strange phenomenon called "netherscreening" would occur in this city, in which images from another realm showed up on a screen in the sky.

Yes, another world. The ends of a land separate from her own, the place she wanted to visit most.

The girl had become obsessed with the other realm after seeing the netherscreening some years back. It was an unknown land no one had ever been to before, an entirely different place from the world she lived in. She thought it would make the perfect destination.

So she'd made a secret base atop the hill from where she could see the other realm's landscape. She couldn't see the netherscreening all the time. People said it mostly happened every few years, after natural disasters. Nevertheless, she would walk to her base frequently, cradling the faint hope she might just see it again.

And on that day, she found a stranger. A tall woman, clad in long, black sleeves despite the summer heat. She looked as though the sunlight might cook her alive. Like she'd just stepped out of a painting depicting hell.

The woman placed a cigarette to her mouth and looked up at the vast blue sky.

"I only came here because they said it's the place closest to the Netherworld."

She appeared to have noticed the girl.

The woman didn't look like a tourist.

"Not today, huh? Is there some other requirement?"

"A storm."

The woman turned around and stared straight at the girl. Her eyes looked like they had been plucked from a corpse.

The girl flinched but continued explaining.

"You can see it when there's a storm. I've only seen it once, though..."

"You sound knowledgeable. Do you want to go to the Netherworld or something?"

"Is that what it's called? That upside-down town..."

"Yeah. I've been there."

The girl's heart fluttered. This was the first time she'd ever met someone who had been to the town in the sky. She gleefully asked what it was like, and the woman in black smiled as she told her everything.

About the countries of the Netherworld. The peoples found there. Its landscapes. And she also told the girl a lot about this world. All about the world outside, the places she hadn't seen. Just listening to the woman made her soul

take flight.

She must've been a politician. A minister would have to know all this stuff.

"You're so pure. Filled with hopes and dreams. You're the kind of person to see a willow leaf on the ground and think it's gold... But I like genuine people like you."

"? Tell me more about the world outside Frezier!"

"Sorry, but I'm out of time. I'm busy."

It was such a shame. But she couldn't keep her there forever.

"Come back again." The girl waved as she watched the woman go. "Bye." The woman waved back with a smile. But then she stopped and said: "My country's philosophers blather on about karma and the mills of God grinding slowly. They need to think that their efforts will pay off."

"Huh...? What are you talking about?"

"But that's a foolish mistake. No God is watching over us. Otherwise, a villain like me wouldn't able to go out in broad daylight. The only things watching over us are the merciless evening stars."

The next thing the girl knew, the woman in black was standing right before her eyes.

She couldn't move. It was like she was trapped in a spider web.

The woman threw down her cigarette and stomped on it.

"All this about cutting and polishing. I'll show them what happens when you stray from the path of heaven they talk so much about. I've come all the way here, so I deserve a souvenir."

The sun darkened.

Slowly, the woman reached for the girl.

Come to think of it, this might've been her last memory.



It was the Wicked God Slayer who saved the girl from dying in a back alley.

She was kind beyond repair. The girl had nowhere to go, so the Wicked God Slayer took her in.

Inverse Moon became her home.

The Lunae were friendly, too. Perhaps her lack of blunders paid off. Even Kakumei Amatsu, who had a reputation for being ruthless inside the organization, committed her name to memory. She enjoyed talking with Lonne Cornelius about her research.

Her life after Spica La Gemini took her in was fulfilling.

Which was exactly why she was filled with rage after Terakomari Gandesblood destroyed Inverse Moon.

"She will pay."

The vampire riots sent the members of Inverse Moon scattering to the winds.

She had just barely escaped from the clutches of the government. But so what? She didn't know where Spica or the Lunae were. The organization where she'd found a home was gone.

She had to kill that vampire.

But she didn't think she was enough to beat her in a fight.

She needed a plan.

"Any problems?"

The Correspondence Crystal glowed as a voice echoed from it, like wind in a graveyard.

The girl tightened her grip on it and answered:

"No. But I don't understand the meaning of this."

"It's an experiment to kill your spirit. The world is formed from your will. Everything is, fundamentally, human spirit. And if you can destroy it artificially, that basically makes you the ruler of the world, don't you think? It is sacrilege—breaking through the barrier between man and heaven."

"...I don't really get it." The girl suppressed the emotion surging inside her. "But you'll tell me where Lady Spica is once I do this, right?"

"Society can't work without some faith. You think a Ruist such as myself would break a promise?"

""

Shivers ran down her spine at the sound of that voice, which was like a grim reaper's.

The girl had already been gathering information on this woman as a spy from Inverse Moon.

Luna Tryphon Cross had forced her to do so. She hadn't been on board at first, but the target's country had a lot of what she wanted—a great variety of medicinal recipes. After convincing herself that it wasn't all bad, the girl accepted. This had transpired in the fall of last year.

However, her target knew about her. At first, the woman pretended to be clueless, but after Inverse Moon fell following the vampire riots, she showed her true nature and made a proposition.

"If you want intel on Spica La Gemini, come and be my chambermaid."

The girl couldn't go against her.

She would have rather been dead than be this creepy woman's pawn, and yet...

The woman treated the girl like a tool. She didn't seem to think of anyone else as human. She was nothing like Spica, who was so kind to her subordinates.

"...You better make good on your promise."

"There's no need to emphasize. And besides...this trip might be worth your while. You might achieve your other goal while you're there."

"Huh?"

"Terakomari. You don't like her, do you?"

"…!"

Terakomari Gandesblood.

The evil vampire who'd ruined her life.

The woman on the other side of the crystal snickered. The girl knew everything that the woman had on her mind—but it didn't matter. She didn't have the freedom to choose to save herself.

The girl asked for details, and the woman laughed before replying.

"Terakomari Gandesblood is coming."

Her hour of vengeance was at hand.



"Are you sure? Perhaps I shouldn't be saying this, but...I heard the Seventh Unit is like a dumpster where they throw all the problem kids. I mean, it's popular now thanks to Commander Gandesblood, but still."

It the day of her graduation from Mulnite Military Academy.

Her schoolmate Camilla gave her a worried look, but Esther Claire felt not a shred of concern.

The Half Moon emblems the principal had given them symbolized the fact that they endured the intense training at the Military Academy. She was confident she could get by, even in the Seventh Unit.

Though that way of putting it made it sound like she'd been assigned there against her wishes.

No, Esther was happy. She herself had written on her assignment survey that there was nowhere else she would rather be than the Gandesblood Unit. The mere thought of getting to work in the Seventh Unit set her heart aflutter.

Esther smiled and turned to look at her buddy.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'll be fine."

"How do you know?"

"Because Commander Gandesblood will be there!"

Camilla sighed dramatically.

"The instructor was weeping about letting a student of your caliber wind up in the Seventh Unit, you know." "But they're the heroic force that saved the Mulnite Empire! Don't you remember? The Commander was so amazing when everything happened. I couldn't do anything but stay put in my house, but when I heard her voice, a fire lit up inside my chest."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Commander Komarin is so cool... I can't believe I get to work with her! It's like a dream come true!"

"I feel like she might kill you if you call her that to her face."

"I know! I'm smart enough to be respectful in her presence."

Any young person looking to get into the Imperial Army idolized Terakomari Gandesblood. They all admired her crushing combat ability and charisma. The Imperial Academy held frequent Crimson Lord popularity polls, and she always ranked number one, by a large margin.

But Esther looked up to Commander Komarin for different reasons.

Last summer, the Six Nations War broke out.

Esther's home was in Mulnite territory in the Dark Core Zone. The Gerra-Aruka Republic Army nearly trampled it during the war, but Commander Komarin swooped in to unleash her Core Implosion and save it.

It was all thanks to her that Esther and her family could live in peace.

From there, her Komari fanaticism only intensified.

Her wish to fight for Komari once she graduated grew stronger by the day.

Half of the Military Academy students wanted to be assigned to the Imperial Army. Though the school surveyed these brave youth to find out where they hoped to be placed, graduates claimed that only a fifth got assigned to the unit of their choice. It was even rumored that the instructors made their decisions by throwing dice.

And yet, miraculously, Esther wound up exactly where she had hoped to be.

She'd jumped on her bed out of sheer excitement when she got the news.

"I mean, you're free to look up to whomever you like, but I'm just saying, you

should probably think about why the giga-popular Seventh Unit is turbounpopular as a workplace."

Thirty people graduated from the Academy this year.

And Esther was the only person in her class who would be going to the Seventh Unit.

"Yeah... I guess the First and Third Units are more popular."

"Right? And even the Academy says they don't want promising graduates to go to the Seventh Unit. The instructors are making sure that doesn't happen. It's gotta be a sign there's something wrong."

"Are you implying they're a bunch of problem kids?"

"Do you even know who's assigned there besides Commander Gandesblood?"

"I know a few names and faces..."

But she didn't know what sort of people they were.

For good or ill, the Seventh Unit's presence as a group was so strong it was hard for the individuals who supported their leader to stand out on their own. What kind of people were Commander Komarin's subordinates? Esther had heard about them rampaging in the Mulnite Palace, but it was by no means uncommon for Military Academy students to cause trouble on their summer breaks. She thought it couldn't be that big of a deal.

Indeed. Esther Claire simply did not care.

Just the fact that she would get to join the unit of her dreams was enough. She was sure she could manage, even if she found herself among some scary senior members. Yes. She was underestimating them.

And so, Esther hugged her diploma and smiled from ear to ear as she said:

"I'll be fine! It's Commander Gandesblood's unit! I'm sure it'll be full of cool and strong people! They must be living examples of the perfect soldiers."

"I hope so, for your sake..."

Camila's expression was sour to the end.

Incidentally, she was going to head back to her hometown in the Dark Core

Zone and join the police. Not everyone who graduated from the Mulnite Military Academy signed up for the Imperial Army.

The two friends promised to meet again one day and parted ways. The snow fell silently on the Military Academy as the birds left the nest.

Time went by, and a new year came. In the blink of an eye, the day of Esther's enlistment arrived.



"So you're our latest officer. Welcome to the Imperial Army's Seventh Unit."

January 5. The start of a new year in the Mulnite Palace.

Clad in a brand-new military uniform, Esther shivered not out of cold, but nerves. She had arrived at the office of Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood, on the top floor of the Crimson Tower.

She couldn't stop sweating. What if she said something disrespectful? *No problem, I'm ready for seppuku at any time.* She walked into the office literally prepared for death, only to be received by someone other than Commander Komarin.

She had blue hair and tranquil eyes. She was Commander Komarin's confidant and maid.

"Don't just stand there, come in."

"E-excuse me!"

Flustered, Esther stepped inside.

She racked her brain to recite the introduction she had thought up beforehand.

"I—I...! I've been assigned to the Seven Unit starting today! My name is Esther Claire, Second Lieutenant! I am still a greenhorn, but I would appreciate your guidance and support! It's a pleasure!"

Esther saluted as she sneaked a peek at her surroundings.

The office was befitting of a commander. There was a map of the Six Nations on the wall, along with shelves full of books on tactics and magic. There was

also a Mulnite Imperial flag, an emergency Correspondence Crystal, and a luxurious sofa, atop which lay a bloody corpse... Wait. A what now?

"I am the Seventh Unit's special lieutenant, Villhaze. I am Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood's right arm, her strategist, her partner, and future wife."

"Um..."

"Lady Komari is absent at the moment, but I'll give you the rundown on your duties."

"...Excuse me! I think...someone's dying right there?!"

"Huh? Oh, you mean Lieutenant Yohann Helders. The other members ganged up on him and killed him, yes."

"They what?!"

Villhaze sighed.

"It all started when Lady Komari offered blondie over here an unfinished steamed bun. 'You want some?' she said. Unbelievable, don't you think?"

"I'm not following..."

"Anyone could see a lynching coming. The vampires grew incensed and threw a blood bath."

Esther was at a loss for words. Was there some sort of secret to that steamed bun?

Just then, she heard a scream come in on the wind from the window. That death rattle was accompanied in short order by magic being fired indiscriminately, explosions, and bodies flying.

"...What's that noise?"

"Oh, that's just the Seventh Unit killing one another."

"Wha...? Are they training?"

"No. Wasn't it obvious from the context I provided you that they're taking each other out for the bun that didn't reach Lieutenant Helders's hands?"

"I-I'm sorry! It wasn't!"

"I see. You seem to have surprisingly normal sensibilities."

The sound of battle continued intermittently.

Just outside the window, a palace spire burst into flames.

What? Am I dreaming? Why would members of the great Imperial Army be ripping out one another's throats over a steamed bun? Is this really the Seventh Unit? This madness was all incomprehensible to someone with a normal brain such as Esther.

"Um... If I may ask, where is Commander Gandesblood?"

"She's in the kitchen, making steamed buns. She has to finish five hundred of them within an hour or the world will end."

The absurdity of it all almost had her in tears.

An instant later, Villhaze's Correspondence Crystal glowed.

"Hey, Vill! We're in trouble!"

Esther raised her head.

That was the same voice she'd heard on the night of the riots in the Imperial Capital.

"What's the matter? Don't tell me you couldn't contain yourself and ate all the buns."

"Do you think I'm stupid?! Listen! The buns just blew up! Even though I followed your recipe!"

"I'm sorry, it seems I gave you the recipe for explosive buns by mistake."

"Why do you have something like that?!"

"But don't worry about that. Forget the buns; the palace is already blowing up."

"And I'm supposed to be making these buns to prevent that! For heaven's sake, when did my subordinates even start liking Eastern sweets?! Are they trending now or something?! Whatever, just come over and help me! We gotta

get them their buns, or Flöte's gonna skewer me!"

"I hear you loud and clear. Let's solve this by whipping up some poisoned buns."

"Forget what I said!! I'm making them on my own!!"

Esther was moved. Even though it was only through the Correspondence Crystal, she could hear Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood's voice.

She did not understand the conversation that was taking place, but it seemed like they were in a life-and-death situation.

It made sense—every day for a Crimson Lord was a battle for dear life. *Can I really become like that one day?* Esther thought, her respect deepening.

"Now then, let's set aside the steamed bun issue."

"Um... I didn't really get that, but, should we really?"

"Yes. Ignoring them from time to time sometimes works in my favor."

Violent explosions started going off one after the other outside. *You sure ignoring that won't actually end the world?*

"Plus, things like this are commonplace," Villhaze said. "We should focus on going over your duties right now. Please, take a seat."

"Ah... No, I am all right standing!"

"If you say so."

There was too much on Esther's mind. The mysterious war taking place outside, the dead body lying right in front of her, Commander Komarin... But if Lieutenant Villhaze said she needn't worry about it, then she wouldn't. She had been taught in the Military Academy that orders were absolute.

Then a frightful voice echoed from the Correspondence Crystal on the table.

"This is Lieutenant Cerbero! It's over, Flöte Mascarail is coming after us! We're all done for! Get the buns here ASAP! Are you listening, Lieutenant Villhaze?!"

...How am I supposed to not worry?!

Villhaze, however, paid no heed to the crystal and launched into an

explanation.

"As you may know, Second Lieutenant Claire, the Imperial Army has two main jobs: elevating Mulnite's prestige by achieving victory in sports-war, and leading the way in times of crisis. Both are important, but our main duty is the former. Turbulent incidents such as those from this past year aren't all that common."

"Y-yes, ma'am! I will give body and soul and do my best for the sake of the Mulnite Empire!"

"I have all the details written out, so read them at your leisure. Now, I hear that you're an elite student who graduated at the top of your class. That means you're joining the Seventh Unit as an officer."

"An elite...! Oh no, I still have much to learn!"

Villhaze giggled.

"We're a popular unit and the face of the Mulnite Empire at this point, yet human resources won't give us any new recruits. They only hand us murderers who've caused chaos elsewhere. We've been wanting someone who's completed their studies and gone through the proper training like you."

"I-it's an honor."

As far as Esther knew, there were three ways to join the Mulnite Imperial Army.

First, apply to the Crimson Tower. If they recognized your potential, they assigned you to one of the seven units. Crimson Lord Sakuna Memoir was an example of this method.

Second, get scouted. The Crimson Tower was of the mind that hidden talent might be out there anytime, anywhere, so they directly recruited outstanding outsiders into the Imperial Army. Commanders Helldeus Heaven and Millicent Bluenight had been recruited at the behest of the government. Commander Komarin, too.

Third, graduate from the Military Academy, like Esther. People who entered via this route were designated second lieutenants from the moment of their allocation, so they were better received than regular enlistees. However, since

they commonly thought of themselves as chosen people and caused issues, they were referred to as "bookworms" or "nobles" behind their backs.

Regardless, the Seventh Unit really was just as Camilla had described. Most of its members were enlistees. And all of them were troublemakers, demoted from other units.

Maybe it won't be as cozy as I thought.

"The work is tough, but someone with credentials like yours will do fine. Glad to have you with us, Lady Claire."

"Thank you! But oh, please, don't call me 'Lady'! There's no need for titles, just use my name."

"I see. Very well, then, Esther."

"Yes! Thank you!"

"You can call me Vill. Lieutenant Villhaze is too long a name, and simply referring to me as 'Lieutenant' would be confusing with the other vampires around."

"...!*"*

Esther was somewhat embarrassed that they would be calling each other by their first names...but she was happy about it. It felt like she'd gotten her recognition.

"Now, then," Villhaze said as she looked out the window. "The buns! Give me the BUUUNS!" came a shrill voice from the Correspondence Crystal. What about that? No, don't think about it. Consider it a hallucination.

"Your first job will be for the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest."

"Th-the Super Massacre...? I am so sorry, but I'm not aware of what that is..."

"Sports-war, basically. It's a festival where every nation will be sending a few of their battalions to fight one another. Our Seventh Unit will be going up against the Polar Union's Butcher Corps."

"Um, is that Prohellya Butchersky's?"

"Yes. We need to formulate a strategy, since simple kamikaze attacks won't

work against them. I'd like you to help me out with that... I'll be blunt: I want you to be the leader of the Seventh Unit's special team, Second Lieutenant Esther Claire."

Her head filled with question marks.

"Leader? Me?"

"The Seventh Unit is divided into six teams. The sixth one, the special team, has long been without a leader. We just haven't had enough officers to give each division a leader... But either way, we need to get the whole unit together in order to win against Prohellya Butchersky. So, I'd like you to be the one to lead the barba—I mean, the elite men of the sixth team."

Esther was moved to her core.

She'd never imagined she would get assigned such an important task right out of the gate. It wouldn't be conceited of her to think they had high hopes for her, would it? *I will dedicate myself to the Seventh Unit and, above all, to Commander Komarin!* Esther clenched her fist as she fired herself up.

"Roger! As team leader, I will bring glory to the Seventh Unit!"

"That's the spirit. Now, please don't quit if your underlings try to kill you."

"Yes! ...Yes?"

Was she just hearing things? She could have sworn that something terrible had just passed her ears.

Esther tried asking about it for clarification, but before she could...

"Heh. Heh-heh-heh. You're a new recruit?"

She jumped, startled.

The corpse at her feet was talking. Rather, it wasn't a corpse anymore. Lieutenant Yohann Helders looked up at her with dead eyes. Somehow, he was still breathing.

"Want a piece of advice? You should go back to studying at your cozy desk in the Academy."

"Wh-what are you trying to say?!"

"Heh-heh-heh-eh. I'm just trying to be nice. There are a bunch of crazies who'll stab you in the back in this unit. A little girl like you'll end up stripped down and cooked in omelet rice... If you're not looking to bleed, then go home."

"Wha...?!"

That did it.

He was her superior. She wasn't allowed to argue back. But she couldn't stand being minimized for no reason. She, too, had come here prepared to work for Commander Komarin, so how dare he tell her to go back home?

Esther glared sharply at Yohann and raised her voice:

"E-excuse you! I am a soldier with the rank of second lieutenant! I'm not afraid of blood!"

"GHBEUBEBABHUAHBUHUBUABABBABAAAA!!"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

Blood spurted out from Yohann onto her.

Esther screeched like death and fell on her butt.

The gush of blood flew so quickly it created a bloody rainbow in the air before staining Esther's uniform. *It was brand-new!* Stunned, she wallowed in despair as Lieutenant Yohann Helders looked around and cursed.

"They won't get away with this... I'll kill them... I'll murder them all...after I come back to life... Damn buns..."

He drew his last breath.

Esther watched on in shock, trembling.

What is happening? Why did they kill this guy? Should we contact the police? She asked herself a few questions that any sane individual would have in this scenario.

"Now then, good luck with your new job, Esther."

Lieutenant Villhaze, meanwhile, was munching on a steamed bun.

I don't get it. But I gotta work hard. Maybe this is how the Seventh Unit does

initiations. Very well, then. Let's do it. Esther took a deep breath as explosions echoed from the garden. She clenched her fist.

I won't let this bring me down!

Esther had another reason for working hard—she had a sickly sister back home. She had to show her that her big sister could succeed as a soldier to cheer her up.

So began Esther Claire's nightmare.

Parenthesis: Commander Flöte Mascarail stopped the steamed-bun war from taking place at the Mulnite Palace. Commander Komarin apologized by offering her five hundred steamed buns (the ones she couldn't finish on time), but Commander Mascarail, fuming, challenged her to a duel.

It was all incomprehensible to Esther.



"Second Lieutenant Claire, no one will blame you if you ever decide to flee. Don't hesitate to do so if you think you won't be a good fit."

"Don't worry! I am also a proud soldier of the Imperial Army!"

"...I believe eighty percent of the Imperial Army would say there's nothing to be proud of in the Seventh Unit," said the beast-folk walking ahead of her—Lieutenant Bellius Hund Cerbero.

He was showing her the way to where the special team gathered.

This man was the most outstanding of the Seventh Unit, below Commander Komarin herself. The image of the man with a dog's head going wild among the group of vampires naturally drew her attention. It was a mystery how he'd ended up in the Imperial Army, but according to Villhaze, he was one of the few odd beast-folk registered to Mulnite's Dark Core. Esther found it wonderful that her workplace was free of racism.

After chatting for a while, they arrived at a spot behind the Crimson Tower. Bellius stopped as they reached a warehouse-looking building.

The place wasn't well-maintained. The walls were darkened and full of cracks. They had also sprayed some weird doodles on them. The skull and ghost

drawings were on the decent side—but there were also words and phrases she dared not read out loud.

"What is this place? It's like a thugs' den."

"It used to be an armory. The special team took it over, though. It's their base now."

"I have a lot of questions..."

"To begin with," Bellius said as he scratched his head, "they're not the sort of people someone like you could rally up."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"I mean you'd be better off working under Lieutenant Villhaze. They're too much for an Academy graduate to handle."

"...!" Esther was teeming with self-confidence. Just hearing Bellius's warning annoyed her to no end. "Lieutenant Cerbero, I am well aware I'm still unexperienced, but one cannot give up before trying. I'm here because Lieutenant Villhaze told me to be the special team's leader to begin with."

"I know that, I'm just saying..."

"You're not saying anything!" She stood on her toes and glared at him. "I have my own apprehensions, but Vill appointed me because she thought I could do it. So if you're against it, then bring it up with her!"

"I don't think that maid thinks about anything."

"Well, I believe she gave proper judgment of my capacities!"

They locked gazes. Bellius couldn't take it and looked away.

Then Esther realized this wasn't how she should be talking to her superior. However, Bellius was the spitting image of her childhood dog. She wasn't trying to belittle him, but his resemblance made him feel more approachable than the other members.

"E-excuse my rudeness..."

"No, it's fine. I get it. Sorry. You're just following orders. But I will say..." Bellius faltered, then continued. "The special team is like an amalgamation of

everything wrong with the Seventh Unit. Be prepared."

"Everything wrong...? Like what, exactly?"

"Like their taste for killing without reason."

"..."

How could there be soldiers like that? Surely the beast-man was only trying to scare her. She had heard of graduates from years past getting put through nasty hazing rituals. Surely the special team was just a bunch of problem kids who skipped work and spent all their time playing around.

"...Are they all in here?"

"Yes. This is basically where they live. Rumor has it they have an underground hideout, and that they get their food by stealing from the castle town."

If that was true, that would make them a group of criminals.

This had to be some sort of hazing. She wouldn't lose to such things.

Esther mustered her courage and placed a hand on the door.

Then she heard someone laughing. She figured the special team was merrymaking inside. In that case, she needed to establish herself as their superior and correct their mischief! Her will steeled, she opened the door.

Fwoosh!

Something grazed her cheek.

"Huh?"

Esther looked back in confusion.

The tree behind her had been sliced through. The top part slid off and fell to the ground with a crash.

"...Huh??"

"That was close! I missed!"

A screeching voice echoed, followed by riotous guffaws. Esther looked into the warehouse in shock.

Inside were a group of vampires in the Mulnite military uniform. Just over

thirty of them. They all had disrespectable faces and tough looks.

Esther was too shocked to move.

These are my subordinates? They're a bunch of lowlifes!

The interior of the warehouse was in a terrible state. Empty liquor bottles and cigarette butts lay all around. As did corpses. And bloodstained saws and hammers. A long-haired vampire began playing a powerful metal guitar riff. The others synced to his headbanging as they chanted shrilly, "FOWOWOW! KOMARIN! KOMARIN!"

Then Esther realized that the tree behind her had fallen after she was attacked.

Bellius had told her they killed without reason.

Somehow, this wasn't a hazing. It took Esther a single glance at this hell on earth to accept the truth.

"Hey, hey, hey, Bellius. What's with this little girl?"

A man with a shaved head approached.

He charged some mana at his fingertips. He must have been the one to shoot that spell just now.

"This is the home stadium of the fearsome Seventh Unit's sixth team. You wanna go on a date, then go watch a dolphin show at the aquarium. But if you're lookin' for our particular flavor of entertainment, then so be it."

He shot her a deadly glare.

Esther hid behind Bellius on reflex.

These aren't just troublemakers. What are they doing in the army? She trembled.

"Don't threaten me for no reason." Bellius took a step forward, covering for her. "Human resources sent her. She's not here to battle."

"Human resources? So you're sayin' she's here to appoint me, Ununga the Banshee, as team leader? Then I welcome her with open arms! Finally, Commander Komarin recognizes my skills!"

"What?!" "You've got to be kidding!" "Who appointed him?!" "I'm gonna kill everyone here and then myself!" The rest of the special team sent murderous glares at the skinhead. Esther felt like dying. These dudes could start beating each other to death at any moment. Clearly, they'd been doing that already before she arrived.

"Calm down, Ununga. You're not the leader," Bellius said.

"The hell?! Oh, I get it! We're deciding it in battle!"

"That's not it! This girl here is your new leader. Second Lieutenant Esther Claire."

"Fweh?!" Esther shouted as Bellius grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her to the front.

"Hah?" the man screeched. "This kid is the leader?"

"Yes."

"You're joking, right?"

Ununga the Banshee looked her up and down. The rest of the thugs gazed rabidly upon her, too. Esther shrank.

"Well then, Second Lieutenant Claire," said Bellius. "My work here is done. The sixth team is in your hands."

"Hold on!" Esther grabbed him by the arm before he could depart. "Don't leave me alone! They're going to kill me!"

"L-let me go! Weren't you saying you can't give up before you try?"

"Aww... I did! And that's right! But still!"

The sixth team didn't look like they were going to give her a chance to try.

She wanted to cry. This was way too big a responsibility for her first mission! Esther clung to Bellius for dear life and stared deep into his eyes, until finally, he sighed and headed over to the skinhead.

"Ununga, Second Lieutenant Claire is an elite graduate from the Military Academy. She has the skills to be your leader. Don't be mean to her."

"Tell me, Bellius. Who appointed little lady second lieutenant here as our

leader?"

"Lieutenant Villhaze."

"So it wasn't on Commander Komarin's order?"

"The Commander has left all personnel decisions to her maid."

"Then no waaaaaay am I doing what she saaaaays!" The skinhead flipped the bird. "You know why we do our ritual of three kneelings and nine kowtows to the south-southwest every morning, don't you?!"

"No."

"Because Commander Komarin's house is in that direction! Listen here, we don't serve Villhaze. The Seventh Unit protects Commander Komarin only! Am I right, guys?! Who the hell are we?!"

"""Commander Komarin's faithful dogs!!"""

"You heard 'em! I'm not listening to Villhaze's orders just because she's friends with the Commander. We are the strongest army, and we fight only for Commander Komarin! We fight, fight, fight... And if we're lucky, we'll die and get to be reborn as chicken eggs to be served in omelet rice, and find eternal rest in the Commander's stomach one day! Komarin! Komarin!"

"""Komarin! Komarin! Komarin! """

.....

.....

...They're insane.

"So no! We don't accept HR's dumbass orders!"

"Telling me that won't do you any good. She's already your team's leader, on paper."

"Do I look like I give a shit?! She clearly can't handle the job to begin with!"

"He's right!" The vampires echoed the skinhead's response.

"The Seventh Unit is no place for a bookworm! Send her to Flöte Mascarail's braindead unit! And if she doesn't wanna, then she should pack her bags and go

back to the sticks!"

"That's right!" "We're an elite troop! If you don't got the skills, then go!" "Everyone here grew up on muddy waters from the back alleys!" "We're filth!" "Do you got the guts to become trash, kid?!" "A pretty girl like you shouldn't be in a garbage dump like this!" "Go get doted on somewhere else!" "Fowowowowow!!" The vampires jumped around the warehouse as they yelled.

What the heck? What the heck?

Huh? Huh? Am I crying?

I never cried in the Academy...

"There's no fixing them. Are you okay, Second Lieutenant Claire?" Bellius gave Esther a worried glance.

She was not okay. She was so shocked she could die. She hadn't been expecting them to tell her to "go back to the sticks" to her face.

But she couldn't stay silent after enduring all this ridicule.

Think of your sickly little sister back home!

Esther wiped away her tears with her sleeve and gathered her courage to yell:

"I! Am Second Lieutenant Esther Claire! And I've been appointed as leader of the Seventh Unit's special team! From now on, you will be following my orders! So start by cleaning up this me—"

"Oh shoot, it's already noon! It's time for the Leader Death Match!"

""""UOOOHHH!!""""

They ignored her.

Her voice was but a breeze to them. The members of the sixth team all grabbed their weapons and started killing one another without rhyme or reason. Esther watched as her (tentative) subordinates gradually lost their lives, wondering why she ever came here.

"Waaa-waaa...! Listen to me!!"

"Don't cry. That's just how things are in the Seventh Unit."

"B-but...! Lieutenant Cerbero...!"

"Let's try again tomorrow. They won't stop until they've killed everyone."

It felt like her head was on the verge of exploding at the outlandishness.

Meanwhile, heads exploded in reality right before her eyes.

"Let's go." Bellius jerked his chin.

Esther left the place, weeping.



Her official title was Second Lieutenant Esther Claire, Leader of the Special Team, the Sixth Team of Gandesblood's Seventh Unit of the Mulnite Imperial Army.

But that was just on paper.

In reality, the members of the sixth team didn't listen to her in the slightest.

Ever since that shocking meeting, Esther had frequently visited the sixth team's home turf (the warehouse) and tried to convince them to follow her, but they seemed to think of her as nothing more than a pebble on the road. No matter how many times she yelled at them to listen or told them she was going to explain their strategy for the next war, they never paid attention.

Her team spent their time drinking, fighting, and cheering for Komarin. Thankfully, they didn't try directly attacking Esther, but with how hard they were ignoring her, she was still getting butchered mentally.

A prime example of that was the sports-war they'd held just the other day.

A penguin troop from the Lapelico Kingdom had declared war. According to Villhaze, they didn't hibernate, unlike most other beast-folk. Esther didn't even know the beast-folk hibernated. But in any case, this would be the first time she fought a real battle.

It would be no exaggeration to say all the training she did at the Military Academy had been for this day. She fired herself up to honor the name of Commander Komarin.

The morning of the battle, as she was getting ready in her room in the

women's dorms of the Imperial Army, the Correspondence Crystal on her dresser started glowing.

"Good morning, Esther. It looks to be a good day."

"Lieutenant Villhaze... Er, I mean, Vill! Good morning! To what do I owe this pleasant call?!"

"Oh, nothing. I was just trying to make sure you wouldn't sleep in out of nerves."

There was evident kindness in her cool tone.

Esther shed tears of joy at the mere thought of Lieutenant Villhaze getting worried over a girl like her, who couldn't even control her subordinates.

"Thank you for your concern! But I'm already well awake. I've been preparing for this day."

"Very well. By the way, have you been communicating with your team?"

"Uh... About that..."

She had come up with a strategy for the special team to use in this battle, but she didn't know whether they'd follow her orders or not... Actually, she did know. They wouldn't.

But she had to deal with it somehow. She was their boss.

"That doesn't sound good."

"N-no, not at all! I mean... Yes, a little... But I'll stay strong and make them look my way! No matter how difficult the path, I am ready to tread it!"

"Excellent. Would you mind telling them to stop rioting in the Mulnite Palace, then?"

"Huh?"

"It appears they've started fighting another unit. We won't even get to battle the Lapelico Kingdom at this rate. The palace hasn't even been fixed yet, and your troops are tearing it down again."

"……"

All color drained from her face.

Esther hurried over to the Mulnite Palace without even brushing her hair.

The first thing she saw was a mountain of corpses.

It had been one week since she'd joined the Imperial Army. By now, she had witnessed her subordinates die on countless occasions, but it didn't look like they had wiped themselves out through infighting this time. The winning troops were still on their feet, after all.

"Oh my."

A vampire standing atop the pile of dead bodies noticed her arrival. A woman with noble bearing. She shook her bloodstained rapier before giving her an oppressive glare.

"What unit are you from? Don't worry, I've taken care of the barbarians."

Crimson Lord Flöte Mascarail.

She was a legend in the Military Academy, said to be its strongest graduate.

"It's unbelievable! We went through this just last week! If you want to lead a righteous and proper life in the army, I recommend you stay away from the Seventh Unit, young lady!"

Esther gulped. I'm part of the Seventh Unit's management, actually.

Flöte frowned in annoyance and sighed.

"Bachelard! Call Ms. Gandesblood! Gosh, what is that vampire thinking? Nothing good, I'll tell you! The last time I came across her, she scowled like she'd just seen a monster and turned around! Oooh, how I want to squish her! Don't you think the same, young lady?!"

"Um...," Esther replied.

"Hey, Flöte. These lowlifes are from the Seventh Unit's special team. They're extremists even within their group."

Esther gulped.

A masked vampire had appeared out of the blue.

She recognized that figure. Crimson Lord Delphyne.

He (she?) held up an Army-provided dog tag. He must have taken one of the defeated vampires' uniform. Esther squinted to read it.

SEVENTH UNIT'S SPECIAL TEAM: SERGEANT MAJOR GOL UNUNGA.

"The special team? I've never heard of it."

"Basically, they're unstoppable beasts. According to my subordinates' reports, they caused this riot over a limited-edition Commander T-shirt."

"Excuse me?"

"A T-shirt with Terakomari's face on it. They made a limited-edition variant for New Year's featuring Komari's sleeping face and only produced a hundred of them. One of the members of the special team got a hold of one, and they began killing each other for it."

"Who would want that?!"

"Here's the item in question."

"I don't want it!"

Flöte slapped Delphyne's hand, and the T-shirt fluttered to the ground.

I want it... No, stop.

Everyone in the Military Academy knew about the Flöte Mascarail and Delphyne pair. They were about five years older than Esther, so while she hadn't gone to school with them, she *had* heard about them ad nauseum.

Those two were always top of their class. The Military Academy had been in total disorder during the time of their enrollment, and they went around killing all the delinquents one by one until they whipped their class into shape. They'd even challenged then—Crimson Lords when they were still students and emerged victorious. Rumor had it that even the principal kowtowed to those two when they crossed paths.

Basically, they were super amazing.

And Esther wasn't experienced enough to maintain a cool front in front of such super-amazing people.

"Whatever. I'll go speak with Ms. Gandesblood myself. Last time, she scurried away and said something about having to polish her statue, but I won't let her get away again! I'll follow her to the depths of hell if I have to and put her in her place!" Flöte said.

"Honestly, though, I don't think Terakomari could've managed this."

"What? You're taking her side?"

"That's not it. It's true Terakomari holds a powerful Core Implosion, but she's just a little girl when she isn't using it. Or at least that's what it seems like. Don't you think so, Flöte?"

"Yeah... I suppose."

"And a little girl ignorant of the ways of the military wouldn't be able to control these wild beasts. So we should hold someone else in the unit accountable for mismanaging them."

"Even so! It's still Terakomari's responsibility!"

"I get how you feel, I do... But I think this wouldn't have happened if the special team's leader had been doing their job. Don't you agree, Second Lieutenant Esther Claire?"

Delphyne turned around and glared at Esther.

His eyes were bright and sharp behind his mask. Esther felt like she had just been thrown into the abyss. He knew who she was.

Delphyne paid no heed to Flöte's confusion and slowly approached Esther.

"I've heard about you from my underclassmen in the Military Academy. They say you graduated top of your class in all subjects. And that you were assigned to the Seventh Unit...then designated the leader of this pile of corpses. Which means this massacre wouldn't have happened if you had kept your subordinates in line."

"I-I'm very sorry!"

"Apologizing won't turn back time. And just so you know, Her Majesty the Empress assigned my Fourth Unit the task of repairing the palace. We've been working day and night without rest to fix it up, and all our hard work is gone

now thanks to your team. You're making me want to cut my wrists, and I'm already anemic as it is..."

"Um, I've heard eating broccoli can help with that..."

"That's not the problem."

It most definitely wasn't. Esther couldn't think straight after being reproached for incompetency by a Crimson Lord.

"I'm not your boss, so I can't say much. But you must pay for this."

"Del! Stop picking on her!" Flöte grabbed Delphyne's arm in exasperation. "Don't talk to her like that just because she's your junior. You're scaring the girl."

"But I worked so hard to get that lawn just right, and now it's all full of holes..."

"Everybody makes mistakes. It is our duty as commanders to be the bigger person and let them off, don't you think?"

"So you're going to forgive Terakomari?"

"Not while I still draw breath. Ahem, Ms. Claire, I assure you Commander Delphyne didn't mean to berate you like that. Would you please forgive us?"

Esther had shrunk up. Commander Flöte Mascarail had a reputation for being commandeering, but it seemed she was quite kind in reality.

"P-please! It's my fault for not keeping them in check!"

"Indeed, that much is true."

"..."

"We aren't trying to vilify you, but in society, one must make up for their mistakes. So I'd like you to clean up this mess. Would you mind, Second Lieutenant Esther Claire?"

The garden was in shambles before her eyes. On it sat a pile of dead vampires. The special team was in no condition to participate in sports-war. So ended Esther's first battle, without even getting started.

She wound up helping Delphyne.

Although Esther said she would fix it alone, Delphyne had insisted he couldn't let someone without knowledge of architecture take care of it. She couldn't argue against the facts.

By the time the lawn was back to normal, her whole body was screeching from the strain of moving rocks and wood.

The sun had dipped behind the horizon before Delphyne told her she could go.

Esther fell onto her bed and let out a deep sigh.

"Sounds like the sixth team won't be able to join us for war. You follow Delphyne's instructions and get the palace back in shape," Lieutenant Villhaze had said.

It was supposed to be her first battle. Her chance to fulfill her duties as a soldier. Her opportunity to see Commander Komarin in action. And it was all ruined. All because of those damn vampires on the sixth team.

"Gosh! I'm pissed now! What's with those idiots?!"

Esther threw her pillow at the wall.

She knew it was also her fault for not being able to guide them, but they were just too much. Weren't soldiers meant to follow orders? Those crazy jerks weren't normal. This was all their fault. Esther was only going through this because *they* were so weird.

"I! Am! Working myself! To the bone! I tell them to stop killing each other! Time and time again! And they don't understand! They have no sense of morality!"

She punched her sandbag over and over. It swung back and came swinging forward to slam her in the face. Screeching, she rolled back and stayed silent on the floor for a few seconds before she began to feel guilty.

No. I shouldn't blame other people for my failings. This is all due to my lack of experience. As she mulled things over, she heard whispers from the room next door.

Was I being too loud? she worried, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"Ms. Komari Ms. Komari Ms. Komari Ms. Komari..." Someone was chanting the slaughter champion's name like a curse. In the week since Esther had moved into the dorms, she would hear a strange voice coming from the other side of the thin wall frequently. It seemed she was neighbors with another crazy Komarin fan.

"Ms. Komari, did you like the omelet rice I cooked for you?"

"Hee-hee. I'm so happy. I'll make you some whenever you want."

"Let me help you with that. Here, say *ahh*... Ms. Komari, please! That's not the omelet rice, that's my finger! Eep, don't just start sucking my blood! Geez!"

Sometimes, her neighbor would also hold conversations all by herself, but Esther couldn't let any more weirdos take up more of her time. She had more important things to think about.

She had a sickly little sister back in her hometown. And she, too, was a passionate Komarin fan. She always replied indifferently to anything Esther said, but when she told her little sister that she'd been assigned to the Seventh Unit, the girl's eyes lit up. "That's amazing!" she exclaimed.

Esther had to stay strong. She had to keep going at it to cheer up her little sister.

 $\stackrel{\wedge}{\sim}$

Three days later.

Esther and the other officers of the Seventh Unit were summoned to Commander Gandesblood's office.

Special Lieutenant Villhaze had called them here. Apparently, they held a management meeting every Friday. However, it just so happened that everyone but Bellius had been dead for last week's.

This was Esther's first management meeting.

"Now then, I would like to start off today's meeting." Villhaze cut to the chase. For some reason, she was sitting on Commander Komarin's chair. "By the way, Lady Komari is out for lunch with Her Majesty the Empress. I would rather be there poisoning Her Majesty's tea, but oh well, we have work to do. This

week's topic will be..."

"About the special team, right?" Lieutenant Bellius Hund Cerbero interrupted. "We need a unit-wide strategy to go up against Prohellya Butchersky's troops. And for that, we need the sixth team to be under control."

Esther's mood sank.

It had been three days since Flöte killed her subordinates; the Dark Core had already revived them.

And yet, her troops showed no sign of self-reflection. They still got into fights at the drop of a hat. They still didn't listen to Esther's instructions. At this rate, it was obvious they'd end up killing themselves in the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest, too.

"What about you, Bellius? Do you have your subordinates in check? Wasn't it your team who led the steamed buns war the other day?" Lieutenant Caostel Conto replied provocatively.

He was the PR leader of the Seventh Unit. Apparently, he was adept at using a rare variety of magic known as Void Magic. According to Villhaze, however, "He's under suspicion of kidnapping little girls, so it's better to steer clear of him." Even in this important meeting, he was wearing a Commander T-shirt (Bashful Komari Edition). It was obvious he was a weirdo.

"My team's fine. We're talking about the special team here."

"I don't even think the Seventh Unit needs to come together like that to begin with. We're the strongest unit out there, and we've achieved victory through chaos and suicide attacks so far. I don't see how we need to change our ways just for that silly Sapphire."

"And you call yourself the Seventh Unit's strategist?"

"Yes. And my master strategy is that we need no strategy."

"While you may be right, Lieutenant Conto, we would only be putting ourselves in Prohellya Butchersky's crosshairs by using tactics like that. I think we really do need a proper plan this time... Esther, how is the special team doing at the moment?"

The question took her off guard.

Everyone turned to look at her. Esther awkwardly stood up.

"There is still a bit of infighting. I also frequently find them drinking and smoking on the clock... However! I will eventually rally them into a perfect team! Or at the very least, I'll get them to not ignore my orders..."

"The Super Massacre Gratitude Fest is next Sunday, though?"

"Oof... I, um..."

Villhaze's orders were to get the sixth team together before the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest. Esther had practically failed her first mission already.

No. Not yet. There's still time. I've overcome every obstacle in my way until now. I can do it this time, too; I just gotta give it my all. Don't give up, Esther Claire!

"Hah! That's obviously impossible."

Suddenly, she heard a jeering voice. The blond vampire, Lieutenant Yohann Helders, got up in her face and glared at her.

"The special team would never bend to a little girl like you! Even I got killed like that when I tried! You don't have the guts to get them in line. You can't make it as a member of the Seventh Unit, let alone as a team leader. I don't even think you're fit to be a soldier."

"Th-that's not true! I studied a lot in the Military Academy to—"

"Ugh, that's it! The Military Academy's the place where they teach you manners and how to drink tea and shit, right? You haven't ever killed a person, kid. Know your place."

"...How many people have you killed, then, Lieutenant Helders?!"

"You keep a count? Then how many have you killed?"

"Zero! But that's only because I just graduated..."

"Who cares! Everyone in our unit's a criminal who committed murder before even becoming a soldier. The Imperial Army's no place for a sweetie like you!"

You're bragging about being a criminal? Stupid asshole. She kept her reply to

herself.

Esther obviously knew she was still immature, but she didn't understand why Yohann had to criticize her to this extent. The troops here sure did hate the "bookworms" from the Imperial Army. Maybe she should have applied to Commander Flöte Mascarail's unit, where there were many graduates.

No. She wanted to work for Commander Komarin.

And she had decided to do everything she could in the Seventh Unit.

But...

"So, I recommend you go apply for a decent job in a decent company."

"Shut your trap, kid," Bellius interjected. "Lieutenant Claire is trying her best. Don't attack her when you don't even know what she's been doing."

"What do I care?! Actually, I think I haven't attacked her enough... Hmm? Huh?"

Oh no. Shoot. I'm crying. I can't stop the tears.

I can't have a breakdown over something so little. They're going to mock me even more. But I just can't control my emotions with how everything's gone wrong lately. I can't. I'm going to embarrass myself again.

"Aww... Hic... D-don't... look at me..."

Yohann stood up, shaking.

"...But, no, I... Was what I said bad enough to make you cry?"

"I'm not crying... I just got something in my eye..."

"Yohann, how dare you make a woman break into tears, you piece of garbage! You should hang yourself in apology," Villhaze said.

"What?! I didn't mean to..."

"Check it! Yohann loves pie, he makes all the girls cry, he's got a blue spot on his behind!"

"Shut the fuck up! I'm gonna kill you!!"

"My. It's raining," said Captain Mellaconcey as he handed Esther a

handkerchief.

Am I all right with things now? she thought, wiping her cheeks.

Why had she joined the Seventh Unit? It wasn't to get her colleagues and subordinates to flip her the bird while telling her to go back to the sticks. It was for her sickly sister, for Commander Komarin, and most of all, to accomplish her dream of becoming a soldier who fought for her country.

She had no time to waste crying, then.

Or at least she knew that in theory.

"Esther, I think I might have given you too heavy a load for a new recruit," Villhaze said kindly. But this only ripped Esther's pride to shreds. "Let's keep the sixth team on the backburner. How about you become subleader for my team in the meanwhile? You can see firsthand how the work gets done in the Seventh Unit and learn that way."

"W-wait, Villhaze! How about you give her a bit longer? It's only been like two weeks, right? Even I couldn't tame those guys in that amount of time," Yohann said.

"Hmm? You've gone in the opposite direction now."

"So what! People can change their opinion every now and then."

"But still, Esther is new here, and I wouldn't like to overwork—"

"No, I'll be fine."

Esther put the handkerchief away in her pocket and stood up.

She placed a hand on her chest and regulated her breathing before shooting a glare at Yohann.

"I...I can still do it! I can't abandon my mission after being made fun of."

"I wasn't trying to make fun of you."

"But you did! I wouldn't be able to face everyone back in the Academy if I ran away! Vill, please let me bring the sixth team together under my leadership! We will help lead you to victory in the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest! Please, don't dismiss me! I beg of you!"

Esther bowed hard to Villhaze.

Perhaps her show of bravery was reckless.

Yet Villhaze responded coolly, "Very well. I will leave them to you. Please go and tame the special team."

"Yes! I will! Now, if you'll excuse me!"

Thank goodness. I still have a chance. I gotta go to them right away. With a will of steel, Esther bowed to her superiors and left the room.

"Wait, please. We still have to talk about whether we're building a second Komari statue."

"Huh...?! I-I'm sorry!"

Esther hurried back to the room and sat down.

She was so embarrassed that she couldn't look up for the rest of the meeting.



Sadly, Esther's wish didn't come to fruition.

In the end, nobody in the special team recognized her as leader, and the day of the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest arrived.

To make a long story short, Gandesblood's Seventh Unit won.

Arctic Master Prohellya Butchersky caught a cold before the match, and Major Pitolina Shelepina stood in to lead the Sapphires, but she greatly underestimated her enemy.

"According to my calculations, we can crush the vampires without any sort of strategy! They're insects! Mosquitoes! Let's give our lady in bed a present of mosquito corpses! Go, my dear Sapphires! For the motherland! For our lady! For tonight's *gorshok*! Burn those lowly lifeforms!"

Is she all right in the head? her troops' expressions seemed to ask, but Pitolina ignored this and ordered an attack.

Prohellya was an expert at surprise attack strategies, so the full-frontal assault approach Pitolina demanded was clumsy at best in the Sapphires' eyes. The Seventh Unit, on the other hand, could do nothing but go all in from the front. It

was obvious that the vampires would run them over.

Esther couldn't really contribute.

The special team rushed ahead the moment the battle began, ignoring her cries of "Please wait!" and "I have a plan!" If they'd even heard her in the first place.

As Esther moved left and right in confusion, someone blew up Major Pitolina Shelepina, and the Sapphire disappeared from this world.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. It was too fast for Esther to even process what went on.

In that moment, the only thing Second Lieutenant Esther Claire knew was that she did not achieve anything in battle.



Esther wobbled her way across the premises of the Mulnite Palace.

She was coming home from the warehouse. She had tried again to make the special team understand, but they'd all brushed aside her pleas and even asked her to join them for a drink. Setting aside the fact that they ignored her orders, her subordinates were surprisingly friendly, so she'd just barely managed to not get her spirit broken. But even then, she had her limits. She was also underage, so she couldn't drink.

"Gosh... I'm pooped..."

Esther sat down on a bench near the Crimson Tower.

The sun was setting. She gazed at the carmine sky and was overcome with the urge to cry. It felt like she had done nothing but weep ever since joining the Imperial Army. It must have been because nothing went her way at work.

She hadn't been able to achieve anything at the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest. The Seventh Unit had won, yes, but she hadn't contributed to their victory.

"...Am I unneeded?"

She couldn't help but feel that way.

She was even starting to feel bad about getting paid for this.

Maybe she ought to beg Lieutenant Villhaze to let her quit as team leader, or even ask to quit the Seventh Unit altogether.

Just as pessimism seized her thoughts, a cold wind blew.

"What's the matter?" someone asked.

Startled, Esther looked behind her. The surprise almost killed her.

A small girl was standing beneath the dusky sky. Her long hair was a vivid blond, and her eyes were crimson. She held a bag full of foodstuffs, and her military uniform was decorated with a full moon crest—the symbol of first rank.

Which meant...that this girl...was... But Esther didn't even need to check her rank. She knew that face better than anyone.

"Koma... Commander Gandesblood?! Why are you here?!"

"Huh? You know my name?"

Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood.

What's she doing here? Come to think of it, I haven't spoken to her once, even after joining the Seventh Unit. Does she even realize I'm working for her? No, she clearly doesn't. She just asked me how I knew her name. Who would say that to her subordinate? But then, why would she talk to me? I can't. My head feels like it's about to burst.

It would be rude to keep quiet, though.

Esther stood up and saluted her.

"E-excuse me! M-my, my name is Esther Claire! I'm the leader of the Seventh Unit's special team!"

"The Seventh Unit?"



"Yes! I was appointed just two weeks ago! I—I am sorry for not introducing myself earlier!"

Esther felt shivers go down her spine as she said that. She'd been appointed two weeks ago and still hadn't introduced herself to her commander? How could she have been so insolent? Commander Komarin was well within her rights to kill Esther on the spot...but for some reason, she just stared at her vacantly instead, her jaw hanging open.

"Huh...? You joined our unit? Why?"

"I asked to be assigned to the Seventh Unit. Erm, at the time of my graduation from the Military Academy, that is."

"But you don't look like a murderer."

"I'm sorry! Should I be one?!"

"No, please don't!"

Esther was too anxious to understand what Commander Komarin was talking about.

She carefully and respectfully observed her idol. She was much smaller than she'd imagined. Maybe a head shorter than she was. And above all else...she was cute. So pretty. And she smelled like flowers. No wonder people called her a once-in-a-generation knockout beauty.

Crap. What do I say to her? Whatever comes out of your mouth, it better not be rude.

Commander Komarin, too, was thoroughly observing Esther. She looked her newest subordinate over from the top of her head to the tip of her toes and began nodding to herself.

"I see, I see. So a decent person has finally joined our group..." She smiled and held out her hand. "N-nice to meet you! I'm Terakomari Gandesblood! I'm Crimson Lord and commander, I guess. I hope we can be friends."

"Friends! Oh my...! I would be very glad to!"

Esther took her hand, albeit shrinkingly.

Oh no. My palms are sweating. And hers are so soft and squishy.

"So...why are you sitting out here? Aren't you chilly?"

"I'm fine. I'm used to the cold."

"It seemed like you were worrying about something..."

"I-I'm fine! I wouldn't want to concern you, Commander!"

"Hmmm."

Commander Komarin held her paper bag close to her chest and stared at Esther with concern.

Esther couldn't show weakness. She knew well that the Seventh Unit was adamant about putting the strong at the top. The commander could fire her on the spot if Esther gave her the impression that she was a weakling.

"Sorry." Commander Komarin scratched her head awkwardly. "Actually, my maid told me that there was someone down in the dumps around here, and that I should go help them. Though I don't think there's anything I can do..."

"Huh...?"

"I just made some steamed buns in the kitchen over there. Wanna go eat them at my office?"

She couldn't refuse.

Esther let Commander Komarin take her hand and lead her away.

"I see. I get it now."

The seventh floor of the Crimson Tower. Commander Terakomari Gandesblood's office.

Esther ended up coming clean about everything.

She told Commander Komarin how her subordinates wouldn't listen. How nothing she learned at the Academy seemed useful. How she'd stood there without doing anything during the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest.

She didn't have the guts to bluff to the Crimson Lord she idolized.

But most of all, she just felt like letting out all her concerns to her. Having

finally met Terakomari Gandesblood for the first time, she felt a curious kindness, friendliness and open-mindedness in her. It was almost like the aliases that Six Nations News had given her, such as "slaughter champion," "the ketchup empress," and "USB" (Ultimate Scarlet Berserker), were all phony.

Esther munched on a steamed bun as she waited for Commander Komarin's reply.

Did I disappoint her? Her worries, though, ended up being for nothing.

"Sorry! I gotta apologize!"

"Fweh?"

Why would Commander Komarin ever apologize for this?

"I have no idea what goes through Vill's head. What's she thinking pushing such an absurd job on a rookie? No, I guess it's my fault. You wouldn't be going through this if I was a better commander. I'm sorry."

"N-no! It is entirely my fault for not being capable enough."

"No, it isn't. Those guys are just uncontrollable."

"But...I think you would be able to keep them in check."

"There's nothing you can't do that I can. I mean, you actually went to the Military Academy, right? You're a respectable vampire, as opposed to someone like me, who spent the whole day lazing around in her room before joining the army—NOT! No, no, I was marching and striding about the Dark Core Zone, street-fighting day in and day out! Piling up the corpses until I reached a hundred million, all felled by a touch of my pinky...GOSH! No! Forget it! Anyways! What I mean is, I'm sure you can do anything I could and better!"

Esther didn't understand what she was saying. It seemed as though Commander Komarin wasn't sure how to approach her. It was almost like...she was hesitating over whether to spill a big secret.

However, Esther *did* understand that Komari was worried about her. Even though she was a useless soldier.

"Commander... It's true, I graduated top of my class. I've almost never placed second, much less lower. My teachers and classmates have always commended me on my achievements."

"Good. You're the kind of person I wanted to join us."

"...However! None of that is of any use in the real Army!"

Esther had felt like she would be able to take on any mission, but that assumption turned out to be totally misplaced. The vampires on the special team had torn her tiny sense of self-respect to shreds.

"I don't know why I'm here anymore. To be honest...I have a sickly sister back in my hometown. She was really happy when I told her I'd been assigned to the Seventh Unit. You may not realize, Commander, but you saved our home during the Six Nations War."

"Huh? I—I did?"

"Yes. So my sister and I are huge fans. Which is why...I have to stick it out in the Seventh Unit, so I can cheer her up. And it's not just for her. I want to become a soldier like you, Commander Gandesblood. But I don't have the talent. I don't think I'm a good fit. I'm beginning to think I might have been better off staying back home and taking over my family's hot springs inn."

Esther let out a weak chuckle.

Many vampires in the Mulnite Empire admired soldiers. They looked up to the brave souls who fought other countries while bearing the hopes of their people. It was a dazzling position to be in.

And an inappropriate position for an incompetent vampire like her.

People should have dreams that were "just right." Dreams that went beyond your capabilities were like chains holding you down. They only distressed you whenever you had to face the difference between your ideals and reality.

"Maybe I should look for another job. There must be something out there I can do better..."

"Th-that's not true!"

Commander Komarin squeezed Esther's hand. She stared closely at Estelle, her eyes filled with a twinge of hesitation, but also full of heartfelt concern.

"Wait... I didn't mean to say that you can't do anything better... What I mean is I think you have what it takes to be a soldier. At the very least, I think I need you."

"H-how can you tell...? We just met today..."

"Because you're a decent person."

Decent? How?

"Er, what I'm trying to say is, my unit loves killing more than three square meals a day. It doesn't have anyone in it who got properly educated, like you did. I think you'll change the Seventh Unit for the better."

Lieutenant Villhaze had said the same. But the members of the Seventh Unit seemed to think her educational background was only a negative. A reason to treat her like an outcast.

"That won't happen... I mean, you can't be a soldier just by being good at studying..."

"I support you in following your dream."

Komari's genuine crimson eyes peered deep into hers.

"You shouldn't put everything on yourself. I imagine you approached the guys in the special team feeling like you could do it all, but there's no way you can whip them into shape by yourself. Whoever can do that is a super berserker among super berserkers."

"But I was given a mission to lead the special team."

"I was also given a mission to be a Crimson Lord, but I don't do it all by myself."

"What do you mean ...?"

"That riots at the end of last year taught me that I can't be a commander on my own. I'm only able to keep up with my duties thanks to the support of everyone in the Seventh Unit and my friends from other countries. I'm not sure I'm actually doing a good job...but that's beside the point. Now that you've shared your worries with me, I've decided to help you make your dream come true. I mean, I am your boss, after all. Improving your work environment is part

of my job."

Commander Komarin got up with a "Hup!"

Esther stared up at the small commander like she was her savior.

It was strange. Just listening to the commander's words filled her with the courage to stand up. It was exactly like what happened during the vampire riots; the commander's voice had echoed through the night, leaving a huge impression on Esther.

"I'll do everything I can. So let's get going, all right?"

"Huh? Excuse me, but go where, exactly?"

"To the special team's warehouse! Hmm, we should bring Vill along just in case..." Commander Komarin took out her Correspondence Crystal. "Hello? Vill? I just heard from the person who's been having trouble. She's okay now, so please come out here."

"I'm already here."

"WAAAH?!"

Lieutenant Villhaze popped out of the refrigerator. She'd been listening in on them from the very beginning.

Commander Komarin threw her Correspondence Crystal at her maid and yelled.

"What the hell were you doing in there?!"

"I was concerned about Esther's future, so I took the liberty of eavesdropping. It seems that she's fine now. She's looking much brighter thanks to you, Lady Komari."

Now Esther was self-conscious. So it was the maid who'd gotten Commander Komarin to meet her; had she also been worried for her?

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, but weren't you cold?! You know, from hiding in the fridge?!"

"I destroyed the cooling Magic Stone, so that's not an issue."

"WHAT?! I had my pudding in there!"

"I ate your pudding, so that's not an issue."

"It's a huge issue!!"

Villhaze ignored Commander Komarin and turned to Esther. With a soft smile on her face, she said: "Well then, Esther, let's go to the warehouse. Don't worry, even if the members of the special team attack, Lady Komari can turn them to ash in the blink of an eye with her amazing magic."

"Hey, stop making things harder for me. That's supposed to be your job..."

"What are you saying? Don't you realize your subordinate is listening?"

"R-right! Don't sweat it, Esther. I'm here with you! Go say your piece to the special team! That means speaking! Only talking! No provocations, all right?"

It was time for the final battle, and she had Commander Komarin to back her up. Esther felt invincible just knowing she was there for her.



The warehouse on the fringes of the Mulnite Palace.

Esther placed a hand on the door as Commander Komarin and Villhaze watched from behind.

She came here every day, but the vampires had never once recognized her as team leader.

Now, however, she had Commander Komarin on her side.

"Good evening! It's Second Lieutenant Esther Claire!" she exclaimed, throwing open the door.

Inside, the vampires were hanging out like always. They stopped chattering immediately.

"Hah? Oh, it's Esther. Wanna join us for some Tycoon?"

"I'm not here to play card games! I'm here to talk!"

Esther strode into the warehouse.

The vampires glared at their official boss like murderers.

"As you know, I am the leader of the sixth team! We need some actual

organization to win our next war! I've come up with a few rules so we can—"

"Hah! Go do that somewhere else! We've got no reason to obey a little girl!"

```
"""That's right!!"""
```

Her subordinates ignored her and returned to their Tycoon tournament.

It's no use. They won't accept me. Maybe I just don't have what it takes to be team leader.

Just as Esther felt as though she had plunged into the abyss, a light shined behind her.

"Hey, everyone! Listen to what she has to say!"

The next instant, all sound cut out, as if everyone had died. But the silence didn't last long.

"Commander...?" "It's the Commander...!" "The Commander's here!" "What's she doing here?!" Voices of shock and delight echoed. The members of the special team were like believers witnessing the advent of their goddess. Commander Komarin paid their stares no heed and continued speaking.

"Esther is your team leader! Stop making things hard for her! And if you won't listen, then I won't make any more sweets for you!"

```
"""We're sorry!!""""
```

The vampires kowtowed in perfect sync, kicking up a gust of wind that nearly blew Esther away.

Esther stared in shock and disbelief at the sight of the vampires rubbing their foreheads on the dirty floor. Was this really the same team of berserkers who hadn't listened to a thing she said?

Commander Komarin approached them with a series of booming steps.

Only then did Esther realize that the prostrated vampires were trembling. They must've been terrified that their boss was yelling at them. But this only served to emphasize what Esther Claire already knew was obvious—she could never hope to reach Terakomari Gandesblood's heights.

"The highest-ranked person here is... Ununga! Why have you been ignoring

Esther?"

"W-we..." The skinhead, Ununga the Banshee, looked away awkwardly. "The sixth team follows an ironclad rule: only the strongest can lead..."

"That's it? Didn't you stop to think about how she feels about being ignored?"

"It's for her own good! She had the honor of graduating from the Military Academy, so it would be a waste to end up with a bunch of scumbags like us! She deserves better than to be stuck in this dump!"

"It's actually impressive how easily you debase yourselves..."

"That's what we really believe... We think our leader should be someone befitting us. And the most important quality for leadership in the Seventh Unit is strength. Everyone else in management is real powerful, right? Well, except for Yohann, so he's in for a killing the next time we see him... What I'm tryin' to say is, we think Esther would just get hurt staying with us."

"My, Sergeant Major Ununga. Are you making up excuses for Lady Komari?" asked Villhaze.

"Huh?! No, that's not my—"

"Good heavens. You've angered her now. I can already see your skeleton adorning the entrance to the Crimson Tower tomorrow morning."

"Vill, stop making stuff up!" Komari interjected.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!!"

"She's joking!!" Komari clarified.

Ununga wailed and begged for forgiveness as the rest of the sixth team froze in fright.

"As I was saying!" Commander Komarin brought the conversation back on track. "I get that you have your reservations about this, but I want you to consider Esther's position."

"Understood! As you wish, Commander. I will consider it with my life!"

The vampires prostrated themselves like obedient dogs.

Problem solved...or was it?

Esther still felt uncertain. Unfortunately, she couldn't just feel happy about it. She was glad that Commander Komarin had helped her out, but Esther wasn't out of the woods yet just because the special team had recognized her. And she didn't feel good about having Commander Komarin work out everything for her.

As though reading her mind, Villhaze gave Esther a bold smile.

"I see... Lady Komari, please look at the poster right there."

"Hmm? What poster?"

Esther also looked at the wall.

On it was a sign written in bold black text that read:

THE STRONGEST IS THE LEADER. RANK DOESN'T MATTER. NO ONE MAY BREAK THIS RULE.

"As they say, when in the warehouse...not even a Crimson Lord should bend the special team's rules."

"Is that so ...?"

"Which means you can go ahead and kill all of them, Esther."

""Wha—?!"" Esther and Commander Komarin exclaimed in shocked unison.

"The Seventh Unit is made up of barbarians who prioritize strength over everything else to begin with. So wouldn't showing them your might solve everything? That would force you to recognize her, right, Sergeant Major Ununga?"

"Yeah, that is true... But we were ignoring her to avoid having to hold her to that."

"Wait a second, Vill! That's too much! What if—"

"May I?!" Esther leaned forward.

Everyone around looked at her like she was some sort of freak of nature.

"Well," Vill said as she placed a hand on her chin. "So long as Lady Komari gives you permission."

"Are you serious?!"

"Murder is illegal in the Mulnite Empire, but there is a clause in the law

stating that it's permitted with the authorization of a Crimson Lord."

"Huh? I don't get it."

"Basically, you just have to say, 'You can kill them.' Then Esther will be legally allowed to take the special team's lives."

"Why would they give me such power?! I'll never sanction that!"

"But Lady Komari, Esther needs your help to make her dream come true."

The most efficient way of securing leadership of the special team was to dominate them with force. Esther had realized this early on, but she'd been hellbent on talking things out. This was partly because she did not like unnecessary conflict, but above all else, it was because killing was prohibited by law.

Even if slaughter was the easiest route to respect, Esther couldn't take it. Not as an honors student who'd graduated from the Academy with SS grades in conduct, etiquette, discipline, and disposition.

But if she had permission...then perhaps she could turn things around.

"Commander, please!" Esther begged desperately. "Please grant me permission to kill them! Then I'll finally get them to understand!"

"Huh...? Esther... Were you not actually on my side of reality?"

"I don't get what you mean... But please, I want them to recognize me!"

"But..." Commander Komarin winced.

She looked away from Esther and glanced at Ununga and the rest, before she finally stared at her maid, as though asking for help. Villhaze went up to her and whispered into her ear. "Don't worry, Lady Komari. If anything happens, I'll take care of it." Then Commander Komarin made up her mind.

She met Esther's gaze, locking onto her with crimson eyes.

"...Fine. I really don't want to say it...but I will if you insist. Go ahead, but try not to put them in the grave, okay? Don't go overboard."

The battle kicked off.

The next moment, a loud metallic clang echoed as Esther took a chain

enveloped in magic out of her uniform. A sharp blade gleamed at its tip. This was her strongest weapon, which she had used to defeat her classmates in mock battle countless times at the Mulnite Military Academy—the Chain Metal.

Everyone gasped.

Esther lifted the chain up in the air with magic and glared at the special team.

"So the strongest gets to be leader, right? I will join the battle, then!"

"H-hey, Esther, we can fight, sure, but you think you can take on our powerful blows with that to—EEEAAAGGH!!"

She sent the blade at Ununga's head with godlike speed.

Then the chain pivoted noisily in midair, striking the skinhead, who collapsed to the floor like a broken scarecrow. He wasn't dead—only unconscious. Commander Komarin had specifically asked Esther to avoid taking their lives.

She had never killed anyone, but she had been trained to kill ad nauseum. There was no way she could fail to put these guys down.

"Come at me. I won't stop until you've recognized me as your leader!"

One of Esther's teachers from the Military Academy had this to say about her: "Oh, her? Yeah, she's an excellent student. Her grades are even better than Commander Mascarail's and Commander Delphyne's. Though she does follow the rules to a tee, to her detriment, in my opinion."

Second Lieutenant Esther Claire.

Her graduating grades in combat skill: SS.

"Whew." Villhaze sighed in admiration.

"Am I dreaming?" Commander Komarin pinched her cheeks as she chuckled.

Meanwhile, the special team's vampires...

""""YOU ASKED FOR IT!!""""

...rushed at Esther in a frenzy.

So began a bloody clash.

Esther pierced every vampire who approached her with the Chain Metal.

Their movements were so obvious it would be harder to *avoid* hitting them than not. We could never defeat Prohellya Butchersky's troops with such a simpleminded assault, Esther coolly thought as she dyed the warehouse in blood.

"Get wrecked, bi—AUGH!!"

Esther wrapped her chain around the neck of a long-haired vampire who'd tried to punch her from behind. That was the last one. Upon confirming he had been knocked out, she shook off the blood clinging to the Chain Metal and looked around.

She saw piles of corpses in puddles of blood. Metaphorically speaking, of course. None of them were dead. They were only unconscious, and the Dark Core would get them back to full health in no time. Regardless, there was no one left to attack her.

It had taken her all of a minute. A minute she couldn't have earned without Terakomari Gandesblood.

Esther turned to her idol and beamed.

"Thank you so much! I've finally gotten them to understand me. It's all thanks to you, Commander!"

Commander Komarin responded weakly.

"...Ha-ha. Ah-ha-ha-ha. Yeah. Good for you..."

"Lady Komari, snap out of it. Accept reality."

Villhaze propped up the commander just after she fainted for some reason.



One month had passed since Esther had been appointed to the Seventh Unit. It was Sunday.

Esther was at a restaurant in the Imperial Capital, on a call with her sister.

She didn't want to use her Correspondence Crystal in her room. The walls were too thin, so everyone would be able to hear her conversation, just like she could hear her neighbor chant "Ms. Komari, Ms. Komari" like a spell every night.

On the other hand, the restaurant was pleasantly noisy around noon.

Esther swallowed a spoonful of stew as she chatted merrily.

"The other day, the members of the sixth team held a welcome party for me in the garden of the palace. I'm so glad they finally recognize me as their leader."

"Wow."

"They're all very good people. It's not great that they tend to solve everything with their fists, but they stop whenever I tell them to now. I was very worried at first, but it looks like I'll be able to manage."

The special team's attitude toward Esther had changed entirely after their fight in the warehouse. Now they even seemed to fear her. Ununga had even bought her a lemonade, crying, "I'm sorry for everything I did, leader!" The others acted similarly, in their own way. They no longer ignored her or disparaged her.

It was all thanks to their philosophy that strength was justice.

Afterward, Esther learned that Commander Komarin had also won their trust by killing one of her subordinates. Esther had been right to shut them up by force.

"I owe everything to Commander Komarin. Her support was what let me keep hanging in there. That's the slaughter champion for you! I'm glad I got to join the Komari Unit... I'll keep doing my best, so I hope you can keep hanging in there, too, Monique."

"...Yeah."

Her sister, Monique, only gave Esther curt responses.

The mysterious illness ailing Monique was more mental than physical. It made her lose interest in everything. Half a year ago, she'd been a guileless girl who smiled all the time, but now she never got out of her bed.

"Commander Komarin..."

"Do you want to meet her?"

"Yeah. That's what the shadow says..."

Esther ran her hand through her hair.

Her sister had started having hallucinations. She would sometimes talk about a "shadow" when she talked to Esther. Apparently, it followed her around, whispering all sorts of things to her.

Their mother said she had never seen anything of the sort. Which meant it had to be a figment of Monique Claire's imagination. She must've been seeing weird things because of her fragile mental state.

Despite that, it was true Monique wanted to meet Commander Komarin. Perhaps she would cheer up if Esther could invite the commander to the hot springs inn back in their hometown... But things weren't so simple. The Crimson Lords supposedly had a deadly amount of work, and Esther wasn't close enough with the commander to nonchalantly invite her to the hot springs.

Just then, her other Correspondence Crystal (for work) glowed.

"Sorry, Monique! I'm getting a call from the Unit!"

"It's fine."

"I'm really sorry. I'll call you back."

"Yeah... Hang in there, Esther."

She said bye-bye before hanging up, then immediately poured mana into the other crystal. The call connected, and she heard that familiar cool voice.

"Good afternoon, Esther. It's Villhaze."

"Good afternoon, Vill!"

It was Commander Komarin's maid and confidente, Special Lieutenant Villhaze.

She was also essentially Esther's instructor within the Seventh Unit.

"Sorry to interrupt your break," she prefaced before cutting to the chase. "I have an important job for you. Since you're not a sicko, you're the only person I can turn to."

"A sicko... What? What do you mean?"

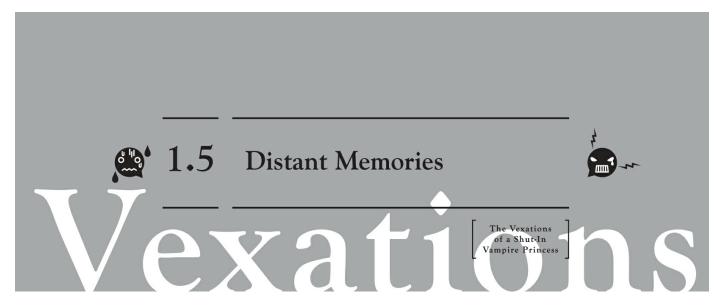
"You see, I've received an invitation from President Nelia Cunningham of the Aruka Republic. It seems she wants us to discuss celebrating Lady Komari's birthday. I would like nothing more than to ignore her, but I can't have her do as she pleases on the day of Lady Komari's birth. It would be wisest to respond to the invitation and keep her in check."

"Uh-huh..."

"So I'd like you to come with me. Unlike the rest of the Seventh Unit, you are not a sicko. I believe you have normal-minded sensibilities, just like Lady Komari. I would very much appreciate it if you could be there to give your opinion."

What a godsend! Now Esther could find a way to pay Commander Komarin back. And perhaps she could even get an opportunity to invite her to her hometown.

Villhaze gave her the details for the date and place as Esther pumped a fist under the table.



"I'll take you to a lovely place, because you're special, Komari."

It was winter. Mom pulled my hand as we walked across the flaky snow.

We were at Frezier Hot Springs... I think.

Mom and Dad's holidays had miraculously lined up, and the whole Gandesblood household was in the hot springs for its first and last family trip.

Young me, however, had no interest in steaming baths. I preferred to stay at home and read. It felt like they had taken away my personal time, and I did not appreciate being taken to Frezier against my wishes. I believe I had been sulking in the inn, looking at the snow outside the window the whole time, when my mom suggested we go play outside.

Excitement ran through me when she told me to keep it a secret from my siblings.

We walked around the hot springs town. A terrible blizzard had hit it the day before, and there were fallen trees, collapsed buildings, and other scars of disaster all over the pretty town. We'd ended up getting there just in the nick of time.

"Where are you taking me? To the place where the penguins live?"

"Hmm. No, not quite that. It's a spot where you can see the secrets of the world."

"The secrets of the world..."

I didn't get it, but I was happy to be walking all alone outside with my mom.

After a while, she told me to enter a Gate. There was one for teleporting at the edge of the town. I didn't know where we were headed, but I followed her.

We warped to the top of a hill.

From there, you could see the entire hot springs town of Frezier. It was an exotic-looking place, teeming with stone buildings fashioned in the style of Heavenly Paradise and Mulnite Empire architecture. But what grabbed my eye wasn't the townscape on the ground below, but the one in the air.

Right above the hot springs town was another one, hanging upside down in the sky.

It looked like a mirror image, but it wasn't a copy of the city below. The fantastic town in the air, decorated with twinkling falling snow, looked far older and smaller than Frezier, like it had been taken right out of a picture book.

"...What is that?"

"A silver screen that projects the view of a different place. It appears after a disaster occurs and specific requirements are met. This only happens in Frezier."

It was a natural phenomenon that projected a view of a different realm. The locals referred to it as netherscreening, but according to my mom, the place above was not the world of the afterlife.

"This hot springs town is in the middle of the Dark Core Zone. It's the closest to the other realm—to a foreign land. That's why I think this curious view happens."

"What kind of foreign land? The animal kingdom?"

"Not the animal kingdom, nor the lands of the hermits. It's a country no one in the world knows... Maybe we're just shut-ins, and the world is far bigger than we imagine."

I didn't understand what she was talking about.

My world was tiny back then, in every sense of the word. A confined space the size of a cat's forehead, made up only of the people who were close to me and my favorite snacks. But still, it was a happy place full of warmth. Noticing my confusion, my mom softly caressed my hair.

"But don't mind the little details. I just wanted you to see this. Isn't it amazing? You can only see it about once every three years."

"Yes. It's pretty."

She smiled, and I did the same.

"Oh, hey, is there something you've been wanting?"

"Why?"

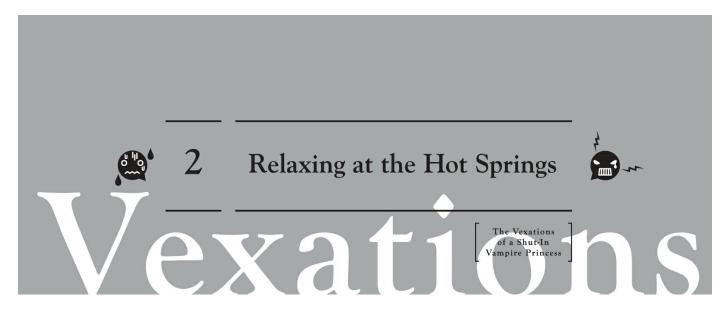
"It's almost your birthday, remember? Just tell me anything."

Knowing how I was back then, I'd probably asked for snacks, toys, or books. I don't remember what I told her, but I do remember Mom's reaction. She broke into an awkward grin and said: "I see, I see... But that wouldn't really feel like a birthday present, so I'll think of something else, too."

I never got a present.

Mom was barely ever home after that trip.

Dad said it was because she had her hands full with all the wars. Days and months went by without us having a proper conversation...until the moment Yulinne Gandesblood disappeared from the battlefield in the Dark Core Zone.



The hot springs town of Frezier was almost in the exact center of the Dark Core Zone. It was close to the Holy City of Lehysia, which I'd snuck into with Sakuna and Millicent last year.

According to Vill, Mulnite and the Heavenly Paradise had exercised joint control of the tourist town since time immemorial. Because of that, the townscape looked very Eastern. Most of the buildings had tiled roofs, the bridges going over the rivers were made of wood, and the streetlights were all stone lanterns.

I looked around as I walked across the snow-covered road.

There were hot springs inns, naturally, but also many restaurants and souvenir shops, and even some entertainment facilities.

People from all over the world chatted merrily as they walked the streets.

"Hmm. Not bad. Not bad at all. Yes, I can feel the creative juices flowing."

It was February 17. Friday. There was only light snowfall.

I'd arrived at Frezier Hot Springs on paid leave.

Accompanying me were Sakuna, Vill, and Esther. The lottery prize was only good for three people, but we soon discovered a shocking fact: The inn we were staying at belonged to Esther's parents. Now that was a strange coincidence. Vill suggested we take Esther with us, too, and so she'd tagged along.

I gave a quick glance behind me. Second Lieutenant Esther Claire was following me like a baby duck.

The honors student had graduated at the top of her class from the Military Academy. She'd had some trouble after Vill assigned her leader of the special team, but ultimately, she won the trust of her subordinates by beating them to a pulp.

However, she'd only done so because there was no other way of getting them under control. Unlike the other members of my unit, her screws were on tight. I hoped that she could serve as a catalyst to get everyone else in the Seventh Unit to acquire a normal sense of morals. They say a bad apple spoils the bunch, but hey, maybe a nice, tasty apple could also enhance the bunch, right? Right? Please?

"If I may...! What do you think of the Frezier Hot Springs?" Esther asked awkwardly after noticing my glance.

"It's a really nice place. I'm getting excited just walking around."

"Good to hear... I was worried you might not like it. I heard you tend to wipe out hot springs towns that are not to your liking..."

"Who told you that?!"

"Me," Vill confessed while munching on a steamed bun beside me.

It looked so warm and tasty...but I had complaints to yell.

"Why do you keep saying stuff like that?! What if Esther believed you?!"

"I was joking. She should have known that... In any case, this is a charming place. The food is also very good."

"...Where'd you get that bun?"

"The stall right over there was selling them. The fluffy dough is filled with sweet, melted chocolate cream. They're so good, it's like the term 'mouthwatering' was made to describe them."

```
"Did you buy me any?"
```

"No."

"..."

"If you really want some, then you must listen to what I say. Let's see... I'll

give one to you if you let me wash your body with my bare hands during today's bath."

Incredible. She had not a speck of respect for her master.

Naturally, I wasn't about to accept her terms. But I did want to try that chocolate bun. Sadly, the maid was currently in possession of my wallet, so I couldn't go buy some for myself. Unbelievable.

"Ms. Komari." Sakuna called my name from my other side. "I also bought a bun. Would you like a bite?"

"What, really?! Yes, please!"

"Stop right there, Lady Memoir! Do not feed the Komari!"

"What am I, an animal?! Don't get in the way!"

"Do not stop her, Ms. Villhaze. She has the right to eat what she wants. Here, open wide," Sakuna said.

"Aaah! Lady Komari!"

I bit into Sakuna's bun. I chewed and savored the sweet chocolate melting in my mouth. It was scrumptious. As if I had come all the way here just for the sake of trying this food.

"Lady Komari, don't. My chocolate bun is much yummier."

"How is it? Tasty?" Sakuna asked.

"Yes, it's delicious! Only you grant my wishes like this, Sakuna."

"Lady Komari, please look! My bun is covered with honey!!"

"Hee-hee... I'll be washing your body with my bare hands, then," Sakuna said.

"Lady Komari, look, please!! I am covering it with whipped cream as we speak!!" Vill shouted.

"Waaah?! Hey, don't shove it in my face! And that's too many toppings!"

We made a scene as we strolled through town. All the tourists turned to look and ask, "Hey, isn't that the Commander?" but I didn't pay attention to them. I'd learned recently that the best way of dealing with my celebrity was ignoring

it.

"We're here," Esther said abruptly after we'd walked for a while. "This is it. The inn you'll be staying at, and my home, the Crimson Snow Hut."

"Ohh!" I exclaimed.

It was a big *ryokan* inn. A building bigger and more luxurious than any other I'd seen in town, designed in a perfect mixture of Heavenly Paradise and Mulnite architectural philosophies.

So is Esther actually loaded...?

"Come on in. I've told the workers about your arrival already."

"You heard her, Lady Komari. Let's get those clothes off ASAP."

"We're not even in the room yet! Let me go!"

I was beginning to think it was a mistake to come to the hot springs with this maid.

Then I felt someone's gaze.

Someone was watching me from the second floor. A girl in pajamas. Once my eyes met hers, she panicked and ducked.

Somehow, her stare felt different from those of the usual rubbernecks. But I paid it no mind and stepped into the inn.

"What?! What do you mean we didn't reserve the whole place?! I'll pay whatever you ask, just get rid of everyone else! How is my dear lady supposed to relax like this?!"

"I am very sorry, but we can't inconvenience our other customers like that."

"Yet you're fine inconveniencing us?! This place is useless. After we gave you the honor of coming all the way here because a tourist magazine gave you a five-star rating...! This is no way to receive a VIP! Call the manager! Manager!!"

We came across an entitled complainer the moment we entered the lobby. A girl was brewing up a storm of grievances at the reception.

She had glistening silver hair. Clearly a Sapphire. The poor receptionist had to listen as the girl demanded that they kick out everyone else if they didn't want

the travel magazine writing a story about how approximately twenty thousand cockroaches lived in the inn.

Her bizarre way of speaking roused memories. I felt like I'd seen her on the battlefield, and recently, at that.

"For pity's sake! If you won't do anything, then I will have to get rid of the other cus—"

"You there, would you please move out of the way? You're troubling my Lady Komari."

"What? You move out of the wa-"

The Sapphire girl turned around. For whatever reason, she let out a whimper and froze the moment she laid her crimson eyes on me. But then she rebooted right away, pointed her finger at me, and screeched: "A-AAAH?! TERAKOMARI GANDESBLOOD?!"

"Yup, that's me... And who are you?"

"Who?! We just fought the other day! Don't you remember?! What are you doing here to begin with?! Have you come to turn the hot springs into omelet rice?!"

"How in the world am I supposed to ...? Wait, I just remembered!"

She was the girl we'd fought at the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest. What exactly we were supposed to be grateful for in that event, however, I still didn't understand. Anyway, this girl was Arctic Master Prohellya Butchersky's right hand, who'd subbed in after her commander came down with a cold.

If I recall correctly, her name is...Pitolina Shelepina.

She had given me the impression of being one insane berserker, as her strategy was just full-frontal assault.

And now she was insanely full-frontal assaulting the receptionist, too.

"What are you doing here...? Wait, are you staying here?!"

"Indeed, Lady Shelepina. We are here to celebrate our astonishing, staggering, overwhelming victory against your forces in the Super Massacre

Gratitude Fest."

Stop that. No, we're not. We just won the lottery. Why do you gotta go around provoking everyone you come in eyeshot of? What if she snaps? Just then, I heard a snap.

"Oh, oh, to be the victor! You've got it easy! But you're just frogs in a well! Got it? Had my Lady been in good health, she would have crushed your ragtag flock of mosquitoes in the blink of an eye!"

"What? So which is it? Are we frogs? Mosquitoes? A flock? Of birds? You can't even insult us properly."

"What's that have to do with anything? We're not competing for most eloquent here. I'm saying we can beat you in a fight."

"You already lost, sweetie. Keep crying."

"Did you even listen to anything I said?! I said we would have won if my Lady had been in good health! The Butchersky Unit would have walked all over you! So basically, that makes us the winners! We just went down a wrong branch in the timeline because my Lady just so happened to have slept with her belly exposed after her pajamas rode up the night before!"

"It's useless trying to argue with this girl. Let's go to our room, Lady Komari."

"You're running away?! Accept reality! Stop right there, maid! And don't take Terakomari with you! I'm not done swatting you flies!"

Pop! I felt a fuse blow inside Vill.

"Lady Komari, please grant me permission to kill."

"I say no to violence. We're here for a peaceful day off."

"Hah! Poor wimpy Crimson Lord won't even grant permission to kill! And oh my! Is that Crimson Lord Sakuna Memoir? You've got the blood of a Sapphire, my sister. There's no need to follow the flies around. Terakomari Gandesblood's filthiness will rub off on you just by being near her! How about joining the Butchersky Unit instead?"

Pop! I felt a fuse blow within Sakuna.

"Ms. Komari, mind if I have a little chat with her? I can't stand racists. I think I ought to give her constellation a little rewrite to correct her views," Sakuna said.

"Huh? Is that a little chat?"

"Um... Commander... Please don't start a fight here," Esther interjected.

"I—I know! Gosh, what am I going to do with you all?"

I pushed Vill and Sakuna from behind as I stepped forward.

"Don't, Lady Komari, she'll bite you!" Vill grabbed my shoulder, but I ignored her.

Pitolina took half a step back as she glared at me.

"Wh-what?! You want to go?! You got it!"

"I don't! We have no intention of fighting you. How about we just forget about the results of the sports-war and get along? C'mon, we came here to relax at the hot springs."

I nervously held out my right hand.

Vill, Sakuna, Esther, and Pitolina, too, widened their eyes.

I had recently learned that if you approached someone with sincerity, they would respond in kind.

Pitolina looked at me like I was an alien from outer space. But then, understanding dawned on her. She slowly raised her hand, white like snow, and...

Slap!

...smacked my palm.

"Hah! We are not buddies! Who knows what they'd say about me back at the Communist Party HQ if they knew I was fraternizing with a vampire!"

"Okay, she's dead."

"I'm washing her brain."

"Hooold your horses, everyone! You can't fight here, you'll aggravate the

staff!"

Still, things were only getting worse. Vill and Sakuna weren't like the Seventh Unit troops; they didn't like to fight. So why were they so worked up?

"Fine! If it's what you want, I'll let you enjoy a murder mystery at the inn! The culprit? Me! Sorry for the spoilers! Now, bring it on!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaah it's so cold cold cold cold cold cold!! There's no heating in the restroom! I thought I was a goner!"

Just then, a familiar voice echoed through the lobby.

Everyone present turned around.

A girl came running toward us, hugging herself.

I'd figured she would show up ever since I recognized Pitolina.

"Pitolina! Let's go back to the room! You finished checking us in, ri...ght?" She noticed us, too.

A Sapphire with white hair and ruby eyes—Prohellya Butchersky.



She looked at us in confusion.

"Terakomari Gandesblood...? What are you doing here?"

"What do you think? Vacationing. We won a trip at the lottery. I'm more surprised that you're here."

"Shocked?! Don't be rude! I may have the strong body of a Sapphire, but I need some comfort from time to time, and I heard there were plenty of hot springs around here. I wasn't that thrilled about going, but my subordinate wouldn't shut up about it."

Prohellya was speaking really quickly for some reason. Maybe that was just how she acted outside of work. She wore a fluffy coat and scarf instead of her usual uniform. Upon noticing my gaze, she looked away in embarrassment.

"Stop gawking! A-anyways, what a coincidence! We're on holiday here, so let's forget about war and just relax... Oh, by the way, beware the restroom—it's freezing. One scarf is not enough."

"Did you recover from your cold?"

"I never had a cold! I just couldn't attend the Super Massacre Gratitude Fest because I had other things to do! I was not in bed with a fever, no siree!"

I didn't get it, but I was glad to hear it.

Prohellya had helped the Mulnite Empire during the vampire riots last year. She'd even sided with Karla by the end of the Heavenly Ball, come to think of it. Yet I hadn't thanked her sufficiently. I didn't even know much about her. Perhaps this was my chance to get closer to her... But just as I was thinking that, for some reason, Vill muttered, "That's unexpected."

That was when I realized that Sakuna and Esther had stern looks on their faces, too.

Huh? Do they not like her or something? I think she's a nice girl.

"Lady Prohellya, we cannot allow the vampires to be around."

That startled me. Pitolina's manner of speaking was the polar opposite of the boisterous tone she'd used before.

"The vampires are elements that should not exist during our holiday. Give the word, and I will secure this inn all for ourselves. First, we expel Terakomari Gandesblood and her lackeys for..."

"What are you talking about? Terakomari and I are equally customers of this inn, and there's no reason for us to fight. You're thinking like a thief. That's not very commendable."

"I apologize. As you wish." Pitolina bowed respectfully.

What's up with her? She's acting the exact opposite of how she was treating us before. What's her true nature?

"And so!" Prohellya spoke as I was thinking. "We are not here to fight. Let's enjoy our holiday. Pitolina, let's go. I want to get a peek at these so-called hot springs."

"As you command."

The pair walked away.

But then Pitolina raced back at lightning speed. She shot me a nasty glare and whispered, "Don't think you've won!" Then she stuck out her tongue.

"Okay, who's the real you?"

"I'm playing the part of the model soldier in front of Prohellya! I don't wanna disappoint her! And if you tell her...you'll get these."

She made peace signs then closed and opened her fingers like a crab's pincers. I had no idea what that meant. I didn't get why she would tell me about her weakness in the first place.

"Hey, Pitolina! What's the holdup?! The hot springs are gonna get cold!"

"I apologize, Lady Prohellya. I will be there right away."

She stuck out her tongue at me one last time before leaving.

She sure was one colorful character. Whatever, I'll just enjoy my trip. But as my mind was switching over to positive mode, I noticed Vill smirking.

"Let's tell Lady Butchersky about her true face."

"Please don't..."

So began my two-night, three-day stay at the hot springs.



They gave us a three-person room on the second floor. That was for Vill, Sakuna, and me. Esther had her own room. It's wild how she just lives in a hot springs inn. She can use them anytime she wants..., I thought enviously as I dropped myself on the comfy bed by the window.

"You're taking the window side, Ms. Komari? I'll take the center, then," Sakura said as she sat on the middle bed and glanced at Vill with a smirk.

"Gee." The maid sighed. "I've lost the bed by Lady Komari's side. Whatever shall I do."

"Early bird gets the worm. You get the bed by the wall, Ms. Villhaze."

"Oh no. I'll just sleep in Lady Komari's bed."

"?!?!" Sakuna looked like she'd been struck by lightning.

Is this a competition? I wondered, as Vill sat on my mattress. Why? Just take the bed on the other side.

"Hey. We've got three beds. It'd be a waste not to use them all."

"The Dark Core Zone is much colder than Mulnite. I need to hold you in your sleep to ensure you don't freeze at night."

"No, thank you! Sakuna, tell her something!"

"You can't trust Ms. Villhaze to keep you warm without ulterior motives. I'll keep you warm in her place..."

"Huh? Wait, why're you sitting on my bed, too, Sakuna?"

"Yes, Lady Memoir, why? This is my and Lady Komari's bed."

"It's not yours."

"I think you should learn to share. Besides, you're with her every day, aren't you? Why can't I get to be with her once in a while?"

"I see. Let's settle this with some arm wrestling, then."

"Stop. Do not arm wrestle," I said.

"Very well! I won't lose!"

"Don't fall for her provocations, Sakuna."

"Whoever falls off the bed first loses. Lady Komari, you will be our referee."

"I will not! I'm going outside! Bye!"

I ignored the battle beginning in the back as I left the room.

Why couldn't we each use a spacious bed? It was a waste of a fancy inn. And *I* wanted a big bed for myself. Could it be that Sakuna accepted the armwrestling challenge to stop Vill from being a nuisance? Yeah, she's definitely a harmless pretty girl.

I raised my esteem of Sakuna as I walked down the hallway.

Then I came across Esther, who was just coming out of her room.

"Oh, Commander! Is something the matter?"

"I'm just going for a stroll. There's a fight going on in our room... But anyway, this is a really nice *ryokan*. I mean, I haven't seen much of it yet, but still."

"Thank you!" Esther smiled broadly. "I'm so glad to hear you like it. To tell the truth, the Crimson Snow Hut is one of the top inns in Frezier. We've been ranked number one in the *ryokan* popularity polls many times."

"Wow. Yeah, it looks like you've got great service. The room was squeaky clean."

"Yes. I received strict training to work here when I was little, too, and... Oh, I-I'm sorry! I shouldn't bore you talking about myself! Forget I said anything..."

"No, I want to hear about it. Are you going to be the proprietor of the Crimson Snow Hut one day?"

"Umm... I've already chosen the path of the army. It would be my sister who takes over, if she wants to."

Esther's expression turned gloomy as she said that.

She looked straight at me with a nervous look on her face.

"Commander, to tell the truth... My sister is a big fan of yours."

"Huh? Is she?"

"Yes. She was very happy to hear she would get to meet you. If it's not too much trouble...would you mind saying hi to her? I mean! I know it is a grave sin to take your precious time away! Please feel free to say no if you're too busy! In fact, I'd feel more at ease if you said no!" Esther shrank as she spoke.

There's no need to fear me... But I guessed she was a newbie, so her attitude made sense. I had no reason to turn her down, and I genuinely wanted to meet her sister.

"It's okay. I'd be happy to meet your sister."

She took me to a place beyond a sign that said STAFF ONLY. At the back beyond there was a door with a board that read Monique.

"Monique! Commander Komarin... er, Gandesblood is here to meet you," Esther said as she knocked on the door.

It opened immediately. A girl wearing a white gown showed herself. *Is this Monique?* I wondered, but that didn't turn out to be the case.

"Ah!" Esther exclaimed and took a step back. "Dr. Kuya! You're here?"

"Yes. It's Saturday, so I'm giving Monique a home visit."

She was an Immortal whose hairdo made it look like she had dumplings on her head.

Kuya looked up at Esther with sleepless eyes.

"You're here on holiday? You should go talk to Monique. Talking with family is an important part of her care."

"Yes! Um... How is she doing, by the way?"

"No big changes. I've been treating her with my Divine Instrument every week, but it hasn't shown any effects yet. We still don't have a surefire approach to treatment. Incidentally..."

The Immortal turned to look at me. What a mysterious person, I thought, when Esther suddenly apologized.

"I'm sorry! Commander, this is Dr. Kuya, Monique's physician. And this is

Commander Terakomari Gandesblood. I believe you might recognize her, Dr. Kuya."

"Of course, I know her." Dr. Kuya approached me and smiled. "The hero who saved the Empire. I've heard plenty about your feats. It is an honor to meet you."

"Erm... The honor is mine. I'm not really a hero or anything like that... But anyways, so you're a doctor?"

I found it strange.

Doctors were people who treated illnesses and injuries. They'd existed in droves ages ago...but they all disappeared after the world came under the influence of the Dark Core.

Dr. Kuya wore a self-deprecating smile.

"An obsolete profession, isn't it? But there is still a demand for it. We're useful for treating injuries that the Dark Core can't heal, or for tending to wounds that people have sustained outside the influence of their country's Dark Core. Or, as in Monique's case, treating mental illnesses."

"Mental illnesses...?"

"That's right. Monique Claire's body isn't ailing. Rather, she's stricken by a disorder that makes her lose the drive to do anything. I call it etiolation."

"Monique had been attending school without issue half a year ago...but now she coops herself in her room and spends the whole day sleeping...," added Esther.

I was shocked to hear such an illness existed.

"Mm-hmm." Dr. Kuya placed a hand on her chin as she looked upward. "However, Monique is a Commander Komarin fan. She might regain some energy if she talks with you, so this is good timing. It would be good for her to meet you."

"I'm sorry, Commander. I would appreciate it if you could talk to her a little, for her sake," Esther said.

"Now I'm feeling the pressure..."

I was worried that Monique would be disappointed to meet the real me. But hey, I couldn't turn both of them down, so I nodded.

"Thank you so much." Esther bowed, smiling feebly.

"Monique is awake right now. Come on in." Dr. Kuya opened the door.

Warm air flowed outside; they must've activated a heating Magic Stone.

At first glance, it was the most normal room. There was a bookshelf, a table, and some decorative plants. A girl was sitting on a bed by the window.

"Huh? Who is it?" she murmured in shock.

The vampire's hair was reddish brown, just like Esther's. Her face resembled her sister's, but there was this feebleness about her, as though she would break the moment you touched her.

"Monique, this is Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood. She's here to see you. Commander, this is my sister, Monique Claire."

"Nice to meet you, Monique. I'm Terakomari Gandesblood. I work with your sister in the Imperial Army."

She stared at me with pure, innocent eyes. Or rather, she stared at my shoulders. Maybe she was too shy to look me in the eye.

That aside, I was hit with a shocking revelation the next moment.

I didn't have any gifts. Should I do a quick trick instead or something? But I think the only one I'm good at is meowing like a cat... Thankfully, it didn't seem like she cared.

"She's real..." Monique muttered in admiration, her cheeks turning red. "You're the real Crimson Lord?"

"Yup. The strongest Crimson Lord the world has ever seen."

"Is it true you'll conquer the world one day?"

"Yup. Not right now, though. That's a little down the line."

"Is it true you've killed five trillion people with just your pinky finger?"

"Yup! I can still hear their screams and feel the blood on my pinky!"

I didn't want to lie, but I couldn't wreck this little girl's dreams.

Five trillion, though? Couldn't they at least keep the numbers within the realm of possibility? That's more than the global population! *I really gotta file a formal complaint against Six Nations News... But I know it won't work, dammit!*

Monique gave me a look of respect. And it hurt. *Please don't stare at me with those eyes.* But wait, something wasn't right.

"Dr. Kuya, isn't Monique kinda cheery? She doesn't look ill."

"She normally doesn't answer most questions. Which isn't surprising, since she's only awake for a short time... She sleeps about fifteen to sixteen hours a day. Indeed, I would say this is a major achievement."

"Yes. It's been a long time since I've seen my sister's expression change. It's all thanks to you, Commander."

I see. I don't really get it, but it seems like I was of help.

I walked up to Monique, wearing the most mature and supportive smile I could muster.

"Thank you for your support. I'm glad I got to meet you, Monique. Would you like to hang out for a while? What do you usually do to entertain yourself?"



"Read..."

"I see. I like reading, too."

"But I haven't been doing much lately. Everyone's been too busy to read to me lately."

"How about I read a book to you, then? What's your favorite?"

"I don't think you'll know it. It's called Hiking in the Dusky Forest."

"I know it! The solution to the mystery blew my mind! I never imagined the fox at the beginning would end up being foreshadowing!"

"...!!" Monique's eyes widened.

At that moment, it felt like she opened up to me.

After talking about *Hiking in the Dusky Forest*, we went on to discuss our other favorite books and our favorite authors, and we recommended series to each other. She was far more talkative than she'd seemed at first glance. It really didn't look like she had an illness that sapped her of the drive to do anything, like Dr. Kuya had said. She talked and smiled a lot.

"I would love to read your novel, Commander. I'm definitely buying it on release."

"Thank you. Hearing that makes me a bit sheepish, but I look forward to it."

I rarely had a chance to talk so much about my hobbies, and I'd ended up telling Monique that I wrote my own novels. She was really surprised and happy to hear it. Her genuine reaction made me blush a little.

"Commander, I think it's about time..."

"Huh?"

Upon Esther speaking up, I noticed that twenty minutes had gone by since we'd gone in to Monique's room. Maybe I'd overstayed my welcome. The girl was yawning and rubbing her eyes, too.

"Sorry. I just couldn't stop talking."

"Don't be... It was fun. But I'm sleepy now..."

It turned out she really did sleep fifteen-odd hours a day. I should ask Vill about this. She knows about poison and medicine, so she might have a hunch about how to cure Monique... But then I remembered that her family already had a professional looking into it, so I realized that it was best not to get my hopes up.

"Well then, Monique. I'll leave. I'm staying here until the day after tomorrow, so if you wanna meet again, just call for me. I might come by unannounced, though."

"Yeah. Ah... But..." Monique looked down as she struggled to say, "...I think you might die, Commander Komarin."

"……"

...Hmm?

Did I just hear what I think I heard?

"H-hey, Monique! What're you talking about?! No she won't!"

"No, Esther. I'm saying the shadow wants her to come."

"Again with the shadow! There's no such thing!"

"There is! It came up to my bed yesterday, too!"

Hold on. What are those two talking about? A shadow? As in the silhouette thingy? Dr. Kuya noticed the confusion on my face and whispered into my ear: "It might be her imaginary friend. Monique sometimes says a shadow speaks to her. Her mental exhaustion could be causing her to hallucinate."

"That can happen?"

"Monique says the shadow wanders the Crimson Snow Hut, but she's the only one who's seen it. It won't be good to tell her it flat-out doesn't exist, though, so be careful what you say to her."

"No, Dr. Kuya. This is just a delusion of hers, so..."

"It's not a delusion!" Monique yelled.

My heart jumped out of my chest. The girl looked straight into Esther's eyes.

"The shadow is real. It said it would take me to a happy place."

```
"It's not real, Monique. Mom said she hasn't seen it, either."
```

"Only I can see it, because it's very shy..."

Was this "shadow" really a hallucination?

Was Monique just pulling a prank? Or was this real-life horror?

Things sure had gotten weird all of a sudden.

"Um... Monique? Why am I going to die?"

"I dunno. But the shadow was mad at you."

""

Oof. Yeah, Dr. Kuya had to be right.

I had never come across this shadow. So why would someone (is a shadow a *someone*?) I'd never met be mad at me? This had to be a prank Monique had come up with to spook me. It had to be.

"Ha-ha-ha. I see, I see. I'll talk to this shadow, then. There's nothing to worry about. I am the strongest Crimson Lord in the whole universe, after a—"

Crash!! The flower vase on the shelf shattered. I nearly shrieked my lungs out. No one had touched it. It just broke of its own accord.

Monique whispered, "The shadow is angry. Someone might die tonight."

I gotta ask Vill to bring the full exorcism kit.

"Don't worry about that, Commander. It's just old."

"Yeah. Anyways, even if the shadow does show up, I'll take care of it... I'll come back later, so get some rest, Monique. Good night."

"Yeah. Good night, Commander Komarin."

Monique lay down on her bed and softly closed her eyes. She was snoring quietly in less than ten seconds.

"So." Dr. Kuya sighed as she sat down on a chair. "I'll take a look at her condition before going home. Thank you, Commander Komarin... It appears meeting you gave her some of her willpower back."

```
"Willpower...?"
```

"Mental strength. Anyways, you two go and enjoy your vacation."

I figured she'd be fine as long as she had this strange doctor by her side.

Esther and I left Monique's room. The moment we were out, Esther bowed her head.

"I'm so sorry. Please, don't worry about what Monique said. It's just nonsense."

"Mmm..."

I couldn't not worry about it.

What could that shadow be? I couldn't rule out the possibility that it was a hallucination, as Dr. Kuya said, but Monique looked way too serious. Was that how delusions worked? This shadow didn't sound like a benevolent being, either.

Take what Monique said about it "taking to a happy place," for example.

Is it just me, or was that totally eerie?

The thing's also mad at me for some reason...

"No use thinking too much about it, I guess. Let's just enjoy our trip."

"Yes. I hope you enjoy your stay at the Crimson Snow Hut."

I snapped out of it and walked away from Monique's room.

The mysterious shadow was worrying...but savoring the hot springs was more important right now.



Vill and Sakuna's wrestling match had ended by the time I got back to the room. The maid was on the floor, arms and legs splayed out.

"This can't be... I lost...? How could this happen...?"

I had no idea what transpired, and she seemed too shocked to talk anyways, so I let her be.

"Welcome back, Ms. Komari." Sakuna smiled, sitting on my bed while clutching both her fists tight. So cute. "I won! As promised, I will be sleeping

with you tonight."

"Huh? Promised? Did I?"

"Did you forget? You promised you would sleep with the victor." Sakuna smiled innocently.

I did? I mean, Sakuna's a good, honest girl. What's the harm in sharing a bed with her? It's not like she'd try something weird like Vill. And she smells very nice, too.

"You were with Ms. Esther?"

"Yeah, we went to meet her little sister. She's sick and bedridden..."

"I see... Should I try some healing magic?"

"No, I don't think that would work..."

Dr. Kuya must've tried that long ago. Monique's problems weren't physical, so the Dark Core had no effect on her. Which meant healing magic, which accelerates the Dark Core's supply of mana, wouldn't either.

"Is that so?" Sakuna said with a frown. "Please let me know if there's anything I can do. And tell Esther the same. I'm very good at support spells."

"Yeah. Thank you."

There was no way a girl as nice as Sakuna would try to do anything depraved like Vill.

I'll sleep at ease tonight, holding her.

"...Lady Komari, Lady Memoir threw me off the bed."

Vill was staring at me with teary eyes when it hit me.

I could tell. The tears were fake.

"Look. She's shattered every bone in my body."

"Really? That's unfortunate."

"It is. I cried and begged for forgiveness, but Lady Memoir showed no mercy as she pushed me off. I only wanted to sleep in your bed... Isn't she wicked? Would you please hold this poor maid close and comfort her?" "No. Let's make a schedule for what we're going to do today. I wanna eat hot springs omelet rice."

"Very well. Seeing as you won't comfort me, I'll tear apart your clothes and throw you into the hot springs right this very moment."

"Whoa! Stop it! Let go of my clothes! I can undress by myself! And not right now!"

"Ms. Komari, since we've come all the way here, how about we do go to the hot springs already?" Sakuna asked, fidgeting.

I mulled her suggestion over as I pushed down Vill's head. *True, we might as well get into the bath sooner rather than later.* Still, I had this budding hesitation inside me.

I mean. Think about it. I was gonna take a bath with my friends.

Wouldn't you find that a bit embarrassing? Or was that weird of me to think?

"What's the matter? You might come up with an idea for your novel once we're there."

"Mmmmmm..."

She was right. The most fruitful times for my crazy, genius ideas to develop were right before sleeping and during the bath. Plus, I'd gone on this trip to get over my writer's block to begin with.

"Fine. You're right, Sakuna. Let's go over to the baths now..."

"Wait, Lady Komari." Vill stopped me, clinging to my belly. She pinched my sides as she voiced her objection. "I agree that we should go take a bath, but there's something we must do before that."

"What? Warming-up exercises or something? And please let go of me."

"It's not in a pool, so that's unneeded. See, the thing is, Lady Butchersky's unit wasn't the only group coming to the Crimson Snow Hut."

"Well, duh, there are other guests here. And I told you to stop squeezing my belly. It tickles."

"No, that's not it..." Vill took out her Correspondence Crystal as she informed

me of a shocking "coincidence." "The girls from Aruka and the Heavenly Paradise are here, too. They just called me. They say they're waiting at the lounge on the first floor."

"Komari! What a coincidence!"

Someone dashed at me the moment we reached the lounge.

"Huh? What're you..."

Before I could even finish my line, something I should've seen coming happened: A girl tackled me like a speeding bullet, then squeezed me tight. Sakuna and Vill shrieked behind me as she rubbed her cheek against mine.

The girl in question was none other than the pink-haired, pigtailed president of the Aruka Republic, Nelia Cunningham.

"You came to the hot springs, too?! What a twist of good fortune! Fate sure works in mysterious ways!"

"I—I wouldn't call this *fate*, but either way, could you please let go of me?"

"No! We're sisters, bound by blood! Why wouldn't I hug my sister? It's been two months since we last saw each other, too!"

Rub, rub, rub, rub, rub.

She wouldn't stop rubbing her cheek against mine. *Please, this is embarrassing. Everyone's watching...* Though I figured that wouldn't curtail her; it looked more like she was showing off to everyone.

"It's been so cold lately, don't you think? How about I warm you up?"

"N-no, thanks! I'm going to the hot spring soon, anyways."

"Right! Let's go, together! Your big sister will wash your back!"

"Why are you the big sister?! We're not sisters to begin with, but if we were, hypothetically speaking, then I would be the big sister because I'm far more intellectual and mature!"

"What're you talking about? I'm already sixteen."

"..."

Huh? Nelia's older than me? Wait, when did you turn sixteen? I would've liked to celebrate your birthday... Just as I was feeling bad about it, Vill ripped the Warblade off me.

"Please stop that, Lady Cunningham. What if you scrape off the skin on Lady Komari's cheek?"

"What? You jealous?"

"I am not jealous. It's obvious that I am Lady Komari's number one. You brag about exchanging blood with her, but I'll have you know that we sucked each other's blood during the latest uproar."

"Right. You sucked each other's blood after we did."

"...What do you mean by that? Is there any significance to who did it earlier? Do you stay up at night wondering about whether the chicken or the egg came first? I personally believe reoccurrence to be more important than sequence, so if you'll excuse us, I'll have Lady Komari suck my blood right this instant."

"WAAAH?! Hey!! Get away from me, you sicko maid!! Help me, Nelia!!"

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. I was joking, Villhaze, so cut it out."

Nelia stepped away from me with a grin.

So she was just messing with Vill. Now even Gertrude was glaring at me, cheeks puffed. I really wish Nelia would stop causing conflict. Not that I even had any idea why there would be any conflict.

"Lady Nelia, I can't believe we're celebrating this scoundrel..."

"Please, Gertrude. We'll throw a big celebration for you, too."

"That's not... That's not... That makes me very happy, actually..."

Nelia and Gertrude whispered to each other. I managed to overhear something about "celebrating"...but what was the occasion? Oh well. Anyway...

"Why are you here, Nelia? Did you win the lottery, too?"

"Basically. And it's not just us, by the way."

"Good tidings, Ms. Komari. How have you been?"

A bell chimed.

Just then, I noticed a girl sipping tea at the table, wearing her usual Easternish outfit. The Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise, Karla Amatsu. Beside her was ninja Koharu Minenaga, eating a pudding. *I want pudding*.

"Karla, did you win the lottery, too?"

"Yes. I feel like I've used up a lifetime's worth of luck."

"...Isn't this too strange to be pure coincidence? Like, don't you think it's weird that we all won the lottery for the same inn at the same time?"

"It's not a normal occurrence. Which is why it occurred," Koharu said.

"Hey, Koharu! Don't say anything more! What if she finds out?!" Karla shouted.

Find out...? What's she talking about?

"Oh, it's nothing," Karla said with a tender smile, as I tilted my head.

I felt like some sort of secret was being kept from me, but I figured it was better not to worry about it.

"Have you been well? I heard the Mulnite Empire is rebuilding without a hitch."

"Huh? Oh... Yeah, I don't think there have been any issues. My life's been pretty uneventful, too."

Mulnite's Imperial Capital had been greatly damaged during the terrorist attacks at the end of last year, but the repairs being carried out under the supervision of the Empress were going smoothly. Most of the city was repaired already, and the vampires were beginning to live in peace again.

It was all because Nelia and Karla had helped us take down the terrorists that things were going back to normal so quickly. I couldn't thank them enough.

"That Inverse Moon bunch sure is out of their mind. They said they want to destroy the Dark Core...but don't they see that would only plunge the world into chaos?"

"They're terrorists, so of course they crave disorder. My grandmother said

that the main objective of groups like them is actually massacre and destruction," said Karla.

"Insane, I'm telling you. At least Madhart's tyrannical reign had a philosophy behind it." Nelia sighed.

The conversation evoked the image of Spica La Gemini. What did she have in mind when she'd declared war on the Empire? I felt like her goals went beyond just destroying the Dark Core...but I had no idea what they could be. I would have to get her to open her heart to me to find out, but I felt like she'd sooner pry open my chest than do that.

"Lady Cunningham, let's refrain from talking about such depressing subjects. Right now, we need to think about how to advance *the plan*."

"Of course!" Nelia grinned before grabbing my hands. "Okay then, Komari. Let's go take a bath."

"Umm... But..."

"What, are you embarrassed? Don't worry. I'll take the lead."



For starters, I was under the impression that a bath was something you took alone.

Bathing was a time of comfort, free from anyone else to bother me. It was the only opportunity I had to relax and wash away the stress accumulated from a hard day of work. My maid was also aware of that, so she wouldn't barge in while I was washing up. Well, actually, she did barge in. But only like once every three days.

Today, though, things were different. We were at the hot springs. Forget about my maid, I was about to get in there with all my other friends, too.

When this dawned on me, I felt really squeamish. *Maybe I could get them to let me come back later all by myself?* I wondered as I stiffened up in a corner of the dressing room.

"Lady Komari? Why are you just standing there?"

"No reason..."

"Ahh! I forgot your bathing cap. I'm very sorry. You'll have it going all in your eyes."

"I don't use a bathing cap! That's not the problem..."

"I see." Vill nodded. "You're embarrassed. Please, allow me to undress you."

"WAAAH?! Get away from me! I can do it by myself!"

"So you say, but Lady Amatsu and Lady Cunningham are already outside."

Vill was already stark naked. Had she no shame? Actually, wait, it was inconceivable to expect her to feel embarrassed. I didn't call her a sicko maid for nothing. But I didn't know where to look, or what to do.

"Um...do you have a towel or something?"

"Yes, here you go. Just keep in mind it's against the rules to get it wet."

I grabbed the bath towel, but I couldn't move anymore.

"Hey, Vill... How about you go ahead and step outside?"

"No. You might run away."

"I won't! It's just...awkward, y'know?"

"Oh, don't be a child. There are a hundred cons that come with shame and not a single pro. You must go back to your natural form in order to enjoy the hot springs... Do you remember that time we went to the beach last summer?"

"I do... What about it?"

"At first, you said you were too embarrassed to be seen in a swimsuit. But once you did, you forgot all about being embarrassed, right?"

"I guess..."

"And now you have no qualms about walking down the streets in a swimsuit, right?"

"I have too many to count."

"It's the same principle. Once you get naked, you'll start feeling like it's normal. And if you insist you don't want to, then I will undress you. Now, please stand still. I'll have you in your birthday suit in no time..."

"Stop! I'll do it myself! Just turn the other way!"

I didn't care anymore. I grabbed my clothes and pulled them off.

As insane as Vill's rant was, it did contain a glimmer of truth. Basically, I just had to get used to communal bathing. I'd stop feeling weird about being in the water with everyone in no time. I just had to take that first step.

I prayed to God as I undressed myself. Rid myself of worldly thoughts and possessions. Good times surely awaited in the hot springs.

"Lady Komari? Are you ready?"

"Y-yeah..." I nodded hesitantly.

Vill turned back to me again.

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed. "What a beautiful body! It's been so long since I last saw you nude under good lighting that I think I'm going to get a nosebleed. I should've brought a camera."

"That's against the law!! I'm going now!!"

"No."

The moment I dashed away, she hugged me from behind.

I felt like a butterfly trapped in a spiderweb.

"Let me go! Hey, stop touching me there! Do any more perverted stuff, and I'll tell Sakuna!"

"I'm not doing anything perverted."

"What do you call this, then?!"

"I'm just stopping you from running into the bath. Don't you see the warning sign over there?"

There was certainly a sign on the wall, with a cute rabbit saying: Don't RUN! YOU MIGHT FALL!

Now I felt embarrassed in a different way.

"I understand you can't hold in the excitement, but be careful not to get vourself hurt."

"I'm not excited... I just ran away because of your weird comments."

"Right. I'm sorry. Let's go, then."

"Yeah."

I stepped into the bathroom while hiding behind Vill's back.

The Crimson Snow Hut had multiple baths.

We'd come to the one that let you enjoy the snow—the open-air bath. A chilly breeze that froze body and mind blew the moment I stepped outside. It whisked away all the heat of my nerves. I needed to get in the bath and warm back up ASAP. I looked ahead, searching for it, and...

"Komari! Come on in, it's nice and warm!"

Nelia was already in the water. Neither she, Gertrude, Karla, Koharu, nor Sakuna seemed to be embarrassed. Now I felt weird for still being antsy about it.

Well, I should be fine. All this steam should hide my bits.

I washed myself and headed for the bath, which was surrounded by rocks.

Then I slowly slid in, starting from my toes, until I sank all the way to my shoulders.

A sigh escaped my lips.

"Oh, that's good..."

"Right?!"

Nelia approached me at high speed all of a sudden.

Our shoulders touched. Her bright smile and strong stare made me flinch.

"The benefits of the springs are listed on that sign right there. It says the bath heals fatigue, relieves stress, and even beautifies the skin. That water has mana in it, apparently."

"Huh. I guess that makes sense—we are in the middle of the Dark Core Zone, after all."

"It also says it can make you taller."

"Really?!" I stood up in surprise.

"Hey! Komari!" Nelia grumbled as I splashed her.

"Sorry." I sat back down.

That was improper.

Not too long ago, I'd realized that I always reacted exaggeratedly when I learned about drinks or exercises or other stuff that claimed to make you taller. It was beyond obvious that I was self-conscious about my height. But clearly, it was cooler to pretend like I didn't care about it.

So I tried to stay composed on the surface. While soaking my entire body in the growth water.

"Oh, by the way, I started learning how to give massages lately."

"Massages? Why?"

"Gertrude wouldn't stop talking about how tired she was, so I read a book about it... Anyway, there's this massage that makes you taller. I'll try it out on you after the bath."

"Really?!" I stood up in surprise.

"You never disappoint, huh?" Nelia giggled as I splashed her.

I instantly despaired. What was it with this instinctive reaction? It was like my whole body was screaming for height.

"Lady Cunningham, I think we have enough in the massage department," said Vill.

"You say that, but Komari seems to want the height boost."

"Lady Komari doesn't need any more inches. She's perfect in that handheld size of hers."

"Vill's right, Lady Nelia. Nothing in this world could matter less than Terakomari's height. Besides, you learned how to give massages for *me...*," said Gertrude.

"Are you tired right now, Gertrude?" I asked her.

Gertrude's shoulders jolted up. She seemed shocked that I'd addressed her. Come to think of it, I had barely ever said a word to her. Maybe because Nelia was always present when I was with her.

"...Yes, I am tired. Being an Illustrious General is hard work."

"And she's not only an Illustrious General, but my maid, too. And she helps Rainsworth patrol the Metropolis as well. We're still far from stable... Murders happen every day."

"I see. Sounds rough."

My casual comment seemed to have annoyed her. Gertrude scowled at me.

"Just so you know, Tera— Ms. Terakomari! We're both equally commanders! Yet while I'm working myself to the bone over here, you spend every day without a care in the world!"

"What?! I'm pretty busy myself!"

"Don't lie! I have proof! Look!"

She grabbed my arm.

It took me by surprise; I squealed.

"Look at how squishy your arm is! This is the body of a woman who knows no labor! You should put on some muscle before asking Lady Nelia for a massage!"

"Hey! Stop squeezing me! It tickles!"

"Hey, you don't get to enjoy Komari's squishy arms all by yourself!" Nelia shouted.

"Step aside, Warblades. Lady Komari's arms are mine," Vill said.

"You step aside!! Hey, stop it! STOP SQUEEZING ME!!"

Nelia and Vill clung to me without reserve or consideration.

I splashed about and managed escape the vile clutches of those sickos. Gertrude was looking at me enviously for whatever reason. If you want Nelia's attention so bad, then why don't you get her away from me? I thought, but then Nelia began laughing out loud. Her aim was not to indulge in perversion, but rather just ridicule me.

Not anymore! The waves of wrath broke the dam.

I made another big splash to blind Nelia and Vill's vision. Now that they'd flinched in the water, it was my chance to escape from this hell.

"Ahh! Lady Komari, you're so mean! I still wanted to have fun with you!"

"Geez. This is your fault, Villhaze. You made her mad."

"What are you saying? It's your fault for sexually harassing her."

Ignoring the argument playing out behind my back, I rushed to the opposite side of the tub. Karla was trying to keep from chuckling as she watched us.

"You sure are loved, Ms. Komari."

"Loved...? They just fondle me in weird places."

"I believe that is proof of their adoration... But I will acknowledge that Villhaze and Nelia take it too far."

Only Karla, Sakuna, and Koharu were in this section of the tub. I was safe.

Meanwhile, Nelia and Vill kept arguing on the other side of the pool. Gertrude tried to stop them, but Vill shot water right at her face. After just a little while, the maids ended up wrestling each other. Why couldn't they at least try to get along for the duration of the trip?

"...There are no sickos on this side, though, so I'm safe."

"Hee-hee... Ms. Komari, let me wash your body later on, okay?"

"Hmm? O-okay..."

Sakuna came over to me and sat down by my side.

A drop of water ran down her heated skin. She was so pretty that I thought I was looking at a snow fairy or something... *Hmm? Isn't she too close? Our arms are touching?*

Sakuna wouldn't just start squeezing me, though. She was safe. I felt her stare right in my face, but she was safe. She wouldn't do anything.

Desperate, I turned to Karla.

"A-anyways, it's been so long since I last went on a trip! Do you visit hot

springs and stuff frequently?"

"There are many of them in the Heavenly Paradise, so I do use them when I have the opportunity. This is the first time I've been to Frezier, though. The snowy landscape is quite beautiful."

"Yeah. I'm glad I came."

You could see the snow piled up on the open-air bath. A world clad in white...

Just then, I was overcome with déjà vu. I'd really been here before. Back when my mom was still in the Mulnite Empire. I hadn't been interested in hot springs at the time, but while I was looking out the window from the inn, my mom told me we should go outside, and then...

"Ms. Komari? I felt your constellation glow a little."

"Constellation? It's still noon."

"No, I mean your memories."

I was taken aback. Maybe this meant I was recovering my memories of the past.

But did this mean Sakuna could read memories without stabbing someone?

That couldn't be good. What if she found out I stole Vill's snacks in revenge for what she did to me all the time?

But anyway.

The past wasn't that important.

I wanted only to think about enjoying the hot springs as much as possible... and hopefully growing in height a little.

"Aaahhh, this brings me back to life. I can feel the earthly fatigue leaving my body..."

"You've been really busy, Komari. Do you have a schedule for your upcoming wars?"

"Yes. I don't know it off the top of my head, but I bet you Vill has it locked down. But whatever, what I'm most worried about is getting out of my slump."

```
"Slump?"
```

"I've got writer's block. After all the back and forth with the publisher, I'm not sure what to write anymore. I'm hoping that staying here will let me get over it..."

"That sounds tough." Karla looked to her side, as though she'd just remembered something. "Speaking of which, Koharu, wasn't there something you wanted to talk about with Komari?"

```
"||"
```

The silent ninja girl turned to look at me.

Koharu hesitated for a while before she made up her mind and came over. Fittingly for a ninja, her movements were completely silent.

```
"Terakomari."
```

"Yes?"

"Here..."

For some reason, she handed me a marker. Where had she even hidden it? I stared at her, and she fidgeted shyly. Then, in a voice as low as the buzz of a mosquito, she said: "...I want your autograph."

```
"Huh? My autograph?"
```

"Not as Crimson Lord. As an author."

I felt a vehement shock. I'd held autograph sessions as commander before, but I had never given my autograph as novelist Terakomari Gandesblood.

My heart beat faster. The sweat poured from my every pore.

What? What is this feeling?!

"Koharu read *Twilight Triangle*. Although it hasn't been published yet, I have the manuscript at home, and she ended up becoming a big fan of yours."

```
"Please, Madam Author."
```

"?!?!?!?!"

Author. Author. Author...

It was the bell announcing the start of a brand-new world.

That moment, it was as if I'd heard the voice of God. I was seized by a divine duty to give Koharu the best autograph I could.

Staying my trembling hand, I grabbed the marker.

An autograph. I was going to sign an autograph. Finally, all my secret practice was about to pay off.

"S-so, you read Twilight Triangle? Wh-wh-what did you think?"

"It was good. All the scenes were great, but I particularly loved the one at the end where they hold hands and stare at the twilight sky. It was so moving."

Koharu's simple thoughts absolutely demolished my brain.

I gripped the pen tight and yelled.

"Got it! I'll give you the autograph to end all autographs!"

"Um...but where will you write it?" Sakuna pointed out.

Normally, you would sign a book or a fancy *shikishi* cardboard square. But the ninja girl had nothing of the sort. Obviously, since we were in the bath.

Koharu realized the same thing and began shivering as a look of despair crossed her face.

"I forgot to bring the shikishi... How did I bring the marker but not that?"

"Oh my. What if you have her autograph one of your personal belongings?"

"I...I don't have anything here..."

"You do in your room. Just wait until we're out of the bath."

"...No. I do have one thing." Koharu grabbed Karla's arm.

"Huh?" Karla muttered in confusion, while Koharu shoved her master before me without showing any concern.

"Please autograph my Lady Karla."

"Wha?! Koharu?! I'm not your property?!"

"All right! Gimme a sec... I'll get it just right for you!"

"Ms. Komari?! Please don't take Koharu's joke seriously!"

"I am not joking. I'm very serious."

"You've got to be kidding me! That's a permanent marker! Those don't come off easily!"

"She can just sign your butt. Then it won't stand out."

"What's the point, then?!"

"Um... Koharu? I can't autograph her butt..."

"Please, Madam Author."

"?!?!?! All right! I'll sign your Karla right away!"

"Hey! Hold on! EEEEK!!"

I held up the marker and clutched Karla as she thrashed about.

I couldn't turn down a fan request. And this was my first autograph. I had to do it right. My duty burned inside me.

Clack. The door to the dressing room opened.

"I-I'm sorry to interrupt you!"

A girl with reddish-brown hair appeared—it was Esther.

Everyone in the bath (including me) froze and stared at her.

"The forecast says a strong blizzard is going to hit Frezier. We'll be closing the open-air bath to ensure your safety... I'm very sorry about cutting the fun short, but I hope you can understand and get ready to go back inside."

I casually looked up at the sky. Snow was softly falling on us. It also felt like the wind was picking up. I wanted to keep enjoying this a little longer...but safety came first. I acquiesced to Esther's instructions.

Just as I was about to stand up, I realized I was clutching Karla's breast. I let go at the speed of light. I was no sicko maid.

"Right," Karla muttered, red in the face. "We shall go before the storm hits. Besides, there are other baths here."

"My autograph..."

"Get Komari to autograph something other than my butt! Nelia, Villhaze, let's go back to our rooms."

"Boo!" Vill and Nelia harmonized.

They were probably just kidding, but Esther took their boos at face value and apologized as hard as she could, shouting, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!!" That made Vill and Nelia feel bad about it and get serious, too. "We're just joking!" "We'll do as you say, Esther." Someone as straightlaced as her was an unusual sight for these two.

So ended the open-air bath chapter of the first day.

At the time, I didn't realize.

During the whole autograph thing, Koharu had said she'd brought a marker, which had to mean that she'd known I would be in Frezier. But that hadn't seemed to be the case when I first reunited with them. Clearly, they were hiding something from me. But between my nervousness about communal bathing and the drama over the autograph, this detail completely slipped my mind.

※

Major Pitolina Shelepina was sure that Prohellya was the strongest person in the world.

Karla Amatsu and Terakomari Gandesblood were more widely popular, but she believed Prohellya was no worse than any other commander. She was underrated for a very simple reason: She was from a "bad guy" country.

The rest of the world frowned upon the Polar Union's glum foreign policy.

Consequently, the Six Arctic Masters were spoken ill of in comparison to the Seven Crimson Lords or the Five Imperial Blades.

Pitolina found it ridiculous. It was plain as day that Prohellya Butchersky was the strongest.

She simply could not accept that people thought of her beloved superior as weaker than Terakomari Gandesblood.

"Lady Prohellya, how do you like the water?"

"It's nice."

Prohellya, towel on her head, looked delighted.

They were at the Crimson Snow Hut's cypress bath. The inn had an open-air bath, too, but Prohellya had opted for the indoor one since it was warmer. There were no other guests there, either, so it was as if they had reserved the whole place for themselves.

"It was good we came. I think I might stay in the bath for our entire stay."

"I'll threaten the inn to let you use it the whole day, then."

"You don't have to. I'll follow the rules. That's what they're there for."

The rest of the world aside, Commander Butcher enjoyed tremendous popularity inside the Polar Union.

She normally behaved like the most gallant soldier, but in private, she let loose more than you would expect. She was very good at switching between both modes.

Pitolina wore her "cool subordinate" mask as she carefully spoke up.

"...By the way, Lady Prohellya, about your dip in health the other day..."

"There was nothing I could've done. The temperature dropped out of the blue."

"I understand. It cannot be allowed to lower without your permission."

"What are you even angry at?"

"The whole world. I hate it... How are you feeling now?"

"I'm okay, don't worry. I'm back in top shape. What about you, though? Are you eating well? You look like you've lost weight again."

"Thank you for your concern, but I am prepared to work without eating or drinking."

"That's not good. You need rest... Breaks are important... Besides, in a sense, your job is even harder than a commander's."

"That's not true. Besides, I like gathering intel."

"Still, I can tell it wears you out. You were exhausted when you came back from Lapelico the other day."

"I simply couldn't adjust to the beasts' environment. But it will not affect my work. Any member of the Committee for State Security can handle this much."

Pitolina Shelepina was not only a major in the Union Army, but also part of the Committee for State Security—in fact, it would be no exaggeration to say the latter was her main job.

Basically, she was a spy.

She infiltrated other countries to get ahold of their intel. Last month, she'd sneaked into the Lapelico Kingdom while they were hibernating to make sure they weren't getting up to anything suspicious. She'd cloaked herself in the fur of a bear to pass as one of them, but it turned out she was allergic. It had been rough, but she'd pulled through.

"King Chiken showed no abnormal behavior. He doesn't even seem to have an eye on the Polar Union. He only cared about announcing the sunrise."

"You should've just turned down the job. The General Secretary said the same, didn't he?"

"It was essential I do it to gain his trust."

"But I really feel like you've been working too much."

"Excuse me, but I believe it is you who needs a break the most. I heard you've been doing work unrelated to the army every Sunday."

"You mean the piano lessons I give? That's just my hobby. It is my duty to pass down my knowledge to the next generation. I've gotten more new kids now, so it's getting very lively. They're all such good students... The other day, they gave me some beadwork to thank me for everything. That made me so happy."

"You do wonderful work. Apologies for my rambling."

Their meandering conversation continued.

Prohellya yawned.

It was truly amazing how easily she could switch between modes.

As hard to believe as it may be, Prohellya came from a wealthy and prestigious family. She could play the piano, the violin, you name it. She could sing and dance. On her days off, she hunted and read. She was environmentally conscious, too, as she was the chairperson of the Increase the Green Lands Association. She was quite the oddball as a Union Army soldier.

The Polar Union's General Secretary often said that she wanted to be a superhero. Pitolina didn't quite understand what that meant.

Just then, she heard giggling in the distance. It was probably from Terakomari Gandesblood and her peers.

"Terakomari looks like she's doing well. I sure didn't expect to meet her here."

"Not to mention Karla Amatsu and Nelia Cunningham. This gathering of VIPs is the perfect hunting grounds for the terrorists."

"Hmm..."

Prohellya crossed her arms and looked up to the ceiling, though she couldn't see much because of the steam.

"There are no guests besides Terakomari's group and us. I smell a conspiracy. But anyway, let's stick to being bystanders and enjoy the hot springs."

"Yes. That's what I was planning to do from the beginning."

"I'll say, though." Prohellya sighed. "It's sad how the Polar Union gets left out. I wish they'd given me a call, too..."

"Huh?? Excuse me, but isn't the Polar Union's isolation policy about maintaining honor?"

"That policy needs to get with the times. I think what the world truly wants now is the reconciliation that Terakomari Gandesblood and Nelia Cunningham are striving for. The General Secretary must know this—which is why he's desperate."

"He's desperate...?"

"This is only speculation, but I suspect a revolt might take place in the Polar Union this year."

u 11

If Prohellya said so, then it had to be true.

Either way, Pitolina only had to do one thing.

"Leave everything to me. No matter what happens, I will kill off your enemies, Lady Prohellya."

"That's encouraging. But I don't want to strain my subordinates. I feel bad about everyone getting injured during the vampire riots. Let's take things in a different direction so no one gets hurt this time."

Pitolina's respect for Prohellya grew even further. She really was something special—unlike Terakomari.

"You're the same as always, Lady Prohellya. That's what is so great about you."

"What're you talking about? I move forward every day. There's no one out there who never changes. You, too, are completely different from how you were yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

"? You were arguing with Terakomari's maid at the reception, right? Or should I say you were bickering like a child... I guess you do have an age-appropriate side."

"....*"*

Breathe in, Pitolina Shelepina. She hasn't actually discovered your true nature yet. You can shake this off.

"It must've been your imagination. They say the strong cold can cause hallucinations."

"Is that so? I mean, sure, I guess I was losing my mind from the cold when I went to the restroom."

"It's all a hallucination. A Union Army soldier would not engage in bickering. And why would I ever try to hide anything from you in the first place?"

"Right. Okay, let's call it a hallucination."

```
"Oof, 'twas close..."

"Did you just say something?"

"No, I did not."
```

It really wasn't that Pitolina was pretending to be a model soldier in front of Prohellya. It was just that she got so nervous when she was with her that she couldn't act naturally.

This tragedy traced its origins to Pitolina's excessive respect for her commander.

She worried that Prohellya would be disappointed if she discovered her true, rugged personality. That fear stifled her behavior. She spoke stiffly and respectfully as a hasty measure to ensure Prohellya would hold her in esteem. And it wasn't even something she could switch on and off consciously.

This meant she could not necessarily play the model soldier when Prohellya was away.

It was only a matter of time before Prohellya discovered her true face. Which was why Pitolina threatened, cajoled, murdered, begged, bribed, or cried to people to keep them from revealing her vivacious personality to her superior.

However, a part of her knew that she was just making life hard for herself.

"Anyways, I can do things myself if anything happens. Let's stop talking about disturbing thoughts and enjoy the hot springs. This might be the last time we get a nice holiday."

"As you say."

"Hmm..." Prohellya stared up at the ceiling, and her ears twitched. "We're getting a snowstorm tonight. It's like we just wandered into a closed-circle mystery."

"Our relaxing trip is ruined."

"That's too bad. Although, I don't hate the idea of a mystery." Prohellya shut her eyes and sighed. "Ahh, this bath is great."

Then she began humming an idol song popular in the Polar Union. Although

her tastes aligned more with the classics, the kids from her piano lessons had begun teaching her about the popular music of today.

Pitolina listened closely to the song.

Then she noticed something: A shadow had passed by the bathroom door.



By evening, the weather had gotten terrible.

The wind hummed gravely. Snow flew at frightening speed outside the window. It was obvious a feeble vampire like me would get blown away the moment she stepped outside.

However, that wouldn't be a problem as long as I kept myself shut inside.

We were in Nelia's room playing a card game. Here's how it worked: If you drew a card with the same pattern as another that was in your hand, you could throw them away. The first person to get rid of their cards won. Very simple.

Simple, but deceptively difficult. I couldn't manage to win, for some reason.

Everyone kept passing me the joker; it was like they could see my cards. And we were already on the fifth round. Koharu and I were in the middle of an intense fight to escape last place. I had two cards in my hand. The joker and the five of hearts.

Koharu stared closely at me, deadpan.

"Madam Author. Which one's the bad one?"

"I'm not telling you! My whole fate hinges on this game!"

"Which is it?"

"Who knows."

"This one, is it?"

"...No."

"You can't tell a lie to save your life, Madam Author. It's this one."

"AAAH!!"

She easily snatched my five of hearts. "I win," Koharu said emotionlessly,

throwing the cards on the bed. I glanced down at the joker in my hands, and despair coursed through my veins.

It can't be. How am I so bad at this? Isn't this a game of luck?

"We've got the results for our five-round match. Last place for the first round: Lady Komari. Last place for the second round: Lady Komari. Last place for the third round: Lady Komari. Last place for the fourth round: Lady Komari. Last place for the fifth round: Lady Komari. Last place overall: Lady Komari. We've established the worst player of all to be Lady Komari."

"Did you really have to announce the results of each game?! We already know I lost!!"

"I recommend you learn how to put on a poker face, like me. We can tell everything from your expression."

"That's not true. There's no better actor out there than me. No one in the Seventh Unit suspects my true colors."

"Well, that's because everyone in the Seventh Unit is an idiot."

"Don't say that. You shouldn't speak ill of people behind their backs."

"Apologies."

"Whatever, let's move on to the punishment!" Nelia approached me with a broad grin. "We agreed that the person in last place has to do anything the other players say. You haven't forgotten about this, have you?"

"I have not. But I was thinking about retracting my agreement."

"You lost and you're not getting away from this! What should I have Komari do?"

Everyone began thinking about what they wanted me to do. Then it struck me that there was a huge flaw in the system. How come everyone got to give an order to the one loser? Wasn't that too much for a single girl? Indignation boiled within me while everyone decided what to command me.

"Become my maid!" said Nelia.

"Would you mind taste testing my new sweets?" said Karla.

"I'll wash your body tomorrow," said Sakuna.

"Let me read the novels you wrote before Twilight Triangle," said Koharu.

"Marry me," said Vill.

"I cannot give orders to the commander!" said Esther.

Nelia reacted to the last one as she produced a maid outfit from her bag. "Don't say that!" She laughed as she slapped Esther's back hard. "This is your chance to have Komari do anything you want! Don't waste it!"

"P-P-Pr-President Cunningham! I—I can't! I shouldn't be here to begin with! I am but a lowly soldier!"

"It doesn't matter if you're a soldier, a president, or a goddess. We're not here for work."

"But... But..."

By the way, Esther had joined the game halfway through. Right around the end of the second round, Gertrude left, claiming to have forgotten something in the bathroom. We could've moved on just like that, but Esther just so happened to have brought us tea around then, and everyone forced her to join us.

Esther froze in abashment as Nelia grabbed her shoulder.

That got a smile out of me. She really was one of the few decent girls in this world. A far cry from the other sickos who were usually in my presence.

"You could learn a thing or two from Esther! She doesn't ask me to do some insane crap. Although, well, Karla, Koharu, and Sakuna are pretty decent themselves. Esther is on my side!"

"How in the world did you come to the conclusion that Lady Memoir is decent but I'm not?"

"Sakuna's a pure, good girl, so she's okay. And Esther is a good girl, too."

"A-aww, Commander..."

I patted Esther's head. Only after I stopped did a question occur to me: How old was she? I'd been treating her as though she was younger this entire time.

Just then, Vill screeched.

"AAAAH! That's not fair, Esther! How dare you put on a good girl act to get Lady Komari to pat your head! I'll take this grudge to my grave!"

"Whaaa?! I didn't mean to..."

"This is strange. There's no way a non-sicko would approach Komari. You must be pretending, just like Sakuna Memoir," Nelia said.

"Um... I'm not pretending to be anything...," Sakuna said.

"Th-that's not true! I just sincerely don't feel right giving orders to my superior!" Esther said.

"I don't want to hear your excuses. Come on. Show us your sicko side."

"Wha?! Ms. Vill?! Sto... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-la"

Vill and Nelia launched a tickle attack on Esther.

I nimbly withdrew so as to not get embroiled in their strike. It was nice to see Esther getting along with everyone else. Hopefully, Vill wouldn't poison her brain.

Then a strong wind rumbled. Something whacked the wall, shaking the whole room.

"What awful weather," Karla whispered calmly. "We won't get a chance to go for a walk around town. The birthd—ahem. The trip is ruined."

"The weather forecast said it's the biggest snowstorm in three years." Koharu puffed her cheeks, still upset that she couldn't enjoy the open-air bath. "And we can't use teleportation Magic Stones. The mana is in disarray."

"Is that so? So we're stuck here, huh?" I said.

"There's nothing we can do but wait indoors. Oh, would you like a dessert?" Karla offered.

"Yeah. Thanks." I grabbed a skewer of sweet soy sauce—covered dumplings from the Fuuzen as I looked out the window. "I hope it's over by the morning. There's this place I wanna go to."

"Where? An omelet rice stand?"

"I mean, yes... But I wanna go to the top of the hill."

I recalled looking at that town.

When I'd gone to Frezier with my family, my mom took me to the top of that hill. And there, I saw an upside-down town in the air. I had no idea what that was, but I was curious if I could see that even now.

My mom had referred to that phenomenon as "the secrets of the world." It would be interesting to investigate it now that I was here in Frezier again.

I told Karla the gist of this.

"I see," she said while grabbing a skewer of dumplings. "An upside-down town, hmm... I'll try asking my grandmother about it."

"You can only see it once every few years, apparently. And it's supposed to be a phenomenon particular to Frezier."

"I—I know what you're talking about!" Esther exclaimed all of a sudden.

She had escaped from the hands of evil (Vill and Nelia) just in time, with the perfect excuse. She steadied her breath before continuing.

"The upside-down town. Like you said, it's unique to Frezier. Once about every three years, a great storm or other disaster occurs, and once that calms down, another realm shows itself."

"Another realm...? What do you mean by that?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know the details, either. Some people say it's the afterlife, but others call it another world in a different dimension. This is not unique to Frezier; there are many legends about this other land throughout the center of the Dark Core Zone. People disappearing out of the blue, people finding notes written in a language not used by any of the Six Nations..."

I was instilled with a sense of adventure just from listening to Esther's explanation.

I had my own hunch about this other realm. In my mind, it had to be related to the new moon world that had appeared when my pendant cracked.

"Perhaps the netherscreening will show after this snowstorm. The last time it

occurred was precisely three years ago, if I recall correctly."

"Stop talking nonsense! You think you can escape me?!"

"P-please don't, President Cunningham! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Nelia caught Esther again. Gertrude would surely grind her teeth in envy if she saw this. That maid really loved Nelia.

Karla munched on her dumplings and swallowed before saying:

"Well, in any case, we can't do anything until the snowstorm gives. Not even go take a look at the hill."

"Yeah. We can't even get in the open-air bath... Wait, now that I mention it, is Gertrude okay? She went there to grab something, didn't she? What if she was blown away?"

"Ahh." Nelia looked up at the ceiling, just now remembering that her maid was gone. (She'd wrapped her arms around Esther, right below her pits. Since when had they gotten so chummy?) "Should I go take a look? I'd feel bad if she tripped and fell and we left her unconscious out there."

"It is getting late, so how about we call it a day already?"

"Yeah. I think it's time to say good night. We don't want to make a racket late at night and bother the other guests... Although it's only those two Sapphires," Nelia said as she stood up.

Only our group and Prohellya + Pitolina were staying at the Crimson Snow Hut at the moment. We basically had the whole place to ourselves. Maybe no one else had made a reservation knowing there would be a snowstorm? I had no idea, so there was no use thinking about it. And luckily for me, everyone had forgotten about my punishments.

"Oh, right. We'll get you to do what we said tomorrow."

Or not. As I wallowed in despair, Karla and the rest got ready to leave. It really was over now. They all said good night and left one by one.

So ended our first day at the Crimson Snow Hut.

It was fun. It had been a long time since I'd gone to a hot spring. My wish for

tomorrow was to take a walk around Frezier...but that was up to the snowstorm.

A twinge of concern in my mind, I began getting ready for bed.



When Nelia Cunningham went to the bathroom to find Gertrude, she came across an unfamiliar Immortal on the second floor.

"Hey, you."

"Yes?" The Immortal turned around.

Her hair was tied up in buns. Nelia hadn't heard about any other guests here, but more importantly, she had her qualms about the place the Immortal was heading to.

"It says Staff Only."

"Yes." She drowsily scratched her head. "And I work here. Commander Komarin didn't tell you?"

"No. And you seem suspicious."

"Yeah, no wonder. I have the most suspect profession in the modern world: doctor. My name is Kuya. I'm treating Esther Claire's younger sister."

Oh. Nelia understood. She had heard that Esther's sister was bedridden. That explained why there was a doctor here, then.

"Bad luck the storm came in all of a sudden, huh?"

"You said it. I was going to go home after finishing the checkup. I didn't get a wink of sleep yesterday, too. Oh, sorry. No use grumbling about it to you."

"You have bags under your eyes. You must be exhausted... Is Esther's sister's illness that grave?"

"Yeah. I'm not at liberty to tell you about it, though, to maintain her privacy. Either way, I was thinking of checking up on her, since I'm stuck here."

Nelia stared closely at Dr. Kuya. She flinched and looked away.

"Wh-what? Is there something on my face?"

"No, nothing. It's just that this is the first time I've seen a decent doctor."

"Is that so?"

"Doctors tend to be masters of magic. You have a staff hidden under your clothes, don't you?"

Dr. Kuya's expression stiffened.

"And a combat staff, at that. Or do my eyes deceive me?"

"You're very observant, President Cunningham. No use hiding it, I suppose." Her expression softened. "This staff isn't much. I happened to be in the Enchanted Lands' army before changing careers, so I recycled the staff I wielded back then to use for treatment. I'm a cheapskate, that's all. I didn't want to get a new one when this one was still usable."

"Oh, so that's it?"

"By the way, don't get the wrong idea just because I look like a pretty young woman. I was in the army over thirty years ago. I'm over fifty now."

That was honestly surprising. Nelia had heard Immortals were long-lived, but she had no idea they looked younger, too.

In any case, she seemed like a decent person. Thinking it would be rude to pry any further, Nelia turned around.

"Sorry for stopping you. Good luck with your job."

"Yeah. Enjoy your trip."

They waved at each other.

Getting to Gertrude was the priority. Although she could be in their room already.

Nelia was walking through the hallway when she felt squirming mana behind her. She turned around, and Dr. Kuya was already gone.

"...?"

It must have been her imagination. No use thinking hard about it.

The wind echoed outside.

Monique Claire woke up.

A once-in-a-few-years disaster occurred. I rarely wake up at this hour.

She stayed still in the darkness as the tears poured out. Perhaps it was proof that she still had emotions.

The doctor had told her that the sickness ailing her was called "etiolation."

It made her feel like a haze was shrouding her mind. She was lethargic at all times. No matter what she did, her thoughts never took a turn for the positive. She could only curl herself into a ball on her bed and wait to expire.

She was afraid of dying like that. It made her tears flow.

But. However.

Something special happened today.

Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood had come to visit her.

Monique felt her heart soar.

For whatever reason, just speaking to her had given her hope.

"Commander Komarin..."

The world's strongest vampire was staying two nights in the Crimson Snow Hut. Would Monique get another chance to see her awake?

As she pondered this, the shadow approached.

"What is it?"

The shadow did not respond. It hunkered down by the bookshelf, staring at her.

It had first appeared right after Monique came down with her illness. It told her it would take her to a happy place. She figured it was there to comfort her.

"...Are you mad?"

The shadow did not respond. Or maybe it did. The wind was too strong, and it often sounded like its voice was being obstructed by something.

The shadow was mad at Commander Komarin. She didn't know why, but it

seemed to groan in resentment, asking to meet Terakomari Gandesblood at every turn.

Monique didn't think too much of it. She was getting sleepy again.

"Good night, shadow."

The shadow crept toward her. It caressed her with an immaterial hand. Esther had assured her it wasn't real. Her parents, too, were suspicious of its existence, and wondered if it was the reaper.

They were both wrong.

The shadow was here, and it was no reaper. She gave comfort to Monique.

Then she heard Dr. Kuya's voice from outside the door.

"Monique, are you awake?"

×

The sound of the wind roused me from sleep.

I stretched up to get a better listen, though I didn't exactly have to concentrate to hear the gales shaking the window. I guess we're not going outside today, either. I buried my face in the pillow.

I'll just go back to sleep. I doubt the sun is out yet, anyways.

It sure is warm, though. Is that Magic Stone heating? I will say that it feels pretty nice to be warm and cozy indoors while a snowstorm's raging outside... Mmm? Wait. Now I feel suffocated. It's like someone's hugging me super tight...

"Lady Komari... Look at the size of this candy bar... Chomp, chomp..."

"WAAAH?! I'm not a candy bar!!"

I shoved away my clingy maid and caught my breath.

"Candy...bar...," she muttered, squirming. What was Vill doing next to me? She had gone against the results of the wrestling match last night and tried to sneak into my bed, so with the help of Esther's mediation, we decided that everyone would sleep by themselves.

How about Sakuna, then? I glanced over at the bed by the wall.

She was nowhere to be found. Maybe she'd gone to the restroom.

"Vill. What are you doing in my bed?"

"One Lady Komari... Two Lady Komaris... Three Lady Komaris..."

She wouldn't respond. Her sleep-talk was absolute gibberish.

Whatever. I'll forgive you this once. I wouldn't want to wake you up. Now then, I should go back to sleep, too.

As I let out a yawn, I glanced at Vill's neck. Her pale nape shined beneath the faint glow coming in from the window. I stared vacantly at it for a while at first. I thought about how I'd sucked her blood before, clasping the corner of the bedsheet.

"..."

But as I kept staring, I was suddenly hit by a wave of thirst.

Then my memories from the end of last year reawakened. Or rather, the sensation I'd experienced back then. The spark I felt in my brain when I sank my teeth into her skin and Vill's sweet flavor raced into my body. I thought I hated blood, but the taste of that red liquid had tasted better than any drink I'd ever had.

I unconsciously crawled over to her.

I knew, of course. I had this ridiculous superpower called the Blood Curse. I knew I didn't have control over it, and that when I did suck blood, I would turn into a meteorite and destroy the world. Apparently.

Which was why I was supposed to avoid drinking blood.

But...maybe a little would be okay?

Think about this carefully, Komari. I drank Vill's blood like a woman possessed back in the Mulnite Empire. I think I downed more than a cup's worth. Surely, just one drop will be fine.

No, no, no. What am I thinking? This isn't like you, Terakomari Gandesblood. I've vowed to drink only tomato juice for the rest of my days. I'd better sail off to the world of dreams to purge myself of these thoughts...

"Mmm..." Vill turned over. She was on her back now, exposing her neck entirely.

I was salivating. I couldn't control myself. I was dying of thirst.

I couldn't just ask her to let me suck her blood if she woke up. That would be too embarrassing. So this was my only chance. I mean, have you ever seen her this defenseless before? No. This is your first and last opportunity.

I inched closer to her, making sure not to wake her up.

I drew my face near her neck.

It's gonna be okay. I'll only have a little bit. Just make sure she doesn't notice. My heart pounded restlessly as I placed my teeth on her skin, and...

BANG!! The door burst open.

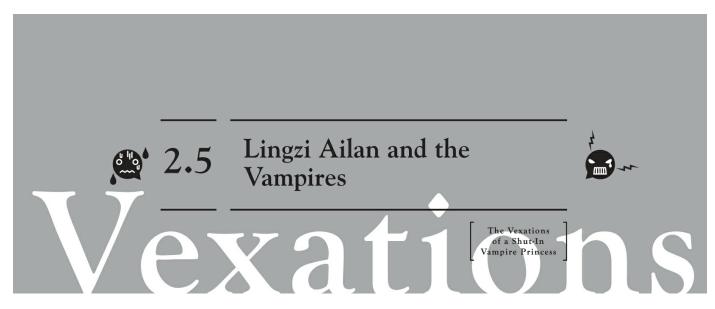
"Ms. Komari!! Bad news!!"

I immediately sensed danger and jumped away like a bamboo-copter. And then landed headfirst on the floor.

"Are you okay?!" yelled Sakuna Memoir, pale in the face.

"I-I'm fine. I must've been half asleep. I would never, ever try to suck blood, no ma'am, not a chance, not even if hell froze over... What about you, Sakuna? You want a rematch on our game of cards?"

"N-no..." Sakuna still had this incredulous look on her face as she explained something that made me feel like hell had actually frozen over. "Someone attacked Ms. Nelia and Ms. Gertrude. They've passed away."



Lolocco Gandesblood was interested in the Imperial Army. Not because she wanted to be a soldier or indulge in slaughter. The organization had gotten her attention because of one of its members: Helldeus Heaven.

"I've gone to church enough! Maybe I'll go see him directly!"

Komari usually referred to her little sister as the incarnation of initiative. The moment she thought of something, she took action. Lolocco thought this was the secret to success.

It was February 18. Saturday.

Koma and her stalkers had gone to some hot springs in the Dark Core Zone. Lolocco found it outrageous that Koma would go out on a trip without her permission. As she walked over to the Mulnite Palace, she plotted to get back at her sister by filling her socks with whipped cream once she came home.

The place was for authorized personnel only. But she just had to say she was there to deliver something for her daddy to get through. The Gandesbloods had absolute power in the palace.

The guards let her through with a bow.

"Hee-hee... I hope Lord Heaven likes them." Lolocco smiled as she looked down at the box of cookies she had bought at a luxury confectionery.

She had met Helldeus Heaven during the winter of last year. He'd tenderly comforted her when she was down from being dumped. He was unlike any other vampire she had met. The priest had this warm air about him that thawed Lolocco's heart.

She had promised to get him some snacks to thank him for his kindness. So technically, this visit wasn't unannounced. And he would hardly get mad at her. Lolocco justified her actions as she walked through the palace.

When they weren't off at war, the Crimson Lords worked at a place called the Crimson Tower. Helldeus Heaven was probably there, but she didn't even know where it was.

Lost, Lolocco decided to ask the nearest person for directions.

She looked around.

In a corner of the palace, sitting on the bench under a resting pavilion, was a girl.

She was dozing off in the gentle sunlight. She didn't look reliable, but there was nobody else around. Lolocco walked straight up to her.

"Hey, you. Do you know where the Crimson Tower is? I'm looking for Lord Helldeus Heaven."

The girl opened her eyes.

Lolocco nearly yelped in surprise when she realized the girl wasn't a vampire.

The green Immortal was wearing an outfit as frilly as a peacock. Her eyes were clear, like outer space. Lolocco wasn't one to fidget, but the girl's stare made her nervous.

"...Who are you?"

The green girl tilted her head. Lolocco caught a whiff of apricot on the wind. This was her first time looking at an Immortal up close, and her first impression was that this girl looked a lot like a plant.

"You're...not...Terakomari Gandesblood?"

"I'm Lolocco. Terakomari's my older sister."

"I see... So she really isn't here."

The green girl seemed dejected for some reason.

Lolocco, on the other hand, was frustrated to no end that the Immortal had compared her to her sister and been disappointed at the result.



The girl noticed that change in her emotions.

"I'm sorry. I'm Lingzi Ailan. Do you want to go to the Crimson Tower?"

"Yes. I'm meeting Lord Helldeus Heaven!"

"You love him, don't you?"

"Huh? What do you know?"

"I just sensed it... If you wait here, something good is sure to happen. I have some mooncakes. Would you like some while we chat?"

""

Lingzi Ailan flashed a mysterious smile as she tapped the bench, asking Lolocco to sit beside her. Lolocco didn't have the time to chat with this weird girl...but for whatever reason, she felt drawn to her.

The pavilion's ceiling was furnished with a heating Magic Stone. It shouldn't hurt to keep Lingzi company while she waited for someone else to pass by. Besides, Lolocco was curious as to why an Immortal would be dozing off in the vampires' headquarters.



"Draconic Meteor Lingzi Ailan...! Where'd she go?!" Flöte Mascarail yelled as she walked down the hallways of the Mulnite Palace.

Officials shrieked as she stormed past them, but she paid them no heed. The only thing on her mind was one word, three letters: war.

It all started with a letter that had arrived from the southern utopia, the Enchanted Lands.

"I want to talk about the door to the other realm."

Her Majesty the Empress had explained to her that a door to another realm opened in the Audience Room of the Mulnite Palace during the riots at the end of last year. Flöte had no idea what that even meant, but she couldn't question her dear Lady Karen's assertion of it as fact.

Originally, Terakomari Gandesblood was supposed to receive the diplomat, for she had gone to this other realm.

However, there had been some miscommunication, and now Terakomari was on a trip to the hot springs with her friends.

It was ridiculous. But even more ridiculous was the fact that Flöte had to deal with the Immortals now.

The Chancellor had chosen her because she "looked unoccupied."

"I'm very occupied, I'll have you know! Why in the world am I acting as standin for Ms. Gandesblood?!"

"Because you're so capable, of course!" Commander Helldeus Heaven yelled optimistically.

He, too, was told to accompany her because he wasn't busy.

"No regular Crimson Lord would be capable of substituting Lady Gandesblood. But you, you've been assessed as competent enough, Lady Mascarail."

"You make it sound like I'm beneath Ms. Gandesblood."

"Oh my God! Please forgive me this lapse of judgement!"

"Apologize to me, not your god! Not that I even care! That aside, where did she go? I can't believe someone in the Immortals' leadership is this happy-golucky."

The Enchanted Lands had sent over two people: Gongzhu Lingzi Ailan, and her retainer, Meihua Liang.

It happened fifteen minutes back. After meeting up in the VIP room, the four of them made small talk for a while. Then the two Immortals said they would be going to the restroom. And never came back.

This reminded Flöte of Julius VI, who'd ended up causing the vampire riots. She'd gotten lost, ran into Terakomari, yada yada, then BAM! Declaration of war.

Of course, Flöte realized that Julius VI had malicious intentions from the very beginning, but if Lingzi Ailan ran into someone who put her in a bad mood... maybe things wouldn't break down into war, but it could give her a bad impression.

"Let's split up and look for them. I'll look outside, you search the inside of the palace, Lord Heaven."

"It's too cold outside. Let me take care of that."

"Oh, are you sure? Very well, then. Thank you."

Flöte hurried down the hallway, the anxiety eating at her.

I better find them soon...or Lady Karen might get mad at me.



Lingzi Ailan had this strange air of magnanimity about her.

She didn't speak much, but she would listen to Lolocco go on about anything.

Apparently, the Immortal was there to meet Terakomari Gandesblood. Lolocco couldn't fathom why, but since Lingzi had come all the way here for her, she decided to talk about her sister.

"I just can't with Koma. She's always been clumsy, dumb, spineless, and incapable of doing anything without me. Until now, it had always been me leading her, playing with her. Like I was the elder sister. And I'm taller to boot."

"Is that so?"

"But she's changed recently. She went and got a bunch of friends while I wasn't looking! She's getting too cocky. She even looks more down-to-earth than when she was a shut-in."

"Your sister was a shut-in?"

"Yeah. She's a coward. Though, it wasn't really her fault... She didn't shut herself away because she wanted to. It was all because that girl bullied her. I really can't stand that she's a commander now."

"A Commander...? Are you referring to Crimson Lord Millicent Bluenight?"

"I don't remember her name. Whatever, what I mean is, it's all thanks to me that Koma's the person she is now! Hey, do you like pudding? She loves it. So I threw a bunch of it in her room. You should've seen her face get all messed up, it was so funny."

"Koma got back on her feet because I looked after her! There's a lot of other things I did, too. But she's so ungrateful... She went to the hot springs without me! She's getting too big for her britches now that things are going well for her after she became a Crimson Lord. I think it's high time I played the prank of the century on her. I'm plotting to shove cicadas in her shoes."

"Take it easy. Fighting is bad."

"I know... Oh, I just remembered now! She doesn't even know the other Crimson Lords who work with her! She's so useless!"

"...??"

"She doesn't even know Lord Helldeus Heaven."

"Ah..."

"The truth is...I wanted her to give it to him today, but since she's not here, I had to sneak in all by myself."

A question mark popped up over the green girl's head.

Lolocco panicked a little. Her sister always talked about how her conversations tended to wander.

But upon seeing Lolocco's paper bag, Lingzi seemed to realize something. She put on a soft smile and said: "Don't worry. I think you'll get to meet him."

"Huh?"

"Good things always come to assertive people."

She'd encouraged her without any basis, but even so, Lolocco was happy to hear that.

To be honest, she was nervous about meeting Helldeus. She wasn't sure he would like it. What if he hated sweets? What if he didn't even remember her? She couldn't hold back her anxieties.

But now, thanks to Lingzi, she could think more positively. She only had to find him.

"There is this thing called the mere-exposure effect. Perhaps you'll have luck if you just meet him multiple times."

"I don't really get it, but okay! Thanks, Lingzi!"

"Yes... Oh, he's here."

Lolocco followed Lingzi's gaze.

Her heart skipped a beat. The man she was looking for, Helldeus Heaven, was right there in the garden. He noticed them and hurried over.

Lolocco immediately stood up. First, she had to say hi.

"L-Lord Heaven...!"

"Ohh! You were here, Lady Lingzi Ailan."

He ignored her.

For whatever reason, he walked over to Lingzi with a smile on his face.

"Mascarail is worried. Let us go back to the room."

"I apologize. I just wanted to walk for a bit. However, I would like to ask you to give her some time first—Lolocco."

"Hm?"

He glanced at her as though he hadn't realized she was there.

But Lolocco didn't let that discourage her and bowed.

"G-good afternoon, Lord Heaven! Have you been well?"

"My, my, if it isn't Ms. Gandesblood! I'm glad to see you're well."

"You remembered!" Lolocco looked up at him, her heart racing. "Yes, I've been very well, thanks to you! I've begun frequenting church, too."

"Ohh! That is wonderful! So you've opened your eyes to God's greatness."

"Yes, viva God!"

"God is the GOAT!"

Lolocco had no idea what goats had to do with this, but if Helldeus said so, it had to be true.

She wanted to invite him for some tea, but she did have a touch of common sense to her. It was obvious he was in the middle of work.

She decided to end it at just handing him the present.

"How is work lately, Lord Heaven?"

"Same as always, although today is pretty busy in particular..." He glanced at Lingzi.

Lolocco wasn't sure what was going on, but she didn't want to impose. She handed him the bag of desserts with a smile.

"... I brought you this as thanks for the other day. I hope you like it..."

"For me? But I haven't done anything worthy of receiving such a luxury gift..."

"You did, and I want to thank you! Please, just take it!"

"Is that so. Well then, thank you."

Helldeus received the bag with a wide grin.

Mission accomplished. Now Lolocco Gandesblood had paid him back for the solace he'd given her, and had instilled him with a flattering image of herself. Now if only she could schedule another meeting for tea... Lolocco clenched her fists, her heart pounding.

"Please, enjoy them in your free time. They're very pricey."

"Oh, I know this brand of cookie. It's famous in the Imperial Capital. My wife loves them."

"Really? Then please, enjoy them with your wi—"

Hmm?

What did he just say?

"Thank you, Ms. Gandesblood. I thank God for the feast. Really appreciate the gesture."

"U-uh-huh..."

"My wife will be so glad. She just adores these cookies, that wife of mine..."

"YOU'RE MARRIED?!?!" Lolocco screamed her lungs out.

Helldeus gave her a puzzled look.

"The Church does not forbid marriage. She's also a member of the clergy."

"No, that's not the issue..."

"She's such a good person; she stayed by my side even after Julius VI excommunicated me. We run an orphanage together, by the way. It was her idea, actually, but I really didn't expect we would be able to keep it running for ten years."

No. No, no, no. This can't be...

Helldeus continued gushing over his wife, but it just went in one of her ears and out the other.

Lolocco felt her knees give out. Darkness clouded her vision. She'd experienced the same feeling many times before. A deep sense of despair as her love was crushed to bits.

Her limits were exceeded.

"......Oop."

Plop. She fell to the ground.

"Huh?! A-are you okay, Lolocco?!"

"Ms. Gandesblood?! Sh-she's dead..."

No, she wasn't dead. But she sure wanted to be.

Lingzi's and Helldeus's voices of worry reached her no more. The only thing inside her was emptiness. The despair of realizing her feelings were all for naught.

I mean, not that I couldn't have foreseen it.

"U-uuu..."

"Oh, she's alive. Are you okay?"

"WAAAAAAAH!!"

She couldn't take it. She wasn't the type to hold in her feelings, to begin with.

She jumped up as her emotions surged and clung to Lingzi, wailing. "Huh? Um..." Lingzi was confused, but Lolocco wasn't able to clarify things right now.

Whenever she got the urge to scream and cry, all she could do was scream and cry. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to go on.

"WAAAAAH!!"

"Um... There, there?"

"PAT ME MOOOORE!!"

So ended Lolocco's umpteenth love.



Flöte Mascarail was about to faint.

Lingzi Ailan was in the palace garden, but the relief of finding her lasted for less than a second.

A blond vampire was wailing as she clung to the Immortal. This could not be good. This could aggravate Lingzi Ailan and lead to international problems.

And to top it all off...that blond vampire seemed familiar. She was about to cause trouble all over again. Furious, Flöte stomped her way over to them.

"Ms. Gandesblood?! Weren't you at the hot springs?!"

"WAAAH! WAAAH!"

"There, there..."

"Stop crying already! She's one of the Enchanted Lands' Three Draconic Meteors! Lady Lingzi Ailan! I am so sorry, Lady Ailan, I will have a stern talk with her later on."

"WAAAAAAH!!"

"Let go of her already! Wait, aren't you taller than I remember?! Who are you?!"

It was not Terakomari Gandesblood.

But that did little to quell Flöte's anxiety.

The meeting with Lingzi Ailan came to a momentary halt as they took the time to look after the golden vampire, Lolocco Gandesblood.

Lingzi Ailan let out a sigh as she was shown to the Mulnite Palace.

In the end, Lolocco Gandesblood had left while yelling, "I'm not giving up!!" Lingzi felt bad for her, but she probably needn't worry too much about her getting back on her feet. Like a true Gandesblood girl, she had a strong spirit. Or rather, it was vampires in general who had such powerful energy. People weren't like this back in the Enchanted Lands.

"Terakomari Gandesblood..." Lingzi muttered her name.

The Crimson Lord had really gone on an outing, despite the fact that Lingzi had told her maid that she would be visiting on February 18.

Either way, the good news was that Terakomari was supposed to be back the next day.

I could take the time to look into the Mulnite Empire.

Just then, she got a call on her Correspondence Crystal. She poured in some mana to answer it.

"Lingzi, there was nothing strange about the Audience Room."

It was her retainer, Meihua Liang.

The reason they'd disappeared was quite simple: They were looking into the state of the Mulnite Palace after the riots. Meihua was still out investigating the palace even after Lingzi had reunited with the vampires.

"Thanks. So we really won't know until meeting Terakomari."

"It's true the door to the Netherworld opened. But I was hoping to see traces of it or something..."

"Don't worry anymore. Thank you."

"...Hey, Lingzi." Meihua paused briefly, then continued. "The Netherworld aside, I think we should have them help you."

"Yes, but..."

"At this rate, the Grand Chancellor and the Minister of Military Secrets will eat you alive. I don't want that."

Her homeland was already in dire straits. The prospect of its outdated, bigoted ways being reformed didn't look promising. The Tianzi was powerless. The Minister and his clique drank and laughed from early afternoon onward. Those ghouls were about to destroy the Ailan Dynasty. And Lingzi had been working to stop them.

But no matter what she did, it was all useless. The fire in the heart of the Enchanted Lands was about to give. Activists were derided in declining countries such as hers. She needed outside help to bring about change, just like how Nelia Cunningham had gotten Terakomari Gandesblood's help to reform Aruka.

"We can use Terakomari's mind. Everything will turn out fine with my power."

"Yes..."

Then Lingzi felt something gushing forth from inside her. She immediately covered her mouth with her hands.

She tried calming her breathing to prevent Meihua from noticing...and spat blood on the floor.

Oh no. So much has been going on that I forgot to take my medicine.

"Let's make a plan. She's coming back tomorrow."

"Ye...ah..."

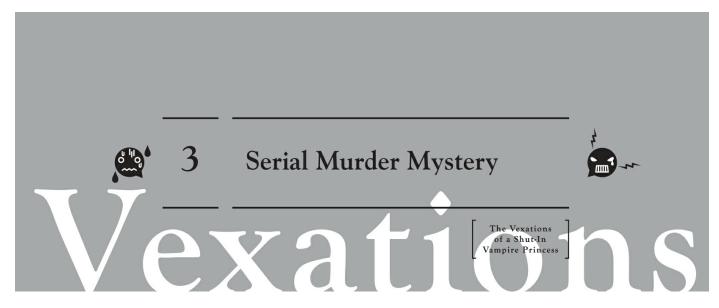
"Someone's coming. I'm heading there."

She hung up.

Lingzi was at a loss as she took out her medicine. Meihua would be furious once she saw the blood on the floor. Perhaps she would even curse herself for forgetting to make her master take her medicine.

She didn't want to see anyone angry or sad.

No choice. I'll destroy the floor. Lingzi took her pill and, quietly so the vampires in the palace wouldn't notice, activated her magic.



Nelia and Gertrude were found dead in the dressing room of the open-air bath.

The first person to find them was an employee of the Crimson Snow Hut who had gone to inspect the bathroom. The girls were discovered lying on top of each other on the floor. They had both sustained a fatal stab to their abdomens.

The Crimson Snow Hut fell into disorder.

What could be a bigger deal than the murder of a nation's leader and one of her commanders?

The employees ran every which way in a panic, but could do nothing else. Naturally. They were common folk; hostilities like this were outside their area of expertise.

"Hmm. It seems they were both killed in a single surprise attack," Vill coolly explained, hand on her chin.

We were at the scene of the crime, investigating at the request of the Crimson Snow Hut.

The bodies had already been taken to their room. The Dark Core was already healing their wounds, thank goodness, but it looked like they'd be out of commission for a day or two. Such a shame to have their trip ruined like that. It was more of a shame to get killed, period, though.

"...Hey, Vill. You don't think they got in an argument and then stabbed each other, do you?"

"Impossible. This is a murder mystery."

"Wait, wait. Couldn't it also be an accident?"

"Impossible. This is a murder mystery."

"What if they're pretending to be dead to play a prank on us?"

"Impossible. This is a murder mystery."

"You aren't giving me anything, are you?!" I clutched my hair and screamed.

Why had this happened? We'd just wanted to enjoy our stay in the hot springs. Was public order this bad in the Dark Core Zone? Yeah, actually. I was stupid for taking things so lightly.

"People always die wherever you go, Lady Komari. That's amazing."

"It's not amazing! It's the worst! Gosh, I feel so bad for those two..."

My long-awaited holiday was turning into a battleground before my eyes. But this time, it wasn't even war or a riot—it was a murder mystery. My head was about to explode from all the things we didn't know.

"...Who do you think is the culprit?"

"No idea. But there has to be someone hiding in the Crimson Snow Hut. The snowstorm is keeping everyone inside, and for whatever reason, we can't use teleportation Magic Stones."

"Could things be any worse? Anyways, my deduction is that it's someone with a grudge against Aruka."

"That's unlikely." Koharu (who had been investigating the crime scene?) approached us. "The culprit is provoking you, Terakomari Sensei."

"What do you mean?"

"They left a note."

Koharu handed me a damp piece of paper. The message on it was just barely legible. It looked like it had been written with the help of a ruler to mask the author's handwriting.

Terakomari Gandesblood,

Shiver in bed. The nightmare is just about to begin.

— the culprit

"...Huh? Why's it directed at me?"

"Too bad, Lady Komari. It seems the culprit is after you."

"Why would they be after me?"

"Why do you think they *wouldn't* be after you? Everybody knows what you've done with your Core Implosion. It's only natural that groups looking for power would set their sights on you."

"Who the hell are these 'groups looking for power'?"

"The berserkers of the underworld. The people who'd want to claim the title of champion by striking you down."

I couldn't wrap my head around a lick of what Koharu had said. The world sure was full of mysteries, huh? Ah-ha-ha.

"That aside, the perpetrator is clearly mocking us by leaving evidence behind like this. Don't you agree, Lady Karla Amatsu?"

"Yes." Karla tilted her head as she looked down at the spot where the bodies had been. "This is certainly unnatural. Why would they risk their cover to try and spook us? Are they absolutely assured that they can defeat us?"

"Considering they went after Lady Cunningham, I believe they'll be killing indiscriminately."

"Yes. By the way, I just so happened to remember, I think I left the laundry outside. I ought to go home now."

Before Karla could leave, Koharu grabbed her arm tight.

"No. We can't run."

"Please!! I don't wanna die!! Don't you get that this person is so skilled at killing that they were able to murder Nelia at the drop of a hat?! A feeble confectioner like me is helpless against them!"

"I'm saying we can't go home since there's a snowstorm outside."

"You don't know until you try it! I believe in possibility!"

"So you'd prefer to freeze to death and get turned into a snowwoman?" Koharu asked.

"Noooo!!"

Good friends as always, those two. I understood completely how Karla felt, though.

"I am so sorry." Esther, who had been moping by the wall, bowed to us. "The trip is ruined."

"It's not your fault, Esther. It's the culprit's fault for killing Nelia and Gertrude."

"And you might join the list soon, Lady Komari. Allow me to pay my respects in anticipation."

"No respects! I'm going home, too! Don't you have a spell to stop the snowstorm or something?!"

"No. Although I do have a Magic Stone that could blow a little breeze to flip up your skirt..."

"Throw that away!!"

"Ah. Look, there's text here," Sakuna said.

Vill, Esther, and I looked at where she was pointing. There were bloodstains on the floor, surely Nelia and Gertrude's. Upon closer inspection, they were a series of letters, written in the common tongue... "Ga"?

"What is this? Did Nelia write it?"

"It's a dying message. It would've been easy to understand were it the name of the culprit, but there isn't anyone staying at the Crimson Snow Hut whose name starts with that."

Things only got more and more confusing. What did she mean "ga"? Did Nelia want to eat some garlic bread?

I crossed my arms and mulled things over.

I never would've thought I'd come across a murder mystery. And one where the culprit was after me, at that. The fear taking hold of me was different from the kind I felt from the Seventh Unit's rampaging. Would I even be able to make it back home alive? I subconsciously grabbed Sakuna. I felt helpless.

Then I noticed a writhing black thing by the entrance of the dressing room.

It wobbled on the floor, as though it was observing me—as though it was examining its next victim. It stayed there on the bath mat for a while before silently passing through below the door and leaving the room.

I trembled. Then I recalled what Monique had said.

"The shadow is angry. Someone might die tonight."

That thing. Was that...?

"...The shadow?"

"Lady Komari, you should be clinging to me when you're afraid, not to Lady Memoir. C'mere, jump into my bosom, so I may give you the comfort you seek."

"No, wait, that's...the shadow!"

I held Vill at an arm's length as shivers went down my spine.

Was the shadow that Monique had talked about real? Had that thing killed Nelia? Had it left that letter?

No one else seemed to notice its presence, though.

"Very well, then," Karla muttered in resignation. "There's no use staying here any longer. Let's go back to our rooms and pray for the weather to get better."

"Praying to God whenever things don't go right. That's very like you, Lady Karla."

"Who am I supposed to rely on, if not God?"

"Luck."

"This is where you say me! Even if you don't mean it!"

Karla and Koharu argued on their way out. Just as they'd said, the case wouldn't be solved by just staying in the dressing room. Still, I called out to them anxiously.

"H-hey! I think... I think we should all stay together."

Karla turned around with a startled look.

"Of course, that's what I was planning on doing. I just want to get changed first...since I'm still in my pajamas."

"Wouldn't it be funny if you got killed, then?"

"No, it wouldn't! I'll be done right away, so I'll be okay! Now then, Komari. Let's regroup in the dining hall on the first floor thirty minutes from now. We'll meet with the staff of the inn to talk about what to do next."

"Will you really be okay? That's what people in mystery novels say right before they die..."

"There shouldn't be an issue. I'll lock my room." Karla smiled super optimistically.

Well, she is the Goddess. Combat skill aside, she's a very capable person, especially when it comes to planning and retentiveness. Surely she has something in mind. Doing some wishful thinking, I left the dressing room.



We had a late breakfast at the dining hall.

Funny how you get hungry even in the middle of a murder case. My tummy growled the moment they brought the toast to the table. *This isn't the time, tummy! Nelia and Gertrude are dead!* I shed tears of shame as I chomped on my toast.

"Are you okay?" Sakuna gave me a worried look. "You don't have to force yourself to eat if you don't feel like it. I'll have your leftovers."

"Sorry, no, I'm actually hungry... I just feel so pathetic munching on this tasty bread while Nelia and Gertrude are, well, you know..."

"Um...I don't really get it, but I think that you should eat if you're feeling hungry, then?"

That's not the issue. I feel bad about enjoying my breakfast when they can't enjoy anything. Oh well, I guess it's no use worrying about it. Not like I can do anything to stop it.

Just then, the windows clattered.

The world outside was pure white due to the snowstorm. It didn't seem like the weather would clear up today. Which meant we were trapped in the Crimson Snow Hut with the killer.

Screw this, I'm shutting myself in! is what I would've liked to shout, but it was plainly obvious that doing so would constitute foreshadowing.

"So cold, cold, cold... Won't the snowstorm please stop?"

Prohellya came in from the hallway wearing a winter kimono. She gave an "Oh!" the moment she saw us. Phony Pitolina was also with her.

"If it isn't Terakomari's group. Good morning."

"Good morning, Prohellya... Have you heard about the murders?"

"Of course. Nelia Cunningham and her maid were killed, right?" She sat down. "Gosh, it's so freaking cold." She put sugar in the coffee Pitolina served her as she yawned. She sure seemed nonchalant for someone who knew about the case. "It's too early for this ruckus. Also, a murder during a snowstorm? It's almost too perfectly designed."

"I will not allow anyone to get in the way of Lady Prohellya's holiday. I will kill the murderer the moment I find them."

"Easy, easy. Stuff like this adds to the entertainment... Pitolina."

"Right away, my Lady."

Pitolina took out a tiny piano-like thing from her pocket. She wound the key on its back and placed it on the table. A gentle classic melody followed. So it was a music box.

"Nothing more relaxing than a hot coffee and some music on a cold morning."

"Well... I suppose everyone has their own morning routine..."

"Oh, I'm not taking the situation lightly," Prohellya said before sipping her coffee. "I heard there was a message alluding to more upcoming murders? It really is as though we found ourselves inside a novel. The culprit must be really enjoying this."

"Only a sick bastard would enjoy murders."

"Whoa, Terakomari, aren't you the slaughter champion?"

"Course I am! Nothing more relaxing than a hot bloodbath and some screaming on a cold morning!"

I'd lost the ability to figure out when was the appropriate time to put on my false persona lately. But it turned out that I was actually able to use a stupidly strong power with my Core Implosion, so I guess it wasn't really a bluff anymore... I would have no idea what to do if I ever got that thing under control.

"A-anyways, you should be careful, too, Prohellya. The murderer is still hiding somewhere in the inn."

"Thank you for the warning, but I think there's something more important than the murder case. Haven't you noticed the strange being creeping around the Crimson Snow Hut? It doesn't seem to be up to any good."

"Huh?"

What did she mean? Was she talking about the shadow?

But before I could ask her about it, a loud voice echoed through the dining hall: "C-Commander! Terrible news!"

I had a very bad feeling about this. How many times did someone have to burst in yelling about bad news in one day?

Esther panted by the entrance, staring at us. Her lips trembled as she forced them open.

"Lady Karla Amatsu...is dead in her room!"



I told you!! I wanted to scream.

Vill, Sakuna, Prohellya, Pitolina, Esther, and I rushed over to Karla's room. Karla and Koharu lay unconscious on the bed, their chests dyed red. Vill walked up to check their pulses.

"They're dead."

It was over. How could the dread not take over my heart after so many

deaths?

Okay, so I saw hundreds die pretty much every day, but this time, it was eerie. We had no idea who'd done it! It wasn't as though the Lapelico army was charging against us up ahead. Although, if you asked me which one was better, I would have difficulty choosing.

"Wh-what do we do now?! You don't... You don't think they did this with Divine Instruments, did they?!"

"Karla and Koharu's wounds are beginning to heal, so don't worry about that. However, there is something strange about it," Vill said calmly. Meanwhile, I couldn't find a single thing that wasn't strange about this scene. "The inn employee who found them said that their room was locked from the inside. And as you can see, the window is closed."

"How did the staff member discover Karla and Koharu, then?"

"They knocked on the door and broke the lock after they didn't get a response. Which means...those two were killed inside a locked room."

"But the killer could've done it a million ways! We've got magic and stuff!"

"Indeed. There's probably no point in trying to figure how they did it... Oh my."

Vill noticed that there was a splash of blood on Karla's bed. It was similar to what Nelia had left behind...

"Now it says 'me.' Another dying message."

"What the hell does that mean ...?"

If they had the time to write that stuff down, they should've screamed for help instead.

Prohellya rubbed her hands together to warm herself up as she observed Karla's dead body.

"I see. So that's how it is."

"What is?"

"My predictions were correct. But it would be a waste to tell you. Guess I'll

respect the culprit's intent and show myself out."

"Hold on, Prohellya! You'll get killed if you walk around by yourself!"

"Heh. No I won't. I'm the strongest there is."

"That is correct, but even so, Lady Prohellya." Pitolina stopped her superior from leaving. "I cannot stand to see the murderer ruin your day off. I ask you permission to look for the culprit and kill them."

"What are you...? No. Well, actually... Right."

"Um, what does that mean?"

"Nothing. Okay, you go join Terakomari to find the culprit. Don't worry about me. I'll be warming myself in the bath."

"I understand. Please be careful not to catch a cold."

"Shut up about that, will ya? I'm too strong to get sick."

"Yes, indeed."

Prohellya left the room as she muttered, "Gosh, it's so chilly."

I was worried. Wouldn't this just lead to us finding the Sapphire dead in the bath? Well, it didn't seem like I'd be able to change her mind, so I just let her go.

"What about Karla and Koharu? Do we just leave them here?"

"That's the only thing we can do, at least until the weather lets up."

"Youuuuuuuuuuuuv've got to be kidding me!!"

I almost jumped in surprise at that that sudden tantrum.

I turned around and saw Pitolina, glaring at me furiously.

"What's up with this snowstorm?! Why's there a serial murder now?! My solo trip with my Lady is ruined!! And it's all your fault, Terakomari!!"

"Wh-what?! What did I do?!"

"I don't know! But I know it has to be your fault! All the rogues in the world are after you!"

u n

All the rogues in the world are after me? I think they're wasting their time... Pitolina didn't care about my lament, of course. She stomped forward and pointed her finger at my nose.

"Now take responsibility! Or else I'm chopping that off."

"What am I even supposed to do?! Do you want me to come with you to the hot springs another time to make up for it?!"

"Who wants to come with you, mosquito?! I'm telling you to solve this right now! At the very least, let my Lady get some rest!"

"Please stay back, Lady Komari. I will poison this insolent Sapphire to death," said Vill.

"No, don't go getting into a fight," I protested.

"You asked for it! I'm gonna kill all you mosquitoes! Come to think of it, one of you might be the culprit! I'll end every last—"

"Don't be hasty, Ms. Pitolina. Or I'll tell Ms. Prohellya about your true nature," said Sakuna, interrupting Pitolina.

"..."

Pitolina stopped in her tracks.

Then she started sweating up a storm, even though it wasn't hot at all.

"S-s-so what?! I just have to kill you before you tell on me. I can take on a couple mosquitoes in my sleep!"

"There's no point in killing me, thanks to the Dark Core," asserted Sakuna.

"I'm sorry, please don't say anything. I'll give you money." Pitolina bowed respectfully.

That was too easy. How did she even hide her true face from Prohellya normally?

Sakuna's reaction was a little scary, too. But she had been a terrorist at one point...so she did have experience with such tactics.

Just then, I saw the squirming black shadow again by the entrance.

"Okay, okay! I won't put everything on Terakomari. I'll catch the culprit myself. I already have my Lady's permission! So I'll just capture everyone in the Crimson Snow Hut and torture them one by one. That'll be nothing for me, since I was trained by the Committee..."

"H-hey! Look!" I exclaimed, pointing at the shadow.

Everyone turned to look at the door. Esther was the first to react, widening her eyes in disbelief as she stared at the mysterious black thing.

"I-is that the shadow?!"

"The shadow? What is that? I mean, it does look like a shadow?"

"Huh?! I've seen that thing before!" Pitolina screamed. "It showed itself last night when I was in the bath with my Lady. What is it? A natural phenomenon? The work of someone's magic?"

"That shadow...appeared where Nelia was killed, too."

"What? Please explain what's going on." Pitolina got up close to me.

I pushed her away by the shoulders while giving her a quick rundown. I told her that the shadow had appeared in the dressing room, and that Esther's little sister had mentioned it. Vill and Sakuna had a skeptical look on their faces as they listened to my explanation, but Pitolina grinned, her eyes lighting up like glowing ice.

"I see! Then I know where to go next!"

"Please wait, Lady Shelepina. That thing must be an illusion. I don't think it's related to the murders..."

"Hah! Can you vampires be any slower? The Polar Union way is to kill anyone who looks suspicious! That's gotta be someone's spell. And the culprit is obvious from what Terakomari just said! Monique Claire is using that shadow to kill! QED!!"

"W-wait, Major Shelepina! Monique wouldn't do something like that!"

That instant, the shadow disappeared.

Pitolina did not wait. She ignored Esther and ran away...then came back in like two seconds. Red in the face, she shouted at Esther.

"Tell me where Monique Claire's room is! Right now!"



"Hey, what are you all doing here? You woke up Monique."

Pitolina sprinted to Monique's room, but Dr. Kuya stopped her at the door. Obviously. She wouldn't let someone who (could) hurt her in.

"Let me in! Monique Claire used the shadow to take people's lives!"

"What're you talking about? I heard about the murders, but Monique has no motive to do such a thing. Besides, the shadow is just something she's hallucinating..."

"Enough! Take this!"

"Eep!"

Pitolina wrapped a cooled towel around Dr. Kuya's neck.

"That's freezing!" Dr. Kuya shrieked while writhing on the floor.

Pitolina seized the opening to get inside the room, and I followed after her.

Monique was very confused at the sudden intrusion, but Pitolina showed no remorse for her situation as she approached her bed.

"Monique Claire! It was you manipulating the shadow to kill!"

Monique was bewildered. Naturally. She had no reason to do that.

"What is this shadow? A sort of illusionary magic?"

u n

"What made you resent the victims enough to kill them? No, I don't care about your motives. You've ruined my Lady's holiday! That's enough of a crime!"

""

"Hey! Why won't you say something?! Ignore me, and I'll hurt you!"

"Wait, Major Shelepina! Monique is sick!" I said.

"Huh? Ooh, I'm sorry..." She lost her will immediately, only to flare back up a second later. "Wait, that doesn't make it right to kill! Monique Claire, explain your shadow! Explain it like I'm five!"

"The shadow...," Monique muttered. She drowsily rubbed her eyes and explained in the smallest voice, "The shadow came from far away, to take me to a happy place... And to meet Commander Komarin..."

"What? Make it easier to understand."

"Eek!" Monique winced.

Pitolina was being really immature. From the way she'd pursed her lips at Monique's reactions, I think even she knew it.

I pushed away the Sapphire and slowly approached Monique.

She looked up timidly up at me, holding her teddy bear close.

"Commander Komarin..."

"I'm sorry we barged in all of a sudden. We'll leave now."

"It's okay... Hey." Monique grabbed my coat, and she did it so quickly she pinched my belly, too. I had to hold in a scream. "Did someone die?"

"Um... Yes, actually..."

"I think the shadow did it."

"I knew it!" Pitolina exclaimed, but Vill, Sakuna, and Esther held her down. She had a pair of giant scissors in her hand and a look of pure wrath on her face. Put those away. You're scaring Monique.

I raised my hands and smiled so Monique wouldn't see the fight going on behind my back.

"What do you mean the shadow did it? Does it kill people?"

"I dunno. But it said it wanted to kill you..."

Why, God, why?

"Ah-ha-ha... What do you think it's plotting?"

"The shadow has two missions."

"Two... And one is staying by your side?"

"Yeah. And the other is telling you something, but its voice can't reach you due to the snowstorm. It seems like its body is in the Netherworld..."

I felt as though someone had shaken my brain.

The Netherworld. I wasn't expecting that word to come up here.

The Empress had told me about it after the riots at the end of last year. Apparently, that place Vill and I were transported during our climactic battle was called the Netherworld. Which meant that the shadow came from that new moon world? Could you go back and forth between worlds in the first place?

"I think...I might die soon, too."

I was stunned.

Tears rolled down Monique's face. Even Pitolina, for all her yelling about how killing the girl would solve everything, pursed her lips.

"Um... Why? What do you mean?"

"I don't think my heart will stop or anything, but I'm feeling less and less alive. I sleep longer and longer every day... And I don't even feel happy to be awake."

"No..."

"The shadow is worried about me. Dr. Kuya is trying to cure my illness, but it's useless. I hear that willpower is important to fight it...but I don't have any to spare."

What even was happening to her? We'd talked so merrily about books yesterday... Was it mental instability? Monique looked so sad you'd think the world was ending today. Maybe that's how serious this etiolation sickness was.

Modern society was built atop the power of infinite regeneration brought about by the Dark Core. The people had forgotten their fear of death and enjoyed life. The biggest example of this change in attitude was the popularity of those barbaric sports-wars.

However, the Dark Core healed only wounds of the body. Its blessings didn't

reach people with mental struggles like Monique. It was unfair.

"Monique...don't you have any dreams?"

"Huh?"

"My dream is to write novels. Don't you have something like that?"

"My dream..." She thought for a while before answering, "When I was little, I wanted to go many places. I wanted to run around the Dark Core Zone like you do. Most of all, I wanted to go to that upside-down town... But I can't move anymore. My spirit won't move..."

"I see... But you shouldn't give up on your dreams."

She gave me a look of surprise. I carefully chose my words.

"I won't say that you can do anything you want as long as you try, but I do think that you won't be able to move forward if you don't have an objective to work toward."

"Yeah. Maybe..."

Monique said nothing more.

I couldn't say anything else, either. I figured that her dream about going to many places could be the key to curing her illness...but I had no idea what to do with it.

Perhaps I should try talking to Dr. Kuya.

Then Monique collapsed on the bed. I stared at her face, worried, but then she began quietly snoring. I sighed in relief.

"Commander Komarin, don't worry about Monique."

Before I knew it, Dr. Kuya was standing by my side. She squeezed the cold towel and furrowed her brow in a serious expression.

"It seemed like she regained her willpower thanks to you. I knew you had a special knack for being a good influence on people. I should've been doing a better job, but oh well..."

"I have no talent. Monique's sickness isn't healed."

"Right... The truth is, there are a lot of people like her out there in the world. Not only people suffering from etiolation. There are people with wounds that the Dark Core cannot heal. I became a doctor because I wanted to do something about these incurable illnesses."

Dr. Kuya crossed her arms.

"It is far more difficult than one would think, though. The world relies too much on the Dark Core. Investigating all this from scratch is quite the undertaking."

"You're amazing, Dr. Kuya."

"I'm not. I can't save all the people I want to save. They slip from my hands like water... And even the organization I relied on for my research was dissolved recently. I don't have the luxury of being selective about my means."

"...?"

"In any case, Monique will be all right. Don't you worry about it."

If you say so.

"Lady Komari," Vill said from behind me. "Lady Monique Claire is unrelated to the murders. It was all this foolish Sapphire's misunderstanding."

"Who're you calling foolish?! This doesn't change the fact that she's suspicious!" Pitolina yelled.

"Vill is right. Monique has nothing to do with this."

I decided to ignore Pitolina in the meantime.

I was worried about Monique, but first, we had to solve the murder mystery.

"Who could possibly be the culprit, though? I have no idea."

"There are thirteen people in the Crimson Snow Hut who are still alive. Me, you, Lady Memoir, Esther, Monique, Lady Butcher, Pitolina Shelepina, Dr. Kuya, and five inn employees. Everyone has alibis for both murders."

"...Doesn't that mean it really was the shadow?"

"No. I mean..." Vill had a strange reaction. "I wonder. It could be the shadow, or it could be a fourteenth person. No way to tell."

"And where's this fourteenth person?"

"They could be hiding under your bed."

u n

"Don't worry. No matter what happens, I will protect you, Lady Komari."

I might not get any sleep tonight. If I even make it to tonight.

Shivers ran down my spine as I left the room.

I was worried about leaving Monique alone, but Dr. Kuya said she would stay with her. I had to focus on avoiding a third round of murders from happening.



However, things quickly came to a head.

Vill, Sakuna, Esther, and I cooped ourselves up in our room to pass the time. There was no sign of the storm letting up, so we couldn't even call the police or the army. Though I guess we were the army.

So anyways, just like that, it was shut-in time.

Being a master of the indoors, I had no issue myself, but I felt pretty bad for Vill and Sakuna. They must've been hoping to enjoy the hot springs.

"What should we play, then? Nothing that makes use of your brains, else Lady Komari will go on a losing streak again."

"That's where you're wrong. I am smart."

"Excuse me. Indeed, you have rare scholarly intellect. Well then, how about we play a game of war? Surely even you can win at that."

"Yes. I don't know how you play it, though."

"Um... I'll go to the restroom." Sakuna stood up.

I could not believe she was about to leave the room just like that.

"Wait a second." Vill stopped her before I could say anything. "It's dangerous to go alone. Please go right here where we can watch you."

"Yeah, that's... That's not right?! Let's just go all together. That way, the culprit won't be able to harm us easily."

"Um... It's okay, you don't need to concern yourselves."

"But the culprit's strong! They've killed two people at a time up to now, even."

"That's true, but..."

"Sure enough." Vill placed a hand on her chin. "They might not have enough time to kill you if you're only going to do a number one. No need to go all together in a group... So Esther, how about you accompany Lady Memoir?"

"Roger. Let's go, then, Commander Memoir."

"Y-yes. This is a bit embarrassing."

And so they headed for the restroom.

Something was off. The culprit wouldn't be able to do anything in the span of a quick trip to the bathroom...but from the way Vill was talking, I felt like she was hiding something.

Oh well. No use thinking too much about it. I'll just pray for their safety.

"Now, then. Seeing as the nuisances are gone now, let's play, just the two of us. If I win, you'll become my body pillow. If you win, I will become your body pillow. Okay?"

"I feel like both of those are the same thing."

We chatted about nonsense like that while waiting for Esther and Sakuna to come back.

As I mysteriously lost my third consecutive round of a game that was supposed to be based on luck, I began to feel uneasy.

The other two weren't coming back. There couldn't have been a line to the restroom, either. Our group and the Polar Union duo were the only guests here.

"...Hey, Vill, aren't they taking too long?"

"Now that you mention it..."

Vill casually looked out the window. The wind wasn't letting up yet. *How long are you staying here, you damn storm?*

"I'll go take a look. Hopefully they're okay."

"I will go with you. Let's also grab some snacks from the lobby while we're at it." Vill stood up, and— *BANG!!* The door burst open with a roar. Predicting the culprit had finally come after us, I tried hiding under the bed, but the gap was too small, so I hit my forehead on the floor. *I'll just pretend I'm dead already!* But then, I heard a familiar voice.

"Dammit, Terakomari!!"

It was Pitolina Shelepina.

She barged into the room holding a giant pair of scissors, like she was a burglar or something.

"The restroom! I found Sakuna Memoir and your subordinate dead in there! What in the world is going on?!"

"Wha ...?"

It was too sudden; my brain froze.

This has to be a dream. Maybe I'll go and get my head stuck in between the bed and the floor after all and knock myself out.

"This is no time to be passing out, Lady Komari. Let's go."

Vill carried me over to the restroom.

There I saw Sakuna and Esther's corpses.

They had both been thrown into a booth. Their chests were dyed red and bore the hallmarks of a stab wound. Neither girl had an expression of anguish on her face; it was like they were sleeping. But after checking their pulses, Vill had this to say: "They're dead."

"Are you serious?!"

"I told you! Why did you let them go alone?! Even a baby would realize that the killer would off those puny vampires the moment they stepped out!"

Pitolina grabbed me by the collar and rocked me back and forth.

She was right. I was beneath an infant. Karla aside, not even Nelia could stand against this enemy. It had been insane to let Sakuna and Esther go away by

themselves.

"There's something written in blood on the wall. Now it says 'ro."

"Who cares?! We just gotta catch the culprit and kill them! Then it'll all be over!"

"What did Lady Butcher have to say about this?"

"My Lady ordered me to do as I wish! And I wish to kill the person responsible for ruining her peaceful day off!"

"Good grief." Vill sighed.

"Good grief" was putting it lightly. That culprit was out to get me. They wanted to frighten me by killing everyone else first. And their strategy was working marvelously.

I was terrified. At least just as scared as when the chimpanzee had charged at me.

"Lady Komari? Are you shaking? Do you want a hug?"

"N-no! Let's take Sakuna and Esther back to the room. I don't wanna leave them here..."

I reached out for Sakuna, but then, Vill grabbed my arm.

Her expression was as composed as ever.

"You need to rest, Lady Komari. I'll carry them."

"And I won't be helping anybody! I'm not taking care of some dead mosquitoes!"

"No one asked for your help, Sapphire."

Vill nimbly picked both girls up, holding one on either side.

She really was very strong, huh. Actually, aren't vampires supposed to be strong in general? My muscles get sore just from doing three push-ups, though.

I lamented my own weakness as we headed back to the room.

"It seems the employees have all but disappeared. Perhaps they were killed, too."

We headed to the dining hall after leaving Sakuna and Esther in the room.

It was past noon. About the time when my stomach would be eating itself. But now, I had no appetite. The most I could do was eat a loaf of bread that Vill scrounged up for me.

"That's right!" Pitolina scoffed while tapping her foot. "You just realized? I haven't seen any staff members for a while. I tried ringing the bell at reception, but no one answered. I looked inside the office, and no one was there. I've found no bodies, but they must be dead already! That shadow wants to kill everyone, guests and employees alike!"

"Hey, Pitolina, should you be leaving Prohellya on her own?"

"Don't worry about her. She's the strongest there is."

It was true that I couldn't picture Prohellya getting killed.

I munched on the bread. After the first few bites, my appetite naturally returned. What could you do?

But why had the inn staff disappeared? What was the culprit trying to do? Slaughter everyone? You've gotta be kidding me...? *Hmm, this could work for a novel, though. Hey, I'm getting over my writer's block! Ah-ha-ha-ha!*

"My, I forgot to get you a drink. I'll go grab some milk."

"Yeah... Thanks."

Vill stood up and walked over to the fridge in the corner of the dining hall.

Pitolina clicked her tongue across from me before taking a sip of her coffee. Then she did a double take at me, for whatever reason.

"...Terakomari, you look surprisingly weak up close."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"They say you're on my Lady's level, so I wondered what sort of vampire you might be. I pictured you as someone as smart, daring, and powerful as Prohellya Butchersky... But the truth is that you're just a wimp. And short, to boot."

"What does my height have to do with this?!"

"Right, it's not okay to make fun of people's physical characteristics. I

apologize. But you have no value without your Core Implosion. You're unworthy of my Lady. If someone like you joined the Polar Union, the General Secretary would eat you alive."

What does she mean? Also, was the General Secretary that tall guy?

"What I mean is!" Pitolina crossed her arms and yelled upon seeing my confusion. "I cannot let a vampire take care of things. I will solve this case. You can go and shut yourself in your room and tremble, waiting for the danger to pass...like a bear in hibernation! My Lady says this all the time."

"Uh-huh..."

"In any case, the culprit is obvious. It's that mysterious shadow that keeps showing up in all the crime scenes. And the only one who can contact it is Monique Claire. My hypothesis can't be wrong."

I felt chills.

Right. Monique. Was she doing all right? Dr. Kuya was with her...but it was only the two of them in that room. That made them far easier targets than Nelia or Sakuna.

I couldn't stay sitting there. I placed my unfinished loaf of bread down on the plate and stood up.

Then, as I began walking away...

"Eeeek!"

...I heard a scream.

It had come from nearby. Pitolina and I turned around on reflex and, there, by the fridge, we saw Vill on the floor.

"...Huh?"

"Dammit, Terakomari!"

Pitolina dashed up to her.

A knife was buried deep in the maid's chest. I felt myself grow pale as I approached her. Vill thrashed about for a while, staring into my eyes, until all strength left her body, and she finally went limp.

What the hell? Why in the world is this happening?

All she did was walk away for a second!

"This is outrageous! Are they trying to make a fool out of me?!"

"Vill... This can't be..."

"There's no time to waste moping! We have to find the culprit right a—" Pitolina stopped mid-sentence.

I couldn't even turn to look at her. This killing was different from the other ones. Pitolina and I were right there, but the culprit had still murdered Vill. Just like that. Without us knowing.

I stared in dismay at the stab wound Vill had sustained, then noticed that there was a message written in blood beside her. This time, it said "om."

"...It's here."

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Pitolina was staring at the entrance to the dining hall, a stern expression on her face.

I followed her gaze and laid eyes on a black shadow standing upright. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be shaped like a person. It wavered and flickered, as though provoking us.

Our stares locked for five seconds.

Then the shadow dissolved back out of the door.

"I'm not letting you go! Let's follow it, Terakomari!"

"Huh? Wait! But Vill..."

I couldn't put up a fight. Pitolina pulled me away from my fallen maid.



In the dining hall, after Komari left. In one section of the wide, deadly silent space.

Villhaze rose from the dead.

"...They're gone. Oh well, this shouldn't be an issue," she muttered as she

pulled out the knife buried—or rather, stuck to—her chest.

She fixed her clothes and wiped away the drinking blood on her hands. She stood up like nothing had happened and stretched.

The Dark Core hadn't brought her back to life. She was never dead to begin with.

"Didn't account for Pitolina Shelepina, but thankfully, she's dim enough not to realize. Now then, it's about time we headed to the main venue."

Vill left the dining hall to go upstairs, walking through the hallways while making sure no one was around. All would be for nothing if Komari noticed her now. Though she figured Komari would be too dense to notice anything. Villhaze arrived at the game room.

"Lady Cunningham. It is done."

"Villhaze! Come on in!" Nelia Cunningham's voice came through the gap in the door.

Villhaze silently entered the game room, and there, she saw a table full of dishes. The walls and ceiling were adorned with flowers and mana lights. Atop the stage was a banner reading, HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!

This was the birthday party venue, and it was full of people who were supposed to be dead: Nelia, Gertrude, Karla, Koharu, Esther, Sakuna, and the Crimson Snow Hut staff. They were all happily preparing for the celebration.

"How's Komari doing?"

"She was frightened. Honestly, this plan wasn't very much to my liking..."

"This's how we do it in Aruka! Scaring the birthday girl and making her feel all alone somewhere with a murderer on the loose, when, *BAM!* The party begins! Operation Birthday Shock! I just know Komari will be crying tears of joy."

"I will not dispute the crying part."

"Besides, wasn't she having writer's block? She needs shocking experiences like this to stimulate her brain. She's gotta get some ideas for her story after living through her acquaintances dying one after the other."

"Her acquaintances die one after the other every day in the battlefield, though."

The serial murders at the hot springs inn had been nothing but an elaborate trick. There was no culprit. All the murders were made up. Nelia, Gertrude, Karla, Koharu, Sakuna, Esther, and Villhaze had never died. They'd only played dead.

"Funny how Lady Komari thought we were really deceased."

"We made sure she wouldn't touch us. Although I'm sure she wouldn't have realized even then. She'd get the idea in her head just seeing us stabbed and bloody."

"The funniest thing of all is that Pitolina Shelepina didn't realize, either."

"You said it. That girl needs retraining," said Prohellya Butchersky, elegantly sipping some coffee in the middle of the room.

The Polar Union pair was unaccounted for in this plan. Esther was supposed to get the Crimson Snow Hut all for themselves, but Prohellya and Pitolina had made reservations three months in advance, so they couldn't cancel them.

They'd decided to just ignore their presence and move on with Operation Birthday Shock.

But then Prohellya caught on to their scheme in the middle of things.

"Either way." She puffed her cheeks. "You could've told me about it. Now I'm here without a present. I guess I could play the piano there instead."

"We can't leak intel to the Polar Union. Can't let the General Secretary know," said Nelia.

"What's he even going to do with that information?"

Aruka and the Polar Union were not on good terms. This was part of the reason why they hadn't told Prohellya about the birthday plan.

I think Lady Butcher's trustworthy, though, thought Villhaze.

In the end, she'd ended up collaborating after putting two and two together.

"Whatever. Why didn't you tell Pitolina Shelepina if you'd realized what was

going on, though?"

"True. Now she thinks it's because of this imaginary shadow and she's going berserk," said Villhaze.

"It wouldn't be fun to have your superior spell everything out for you. That's the Polar Union way," said Prohellya, grabbing a matcha pudding and eating it without permission.

"Don't eat those yet!" Karla admonished her.

Prohellya sulked, but continued snarfing down the pudding.

In any case, it was true that Pitolina's involvement had gotten in the way of the plan. Komari was supposed to connect the dots of the dying messages and show up at the party venue.

"Ga." "Me." "Ro." "Om." — "Game room."

But Pitolina had dragged her off before she could even think about it.

"Maybe I should have stayed alive to guide them here."

"That would be no fun. We're doing this thing, and we're doing it right."

"Still...I don't think Lady Komari can decipher the message on her own. She calls herself a scholarly intellectual, but you'd be hard-pressed to get an actual insight out of that girl..."

"How could she *not* decipher the message? The answer is literally spelled out for her. Aren't you selling your master way too short?"

Vill couldn't help but be worried. What if Komari was hugging her knees, shivering in the hallway?

"Everyone, look!" Sakuna said all of a sudden. "The sky is clearing up. It seems like the blizzard is over."

"Ohh! Nice!"

Everyone in the venue turned to look at the window.

Cheers spread through the room as the thick clouds covering the sky slowly drifted apart. Sunlight shined down between the gaps in the clouds. The tranquil townscape of Frezier returned. The wind had died down, too.

By the way, the bad weather was a complete coincidence, although it added to the mystery-novel atmosphere. (The stipulation about not being able to use Magic Stones to teleport was a lie, though.) And now, just as the party was about to begin, the weather had cleared up. Villhaze couldn't help but feel that divine intervention was at work.

"Huh...?" Someone exclaimed.

Then, Villhaze also took notice. Something was floating in the sky. Perhaps "spreading" would be a more accurate description.

"What is that? A town?"

"That's the netherscreening! Frezier's special phenomenon!" Esther leaned forward in excitement.

There was a town upside down in the sky. This was the mysterious phenomenon that Esther had explained yesterday: scenery from another realm being projected in the heavens.

The town looked older than those commonly found in the Dark Core Zone. The stone architecture was from about two hundred years in the past...although the architecture was a tad different from the historical buildings of this world.

"What a view! Hopefully Komari arrives soon to see it...," said Nelia.

"I don't think she's going to come on her own. Let's leave a message casually saying to come to the game room," said Vill.

"Okay. Everything here's ready anyways."

Just then, they heard a harrowing shriek come from the hallway.

Villhaze and Nelia looked at each other. What just happened? As they wondered, Prohellya stood up, gun in hand.

"That's Pitolina's voice."

"What could be— Hey, wait!"

Prohellya threw away the rest of her pudding and ran. Komari could find them if they made a ruckus...but this wasn't the time to worry about that.

Villhaze had a bad feeling about this. She couldn't stay put.

Ignoring Nelia's pleas, she followed behind Prohellya.

They found Pitolina Shelepina in a hallway on the second floor.

A knife was buried in the back of her head. Blood had splattered everywhere, dyeing the floor red. This wasn't what the others had looked like when they faked their deaths. She was obviously dead.

"Wh-what is happening?" Nelia whispered, shock on her face.

This made no sense. The murders were all a trick.

And yet...there it was, an actual dead body. Who had done this? Everyone but Pitolina and Komari were in the game room, in full view of each other; none of them could have done it.

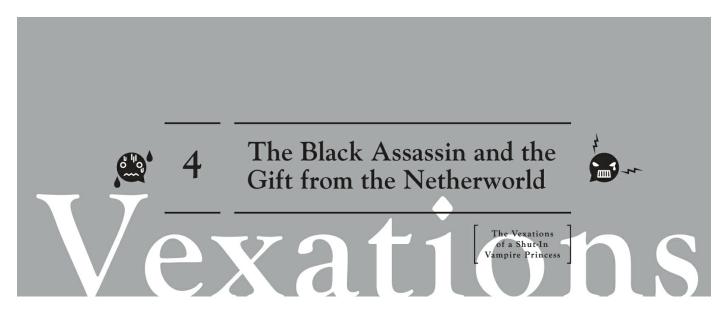
"I see." Prohellya furrowed her brow. "She fell into a trap. Look at the ceiling. There's a cut wire hanging."

"How primitive. But who would do this?"

"There were few people outside the game room. Obviously, Terakomari couldn't have killed her. And Monique Claire is even more unthinkable. She's sick and bedridden."

"So who was it, then? Are you saying it was an accident? Or..." Nelia suggested.

"Right. You've noticed, haven't you?" Prohellya sneered. Then she stoked Villhaze's worries. "A vicious character has been hiding in the Crimson Snow Hut all along. I always thought it wiser to believe what Monique Claire said."



It was the time to act.

One could only think God was on her side. Terakomari Gandesblood, who was typically surrounded her friends, had now been conveniently isolated, thanks to none other than her friends themselves.

She hadn't gotten a wink of sleep yesterday. She was feeling drowsy.

Just thinking about that spiteful vampire made her blood boil.

She would not get away with it. That girl had destroyed her peaceful life in Inverse Moon. She understood that many people around the world thought that Terakomari's actions were worth celebration, but her brightness was anathema to those who preferred the dark.

"It's time."

She was in Monique Claire's room.

There was no need to put up appearances anymore. She had no duty to that woman in black.

Were she to come back with news of defeating Terakomari Gandesblood, then Spica La Gemini would naturally let her in. After all, Lady Spica was very considerate of her peers.

"I'll support your dream!" she'd said with a smile.

So it was time to get rid of that vampire. Time to make her pay for all the suffering she'd forced her through.

Etiolation wore out a person's mind and spirit, but the illness healed by itself.

No matter how drenched in darkness someone's heart was, the tiniest of things could restore its brilliance. Take, for instance, how Monique Claire regained her spirits by just talking to Terakomari Gandesblood for a while. The heart had regenerative power equal to that of the Dark Core.

Her mission was to periodically whittle away at the girl's willpower; that woman in black had given her a Divine Instrument for the task—the Cogito Staff. A fantastical weapon that had the power to open someone's mental wounds. She'd used it to magnify Monique Claire's etiolation.

The woman in black described it as a load test on Monique's heart. She had to come here every Saturday to use the staff on Monique while pretending to cure her.

But she no longer needed to follow those instructions. If she killed Terakomari Gandesblood, then her goal would be accomplished.

"...What's wrong?" Monique Claire woke up.

Let's end this before she arrives. She took a knife out of her pocket. Not in her wildest dreams would Monique Claire have thought the woman in front of her was about to kill her. Her innocent glance only added fuel to the fire. Made her want to end the girl's life even more.

She raised her knife. And then, Monique Claire opened her eyes wide.

"Die."

This was an act of rebellion against the woman in black.

She swung the knife down quickly.

"...What are you doing...?!!"

"?!"

Blood splashed, but her blade hadn't gouged Monique Claire's heart.

Before she knew it, a girl was standing in front of her.

Golden hair. Crimson eyes. A bearing so gallant it was as though she had been born to condemn evil. A vampire whose every trait got on her nerves—Terakomari Gandesblood.

Crimson blood dripped down her sleeve.	



She had stopped the knife with her arm. Terakomari gritted her teeth.

"...Dr. Kuya, don't you know that hurts?!"

She hated everything about that vampire.

The culprit—Monique's caretaker, Dr. Kuya—frowned as she pulled out her knife.

Pitolina assaulted the shadow with her giant scissors.

Snip, snip went the ludicrous attacks. But they couldn't touch the shadow. Even when she landed a hit on the entity, her weapon slipped right through it, doing no damage. Instead, they wrecked the wall and pillars in her vicinity.

"Wait, Pitolina! You're smashing the building!"

"People are getting killed! The Polar Union will pay for the damages, don't worry! Priority number one here is killing the culprit!" the Sapphire girl absurdly argued while swinging her scissors around.

The moment I saw an expensive-looking vase decorating the hallway breaking into pieces, my first thought was, I'm going home.

Yeah. I have no reason to go along with Pitolina. Why can't I just go back to the dining hall and look after Vill? But just as I was turning around...

"Stoppp!"

Pitolina charged at the shadow like a vampire from my Seventh Unit.

The shadow dodged, moving like a piece of paper. The next moment, I heard a *beep*, as if something had gone off.

"Huh?" Pitolina exclaimed.

A knife plunged from the ceiling at deadly speed.

I had no idea what was going on, but the next thing I knew, the knife had already plunged deep into Pitolina's head.

It was a trap. We'd fallen into a trap. And it was already too late. Pitolina let

out a ghastly screech and fell to the floor. She tossed and turned for a while before she finally said, "L-long live my Lady..." and lost consciousness.

She was dead. The life had left her body. Did this mean the shadow really was the culprit? Despair took hold of me. The shadow drifted up to me.

"Terakomari Gandesblood. I do not like you."

I felt like I was gonna die from the sheer shock.

The shadow spoke to me. It was no animal or natural phenomenon.

I stood there frozen in disbelief.

"You... Why did you do this?! Killing is a crime!"

"She attacked me."

""

No argument there. It was self-defense.

The shadow turned around and went farther into the hallway.

It was heading in the direction of Monique's room. I had no idea what the shadow was, but I felt like it could only be dangerous to let it go. At the very least, there was no denying it had killed someone now.

I hurried after it. From behind, it looked like it was challenging me to follow it. Finally, it sneaked into Monique's room.

The two really were connected somehow.

I couldn't let the shadow go free. I ran as hard as I could, prepared for the muscle pain that would come tomorrow.

I placed a hand on the door and pushed it open without stopping.

"Monique! Are you okay?!"

Then I saw something I was not expecting.

The Immortal with her hair in a bun, Dr. Kuya, was holding a knife above Monique.

It did not seem like a prank or anything of the sort. I could feel her intent to kill.

I didn't understand what was going on, but I ran ahead automatically. Dr. Kuya swung down her blade, but right before it reached Monique, I slithered in between them.

Agony shot through my arm. It took my whole strength to hold my ground.

"...Dr. Kuya, don't you know that hurts?!"

The Immortal's eyes widened.

I wanted to cry from the pain. In fact, I was crying already. Why? Why? Why would Monique's doctor be trying to kill her? Where had the shadow gone? Why had the serial murders taken place? The vortex of questions was about to make my head explode.

Dr. Kuya pulled her knife out from my arm and leaped back.

I fell to my knees, screaming in pain.

From behind me, Monique muttered in surprise, "Commander Komarin..."

"It's all right." I smiled to her before turning back to Dr. Kuya.

She was emanating fury.

The bloody knife was in her right hand, and her scary staff was in her left.

"Dr. Kuya...why?"

"Why? Because you came here." Her voice was trembling with intense emotion. "I don't care what happens to Monique Claire so long as I get to kill you. I won't have to obey that woman anymore. Because once I place your head on a platter...Lady Spica will welcome me."

"Lady Spica...?"

"You know her. The Wicked God Slayer. I was her loyal servant. And this is the proof," Dr. Kuya said as he rolled up her sleeve.

On her arm was the eerie mark of an inverted moon. The emblem of terrorist organization Inverse Moon.

I was at a loss for words. Kuya wasn't this girl's doctor—she was an assassin sent by Inverse Moon. Monique and I had been tricked.

But why? For what purpose?

"I don't get it... Weren't you trying to cure Monique's disease...?"

"I was not healing her. In fact, I was maintaining her etiolation."

I heard Monique gasp behind me.

I could do nothing but hold my left arm and crouch down in pain.

"This Divine Instrument, the Cogito Staff, has the power to open mental scars. I've been coming to the Crimson Snow Hut every Saturday to use it."

"Why...?"

"Supposedly, it's for an experiment about breaking people's spirit. This spirit thing sure is interesting, though. No matter how many times you harm it, it will always heal with time. *Willpower* always comes back. Because of that, I've had to stay in this remote town for months..."

"Oh, screw you! Do you have any idea how hard it's been for Monique?!"

"It's been much worse for me!"

A knife flew at us. I hurried to get myself between it and Monique, but I didn't deflect it correctly. The dagger opened a red line on the back of my right hand. Gritting my teeth to withstand the pain, I managed to glare at Dr. Kuya.

The woman was emanating pure hatred.

And for some unknown reason, it was directed at me.

"The people praise your achievements... They lauded you after the Six Nations War, then after the Heavenly Ball, then after the vampire riots... They see you as the hero who saved the world... The savior who got the people of the Six Nations to join hands... You get all those titles and honors. But have you ever given a thought to those who were driven to ruin under your fists of justice?"

"What are you talking about ...?"

"You smashed Inverse Moon to pieces. Lady Spica and the Lunae have vanished. I liked that place... And you destroyed it! You took away my peace! All because of your self-centered sense of justice, you stupid piece of shit!"

I understood how she felt.

Still, I felt burning fury within me.

My self-centered sense of justice? You're the one being egocentric here. I fought Inverse Moon with everyone's help because they were harming the people of the Imperial Capital. It's true that my actions may have devastated other people... But was that any reason to hurt Monique? Did your pain justify taking away the dreams of an innocent child?

"You... You were manipulating the shadow? You killed Vill and everyone else?"

"What? I can't believe how dense you are. How can you even make it as a Crimson Lord without the wit to figure that out?"

There was one thing I had figured out, though: I could not let Dr. Kuya roam free. Otherwise, she would hurt Monique even more.

"Commander Komarin... You're bleeding...? Are you okay...?" Monique anxiously grabbed at my clothes.

I decided to protect her, no matter what.

"Don't you worry. I don't feel a thing."

"But you're going up against a terrorist..."

"And I'm a Crimson Lord. I won't let her lay a finger on you."

I think I wasn't wincing then.

Monique pursed her lips in astonishment. I sensed her belief in me. Her frozen expression thawed into a grin.

See? You can smile.

Right after that moment of relief, Dr. Kuya hit me in the side with her manaimbued staff.

I just barely managed to guard my face. I felt my bones creak as I was blown backward. The moment I hit the wall, I blacked out for an instant.

"You took away the place where I belonged. Back when I was in Inverse Moon, I could do all the research I wanted. But now, I don't have the slightest

freedom. The idiots back at Jingshi won't let me do anything. And it's all your fault. You have to pay. Apologize with your death," Dr. Kuya cursed me as though she were in a trance.

Mana gathered in her staff. She was going to shoot a spell at point-blank range.

I couldn't feel my arm. It was over. I couldn't protect Monique.

"...Commander! Commander..."

"Monique..." I forced myself not to shake as I spoke to her. "This is embarrassing after I showed off earlier... It's downright pathetic, really... But I want you to help me."

"What ...?! I'll do anything I can!!"

"I want your blood, Monique."

She accepted right away. Monique crawled on her bed toward me and held up her right arm to my mouth. This was the second time I was using Core Implosion out of my own volition. Honestly, it still didn't feel real. But there was no other way. I steeled myself and brought my teeth to her arm.

"I'm not letting you use your Core Implosion!"

Of course, the enemy wasn't about to sit back and watch.

Dr. Kuya's spell was ready. A tremendous volume of mana converged on her staff and, the next moment...the sound of a gunshot pierced the air.

"Gagh ... ?!"

The staff was blown out of her grasp, and Kuya's spell went off without a target. A huge mana blast smashed through the wall and disappeared into the blue sky. Dr. Kuya clutched her right hand as her face contorted in pain.

"Wh-what?!"

"Wah-hah-hah! Once again, by the breadth of a hair! You'd be dead if it weren't for me!"

Prohellya Butchersky stood by the door, smoke rising from the tip of her gun.

I wasn't about to let this opportunity go to waste. Ignoring Dr. Kuya's

screams, I bit into Monique's arm. She squeezed her eyes shut to resist the pain. It'll be over right away, I thought, lapping up her warm blood.

Then the world turned crimson.

×

I failed. I failed. I failed.

It felt like she'd been thrown into a crimson pit of despair.

Terakomari Gandesblood activated her Core Implosion by sucking blood. On the one hand, this meant she posed no threat as long as she didn't have access to blood. On the other hand, escape was impossible once she did get her hands on it.

Prohellya Butchersky was blocking the door. She held up her gun with a smile of total calm on her face, anticipating the slaughter that was about to take place.

Dr. Kuya's vision darkened with rage. *I should've killed her sooner.* She ground her teeth as the crimson storm swirled.

The vampire princess stood beside the bed, emanating bloodlust.

Protecting Monique Claire, she glared sharply at Dr. Kuya and parted her lips.

"You."

Dr. Kuya recovered her staff and poured mana into it, chanting a spell under her breath. She couldn't let herself be struck down so easily.

"Repent."

"You don't have any right to tell me that!!" Dr. Kuya roared as she unleashed her incantation.

It was a mid-level explosion spell: *Rain Bomb*. She sent out a hail of mana bombs at Terakomari...and they bounced back at her. The barrage easily blew the wall to bits. Covered in dust, Dr. Kuya desperately slid through the hole.

She couldn't take on the vampire princess alone. And it wouldn't be long before Terakomari's other friends showed up. Dr. Kuya had to withdraw and buy enough time to teleport out of there.

She made her way through the rubble and emerged in the room next door. She ran at full speed, consumed by hatred without an outlet.

It's all Terakomari's fault. Nothing's going right for me because she destroyed Inverse Moon. I would be the world's greatest doctor by now if Inverse Moon was still around. I could've gotten Lady Spica to praise me.

There was no point thinking about it now, however. She had to get somewhere safe ASAP.

But then...

"Gweh...?!"

...she tripped on something and fell to the floor.

Feeling like she was dying, Dr. Kuya looked at her feet. A bloodred hand was grabbing her ankle.

She struggled against its grasp, but to no avail. Her spells didn't have any effect on it, either. Chills ran down her entire body, from the tip of her head to the soles of her feet.

"Stay put," the monster bellowed.

The vampire princess, clad in crimson mana, was approaching from the other side of the dust curtain.

"Apologize to Monique."

"—!"

Dr. Kuya poured mana into her staff and shot magic at random. Glowing bullets sped toward Terakomari, but she swatted them away like they were bugs. She was beyond the realm of nature. Dr. Kuya had never seen a Core Implosion like this.

"I... My whole life! It's all ruined because of you!"

She shot Rain Bomb again, but there was an invisible barrier surrounding Terakomari. The explosions were ineffectual.

"Do you take pleasure in ruining someone else's life?! How can you live with yourself doing that while pretending like you're saving people?! I was at peace

in Inverse Moon! I may have tricked innocent people myself...but is that any reason for you to throw me into a pit?! Do you have the right to do that?!"

"I do."

The next thing she knew, Terakomari was right in front of her face.

"Because you made Monique sad."

Dr. Kuya couldn't stand it.

Nothing was getting through to her. Terakomari was thoroughly convinced she was saving people, that she was acting on their behalf. Someone that self-centered shouldn't have been allowed to draw breath.

She shouldn't... But deep down, Dr. Kuya was nostalgic at the sight of her.

Somehow, Terakomari resembled the Wicked God Slayer.

She possessed unwavering conviction, consideration for others, and the same steadfast kindness that had saved Dr. Kuya.

"I won't let you go. Or anyone else who hurts people."

"How wonderful! I just know your research will help people."

"So... Apologize."

"Do whatever you'd like. There's no need to look back. I'll take responsibility for everything!"

"RAAAAAAAAH!" Dr. Kuya took her backup knife out of her pocket.

For some reason, looking into Terakomari Gandesblood's eyes gave her willpower.

She was just like that other vampire princess. Their methods were clearly different, but they were both heading in the same direction. Perhaps that was why they shared the ability to have an impact on people.

But it had been Spica La Gemini who helped Dr. Kuya.

Maybe things would have been different had she met Terakomari Gandesblood first.

"I will...not lose!!"

She couldn't keep running. She had to slay her enemy, for Spica's sake.

She poured all her mana into her blade and thew it. The dagger flew straight for Terakomari's chest...but before it hit, the girl softly raised her hand. A dense layer of mana gushed from her palm.

"Wha...?"

Effulgent magic enveloped everything.

Dr. Kuya's vision turned red in an instant. She couldn't tell where the knife she'd thrown had gone. She couldn't even tell whether she was standing or sitting.

"Away you go." Those were the last words she heard.

Dr. Kuya was engulfed in a crimson wave that sent her flying out of the Crimson Snow Hut.



The crimson mist shrouding my mind cleared.

I slowly regained consciousness.

When I came to, I was standing in the middle of a wrecked room. The walls were broken. The floor was cracked. The furniture was all over the place. There was a hole running across five or six consecutive rooms. You could even see the snow out beyond the last one.

I stood there frozen for a while, until my mind came back to me.

"WHAT?!?!?!?!" I screamed.

The Crimson Snow Hut was in shambles, and though my memory was hazy, there was a nearly 100 percent chance that I was responsible for the damage. I'd used Core Implosion, unleashed my magic, and blown away Dr. Kuya for trying to hurt Monique. All with the power of a meteorite that just so happened to fall at the right time (just kidding).

This is the worst. I don't have the money to pay for all of this. Will Esther let me go if I beg her forgiveness? I don't think she will...

Just as I was getting ready to sell my organs for cash, someone grabbed my

clothes.

"Commander Komarin...are you okay?"

"Monique...! Are you okay?!"

Agony hit me the moment I tried to grab her shoulder. I squeezed my eyes shut and doubled over.

Right. I had been stabbed in the arm. The pain was slowly fading thanks to the Dark Core, but it still hurt. So much. I'd come to the hot springs to refresh myself and now here I was, having narrowly avoided death. Was *anywhere* safe in this world? Any place free of murderers?

"Are you hurt? You're bleeding."

"I-I'm fine. This is just a mosquito bite."

Monique looked at me closely, then lowered her eyes.

"...You're really amazing, Commander Komarin. You can do anything. You have the talent. Unlike me..."

"...I have no talent."

Despite my response, I would have been at a loss for an answer if she asked me how I'd done all this.

"Excellent, truly." Prohellya, who'd been watching from the sidelines, clapped merrily. "You never fail to surprise me. With that much power, you might just be a match for me."

"Prohellya... The shadow didn't kill you?"

"Hmm? Oh, that. Right. I forgot about that."

"Anyways, I'm happy to see you're okay." I sighed in relief.

Then I put everything that had happened in order.

Dr. Kuya resented me because I'd destroyed Inverse Moon. From my perspective, that was unbelievably self-serving. She wanted to get revenge on me, and she'd probably used that shadow to attack my friends, too. I had no idea why she'd tried to kill Monique, though. I also had no idea why Kuya had come to the Crimson Snow Hut as a doctor. There were too many mysteries for

me to put everything together.

"You sure went all-out, though. Though because of that, we don't have any idea where she is."

"Uh... Sorry... I didn't mean to."

"She was a remnant of Inverse Moon, so we ought to interrogate her. I'll go after her. You stay with Monique Claire until everyone else gets here."

"Everyone else...?"

"We split up to look for you. What a catastrophe, seriously. And to have it happen on your bir—um, on such a special day. Anyways. See ya." Prohellya waved as she left the room.

It felt like she was hiding something from me. Oh well. I turned to Monique. She was staring at a single point in the room, her eyes wide open.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"The shadow..."

A cold wind blew from the broken window. The curtains fluttered.

Then, I saw it. In the depths of the sunlit room, standing by the window, was a black shadow.

"...!"

I got to my feet in shock, but Monique smiled softly.

"Don't worry. The shadow is on my side..."

I didn't understand. Wasn't it a magical phenomenon Dr. Kuya controlled?

I couldn't sense any animosity coming from it, though. It didn't feel like it was about to attack us.

"...Thank you, Terakomari Gandesblood."

Chills ran down my spine as I heard the shadow address me.

Come to think of it, it had spoken to me before I came to Monique's room.

"Um... I didn't know I could speak to shadows..."

"The shadow simply couldn't speak because of the bad weather... Because she's in the Netherworld."

Frezier's climate disasters were related to the Netherworld. Was Monique really right, then? That meant the shadow was a separate entity from Dr. Kuya... It noticed my skepticism and coldly said: "Don't worry. I'm on Monique Claire's side. I am not your enemy, either. It's true that I do not like you...but you got rid of Monique's would-be killer. I'm grateful."

"So you weren't behind the murders?"

"I did kill Pitolina Shelepina. Because I thought she would try to harm Monique. Everyone else...is simple tomfoolery I had nothing to do with."

"Then who did it?! Was it Dr. Kuya?!"

"No. Just ask Villhaze later."

Right. I could just ask the victims once they came back to life.

"Those shenanigans aren't important." The shadow changed the subject. "It's a pain having to tell you this...but I must. This is why I called you here to Frezier."

"Wait, I thought I only came here because I won the lottery?"

"I told Monique I wanted to meet Terakomari Gandesblood, and she told Esther Claire. With that and the event of February eighteenth overlapping, there was a thirty percent chance you would end up here. Although it was but one of the many threads I laid down..."

I didn't have the slightest idea what she was talking about.

What was this February 18 event? Some festival in Frezier?

"You really are dense." The shadow chuckled. What had I done to deserve being laughed at by a shadow? "In any case, I am Kilty Blanc, a Shade from the Ishuera Empire. I am here to tell you the secrets of the world."

"Wha...?"

"The netherscreening is materializing as we speak. Let's go up that hill, the three of us."

The shadow—Kilty—pointed at the Magic Stone on the table.

According to her, it was imbued with a teleportation spell. I was wary of it, but how could I say no to someone telling me she would show me the secrets of the world? That was exactly what I wanted to show my mom.

She told us to get dressed for the cold, so I helped Monique change. I wrapped a scarf around her neck.

I had my heater packs, so I was good to go.

Monique and I held hands before activating the Magic Stone.

The world around us shifted in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, we were standing outside. And there, I saw something unbelievable.

Below us stretched the hot springs town of Frezier, coated in silver. The blizzard had destroyed a few places, but its captivating beauty took my breath away.

But then, I noticed an even bigger surprise: A town was floating upside down in the sky.

It was like a mirror image of the resort village on the surface. Each building was clouded, blurry like a mirage, but since the sunlight was pouring through the image, it all glowed like jewelry. Coupled with the snowflakes swirling in the air, the town resembled an upside-down snow globe.

I took in the sight for a while, entranced. This was the netherscreening that Esther had told us about. The same image I'd seen years ago with my mother.

Then it hit me. After taking a quick look around, I noticed we were on a hill on the outskirts of the town. This was the exact same place I'd visited with my mom.

"The center of the Dark Core Zone is the place closest to the Netherworld," said the shadow from beside me. She'd teleported along with us. "The barrier between both worlds recedes after natural disasters, and the image of the town on the side of the Netherworld is projected into the sky. By the way, that upside-down town is deserted. No one lives there."

"What is the Netherworld? Did you come from there? And how are you related to Dr. Kuya?"

"I have no relation to Dr. Kuya. Let me go through things in order. First, I would like to say I came from the Netherworld, but that's not precisely true. I didn't *come* here. Shades can use our powers to send our shadows across the boundaries of the worlds. My body remains in the Netherworld, even now."

I had never heard of Shades. The shadow had also said something about an "Ishuera Empire." Was that a country in the Netherworld? When I asked her this, she denied it.

"The nations of the Netherworld are similar to those of this world. The peoples inhabiting it are also roughly the same. The Ishuera Empire and the Shades bear no significant connection to the Netherworld, so don't think too much on it."

"I'd like to understand, though..."

"I'll explain the Netherworld. That is my duty."

The shadow swayed on the snow as she looked up at the town in the sky.

Monique sneezed. I hugged her from behind to warm her up with my heater packs.

"The Netherworld is a land that exists in another dimension. It is the same place you wound up in during the riots at the end of last year. It used to be a bountiful land of nature...but after many things happened, it came to resemble this world, or so I've heard."

"What things?"

"I don't know the details, but I don't think they're that important. Normally, you cannot go back and forth between this world and the Netherworld. Unless you can use your shadow, like I can. However, a few special people can open the gate using Core Implosion."

"The gate to the Netherworld?"

"Yes. But that gate is sealed, and the key is the Dark Core."

The Dark Core. The pillar of every country, which could heal physical wounds

in the blink of an eye.

"If you destroy the Dark Cores, you will be able to go back and forth between worlds. But we can't ignore the catastrophes that such an act would bring about."

"I have no idea what you mean..."

"I'm saying a lot of trouble will spill over from the Netherworld. You aren't aware of this, since you barely dipped your toe in the place, but the Netherworld is in strife thanks to one big fool. Terrible things will happen if they were to cross the gate into this world. They're intent on conquering it."

"Who are they?"

"We know them as Yusei."

My brain was about to explode from information overload, but what the shadow had said up until now was nothing compared to what was about to leave her lips.

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

My brain froze at the sound of that name.

After a few seconds, I managed to speak again.

"Why...? Do you know my mom...? Is she alive...?"

"She's alive. I am one of Yulinne Gandesblood's collaborators in the Netherworld."

I was shocked. Like, this turned my whole world upside down.

My father had told me she'd gone someplace far away. If she was alive, then why hadn't she come see me? Why was she contacting me now?

"I can't believe it. My mom, in the Dark Core Zone..."

"I have proof. You received a message from Amatsu, didn't you?"

Right. Karla's brother had given me a letter. That was Mom's handwriting.

"Kakumei Amatsu is a double-triple spy; he gets in and out of many places. He keeps in contact with the Netherworld through special methods. He's an

anomaly among anomalies..."

"Does that mean my mom is all right?"

"Yes. But she can't come back home. The Dark Core is sealing the gate to the Netherworld shut."

"…"

I hugged Monique tight to fight back the tears.

My mom was alive. Nothing could be more shocking.

Even if she couldn't come back home, I was so glad. I mean...I'd thought she was dead this whole time. That I would never get a chance to see her again. But if she was alive, then no matter what barriers stood between us, then maybe, just maybe, we could get another opportunity to go on a family trip.

I felt the shadow's mood soften.

"Look at the town."

Then I finally realized. There was something tied to the top of the tallest spire.

A scarf. A red scarf.

"You remember it, don't you? That is Yulinne's," the shadow quietly said.

"...!"

I looked closely and realized straightaway it had belonged to my mom. I remembered her using it to wipe away my tears whenever I tripped. What was it doing there? I froze in astonishment for a while.

"What a coincidence that the netherscreening happened on your birthday."

"Huh...?"

"Yulinne must've wished for you to come here one day. I don't think she really expected something like this to happen...but I guess miracles do occur. That scarf is a message. It's telling you that your mom is right here."

Tears were streaming down my face.

She was thinking of her family, even from afar. She hadn't forgotten about us. That made me happier than anything.

"There are two reasons why I called you here. One was to tell you about the Netherworld. The other...is to celebrate your birthday on Yulinne's part. Good thing I managed to get you here in the nick of time."

"My birthday?"

"Happy birthday, Terakomari Gandesblood. You're now sixteen. According to Mulnite tradition, you're now a full-fledged vampire."

Then it finally came back to me. February 18 was my birthday.

No one had celebrated it back when I was a shut-in. I'd forgotten all about it. Right...I turn sixteen today.

My mom remembered. And not only that, but she'd also sent me a happy birthday message.

I was reminded of the time my whole family came to Frezier. Fading memories, covered in snow. The words I had forgotten came back one by one, slowly showing their outline.

"It's almost your birthday, remember? Just tell me anything."

"There's nothing I want..."

"Geez... I can give you anything. I'm a Crimson Lord, remember?"

".....Okay, then. I want you to stay with me forever."

"The world is constructed atop the will of the people. It was Yulinne's love for you that brought this clear sky."

I didn't get the logic, but my mom was alive out there somewhere. And wherever she was, she was still thinking of me. That alone was enough to make me feel fulfilled.

"Thank you...um, Kilty."

"There's nothing to thank me for. And that's not your present. Yulinne sent something else for you."

The shadow chanted a spell of some sort.

Then she pointed her finger (?) into the air. I looked up and saw a dot shining in the sky. I stared at it for a few seconds, until I noticed it was slowly falling

toward me. I rushed to hold out my hand, and the crystal landed on my palms. Its glossy surface reflected the face of a once-in-a-billion-years knockout beauty.

"That is a Divine Instrument. The Quartz Orb. A secret crystal that can let you regain what you've forgotten."

"What do you mean ...?"

"During the last netherscreening, a small gate opened in the skies of Frezier for the briefest of moments. Yulinne took that opportunity to send presents over to this world. She asked me to give them to you and Lolocco once you turned sixteen. That's a birthday gift from your mother, to celebrate your coming of age."

I looked down at the crystal with surprise.

A secret Divine Instrument that restored what you had forgotten.

What had Mom been thinking when she decided to give it to me?

"I think," the shadow said, as though reading my mind, "that Yulinne didn't want her daughter to forget her. Although who could ever fail to remember one's mother?"

"But..."

"I know. Curiously, you just so happened to have lost some of your memories."

The things that had happened with Millicent at school must have shaken me up real bad, since I had gaps in my memories from before my life as a shut-in. For example, I didn't remember knowing Vill at school, or talking to Nelia at a party when we were kids.

It didn't feel right that these precious memories were covered with mist. But this Divine Instrument would clear it all up. I could even get back all of my memories with my mom.

"Thank you. I'll use it later."

"Yeah. Make sure you do."

"What is...my mom doing in the Netherworld?"

The shadow didn't say anything for a second. Then, carefully choosing her words, she answered: "A Crimson Lord's job is to fight. She's fighting over in the Netherworld."

"Against this Yusei you mentioned?"

"Yes. Yusei is causing chaos all across the Netherworld, that fiend. It would be terrible if something destroyed the Dark Cores over in this world. That future the Goddess saw must have transpired after Yusei invaded this world."

"Future...? What're you talking about?"

"Ask Karla Amatsu about it later. In any case, Yusei is dangerous and will come here if the Dark Cores are destroyed. Or rather...Yusei is already encroaching on this world. And this town, Frezier, is the first place to have taken damage from the Netherworld."

The shadow glanced sadly at Monique.

The girl was staring at the town of the Netherworld.

She'd said her dream was to travel the world. And that she wanted to go to that upside-down city. But there was no light in her eyes. Her heart hadn't been moved, even after witnessing the place she yearned for.

"...What's wrong with Monique?"

"Her etiolation is Yusei's doing," the shadow said scornfully. "Over in the Netherworld, it's not mana that's the biggest source of energy, but willpower. Yusei has somehow gotten in contact with this world and tested it by stealing away Monique's willpower—her heart."

I couldn't follow. Why had Yusei gone after Monique specifically?

"Erm... Is there any proof that her etiolation is Yusei's doing?"

"Yusei is the only one who can do this sort of thing. There are many people suffering from etiolation in the Netherworld due to Yusei's evil powers. And Monique has the same symptoms. Look at her neck. Do you see that scar in the shape of a star? That is proof of Yusei's power at work."

I flipped up the girl's scarf a little. Sure enough, there was a star-shaped scar on her neck.

"It was mere coincidence that I came across Monique, which is why I was shocked to see that Yusei's power had reached this world. It was probably coincidence that she was chosen, too. Or perhaps it was because of her desire to visit that upside-down town that Yusei went after her."

"That makes no sense! It isn't fair..."

"You mustn't look for logic in every disaster. The world is irrational... Anyway, I kept near Monique to do something about her illness."

"...Then what about Dr. Kuya?"

"I don't know. But it's certain she holds a key. This didn't occur to me since I wasn't always by Monique's side...but Dr. Kuya was aggravating her etiolation."

"For what reason...?"

"I don't know. We need to investigate. But even if she is connected to Yusei, I don't think she'll lead us to that sly bastard."

We really had to look for her as soon as possible.

Well, I guess Prohellya is already after her.

The shadow let out a sigh (?).

"If we let them be, Yusei might start attacking other people. I have no idea what their methods are, but we must stop them... Also, I should mention that I'm doing research on etiolation while Yulinne keeps Yusei in check. Those are our basic roles. Although I have no results to speak of yet."

"..."

I slowly approached Monique again.

She was weeping as she looked up at the town in the sky.

"Dr. Kuya said she was worsening Monique's etiolation, but I've seen other patients with the condition, and I can tell you that she didn't need to do that to prevent it from healing. Yusei's poison wears down the heart over time."

What an unreasonable illness. And from looking at Monique, it was clear that

the etiolation left her sadness untouched, even though it had stolen her heart. The disease sapped her of the will to do anything besides wallow in despair.

She was just like how I had been during my days as a shut-in.

Did that mean Yusei's world was full of shut-ins, then?

"...Monique." I took a step closer. Unable to bear the feeling in my chest, I whispered, "You can't see, can you?"

"..." Her shoulders trembled.

I'd hit the mark. It wasn't that hard to connect the dots.

I couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss when I'd first met Monique in her room. She hadn't done anything that relied on sight. Even when she looked at me, her eyes weren't quite aimed in the right direction.

It wasn't that she was born blind. The etiolation must have stolen her sight. It made her give up on her dreams.

Monique stared vacantly at the sky as she said, "...The Netherworld is right there, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But I can't see it. I can tell it's there...but it looks blurry."

She wasn't in complete darkness. But so what? Her condition had still taken the world away from her.

The shadow drew close to me and quietly whispered:

"The heart is a person's foundation. Lose it, and your bodily functions will be negatively impacted. In Monique's case, after losing her dream and falling into despair...she lost most of her sight. And the loss of her vision inflated the despair even further. It's a vicious cycle of misfortune... I did the most I could as a shadow, but nothing made her better."

The Dark Core couldn't heal Monique's eyesight, since her lack of vision stemmed from an affliction of the mind.

"...Thank you, Commander Komarin." Monique smiled. "I feel odd when I'm with you. I haven't felt happy in such a long time. You taught me how important

it is to hold on to my dreams. I think you're a special person. You have a lot of willpower."

"That's not true. I'm just a regular vampire."

"No, you're amazing. I hope you keep it up. I...I will be supporting you from the shadows. Although I don't think I'll be able to feel anything soon..."

"..."

How could the world be so cruel?

The same had happened with Sakuna. And Nelia. And Karla. How could the people who had tormented them stomp on their dreams and feel nothing? Maybe this Yusei had a reason for doing this, but it couldn't possibly justify taking away the dreams of a little girl.

I was short and weak and couldn't use magic; I was the most useless vampire in the world, even if I was gorgeous. There was little I could do against such grand evil but flail my limbs and charge from the front. Yet it was better than doing nothing. I wanted to do something for Monique.

Yes. And, miraculously, I had a "guide" now.

You wouldn't come across something so fitting that easily.

"Monique, come over here," I softly said.

She turned around like a child looking for her parent.

I gave her a comforting smile. It wasn't until I did so that I realized it wasn't getting across to her.

"Monique... You want to see the upside-down town again, right?"

"...I do, but it's impossible." She sighed, her white breath vanishing in the wind. "A lot of people checked me, but something about me is just messed up. My heart is still. Don't worry yourself about me. I'll just watch you from afar."

"All right."

There was no need to hesitate any longer.

I held up the crystal my mom had given me, the Quartz Orb, before Monique.

Her confused gaze penetrated me. "What are you doing?!" the shadow screamed.

I ignored them and thought about what had to be regained. What Monique needed. What I could do to help her take back her hope. After I pictured this for a little while, a faint light leaked out from the surface of the Divine Instrument.

Monique opened her eyes wide in surprise.

The light eventually became so strong that it threw me off balance. Then, as the world was dyed white, the Quartz Orb loudly cracked.

The light disappeared.

Fragments of the crystal fell on the snow.

And then, Monique exclaimed, "Ah."

"Snow... Light..."

She stared straight at me with tender eyes. No deviation. She opened and shut her mouth again and again, her face full of wonder.

I wasn't sure the Divine Instrument would be able to bring her back what she'd forgotten, but looking at her, it seemed what I just expected had happened.

Basically, the Orb had given back her light.

Monique wailed in place.

I waited for her to calm down before asking, "Well? Can you see?"

"What did you just do, Commander Komarin...?" She reproached me, grabbing my clothes. "That was a birthday present from your mom. That was meant to give you back your memories of her. And yet...you wasted it on me..."



"Don't worry. I already know that my mom's in the Netherworld now."

"But ...!"

"It doesn't matter. I wanted you to get your dream back."

Monique went stock-still, as though time had stopped.

Even the shadow was stunned into silence.

I just couldn't allow something so unfair to go on. Monique had the right to live with optimism. I just did what I could.

"You dummy...," Monique said between tears. "...I can't. I can't see. There's no way I'd be cured that easily."

"Huh...?" I felt like I had my heart gouged out.

"The light startled me...but that's it. Everything is still blurry. I wish that instruments or medicine could cure me. The problem is, they can't..."

I ground my teeth unwittingly.

Miracles didn't happen so easily.

You couldn't overwrite someone's heart, even with a Divine Instrument.

I ought to have known that better than anyone else.

"Right... That should've occurred to me."

There was nothing I could do.

There's no point in staying here any longer. I should go back to my room... Just as I felt resignation, Monique tugged at my sleeve.

"But...that made me happy. It's strange. I feel good thanks to you. I feel warm... Now I...I feel like maybe going outside one day... Thank you, Commander Komarin."

Monique slowly walked up to me. She nearly tripped on the snow, but I caught her. She buried her face in my chest and wept silently.

"Commander Komarin... You get to use Core Implosion because you can do stuff like this..."

Startled, I looked down at her.

She wasn't radiating despair anymore.

She felt a little warmer.

"Wow. To think you'd grant Monique a change of heart." The shadow broke its silence. "It was no coincidence that you saved the Mulnite Empire... Look. Monique's complexion looks better than I've ever seen. Even the star-shaped scar on her neck is fading away. You broke through a wall I could never overcome."

"What're you saying? I just made a wish for her to get better..."

"No. Thank you, Terakomari Gandesblood. Not everyone can so easily give up what's precious to them for the sake of others."

"Honestly, I wouldn't say I throw away things *that* easily. You should take a look at my room."

"In any case, you planted a seed of hope in her. Perhaps the etiolation will subside now, little by little."

I didn't really understand what the shadow was talking about, but if Monique was going to feel more positive, I could ask for nothing else.

I patted the girl back and said, "Let's go out somewhere together next time. We could hang out in the Mulnite Empire."

"Yeah..."

I gazed at the town in the sky. It was as fantastical as ever. It looked like the wind was blowing over there, too. The crimson scarf my mom had left there was fluttering. Would I get to go there someday, too?

"There are many people who've been driven to the brink, just like Monique. Yulinne hopes that you can help them, too," said the shadow.

"What can I even do...?"

"I didn't like you. I wanted to change your way of thinking even if it meant beating you to a pulp to do it. Underestimating yourself like that is not good."

"I don't underestimate myself."

"Overestimating yourself isn't good, either. It's embarrassing how you keep calling yourself a total knockout beauty."

"That's no exaggeration!"

"Whatever. Yulinne is waiting for you in the Netherworld. But you don't have what it takes to meet her. You physically cannot go see her. What you need to do...is unite the world. There are still many people out there in need of help. Like the Immortals. They're in the Mulnite Palace, hoping to meet you."

I tilted my head. The shadow noticed my confusion.

"It'll become clear soon enough." She chuckled.

Regardless, I felt hope bud within me.

That town in the sky was more proof than anything that Mom was still waiting for me. Maybe she had helped me and Vill when we were transported into that new moon world.

Suddenly, a northern wind blew.

The town in the sky began to fade away. Evidently, the netherscreening only showed up for a brief span of time. The dream was about to end.

"Terakomari," the shadow called my name. "The path you must follow will naturally show itself. Don't think you can shut yourself in forever."

"Just...don't lead me to war, okay?"

"The fight that awaits you is the path that leads away from war. In any case, my work here is done. Enjoy the rest of your trip with your friends."

"Right. If you want to, you can join..."

The shadow had disappeared out of the blue.

Only the snowy ground remained. Not even her footprints were left.

Had she gone back to the Netherworld? From the way she spoke, it seemed like we would meet again. Hopefully.

"Let's go back, Monique."

"Yeah." She wore a soft smile.

Thanks to the shadow, I knew that my mom was alive. I knew what I needed to do. There was only so much this failure of a vampire could accomplish... But I wanted to do the best I could so that kids like Monique would be able to smile in peace. That was the path for Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood to follow. No war or battles, though, please.

The town in the sky had disappeared. Only the boundless blue sky remained.

I grabbed Monique's hand. I wished the shadow had given us a Magic Stone for the trip back. Just after we started walking, however...

"There she is! Ms. Komari!"

"Lady Komari?! Are you all right, Lady Komari?! Did that monster do anything to you?! Why and how did you use the Blood Curse?! Did you eat a blood pudding by mistake?!"

"Komariii! Did you get lost?! Let's go back already!"

I was totally surprised. A ton of familiar faces had showed up in the distance. Sakuna, Vill, Nelia, Karla, Koharu, Esther, even Gertrude. Weren't they supposed to be dead? As I thought this over, Nelia leaped in for a hug all of a sudden, kicking up snow.

"Are you okay?! Oh, Monique Claire is here with you! And she's okay. Thank goodness!"

"Huh? Nelia? What's going on?"

"Lady Cunningham! Stop clinging to Lady Komari! It is my duty as her maid to thaw her freezing core with the warmth of my body!"

"Who cares, Villhaze?! We're having a party! Sorry I scared you, Komari! And...happy birthday!"

"Hey, not fair! I was supposed to say that first!"

My brain froze, unable to handle so much at once.

Meanwhile, all my friends kept talking, one after the other. "Thank goodness." "Happy birthday." "Where's the shadow?" So...we were celebrating my birthday?

"Monique! Are you okay?!" Esther ran up to her sister, pale in the face. She grabbed her hand with the utmost concern. "Are you cold? Let's go home."

"Hey, Esther..."

"What is it?"

"I...I want to go visit lots of places like Commander Komarin."

Esther's eyes widened with shock. Monique's usual apathy was gone. Her eyes were glowing like stars.

Esther glanced at me, crying.

Don't look at me like that. I didn't do anything.

Then, overcome with emotion, she smiled.

"...Yes. Good. I will take you anywhere you want."

"How about a visit to the Imperial Capital, for starters? The Seventh Unit will gladly receive you," Vill said.

"I wanna see Esther's house."

"S-sure...but it's very small. I live in the army's dormitory."

"Oh? You're also in the dorm, Ms. Esther? Me too, actually. Maybe I'll visit, too, if Monique is coming."

"C-Commander Memoir, you also live there?! I'm in room 101."

"Wow! We're right next to each other. What a coincidence. I'm in room 102."

"Room 102......Huh??"

Esther's face stiffened up for whatever reason, but I decided to ignore it.

In high spirits, I looked at Monique. I was satisfied just to know she had brightened up. Hopefully she could get back her dream now... Just as I was thinking about Monique's future, Nelia locked arms with me out of nowhere.

"Komari! Let's go! There's a party waiting for you. And I wanna hear about the shadow and your Core Implosion and all that! I'll tell you the truth about the murders in return!"

"Ah, hey, wait..."

"I can't let you do that, Lady Cunningham. It is my duty to transport Lady Komari."

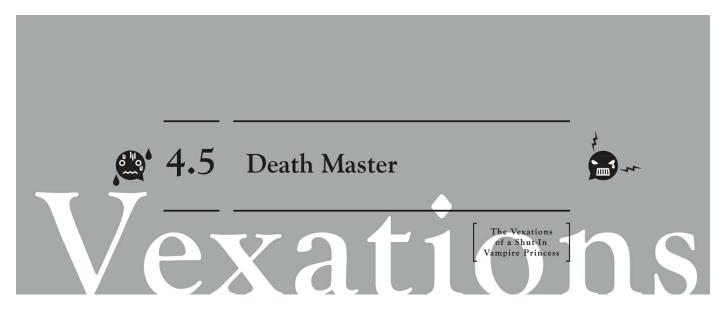
"Stop pulling my arms!!"

Vill and Nelia dragged me down the hill.

The first half of our two-night, three-day stay at the hot spring had been quite the ordeal, but at least it seemed like we'd be able to enjoy the second half. We were even having a party, for whatever reason. Hopefully Monique could enjoy it with us.

My heart raced as we made our way back to the Crimson Snow Hut.

(FIN)



She couldn't feel the cold of the snow. It was proof of how hot her spirit burned.

Dr. Kuya was in a forest outside of Frezier.

Terakomari's Effulgent Magic had blown her away. She squirmed on the snow until she noticed the blood flowing out of her body. Nothing lethal, though. The vampire had held back... How sweet. How kind. How foolish.

"Next time... I won't lose next time." She clenched her fists and shivered out of sheer hatred.

Dr. Kuya was born in the remote countryside of the Enchanted Lands, about fifty years back. Her body had been frail when she was little. She was sickly in a way the Dark Core could not heal. She would catch colds just by standing in the rain for a few moments and would run out of breath after the slightest physical exertion. Because of this, she started to look into work that could help people like her, who had rare physical characteristics that the Dark Core could not influence.

After reading some history books, she learned about a profession called "doctoring." She lost sleep learning all sorts of techniques. But her research sucked up her family's finances, and she was consequently disowned. Still, she did not give up on her endeavors.

Eventually, Dr. Kuya started to create her own medicines. She felt joy from the bottom of her heart when she was able to help a child suffering from depression. "Thank you, Doctor," he'd said with a smile. She felt like she was born for this.

However, most people didn't understand Dr. Kuya's idea, and for a very simple reason: The rest of society lived under the influence of the Dark Core.

"Your research is useless." "The Dark Core heals all wounds." "It's all empty theories." "This won't help society in any way." "Just get an actual job already," they thoughtlessly argued.

Ultimately, the Dark Core worshipers demonized her and enacted violence on her.

They stole her money, they burned her research, they destroyed her home.

Was everything I did for nothing? Will no one ever accept me? Just as she was crawling through a back alley, awash in despair, a girl appeared before her.

"You! You're pretty!"

Why was she saying that to a homeless woman like her?

The girl swayed her crimson-colored candy. Maybe she was a vampire, but Dr. Kuya thought she had an Immortal-like aura about her.

"Are you making fun of me? Go away, kid."

"You're way more of a child than me. But that doesn't matter. Your heart is so pretty. You work hard for the world and its people, don't you?"

Dr. Kuya was taken aback. The girl's comment seeped deep into her worn-out heart.

Then, she said the decisive words:

"I'm Spica La Gemini! If you're going to die here anyways, how about you join Inverse Moon instead?"

Then Dr. Kuya's fate changed. Inverse Moon spared no expense to support her. Her research on illnesses unaffected by the Dark Core saw unprecedented progress. Inverse Moon was an evil terrorist organization, yes. But it was also her home, the group who would help her change the world. She decided to keep working within it. To strive to help all those ill people again.

Above all else, Spica was kind. She recognized Dr. Kuya's potential, even

though everyone else in the world had said she was unimportant.

What left the strongest impression were her eyes. They glowed with a mighty will, powerful enough to take over the world.

One time, while they were eating dinner on the night of the new moon, she said: "I will make my dream come true."

"I will reach the Netherworld."

"But I can't do it alone. I need everyone's help."

"Which is why I will never abandon my friends. You can use Inverse Moon to achieve your goals. I will support your dreams."

"So, let's hold a birthday party now!"

"It is your birthday, right? That's why I invited you for dinner! C'mon, Tryphon, bring the cake! Amatsu, you get the fireworks! Not the tiny sparklers, I want them to blow up in the sky! And you're dead if you don't get them!"

Spica wasn't a one-woman army. She stood at the top of the moon with the support of all her friends. She understood that and valued her collaborators. From what Dr. Kuya had heard, she had even forgiven Odilon Metal for his critical failure at the Crimson Match.

On the other hand, corpses piled up wherever the Wicked God Slayer went. Perhaps she needed to kill in order to achieve her ideals. This willingness to make sacrifices for her goals was the biggest difference between her and Terakomari Gandesblood.

And Dr. Kuya thought Spica's ideology was correct. That she was worthy of ruling the world.

That's why she could not forgive Terakomari Gandesblood for ruining everything.

"Next time... Next time, I'll...," she muttered as if in a fever, writhing in the snow.

Next time I'll...do what?

The crimson vampire princess's words echoed in her mind.

```
"Apologize to Monique."
```

"Because you made Monique sad."

Monique Claire...was an unfortunate girl. But she was a sacrifice necessary for finding Spica La Gemini. A stepping stone for her great enterprise. That was just like what Spica did.

Dr. Kuya felt no regret for making her suffer.

She did not. And yet.

"Repent."

"Gu...uh..."

Tears ran down her face. Flames of burning anger fanned inside her every time she thought back to Terakomari Gandesblood's gentle eyes. Anger...and shame.

Where did she go wrong?

Monique Claire was the kind of child she was supposed to be helping.

Yes. Spica was ruthless against her enemies, but she was absurdly kind to her allies.

Monique was not her enemy. She'd sincerely believed she was trying to cure her. Dr. Kuya hadn't acted like Spica at all.

"Forgive me... Please forgive me... I could do nothing else..."

Dr. Kuya clenched her fists as a torrent of tears streamed down her face.

She could not forgive Terakomari, but her words had made her realize something important. They reminded her of her absolute policy.

She was not thinking of atoning. She did not think she could.

The only thing she could do was continue her research. For the sake of everyone suffering under the Dark Core.

She changed her heart. Changed it back to her roots.

"...Ha-ha. I'm in a pool of blood."

This was also Terakomari Gandesblood's fault.

What could she do to prove herself her superior?

It was obvious. Find a cure for etiolation, this time for sure. Work for the people of the world. Not abandon the small for the big. That was it.

Dr. Kuya staggered to her feet.

First, she had to take a bath. Better go back to some hot springs.

Then, as she took a step forward...

A wind that reeked of death blew.

"Good work, Dr. Kuya."

She turned around on reflex, astonished.

There was a single spot standing out amid that world of white. A woman dressed in pitch-black. Like a fly that had landed on a painting—though this was not the time for lighthearted impressions.

A tall woman in black. The woman who had been issuing Dr. Kuya orders up to now.

"Lady Nerzanpi..."

"To err and not change one's ways, this is what it is to err... Quite the wise saying, don't you think, Dr. Kuya?"

This woman was the Enchanted Land's Minister of Military Secrets. Rocha "Death Master" Nerzanpi.

She slowly walked up to her, a lit cigarette in hand.

Dr. Kuya could not move. Her eyes were trembling in fear, and her legs disobeyed her.

"Why are you here?"

"I heard the netherscreening happened. Though sadly, it ended in an instant. I also wanted to try out the hot springs. Rest of mind and body is the secret to a long life."

That was a lie. She was not here to go to a resort.

Dr. Kuya tried her best to stay the trembling in her legs as she replied: "Lady

Nerzanpi... What do you want? If you're here about Monique Claire...I finished my visit no problem today. I boosted her etiolation with the Cogito Staff. There is no need for you to go check on her. It's cold out here, so you should consider going ho—"

Bang. A gunshot echoed.

"Huh?" A question escaped her lips, and blood escaped her veins. The next thing she knew, she was staring at the sky, lying in a pool of blood. The hot liquid pumped incessantly from her chest. Her head went hazy while Lady Nerzanpi's revolver smoked.

She looked down at her with dead fish eyes.

"You can't have interpersonal relationships without trust. You betrayed me. It appeared you were trying to correct your past mistakes, but unfortunately for you, I cannot allow the slightest of errors. Especially when a fool like you is committing them."

"...!"

Dr. Kuya's mind reeled in pain. Her whole body trembled as blood and saliva bubbled from the corners of her mouth.

This couldn't be. This could not possibly be fair.

She had just gone back to her roots. She had just decided to go out and save people.

How could it end like this?

"Prohellya Butchersky is looking for you. They might trace things back to me if they take you alive. So I have to get rid of you."

"You... You've got to be kidding me... I want to save all the people who are suffering...! I can't die here...!"

"My, my. You see, I'm just a little birdie, so I wouldn't get what a doctor's great mind is thinking. Save people for what purpose? Stave off their deaths for what purpose? Don't you think that dying is sometimes the better outcome?"

Nerzanpi couldn't understand. It was as though they weren't even speaking the same language.

But Dr. Kuya could not concede. She had changed her mind. There was no reason for her to submit to this unreasonable murderer. She could not back down—for the sake of her dream.

"I...! I will not lose...! You've always been so arrogant! You think nothing of anyone! You're unlike Lady Spica! And unlike me! From the very beginning, I wanted to work for the sake of the people! I will cure etiolation. I will save everyone from suffering. I..."

Another gunshot.

Dr. Kuya rolled over like a ball.

"How admirable. Did you think I would feel for you if you said that? But admirable words and appearance do not make for an admirable person."

"S-stop..."

"If you hadn't betrayed me, I would've told you where the Wicked God Slayer is. I don't really care, though. Thanks to your experiments on Monique Claire, I've learned a thing or two about the workings of willpower. Now I'm ready to take down the Ailan dynasty."

"Please...don't..."

"Thank you, Dr. Kuya. And farewell. I will give you a grand funeral."

The blood would not stop flowing from her belly.

She was a doctor, so she knew. She was going to die. She had no hope of surviving.

Nerzanpi pulled the trigger impassively. Dr. Kuya felt her body jump again. She rolled over the snow, leaving a trail of blood behind. Then the pain vanished.

"A-ah..."

She couldn't speak anymore.

She'd wanted to see Lady Spica one last time, but not even that wish would be granted.

Her consciousness faded away. Her body sank in darkness. All her memories

vanished.

The woman in black turned around and walked away. Immortals appeared from the shadows of the trees and carried away Dr. Kuya's body. Were they going to throw her into the sea? Her brain stopped as that thought crossed her mind.

Dr. Kuya's dream came to an unfulfilling end.



Ten minutes later, Prohellya Butchersky arrived.

Dr. Kuya was nowhere to be found—all that remained of her was her blood on the snow.

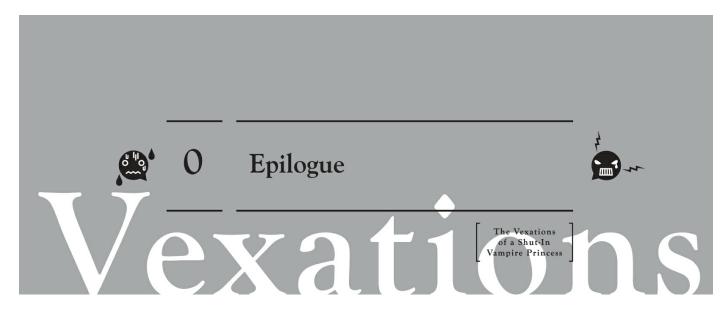
Is she still nearby? Prohellya thought. She continued looking for her, but in the end, she could not find her.

"Dammit. She got away."

After running around for a while, Prohellya gave up and returned to the hotel. She would miss the birthday party if she got back too late, and she wanted to celebrate with everyone.

So ended the conflict at the Crimson Snow Hut.

With only the woman in black knowing the truth.



It turned out that the two-night, three-day stay at the hot springs was all a ploy to celebrate my birthday.

The lottery was Esther's fabrication. Nelia and Karla had come to the Crimson Snow Hut for the same reason. The serial murders had been a prank to spook me. I was frightened seeing everyone go down one by one, but it turned out they were only pretending to be dead.

Naturally, I was livid. The whole thing terrified me. I thought I was going to die, actually, this time for sure.

But even so, I decided to be grateful. I was happy they planned all of this for my sake, and no one actually died. Well, except for Pitolina. But anyways.

After all that, we had a big birthday celebration in the game room in the Crimson Snow Hut.

Talk about a surprise party. I'd forgotten that February 18 was my birthday to begin with. The moment everyone said, "Happy birthday!" I felt tears stream down my cheeks.

I mean, it was my first birthday party in years. And surrounded by so many friends?

I couldn't be happier. I wanted to jump around like crazy, but intellectuals don't do that. Instead, I just grinned the whole time, and Vill liked pointing out how happy I looked. Of course! How could I not?



They also got me birthday presents.

Nelia gave me a maid outfit. Gertrude a paring knife. Karla a quill and some sweets. Koharu a vase. Sakuna a bouquet of ice flowers. Esther a perfume. And Vill gave me aromatic candles and a cookbook. I was sure Vill would come up with something like, "I'm your present," so I was disappointed. Er, pleasantly surprised. Anyways, the barrage of gifts made me cry out loud.

The party went on until late at night, and on the next day, we all went out on the town, along with Monique. It was a peaceful time, so unlike the first two days. I hoped it would go on forever. But holidays must come to an end. Once the sun went down, I told Monique I would be back one day, and we left Frezier.

I'll put it simply.

I had a whole lot of fun.

I felt refreshed from the bottom of my heart for the first time in a long time. I had to pay my friends back for it in some way later. Ask everyone's birthday and celebrate all of them.

And that sensation of refreshment and the gratitude from the birthday party weren't the only reasons I was happy to go to Frezier. I'd also gotten to cheer up Monique. And I saw that upside-down town in the sky. I'd gained a lot.

"Yulinne is waiting for you in the Netherworld."

Suddenly, I remembered the shadow's words.

My mom was apparently alive in the Netherworld.

I had to work hard so I could get to see her.

The shadow said something like I had to unite the world for it. I had no idea what that meant, exactly. But I would do the best I could. I was feeling positive enough to think I could make it.

"Can't stay shut-in forever, huh?"

Although I really wanted to.

But my efforts would be required to save more people from suffering, like I

had done for Monique—or at least it felt that way. Anyhow, I would do what I had to, just like the shadow said.

And speaking of Monique, we didn't find the woman who was tormenting her. Prohellya said she found Dr. Kuya's blood on the outskirts of Frezier, but that was it. And that Yusei character was a total enigma. *Well, I think Dr. Kuya learned her lesson; we can look for her later*, I thought, optimistically.

All that aside, my number one priority at the moment was deciding what to do with *Twilight Triangle*.

"I am refreshed after going to the hot springs...but..."

My pen was still.

I'd changed my mind in a few ways after the trip, but the purpose of that holiday wasn't exactly to get ideas for my novel. Naturally, I was still at a loss. Nelia had said the serial murders would inspire me, but... Sorry. I mean, it was stimulating, but I wasn't writing mysteries here—I was writing romance.

"Dammit... My lack of experience rears its ugly head once again..."

"What sort of experience are you lacking?"

"Romantic experience, what else? Wait, we're going in circles now!"

"You're still lamenting that? Very well, then let us forge some experiences here and now. Specifically, how about we go look for venues for our wedding?"

"You sure skipped a lot of steps there!!"

Vill locked arms with me and I brushed her away.

Couldn't get a moment of peace with her around.

"When did you even get here? It's not work time yet."

It was Monday, by the way. Just thinking about how I was about to go back to my hellish life as a commander made me want to scream my lungs out. But I couldn't, for that would get me killed by my own subordinates.

"There is still time, yes. You can take it easy for a while."

"I'll go back to sleep, then. I'll just write later."

"Have you made any progress?"

"No... But I am refreshed after the trip. I feel more capable than before. I just gotta sleep to get some ideas, so wake me up in an hour."

"Very well. By the way, an envoy from the Enchanted Lands is visiting the Mulnite Palace."

"Hm? The Enchanted Lands?" I tilted my head at the unfamiliar sound of that name.

The Enchanted Lands was the hermit paradise in the south. I didn't have any Immortal acquaintances, so I had no idea what sort of place it was... Were they in Mulnite for sightseeing?

"They're here to meet you."

"Huh? Why?"

"I don't know. But they've been waiting for two days now."

"…"

"I just received a call from the VIP room. The Immortals are saying they'll start a war if we don't bring you ASAP."

"...Why are they so pissed?"

"Who knows? Maybe because we ignored their appointment and went to the hot springs."

"We had an appointment?"

"Yes, I made it, without permission."

"Without permission?"

"Yes, and then I forgot."

I see, I see.

So basically, I'm dreaming right now.

I crawled back into bed.

Then a panicked voice came from Vill's Correspondence Crystal. My dad's voice.

"Villhaze! Could you get me Komari? They're going to make her heart burst if we make them wait any longer."

"You heard him, Lady Komari. We should go right away if you don't want your heart to explode."

"AAAAAAAAAAH?!"

I hopped and tossed and turned on the bed like a fish out of water.

Trouble had found me the moment my trip ended. Actually, it had already started while we were on the trip. Could things be any worse? Why did this have to happen to me? I was planning on feigning work and reading instead since I was just coming out of my vacation!

"Let's go. This isn't the time to play around in bed."

"Vill! Breaking appointments is bad! You annoyed the Immortals!"

"I am very sorry. Should I dance for you in apology?"

"No! Let's go already!"

I just prayed that my heart wouldn't burst. That reminded me, I'd heard of that phrase before. Was it that person I saw at the party before the Heavenly Ball?

In any case, there was nothing for me to do but apologize like a bobblehead.

I changed clothes at the speed of light and raced to the Mulnite Palace.



It was exactly who I thought waiting for me—Lingzi Ailan.

The Immortal in frilly green clothes shot me a glare the moment I stepped into the room. Her eyes had this curious magnanimity to them, like the sea. I could not tell what went on in her mind, except that she was about five seconds away from exploding in indignation.

"I-I'm sorry for making you wait! I'm Terakomari Gandesblood! Welcome to the Mulnite Empire."

As I greeted her nervously, my father said, "Well then, I'll leave you to it," and left. I wanted to object to that, but there wasn't time. I had to make sure she

wouldn't burst my heart.

I straightened up and looked back at Lingzi Ailan.

"Erm... It seems there was a mistake in the line of communication. I am very sorry I had to make you wait for this long, after having you come from so far away..."

"Did you have fun in the hot springs?" she asked, deadpan, inexpressive.

Unlike the time I first met Karla, I couldn't read her emotions. I could only sense the signs of death. At the very least, it was clear how greatly upset she was at me.

What do I do? I gotta come up with an excuse...

"Lady Komari was having a lot of fun at the hot springs while you were getting fed up with waiting here, Lady Lingzi Ailan. We held a huge party on our last night there, actually, and raved to the point of exhaustion."

"You little...!! I mean, it's true!! But can't you tell this isn't the right thing to say?!" I yelled at Vill.

"I see. That's good for you," whispered Ms. Lingzi Ailan.

She had the completely wrong idea. I mean, she didn't really, but the point was I wanted to let her know I didn't know about the appointment in the first place. War could break out if I didn't. I desperately searched for the right words to convey to her.

Then the Immortal smiled and said, "It's important to get some rest once in a while."

"Huh? Uh-huh..."

"Excuse me, I haven't introduced myself. I am the Enchanted Land's Gongzhu, Lingzi Ailan. I am here today to talk about the Netherworld. And..."

My brain froze at the sound of the word "Netherworld."

That same moment, I felt someone slap my shoulder.

I turned around nonchalantly.

There I found another Immortal girl. Who was she? Lingzi Ailan's

acquaintance? As I wondered...

"Core Implosion: Lovebird Infection."

Her eyes seemed to glow scarlet.

Maybe it was just my imagination. "Lady Komari?" Vill asked me suspiciously, to which I shook my head. "It's nothing."

I thought I'd heard her say "Core Implosion," but surely that was just my imagination.

There was no reason to wield that power out of the blue, after all.

"Excuse me. I am Meihua Liang, Lingzi's retainer."

"Oh, I see."

"Lingzi wants to speak with you. Please turn to look at her."

"O-oh, right. Yeah."

First things first, I had to apologize.

Maybe I could coax her into a good mood by giving her some sweets from the Fuuzen. No, trying to buy her out wasn't okay. I had to sincerely bow my head and...

As I turned to her, our eyes met.

Eyes so pretty I felt sucked in by them.

I stared into them for about three seconds and...

Ba-dump.

...my heart began racing for some reason.

"U-gh..."

"Lady Komari...?"

I was out of breath. I couldn't keep standing.

I fell to my knees, but even then, I couldn't take my eyes off Lingzi.

Her cherry-colored lips softly parted.

"I'm sorry. There's something I want you to help me out with..."

"Wha ...?"

I didn't understand.

My vision went dark. Vill's voice faded away as she called my name. I could only hear the excruciatingly loud beat of my heart.

People said that Lingzi Ailan had the power to burst someone's heart just by looking into their eyes. I'd thought that was ridiculous—but it looked like it was the truth.

A few seconds passed, and my heart pitifully succumbed.

How could anyone's heart not race at the sight of such an attractive girl?

No wonder people said theirs burst when they looked into her eyes.

I'd never felt anything like this before.

However, as a scholarly intellectual well versed in romance stories, I knew what it was.

I could tell by instinct—this was love.

"Two." Lingzi raised her index and middle fingers. "I want to talk about two things. One is a question. The other is a request."

I couldn't even react. I was glued to her eyes. Her beautiful, gorgeous eyes. *No, hold on, Terakomari Gandesblood.*

What do you mean love? You fell in love at first sight? That's ridiculous!

I had already seen her before, and I hadn't felt anything back then. Love at first sight was silly, but love at second sight like this? Even more so!

"...?"

I felt a prickling pain on the back of my right hand.

I looked down. A scar of some sort showed up on my skin.

It looked like a bird... A crow spreading its wings.

Had a bug bitten me? Surely this would go away on its own.

"What's the matter?"

```
"Wyaah?!"
```

The next thing I knew, Lingzi was right in front of my face. And she was holding my right hand with both of hers.

"Are you feeling unwell? Please, don't force yourself..."

"N-no-no-no, not at all! I'm feeling a hundred times livelier than ever!"

I brushed Lingzi's hands away in a hurry. Vill gave me a concerned look. "Lady Komari?" My heart was beating hard and fast. Oh no. Was I really feverish?

"I see." Lingzi sighed. "The question is about the Netherworld. Have you been to the Netherworld?"

I calmed my heart down as I answered, "I think I have..."

"How did you get there?"

"l..."

"You don't know, do you? Have you heard of the word waidan, then?"

"Waidan? No, I'm sorry."

"Lingzi, you might leak our secrets if you keep asking questions. Besides, it was a long shot to bring up the Netherworld in the first place. The important part is the request," said Meihua Liang while leaning on the wall.

I had no idea what they had in mind.

What was I supposed to do? I stared into Lingzi's eyes in confusion, and, soon, I felt embarrassed. I could feel myself flushing. I looked away. I was not in the right state of mind. Maybe I really had a cold.

Then:

"I ask you, please, Commander Terakomari Gandesblood."

Lingzi bowed down, knocking me dumbfounded.

"Please, help me."

"Huh...?"

"The Enchanted Lands will fall at this rate. I want you to help me."

I couldn't move.

She earnestly asked me for help in an innocent voice.

"Just like you saved Aruka, just like you saved the Heavenly Paradise, I want you to do something about the evil traitors of the Enchanted Lands. No, I'll do the work, actually. I just want you to lend me a hand. If I let things go on like this... The Grand Chancellor might kill me and my father."

"..."

"You can turn me down if you don't want to lend your assistance. I will not force you. But I...I need your help, Terakomari Gandesblood..."

Let's think back on all the incidents up to now.

I'd never made my own choices. Not once.

It had always been Vill kidnapping me and dragging me to the battlefield.

But things were different now.

Lingzi was asking for my help from the outset.

I thought back to my conversation with the shadow, Kilty Blanc.

She'd said that I would need to help those in trouble and unite the world to have any hope of meeting my mom again.

In that case, perhaps this was a call I had to answer.

"... Asking like that is no fair." I smiled. "Look at me. I'll lend you a hand."

Lingzi looked up in surprise.

I heard Meihua Liang gasp.

I paid them no heed and continued:

"What happened in the Enchanted Lands? Tell me about it over some snacks, won't you?"

Lingzi stared at me in disbelief for a while, until finally, she closed her eyes, overcome with emotion.

After a moment of silence, she began telling me all about her circumstances.

Afterword

Nice to see you again. I'm Kotei Kobayashi.

Aren't hot springs great?

I want to go to one, too.

Now then, thanks to all of you, we've reached volume 6.

This volume is in part an epilogue to the events from volumes 1 to 5, as well as the prologue to the story beginning in volume 7. Komari has made more and more friends, she's realized what her goal is, and she's been going out more and more frequently, so we can hardly call her a shut-in vampire princess anymore. Her growth is all a reflection of the support she has gained from so many people, and it's something to be happy about. I believe this idea about the support of many people is very important, and in this series, I want to write about this empathy that overcomes loss/gain interests and how it takes shape to change the world. I hope you'll enjoy Komari's more mature exploits. Although I don't think the tone of the story will really change.

Now, for the thank-you section.

Thank you to riichu for always giving life to so many characters with your fantastic illustrations.

Thank you to Ryo Hiiragi for the design of the book that fits *Vexations* to a tee.

Thank you to Yoten Sugiura, my editor, for all the advice I've received in the penning of the manuscripts.

Thank you to everyone involved in the publication and selling of this book.

And of course, thank you, for reading it!!

May we meet again.

Kotei Kobayashi

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink