

The Vexations of a Shut-In VAMPIRE Princess

5

Kotei Kobayashi

Illustration by **riichu**

THE VEXATIONS OF A SHUT-IN VAMPIRE PRINCESS

– Hikicomari Kyuuketsuki no Monmon –

- VOLUME 5 -

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The illustration features two anime-style girls in a dynamic pose. The girl on the left has long blue hair with white flower accessories and is wearing a white and black maid-like outfit. She is in a crouching position, holding a glowing pink energy sphere. The girl on the right has long orange hair and is wearing a red and white outfit with a large blue bow. She is standing behind the first girl, looking towards the viewer. The background is filled with warm, glowing orange and yellow energy streaks.

The Vexations of a Shut-In VAMPIRE Princess

5

DO YOU
BELIEVE
IN GOD?"

Spica La Gemini

Pope Julius VI

**Prohellya .
Butchersky**

Arctic Master of
the Polar Union

Karla Amatsu

Goddess of the
Heavenly Paradise

**Nelia .
Cunningham**

President of the
Aruka Republic

**Terakomari
Gandesblood**

Crimson Lord of the
Mulnite Empire

Sakuna Memoir

Crimson Lord of the
Mulnite Empire

Villhaze

Komari's maid

**“THE FUTURE
HAS BEEN
WRITTEN.”**

“REPENT”

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess



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The Vampire Princess
of the Holy Paradise

1.5

Predators Against
the Imperial Capital

2

The Day the Maid Vanished

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The Wanderer from the Netherworld

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God's Territory

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Epilogue

The
Vexations
of a Shut-In
VAMPIRE
Princess

5

Kotei Kobayashi
Illustration by riichu



New York

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The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess 5
Kotei Kobayashi

Translation by Sergio Avila
Cover art by riichu

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Vexations

0 Prologue

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

A cold northerly wind had begun to blow in the Mulnite Empire.

It was mid-December. The Crimson Match, the Six Nations War, the Heavenly Ball... I had been worked to death (nearly literally so!) the whole year, but soon I could put that all behind me.

Sports-wars were also few and far between during this season. In my maid's words: "It's a little break for everybody to gear up for the first Super Massacre Gratitude Fest of the new year." I was all for breaks, big or small, but what was the deal with this "Super Massacre" thing? Was I supposed to be thankful for getting killed? Which would totally happen to me if I had to participate in it? What was it anyway?

Unfortunately, Vill wouldn't give me the deets on the event; she would only grin whenever I asked her about it. I decided I would ask Sakuna instead whenever I got the chance.

Anyhow.

Despite my anxiety, I was actually doing some relaxing. Get this: It was Sunday, and I had the day off! And the Empress had summoned my maid away from me! A true miracle the likes of which I'd never experienced before and would likely never experience again.

Someone had to be smiling down on me from above. I needed to make sure not to waste a single second of this gift from heaven, which was why I cozied up on the rocker by the fireplace to read a book.

Bliss. Ecstasy, even. If only this moment could last forever.

Oh, I know. I should hibernate. Just tell everyone I'm a hibernating species of vampire and snooze all the way to spring. Yes! I'm a genius!

“Hey, Koma! Good morning!”

Then I heard the voice of evil.

Could this be a hallucination? There's no way she's in my room...

“Koma, are you listening? What're you reading? I'm gonna suck your blood if you keep ignoring me!”

“Woaaaaah?! Stop it! Don't bite my ear, you idiot!”

I threw away my book and jumped back.

But she had already teleported behind me.

The vampire of innocent evil—Lolocco Gandesblood.

Her lips twisted into a curl as she snickered. “Nya-ha-ha-ha!” Only a freak would laugh like that.

“It's just, your blood's so delicious. I can't help myself.”

“Enough! What could possibly be yummy about that vile liquid?!”

“Haven't you heard? They say it tastes sweet when it's from your loved one.”

I had read that before in a novel or something. In fact, I used the same trope in my own stories. But that had to be an urban legend. I mean, blood? Sweet? Hah!

“...You're saying you love me?”

“Of course I do! I love you so much I could throw you in a ditch!”

“Are you listening to yourself right now?”

“Anyway, you don't have anything to do right now, do you?”

“Where did you get that idea? And stop changing the subject...”

“Would you mind doing my winter break homework for me?”

Now look, I was kind-hearted and charitable vampire, but even I couldn’t take the sheer insolence spilling from this girl’s mouth.

“Why in the world would I do that?! How did you even get in here?! I locked the door!”

“Villhaze gave me a copy of the key in exchange for a photo of you when you were a kid.”

“Are all of you out of your minds?!”

That had to be the shadiest backdoor deal I’d ever heard of. I had no idea those two were in contact.

And what did Vill want a picture of kid me for in the first place? What was so great about that? Though now that I think about it, I would certainly like to see a picture of little Vill... No, no, focus on what’s at hand, Komari.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Lolocco was my natural enemy. This little sister of mine had made me shed three hundred million ounces of tears throughout my life at the very least.

She would snatch away my candies, steal my allowance, suck my blood, draw cat whiskers on my face, and give me nightmares by telling lies about watermelon seeds growing in my stomach if I swallowed them... I couldn’t possibly list all the atrocities she’d inflicted upon me.

“Listen, Koma, I need to go out today. So please do my homework, or I’ll tell everyone you’re writing dirty novels.”

“I-I-I-I-I’m not writing anything dirty!”

“Wow, you’re shaking! So you really are aware of what you’re doing!”

“...”

This girl was the devil incarnate. But I couldn’t give her the satisfaction of victory. Not

this time. For I was one of the Seven Crimson Lords. Doing a younger girl's bidding would ruin my reputation.

I took a deep breath to calm my heart, then donned my mature, majestic aura, and cleared my throat.

"Listen, Lolo. Are you even taking life seriously?"

"You're the one goofing off here. You're always weeping and wailing about how much you want to hole up inside and all that. It makes me ashamed of being your sister, to be honest."

"H-homework is something you have to do yourself, otherwise there's no po—"

"Oh, I get what's going on here! You couldn't do my homework even if you wanted to! You may call yourself a scholarly intellectual or whatever, but you wouldn't want anyone finding out you're actually dumb because you failed my assignment. Oh well. Yeah, I guess math is simply too hard for you."

The spirit of wrath inside me awakened from its slumber.

...Me? Dumb? You're telling the brightest mind of the generation that she can't do math?

"Heh-heh-heh... You underestimate me. With my smarts, I could finish your homework at the drop of a hat."

"Woah! Would you give me a demonstration of your incomparable genius, Koma?!"

"Very well! Bring up all the multiplication and division problems you like!"

"You're the best, sis! Here, take care of this."

She shoved a workbook at me, a smile on her face.

It was thicker than I expected, but that wasn't a problem. Academic work like this was the domain of the brightest mind of the generation—not killing. It was time to show Lolocco what I was made of. I could already picture the look on her face as she ate her words... With victory on my mind, I opened the workbook. The first page read:

"Complex Plane Applications"

?

??

"Wrap it up by tomorrow, okay? I'll buy you a bottle of expensive ketchup for your efforts."

"Um..."

"What is it?"

"It's not times tables?"

She looked at me in confusion.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you use multiplication at some point. Surely you can do this, right? Don't worry if you get a few wrong. The teacher would be suspicious if I got everything right anyway."

"..."

A new possibility came to mind: This might all be a prank. This workbook was the stuff of nightmares; only top-level mathematicians would stand a chance against it. She had to be pulling my leg.

"...Little sis, do you understand what's in this book?"

"Well, duh. It's what we're studying right now in school! Anyway, I gotta go to church already. It is Sunday, in case you forgot!"

She then used Void Magic to pull out a thick book from nowhere. The Holy Church Scripture.

I was still baffled at how easily she had lied about studying this at school, but the issue was out of my mind already, as my attention diverted to her piety.

"And when did you start going to church?"

"Today." *Today*?!

"But weren't you saying how religion 'sucks shit' or whatever before this?"

"I changed my mind." Lolocco blushed. *Why?* "A priest visited the academy yesterday. He was so dreamy... I was feeling down, but he cheered me up. He heard me out and said, 'God will surely smile upon you, for deep down, you are brighter than the sun.' He even treated me to some hot coffee."

More like hot air that's blowing up your head right now.

Lolocco had just broken up with her boyfriend. Had she found a replacement already?

"The thing is," she continued, her face scrunching up like the heroine of a tragedy. "He sees me as nothing more than one of his lost little lambs. I asked him out for tea, but he declined. So I'm getting into his faith. I will join the church so that he... so that Lord Heaven will see my way."

"Who the hell is Lord Heaven?"

"One of the Seven Crimson Lords! Lord Heldeus Heaven!"

I nearly exploded in laughter.

"He's your colleague, you must know him. What sort of person is he?"

"Uh... Well, we don't really talk, so..."

"Still, you must know more about him than I do. Spill it, or I'll sneak some tabasco in your dinner to make you suffer."

"I don't negotiate with terrorists! To be honest, I only know that he loves God or whatever... Oh, and that he runs an orphanage."

"Gosh, you're useless. I know that already. I guess I was stupid for expecting anything out of you. Yeah, it makes sense the only friend you have among the Seven is that white-haired stalker."

Cheeky brat... Just you wait! Maybe I'll sneak some tabasco in your dinner one day!

Unfortunately, the idea was worthless. Lolocco could handle any type of food, unlike my spice and bell pepper-hating tongue.

In any case, I'd at least gotten a handle on things. She wasn't just after making me do

her homework—she was also looking to get intel on Helldeus out of me.

...Helldeus, eh? I suppose he was on the decent side of the Seven Crimson Lords, but objectively speaking, he was still a total weirdo. But I guess Lollocco was one, too. Still, she was too excitable—as quick to lose interest as she gained it. I imagined she'd give up on religion soon enough.

Sincere disappointment showed on my sister's face as she sighed.

"I never expect anything from you, and you still let me down."

"Well, sorry. I think I'm way more shocked at you investing into the Holy Church, though."

"Oh, please! God is *in* right now! You'll see, the holy light will envelop the whole of the Mulnite Empire soon enough!"

"Now you're sounding like him..."

"It is true that the Holy Church's getting more followers recently. The faith is propagating all over the Imperial Capital. Why don't you try hearing out their teachings just once?"

"No, thanks. Not interested."

"Fine. Anyway, I've gotta go to the prayer and psalm lessons." Before Lollocco left, she remembered something and flashed a smile. "Oh, and don't forget about my homework! I'm sure it'll be no sweat for your genius! Nya-ha-ha-ha-ha!" She snickered on her way out, making sure to grab some of my marshmallows for herself.

I stared at her as she departed, a question on my mind: *What kind of religion is the Holy Church anyway?*

Flöte had said that "House Gandesblood has always been known for their atheism that borders on blasphemy." I didn't really care about my parents' beliefs, though, so I felt it had nothing to do with me.

In any case, there's a much graver matter at hand. I looked down at the thick workbook.

"Oh, poor, poor Koma and your useless little brain." I could already hear Lollocco

sneering at me for not doing it correctly. And I could take no more. I couldn't lose my dignity as the elder sister. I had to ace this workbook, no matter what.

"...But how am I gonna do that?" I clawed at my hair in despair.

I flipped through the book. This had to be a really intricate prank if it was one. But the first few problems were already solved. Which meant... this really, truly was her homework. No joke.

Someone, please help.

What was my sicko maid doing out in my moment of crisis?

※

Meanwhile, in a room of the Mulnite Imperial Palace, Villhaze, Komari's maid, was sitting at a fancy table across from the Empress.

Villhaze had been summoned just as she was gearing up to enjoy her indoor date with her mistress. She couldn't have possibly refused, but that didn't stop her from being in a bad mood.

Mulnite Empress Karen Helvetius sipped elegantly at her black tea.

Please, let's get this over with already.

"Wipe that frown off your face. We'll be done right away."

"I'm not frowning..."

"Yes you are, unambiguously. Look, I'm sorry. I know anyone would be annoyed at having their boss call them in on Sunday." She placed her teacup back on the saucer. "So let's cut to the chase."

"Should I keep this from Lady Komari?"

"I'll leave that up to you." The Empress grinned. "Now... You're aware of the Holy Church's growing popularity in the center of the Mulnite Empire, correct?"

"Yes, I believe."

The Holy Church was the leader of a monotheistic religion that revered a single absolute god. The organization was known throughout all six nations, as well as the Dark Core Zone. According to reports from Villhaze's direct subordinates, they had exploded in popularity around the summer... But what was the issue here?

"Something's fishy. Being enthusiastic about propagating their beliefs is one thing, but I'm hearing that they're holding shady gatherings in secret from the government. I also got intel on them importing weaponry from the Dark Core Zone. Although that last bit isn't entirely confirmed yet."

"Would you like us to mobilize the Seventh Unit to put them down?" Villhaze asked.

"The Seventh Unit would wreck everything. I'd be better off going with Helldeus's Second Unit, if anything... That's not what I'm asking of you."

The Empress looked out of the window.

Snow season would soon be upon them.

"...Excuse the sudden question, but do you believe in God?"

"That's certainly out of the blue. I'm an atheist."

"Same... I mean, I am one, too."

Karen's empressly aura weakened for a moment, but she regained her posture right away.

"I believe the Holy Church Scripture says something along the lines of fearing God, but I wonder just exactly how many people actually believe that from the bottom of their heart."

"Wouldn't a follower of the Church believe in God?"

"Not everyone can be as devout as Helldeus. I'm sure that some people out there merely use religion as a tool to achieve their own ambitions."

"I see..."

"The Pope will visit Mulnite three days from now."

Villhaze blinked. What did she just say?

"The Pope is the head of the Holy Church. They have a huge cathedral smack dab in the middle of the Dark Core Zone. The Pope usually holes up in there to issue her orders like a monarch, but now she wants to tour Mulnite. We must welcome her with open arms."

"Shall I prepare something along the lines of a feast for her?"

The Empress laughed. "That's for someone else to handle. I have a far more important task for you. Her Holiness wants to visit our nation to promote theological exchange. She has something in mind. It is the duty of the Mulnite government to find out what she might be plotting and put a stop to it before things get out of hand."

"Has the government ever been involved with the Church's headquarters?"

"No. The Mulnite Court was excommunicated a hundred years ago, and we haven't been in contact since. Still, the new Pope took charge three years ago, so maybe she's made some changes."

"..."

It was certainly strange that the Holy Church would contact Mulnite out of the blue after all that. But was there really a need to be so up in arms? After the Six Nations War and the Heavenly Ball, the nations of the world had been avoiding any serious conflict, hoping to achieve peace and amity. And religions were supposed to be concerned with the salvation of the people; would the Holy Church really plot something to go against the peaceful current?

Or am I simply too naive? Villhaze thought.

"Your Majesty, what do you want me to do, exactly?"

"I summoned you here to personally hand down my imperial decree. Listen well." She wore a suggestive grin as she explained the plan.

Villhaze absorbed her orders in total silence. She had no questions in particular. Whatever the Empress said had to be necessary for the Mulnite Empire. Above all else, she'd emphasized how the orders were "for Komari's good." Villhaze couldn't say no to that.

Upon finishing her explanation, the Empress stared at Villhaze as if asking for her thoughts.

“This for the good of all vampirekind. I hope you’ll accept.”

“Yes, I’ll do as you say.”

“Excellent!” She put on a broad smile. “I knew Komari’s loyal maid wouldn’t disappoint me. I’m sure you’ll perform with flying colors. So. That’s all. You can go now. Sorry for taking up your day off.”

“It’s no problem. Well then, good-bye.”

Villhaze bowed and left.

The plan was to be carried out in three days, when the Pope arrived at Mulnite.

Villhaze was not worried about it. She had plenty of experience conspiring. There wouldn’t be any problems, so long as she acted as boldly as ever.

Yes, and let’s do it without telling Komari this time, either. That’s what makes it fun.

Villhaze smiled internally as she went out to the hallway.

Cloing.

A switch flipped behind her, where the Empress had been sitting.

※

“Oh no... Oh no... Oh no, no, no...”

Cold sweat cascaded down my body as I confronted the workbook.

I couldn’t understand a single thing in it. Were kids these days really solving these problems like they were nothing? *The Mulnite Empire has a bright future in store, that’s for sure...* I escaped the present while gripping the quill tightly. So tightly that tears were spilling from my eyes.

Stupid Lolo. How dare she study more advanced topics than her big sister? I know I would

be able to solve this at the snap of a finger if I had studied it! If only I hadn't dropped out of school!

Why does she get to have everything? Height? Smarts? Friends? Communication skills? Magic skills? Leadership? The charm to get away with any misdeed? And more than anything... the freedom to live without being bound to work obligations! She gets to enjoy her school life! It's not fair!

The more I thought about it, the more my mood soured.

I decided to, instead, draw my favorite dishes on the answer column. Omelet rice, Hamburg steak, curry rice... *No, I shouldn't do that. I said I could solve this. No matter how much I hate my sister, my moral code won't let me leave this task undone.*

“Oh! Lady Komari’s crying! Fear not, my lady, I will wipe those tears away with my tongue. Look this way, if you please.”

“WAAAH!?”

I tumbled out of my chair on the spot. Where did this sicko maid pop up from?! I was too used to her shenanigans already to grumble, though. I simply wiped my tears (with my hands) and stood up.

“...What’re you doing here, Vill? Didn’t the Empress call you?”

“Our meeting is over. But enough about that. What’s the matter, Lady Komari? Did you find out I ate your pudding in secret?”

“You did?!?”

“I am so, so sorry.”

You little...!! I was looking forward to having it for dessert after dinner!!

...No, calm down. Breathe in, Komari. You can’t blow up every time they eat your snacks, else you’ll die an early death. Keep your cool. She apologized already.

“...Everybody makes mistakes. Just make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“As merciful as always, Lady Komari. But that won’t do. I must atone in some way. How

could I be of help?"

"...?!" It was then that I realized the truth.

My maid was trying to give me a hand with my insufferable task. I was shaken to my core. I thought the absolute weirdo had no shred of consideration, but well, I'll be! Now this was how the master-maid relationship ought to be.

"V-very well! If you so insist, I will give you due punishment. My sister just dumped her homework on me, so please take care of it."

"No."

"Why?! *Seriously?*!"

"That's too much in exchange for one pudding. I request an after-bath ear cleaning."

"What?! You're the one apologizing! Where do you get off making requests?!"

"If you don't accept, I won't do your sister's homework. Enjoy having your pride as the elder torn to shreds."

"Argh..."

I was stupid for expecting consideration from my maid. She was always plotting to make me suffer. Fine! I'll do what you want! I'll sell my soul to the devil if it means getting out of doing homework!

"Okay, okay! I'll clean your ears or whatever, just do the workbook, please!"

"Oh my. I didn't expect you to give in so easily. I request a massage as well, then."

"And you call yourself my maid?! Fine! I'll do it!"

"Deal," she said inexpressively before taking the homework.

Why must I suffer through this? It's all Lolo's fault. Okay, Lolo and this maid's fault. I'm surrounded by evil. I grumbled on my way to bed.

I sat down and watched the maid at work in silence. There really was nothing she

couldn't do. Housework, scheming, battling, homework, you name it.

I got restless five minutes later. Now that I could think things through more calmly... Wasn't it silly to have someone else do my sister's homework for me?

"...Hey, Vill. You can stop if you want."

"What? No, I'm doing it for the ear cleaning and the massage."

She kept on writing, not the least bit perturbed.

Come to think of it, I make her do a lot of menial tasks. She must have enough on her plate just making sure I don't die, and she still finds the time to make me sweets, clean my room, buy me books... I began fearing I'd become a bum thanks to her.



“...My personal life would be in shambles without you, huh?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” Vill turned to me in confusion.

I shook my head hard.

“Nothing! Anyway, if you have any requests regarding your job as a maid, please tell me. I’ll see what I can do. It is my duty as your boss to make sure you have a proper work environment.”

“Thank you. If you insist, I would like to receive the right to marry you in place of a paycheck, please.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself!”

As I screamed my retort, I picked up a book from the floor.

...Well, she wouldn’t leave my side anyway, right?

Vill clung hard to me, if I did say so myself. She probably didn’t have any employment opportunities besides the Mulnite Imperial Army. Entirely convinced that my bum levels would only increase as time went on, I continued reading my book from where I’d left off.

I’d had no idea back then. No idea that my peaceful life was already on the path to its demise.

※

The next day, my sister’s dishonesty came to light because the handwriting on her homework wasn’t hers; the teacher gave her the scolding of her life and made her stand in the hallway for five hours. Yeah, karma! I hoped this would make her reconsider her life choices, but knowing her, she’d forget all about it by the next day. How I wish I had her nerves!

Vexations

1

The Vampire Princess of the
Holy Paradise

[The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess]

Three days had passed since I was forced to do Lolocco's homework.

It was a workday. Again.

Still, that didn't mean we had sports-war. The lucky bastards of the Lapelico Kingdom, who usually challenged me on this stuff, were hibernating. Was I sad about it? Hell no! Let them snooze for the rest of eternity.

Anyway, I still had to come to the Mulnite Imperial Palace, despite the shivering cold.

My job for the day would consist of holing up in my office to sign documents of cryptic purpose, along with supervising my subordinates' training and hearing them out if they wanted advice. A million times better than war, that was for sure.

Yet as I walked down the hallways of the palace, I couldn't help but feel that something was off.

It was noisy in here. Civil servants were running every which way around the Palace, yelling the whole while. Just then, I heard a dainty scream, and the government officials crashed into one another, their papers scattering all about the hallway.

"...What's with everyone? Are they busy because it's the end of the year?" I asked Vill as I helped pick up some documents.

"Well..." She brought her fingers to her chin, no intention of giving us a hand. "It must be because the Pope is coming."

"The Pope?" I handed someone the papers. "Oh, here you go."

"Th-th-thank you so much, Commander Gandesblood!" the civil servant responded with a bow.

C'mon, don't be so scared. Why's everyone like this? I'm as calm as a whale in the sea!

"The head of the Holy Church is traveling here all the way from the Holy City of Lehysia in the Dark Core Zone. They want to do some cultural exchange with the Mulnite Empire or something."

"Huh. You know, my sister has started going to church recently..."

"The Holy Church has been gaining many followers of late. Perhaps the people have begun looking to God for peace of mind after the Six Nations War... Whatever their reasons, it's got nothing to do with us in the Seventh Unit. We're all the kind of people to flip the bird at God anyway."

"Okay, but listen, don't you go actually giving the finger to the people coming in from the Holy City, okay? Got it?"

"I understand. The Pope is a believer among believers, after all. If we dared to deny the existence of God before their eyes, the Holy Knights might turn Mulnite into a sea of flames. The list of cities destroyed throughout history is not a short one."

"..."

Holy fudge. *All right, I'm keeping quiet as a mouse if I come across the Pope.*

"We'll be fine." Vill smiled. "The Holy Church comes with friendly intentions. They even sent us a giant idol as proof of our bond."

"A what?"

"A hundred-foot tall bronze statue of their god. Look, they placed the sacred figure in that corner of the Mulnite Imperial Palace." Vill pointed out the window.

Far off in the distance, I saw a giant mass covered in cloth. Perhaps they were going to unveil it at a ceremony later today or something. I felt like that couldn't be anything but baggage for the Mulnite government... but I dismissed the hunch telling me something was wrong as unfounded.

I had destroyed the Daydream Paradise hotel in summer. Then the ten-billion-yen vase at the Amatsu manor in fall. Was there any guarantee I wouldn't also break something of value this winter?

I gotta make sure the Seventh Unit guys stay put when the Pope arrives... Or wait, what if they're here already?

“Hey, Vill. I don’t have to do anything for this thing, right?”

“The Seventh Unit hasn’t received any orders. According to what I heard, they’ll have a meeting in the Mulnite Imperial Palace, but that should only be for a meal with Her Majesty.”

So it’s got nothing to do with me. Got it.

Still, the sheer... pompous (popeous?) sound of the title gave me a very bad feeling. Perhaps the best course of action was cooping up inside the Crimson Tower and waiting for the storm to pass.

“Commander! Good morning.”

Then I heard the voice of the devil. Before I knew it, that dried-tree-like vampire was standing behind me. It was still too early in the morning to be confronted with Caostel Conto’s eerie grin.

“Glad to see you here. It’s getting chilly, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Take care not to catch a cold!”

“Ohh! The compassion! It should be you at the seat of God, Commander, instead of the Holy Church’s deity!”

Stop. Don’t say that out loud. Who knows who could be listening!

“Caostel, please be more respectful of God.”

“I always am! The Seventh Unit will always unite to rip apart anyone who dares commit heresy against our Commander!”

“Are you even following what I’m saying?”

"Of course I am. More people should revere you as the divine leader you are. The PR team is always thinking of ways to communicate your wonders to the world."

Yeah, you're not following.

By the way, my Seventh Unit was divided in six teams:

1. The conspiracy team, led by Special Lieutenant Villhaze. Fifty members.
2. The PR team, led by Lieutenant Caostel Conto. One hundred members.
3. The wrecking team, led by Lieutenant Bellius Hund Cerbero. One hundred members.
4. The kamikaze team, led by Lieutenant Yohann Holders. One hundred members.
5. The raid team, led by Captain Mellaconcey. One hundred members.
6. The special team, currently without leader. Fifty members. They'd been fighting to the death to see who would lead it for a while. Don't ask me why.

But to be honest, I just thought of them all as the "berserk team." Regardless, my troops seemed to be very particular about the composition of their organization, and they always proudly introduced themselves as "XX from the X team of Gandesblood's Seventh Unit."

Now, back to the story.

"...Work as hard as you want, but please just don't cause any trouble."

"Roger. I believe you will find our new PR proposal to be of huge impact and importance. See, we're thinking about building a Terakomari Gandesblood statue."

"What are you talking about?"

"A bronze statue of you, Commander. Oh, don't worry about the construction costs. Everyone in the Seventh Unit is in favor of the project, and we're pooling our own funds to make it."

"That's not the problem. I don't need a statue."

"Oh, but you do. That's the best way to convey your greatness to the people."

"He has a point. As you might remember, Madhart had an effigy of his own in front of the Executive Office in Aruka," Vill chimed in.

"Right?! There's nothing that says power quite like a statue!"

"No, not right! Why would I follow in Madhart's footsteps?!"

"Oh, but ours will be far greater than the one in Gerra-Aruka. As a matter of fact, it's already nearly complete."

Caostel handed me a picture. And there I was, all in bronze, wearing a huge smile on my face and flashing peace signs with my hands. My cheeks burned with embarrassment.

"We tried emphasizing your cuteness over your strength for the first one. It's a little over a hundred feet tall."

That's some godlike scale!

"Please let us know if you have any requests. We can add anything you like to it."

"Oh, I have many requests! Too many to put into words!"

"If I may put one forward myself, I think it should shoot lasers from its eyes at the push of a button," Vill suggested.

"No one asked you!!" I shrieked back.

"That sounds magnificent! Let's set it to shoot at Lapelico's Royal Capital!" Caostel added.

"Are you trying to start a war?!?!"

I would actually *die*, in multiple ways, if they implemented Vill's suggestion. And wait, did he just say *for the first one*? They're making more?? I had to stop my troops before we got a second coming of the Commander T-shirts! Those were still being sold, by the way. They released a new variation every month.

“Uh, Caostel... We can’t...”

“Don’t worry. We’ve already selected where to place it.”

“No, listen, you gotta...”

“Lieutenant Conto! There’s trouble!”

Troops from my unit, Caostel’s direct subordinates, showed up from the end of the corridor.

“What is it? And don’t run in the hallways.”

“Look over there! That’s where we were going to place our statue! But someone’s already put another one there!”

“What?!“ Caostel looked out the window and narrowed his eyes like a thief surrounded by the police. “This is certainly troublesome... We scoped out that place a week ago. I was overjoyed to have found such a perfect spot—it’s practically made for hosting a statue.”

Well, I’m pretty sure that was the case. Just not for my statue!

“I can’t allow this. We won’t let them get away with illegally dumping their garbage on the place where our Komari statue will stand!”

“Hold on, Caostel, the thing is, that’s...”

“There’s no time to lose! Let’s go investigate!”

“Please listen...”

““Roger!!””

Woosh! Caostel and his troops dashed through the hallways, leaving me in the dust.

I felt waves of despair crash in on me. The pieces of my demise were slowly but surely coming together. History was bound to repeat itself. I was toast.

“What now, Vill?! We gotta stop them before they cause trouble!”

“And how can we do that?”

“.....”

Nothing came to mind.

Hey, Caostel wouldn't actually destroy a statue of God for no reason, right? Oh, but he would. He was second in the “Seventh Unit Crazy Leaders” ranking. Mellaconcey was first place, btw. Then came Yohann, Vill, and Bellius, in that order.

Rankings aside, they were all crazy enough. There was not a single decent soul around me.

I wanna quit already. Oh, that reminds me, Twilight Triangle will be getting published as my reward for participating in the Heavenly Ball. Karla should be getting in touch with the publisher around now. Hope that happens soon.

“I know what to do, Vill. I’ll escape reality.”

“Very well. Want to do it while lying on my chest?”

“Nope.”

Anyway, the only thing I could do now was hope for the best. Pushing my anxieties out of mind, I started to head back to my office. *All right, time to take a nap by the fireplace while pretending to work.* Just as I began escaping reality as announced...

“Hello. Would you happen to know where the Bloody Hall is?”

...I heard a voice call out to me. A voice sounding as if it was echoing from another world.

I looked around in surprise and found a girl. A vampire with blond hair like the cold moon, tied up in pigtails. She looked about my age, but her mellow vibes made her resemble an antique doll. So serene! She wore a strange, brimless hat that was emblazoned with a symbol of a slanted cross pierced by an arrow.

What stood out to me about her more than anything, however, was the lollipop in her mouth. Walking around with candy on a stick was pretty dangerous in my opinion; what if she tripped?

“Um, uh... Who are you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m Spica La Gemini. People also call me Julius VI,” she said, plucking the sucker from her mouth. It was as red as an apple.

She trained her starry eyes on mine. I still had no idea who she was. The daughter of a court aristocrat? Was she here to deliver the lunch her daddy had forgotten back home? Whatever the case, I really didn’t need to pry further into this. I stared right back at her.

“The Bloody Hall is over there. Want me to show you the way?”

“Thank you, but I shouldn’t take any more of your time.”

“But... um, are you meeting someone from the Court?”

“Yes, I have things to do here. Though I must say, the Mulnite Court is much livelier than I expected. It almost seems like they’re getting up to some trouble. Do you happen to know what is going on, Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood?”



That took me off guard, but then I realized it wasn't that weird. I was already a household name thanks to Caostel's PR and Melka's phony newspaper articles.

"...Yeah, they do seem pretty busy. I heard the Pope's coming, so I guess they're preparing for that?"

"My, I see. I wonder what sort of person this Pope is."

"I heard she's a total berserker, quick to lose her temper. You should watch out for her, too. She might kill you if you so much as imply blasphemy."

The look in Spica's eyes seemed to change. But then she nodded along like nothing had happened.

"Oh. That is frightening. And how would you avoid angering her, Commander Gandesblood?"

"Hmm... I'd just pay her some compliments, I guess. Talk about how cool God is or whatever. That should do the trick."

"Wouldn't you be at risk of digging your own grave by lying?"

"Maybe... but I think it's better to avoid any needless friction, you know?"

The girl grinned, then spun the lollipop in her hand as she said:

"You're really nothing to sneeze at. I see now why my brethren have their eyes on you."

"Huh? What'd you say?"

"Nothing. Thank you for giving me directions." She turned her foot, but then she stopped as something came to mind. She looked at me again and, nonchalantly, said, "So, about God..."

"Huh?"

"Do you believe in Him?"

What's she on about?

“I—I don’t know... I think it’s up to the individual whether God exists or not.”

“I’m asking for your personal opinion.”

“Well, I think it would be better if He did. But I haven’t met Him, so I can’t really say I fully believe. It’s like the *tsuchinoko*, y’know?”

“So you won’t believe in anything you can’t see. I think that’s a bit narrow-minded.”

“Maybe, but hey...”

If an almighty, omniscient God really existed like the Holy Church said, then I felt like the world should’ve been a better place. More specifically, a paradise in which no one had to work or go outside ever. Sadly, the real world was hell—I had to go to war even on Saturdays and Sundays. It was like my week has two Mondays and two Fridays. So no, God might as well not have existed. If He did, then He was one lazy bastard.

I gave her an abbreviated version of my thoughts.

“I see,” Spica whispered. “So there are still many who think like you out there.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I was just thinking about the purification. In any case, I must be on my way.”

She put the lollipop back in her mouth and left for the Bloody Hall.

Purification? Is she cleaning up the place or something? What a weird girl. Probably not any regular vampire. I’d say she’s got a non-vampire parent, going off her vibes. Hope she finds the room...

“As astonishing as always, Lady Komari,” Vill said out of nowhere. “This is why they call you the slaughter champion. You have no fear stating radical ideas like denying the existence of God in the face of the Pope of the Holy Church. And not only that—you even called her a berserker who’s quick to lose her temper. I wish I had a single shred of your bravery.”

“Hmm? What’d you just say?”

“Huh? I was saying how much I would love to fondle your thighs right now.”

“No, you didn’t say that!! You mentioned the Pope!”

“Yes, I did. Julius VI—Spica La Gemini, that is—is Her Holiness, resident of the Holy City Lehysia. Surely you must have made the connection.”

“...Huh??”

“Remember the slanted cross and arrow on her hat? That is the emblem of the Holy Church. And I heard she was meeting Her Majesty the Empress at the Bloody Hall.”

My eyes turned into dots. *Wha—? That was the Pope? I was picturing an old guy like Helldeus!... You mean a vampire my age is the head of the Holy Church? Wait, why's she waltzing around the Palace like it's nothing? How'd she get lost? No, maybe I just imagined the whole thing.*

“For real?” I asked Vill fearfully.

“For real,” she answered calmly.

Then the full consequences of my actions hit me.

“WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL ME?! Now what?! How can I even say I’m sorry for the shit I said?! I might as well have just declared war to the girl!”

“Julius VI has a graceful appearance, but she is famous for being a hardcore bellicist. You should read her book, *Tidings from the Kingdom of God*. She states her intention to ‘purify’ every savage who doesn’t believe in God.”

“...You gotta be kidding me.”

“I am not. You underestimate organized religion, Lady Komari.”

“All right! I’ll convert to the Holy Church, starting today! Surely she’ll forgive me after I repent and she sees how much I regret my words and deeds! So how do I join the Church?!”

“The Holy Church’s doctrine is based on love. First, you must place a hand on your chest and close your eyes. Then look for true love slumbering deep in the bottom of your heart.”

“Okay... Love... Love... Love... Oh, I think I’m getting something!”

“Is love blooming within you? Now you must direct that affection to the people near to you. First, you must thank your maid for her daily efforts and pat her head.”

“Got it! Pat, pat, pat...”

“Thank you. Now, you must keep on nurturing that love. Do it with a hug now. Throw yourself into my arms and...”

“Got it!... Wait, I know what you’re doing, you trickster!”

I shoved her away and jumped back. *Why did I believe her?! How dare you use religion as a tool for your own ambitions! You’re who the Pope should be mad at!*

“It’s over... War’s coming again...”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure Her Majesty will take care of things.”

“Huh? You think so?”

“She’s clever, so she must have anticipated you being rude. And, of course, the Seventh Unit’s rampaging is but a tiny problem. She’ll take care of everything.”

“I see... Yeah, I guess...”

That busty blond might be a nasty pervert, but she was also a capable one. Apparently, she’d even acted behind the scenes to ensure things would go well during the Six Nations War and the Heavenly Ball. Plus, Daddy was always grumbling about how she was so capable that she really didn’t need a chancellor.

With that in mind, I started feeling like things would work out. Surely the Pope would understand. Although I should probably still offer her an official apology.

“Okay. Let’s forget about the Pope stuff for now, then.”

“Now we’re talking. Well then, let’s go to the office.”

“Yup.”

Weight lifted from my shoulders, I started to head back there, when I saw a woman rushing from the end of the hallway.

Gee, things sure are hectic today, huh? I sighed as I kept on walking, but then my eyes met hers, and I turned back around. My survival instincts kicked in, yelling at me to hide behind a pillar, but it was all for naught. She grabbed my arm tightly.

“Ms. Gandesblood! Why are you trying to hide?!”

“I’m not! I just saw a hamster behind that column, and I wanted to get a closer look!”

“There’s no hamster! I know you’ve been avoiding me lately!”

Lately? Hah, I’ve been doing that since the very beginning.

It was THE aristocrat herself, the lady with the almond-shaped eyes and wood-ear-mushroom-like hair: Crimson Lord Flöte Mascarail. She looked down upon me with her usual high-handed glare. This was the last person I wanted to meet in the Mulnite Imperial Palace. Out of the frying pan and into the fiery pits of hell.

“Leeet meeoo goo! If you wanna fight, then you gotta go through Vill and Sakuna and Nelia and Karla first, then grab a die and roll six consecutive sixes. Then, and only then, will I consider it!”

“How many barriers do you need?! I’m not here to fight you!”

“But you’re like the queen of berserkers! You’re always ready to rumble! I’m pretty sure you’re the number one reason why we Crimson Lords get called a bunch of brutes!”

“What did you just saaay?!”

“Lady Komari, you’ve become a true master of adding fuel to the fire. I kneel.”

I braced myself for Flöte to draw her sword... but it didn’t happen. Surprisingly enough, she sighed and let me go.

Something was off. Her impeccable noble front had crumbled; she was showing weakness. Had she stayed up all night or something? Curious, Vill pointed it out.

"Lady Mascarail, what is the matter? You've got more wrinkles than usual."

"Do you have a death wish?" Flöte growled.

"Vill, please don't provoke her."

"I'm sorry. I just counted them, and it seems you do have the same number of wrinkles as before." Vill corrected herself.

I curled myself up for the coming shock wave. *Another Crimson Match coming right up! Now including one Komari death.*

I could feel the storm brewing as Flöte shook her whole body, red in the face, but then she took a deep breath to calm down. Seeing her act like the adult in the situation just made me feel bad. It was almost like we were the bad guys.

She stared at me and calmly asked:

"...Have you seen Lady Karen?"

"Huh? No... I haven't."

Flöte put on a grimace before revealing the startling news that would lead to my demise:

"I can't seem to find her. She's going to miss her meeting with Her Holiness the Pope."

It turned out the reason why the officers were all hurrying about was because the Empress had vanished out of the blue.

Flöte said the Empress had been cooped up in her room for the last week, officially because of a cold, but I surmised this was a lie. As we all know, idiots don't catch colds. By that same logic, I believe perverts don't, either.

"Lady Karen?! Lady Kareeen?! Where are youuu?!"

Snow fell silently around the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

I was with Flöte, helping her look for the Empress. The whole palace was searching for her, actually. You could hear “Your Majestyyy! Your Majestyyy!” all over the place. However, no one was having any luck finding her.

“...It’s no use. There’s no trace of her,” Vill said as she opened the incinerator hatch.

Well, good thing there’s no trace of her inside that thing!

“She must not be in the Mulnite Imperial Palace. There are other people looking for her with Void Magic, too, so I’m thinking she’s not in the Imperial Capital at all.”

I had the Seventh Unit guys looking for her, too. Their reactions to the request was as followed: “Where’re you hiding, Your Majesty?!” “Stop wasting the Commander’s time!” “Get out here right now, or we’ll fucking kill you!” “You’re dead meat either way!” *What are they, the yakuza? Actually... yeah, they pretty much are...*

“We can’t find her. She probably got killed by some terrorist or whatever.” Blond Yohann Holders came to a terrible conclusion.

Killed?! I mean, sure, the terrorists have been pretty active lately... but I don’t think Pervert Empress is so weak as to let that happen.

“And the Empress didn’t say anything to my dad, either, Vill?”

“We’d know where she was already if she had... By the way, Lady Mascarail, does Her Majesty disappear like this frequently?”

“Of course not,” she said, the words *you idiot* implied in her tone. “Lady Karen might be eccentric, but she’s a responsible ruler. There must be extraneous circumstances at hand.”

“But she is making Her Holiness wait. It’s already become a diplomatic issue.”

“True... The head of the Holy City is here, and we must get the Empress to receive her! Gosh! Lady Karen, wherever could you be?!”

“Maybe she slept in? I do it all the time,” I suggested.

“She’s not like you, you lazy vampire!”

Fair enough. I didn't know about the Empress's private life, but I could hardly picture her in bed mumbling, "Five more minutes!"

The situation aside, it sure was cold.

I rubbed my hands together and exhaled. Gazing at the snow falling like fluffy pieces of cotton from the sky, I thought, *I wanna go back to my heated room already.*

I was chilled to my core. Maybe the Mulnite Imperial Army uniform was lacking in protection from frigid weather. See, this poor little vampire was weak against the heat *and* the cold. At this rate, I would wind up freezing to death before we could find the Empress.

Where is she, even? Maybe she went out shopping? As I grumbled internally, I noticed Yohann staring at me.

"...What? You hungry or something?"

"N-no! I was just thinking if you'd like me to warm you up with my ma—EEK!"

Yohann was blown away by his own subordinates. The guy was still rolling on the floor as they yelled: "Die, you insolent bastard!" "How many times do we have to tell you not to pull that shit?!" "Grovel and die three times over!" "How about you warm *me* up? With your blood!"

I had no idea what was going on and was too scared to find out, so I pretended I hadn't seen anything.

"My, my," Vill whispered as she grabbed my hand all of a sudden. "You're freezing. I will make you a pair of gloves for the winter."

"Huh? No, I think I already have some in the closet."

"Yes, but I want to knit you a pair. And a scarf, too. Sadly, that would take some time, so please make do with a scarf made of your own maid's skin for now."

"A skin scarf? What the...? Hey, get off me! Stop! Don't hug me! I mean, you're warming me up, but this is too embarrassing... But so warm... But so embarrassing..."

"What are you two doing in broad daylight?!" Flöte yelled at us.

I came to my senses and escaped from my maid's arms. What had I been thinking?

"Listen, the honor of Mulnite is at stake right now. We need to get in contact with Her Majesty or..."

"Lady Flöte! Terrible news!"

Just then, a vampire came running from afar. I felt like I recognized him... kinda... Maybe he was Flöte's subcommander? Pale in the face, he kneeled as soon as he approached her.

"It's the Pope. Her Holiness..."

"Calm down, Bachelard. What happened?"

"I am very sorry... Chancellor Gandesblood was buying us some time, but it appears Her Holiness has finally lost her patience... She's saying that we need to bring a surrogate if the Empress won't show, otherwise she'll break off relations."

"What...?"

I had a very bad feeling about this.

See, in Mulnite, military officers were of higher standing than civil ones.

The Empress, coming from a Crimson Lord background, was number one. The Chancellor, who oversaw internal affairs and was the head of civil officers, was only number three.

The next in line after the Empress were the Seven Crimson Lords. So, Flöte and me and the others. The structure of power was clearly ridiculous, but it had been this way since time immemorial.

Well, there's six other Crimson Lords, right? Actually, five, I guess. Either way, it doesn't have to be me.

"So she wants to see a Crimson Lord?"

"Yes, it seems so. She doesn't seem to care who specifically she sees, just that they're of the highest authority in the Empire."

"Whew. Hey, I just remembered I have some work to do. You can take care of things, right, Flöte?"

I turned around nonchalantly, but then Vill grabbed my arm tightly.

"What are you saying, Lady Komari?! We must go see the Pope! It should be you cleaning up Her Majesty's mess, since you're the strongest candidate to succeed her! This is not a job that measly Flöte Mascarail can take care of!"

"Let me gooo! Stop provoking heeer!"

"Cleaning up after her mess?! The strongest candidate to succeed her?! I've had enough of your buffoonery! I can't let a clown like you handle things!" Flöte asserted.

"My maid's the clown, not me!"

"Um, do you have any problem with Lady Komari's methods? Very well, then. Let's see who can put Her Holiness back in a good mood. Or will you back down from the challenge?" Vill said.

"I told you not to provoke her!" I shouted.

"Fine! It is obvious the Mulnite Empire would fall if I left it in Ms. Gandesblood's hands! Let us go together!" Flöte said.

"Hey, don't listen to her silly provocations!" I protested.

"You heard Flöte, Lady Komari. Let's go show the Pope that everything's all right."

"Stop, Vill, stop pulling mee!!"

"I'll carry you there, then."

"Don't carry mee!!"

She lugged me there as if I was a suitcase.

Why does life never go the way I want it to? The answer is quite simple, actually: because this maid drags me everywhere against my wishes. Please just let me have one peaceful day without her... Hey, why're you putting your hand inside my clothes?! I'm gonna cry!



What was the Pope's objective in the first place?

Vill said she was trying to strengthen amity between the Holy Church and the Mulnite Empire. But the word was that Julius VI—Spica La Gemini—was hardcore against pagans. And she had said something about “purification” after all those crazy things had come out of my mouth earlier. I was beginning to think she hadn’t been talking about cleaning.

“...Vill, is there anything I should avoid saying?”

“For starters, don’t deny the existence of God.”

“Um, I think it’s too late for that...”

“Then we’re off on the wrong foot. I think you should kowtow for forgiveness.”

“It’s so over! I should’ve brought a pudding for her or something!”

“Silence, you two! She’s right there!” Flöte spat in low voice.

I shut my mouth immediately.

We were at the Bloody Hall, in the Mulnite Imperial Palace, sitting at a long, rectangular table dividing the two parties.

On one side, the Mulnite Empire: Flöte, Daddy, and me. The Seventh Unit troops were standing behind us, too, for whatever reason. They had started trailing behind me like ants the moment they heard about me going to see the Pope. The moment that happened, I hadn’t been able to picture anything but doom in my future.

On the other side, the visitors from the Holy City of Lehysia. The blond girl, Spica, was sitting between two cardinals, as though they were her bodyguards. Her eyes, like blue stars in the night sky, bore right into mine. I froze up like a snowman. I had no idea what to say. *Maybe I should start by talking about the weather?* Then Daddy whispered into my ear:

“It’s in your hands, Komari.”

“Bwuh?”

Was he for real? And he didn’t even stop there.

“Her Holiness is awfully upset... She won’t listen to anything I say. She hasn’t even touched the snacks I offered. I think she only wants to talk to someone young. You know, the next generation. So I’ll just take my leave.”

“Wait! You can’t leave this in my hands!”

“Don’t worry, Commander Mascarail is here with you. Besides! You’re close to her in age. You can be friends. You got this, Komari.”

“Wai...”

Then he smiled and left.

My jaw fell to the floor. Daddy just didn’t want to deal with the Pope any longer.

Be friends? With the Pope? Yeah, right! If making friends were that easy, I’d be having an even brighter and more exciting youth than my little sister right about now! Imagine that! Hunkering down with all my friends to read books together every week!

But I digress.

I had to come up with a way to survive this, and fast.

“...So Her Majesty the Empress really isn’t coming.”

Her voice reverberated as though it had come from another world.

Julius VI—Spica—shot me a cold glare. She shook her red lollipop as she said:

“I sent a letter saying I would meet her here at noon today. I even received a response agreeing to meet me... So what happened? Is this how unimportant the Holy Church is to Mulnite?”

“Th—that’s not the case at all!” Flöte said with an unsuitably polite smile. “There are many churches in the Imperial Capital. Even one of our top officers, a member of the Crimson Lords, is a priest of the Holy Church!”

“Heldeus Heaven? I personally excommunicated him last year.”

““You what?!”” Flöte’s and my voice overlapped.

Talk about shocking. What did he do?

“Lord Heaven was an outlaw. He didn’t adhere to the Holy City’s policies. We tried summoning him again and again, but he kept prioritizing his job as commander. Having someone put killing above working for God is out of the question. If he’s representative of the clergymen in the Mulnite Empire, then I can only imagine how low the country’s religious awareness is.”

I feel like he was actually very busy. We had that whole thing with Sakuna and Inverse Moon, after all. Regardless, Spica puffed her cheeks in anger.

My men started murmuring behind me, “Who does the Pope think she is?” “I think we oughtta teach her a lesson.” I had to do something before they did.

“A-anyway! Welcome to the Mulnite Empire! We’re terribly sorry that the Empress isn’t here to receive you, but Flöte and I are here in her stead. I hope you can forgive us!”

“Wouldn’t the head of the Crimson Lords be Commander Petrose Calamaria? Why are you two freshwomen here? Should I take this as further proof of how little you think of the Holy Church?”

“Vill, she won’t stop complaining. I can’t do this. Go get another Crimson Lord.”

“Impossible. The First Unit commander is nowhere to be found. The Second Unit commander is having a party at the orphanage. The Third Unit commander is training in the Dark Core Zone. There is no current Fifth Unit commander. And the Sixth Unit commander is on paid leave.”

“Why does Sakuna get to have vacations? Do I also get paid leave?”

“No.”

“Why?! You’re gonna overwork me to death! It’ll be on your conscience! I’m gonna write *it’s all my maid’s fault* in my will, you hear me?!”

“What are you two whispering to each other? Is this how you treat your guests?”

“I am so sorry, Your Holiness! Ms. Gandesblood, you apologize, too!”

“I’m sorry.” I bowed.

Crap. This is even worse than when I met Karla.

The guys behind me made a fuss once again: “She’s making the Commander bow?” “Cheeky brat.” “She won’t get away with this.” “How about we just kill her?” “No, you’ll just turn her into a lump of meat if you do that.” “Ugh. Okay, fine.” *What’s up with those last guys?*

“Very well,” Spica said after licking her lollipop. “Blaming you won’t make time turn back. I’ll just go ahead and explain why we’re visiting today.”

Her eyes sparkled like stars.

Then she dropped a bomb on us.

“Make the teachings of the Holy Church Mulnite’s official religion.”

Her demand left everyone in shock. Flöte furrowed her brow. Vill placed a finger on her chin. The Seventh Unit guys roared in commotion. Meanwhile, I simply tilted my head to the side.

“Wars have broken out across the six nations that are not for entertainment as of late. The reason is obvious: Darkness has taken hold of the hearts of the people. We believe it is our duty to clear the gloom with the light of the Holy Church.”

“One second, Your Holiness! Even so, we can’t—”

“Silence, Flöte Mascarail,” she commanded. “I recognize the Mulnite Empire’s efforts in the Six Nations War and the Heavenly Ball... but your achievements are only a result of barbaric violence. That won’t solve the root of the problem. We need to change the hearts of the people if we want to achieve true peace. And only a force above worldly matters can accomplish that.”

“I find your goals commendable, but I don’t think we should force an ideology onto the people. We can’t simply accept to make it the state religion at the drop of a hat.”

"Acceptance is the first step toward peace. The world must be covered in love. Sooner or later, the light of God will envelop the Mulnite Empire—with or without the government's permission. Our clergymen are already evangelizing in the Imperial Capital. Once the people lay on the pressure, even the Empress will not be able to refuse God."

Sure enough, there were a lot of priests around the Imperial Capital lately. Even my sister was converting (though that was because of Helldeus). Spica's invasion had already begun.

Wait, is this an invasion? I don't get it, but I feel like there's something wrong with just showing up and going, "Believe in my faith, now!" That seems a bit lacking in empathy.

"To tell you the truth, Mulnite is not the first nation I've given this advice to. I already had an audience with the Enchanted Lands' Tianzi about this."

"I see. And what was their response?"

"That they'll give it proper consideration. And they didn't say so casually. They're already working on building ten churches in Jingshi."

"I hear the Enchanted Lands is weak at diplomatic negotiations. Did you happen to use any underhanded tactics?"

"Heh. You don't get it... We're merely acting in accordance with God's will." Spica sighed. "Refusing our proposal means rebelling against God. Heresy. And heretics will receive divine punishment. Specifically in the form of God's army mobilizing to turn their dwellings into a sea of flames. Surely the Enchanted Lands wanted to avoid that."

"..."

"So I insist, barbaric vampires of the Mulnite Empire: Believe in God," Spica commanded with full confidence, pointing her lollipop at us.

Basically, she had threatened to lay waste to the Enchanted Lands if they didn't accept.

Great. Another crazy person to deal with. And she seemed to think what she was doing was totally justified.

Vill whispered to me gravely, "I think the Enchanted Lands did the right thing. The

Holy City is big and strong enough to be considered a seventh nation. Their military prowess surpasses Aruka's at their peak, and they put the full weight of their beliefs behind their merciless actions. That's the Holy City for you; ready and willing to eradicate whomever they consider an enemy."

What the heck? So they're like our Seventh Unit on roids?

I glanced at Flöte. She gave me a look, too, as if saying, "*I trust you know what to do.*" Funny how we could only understand each other under such circumstances. She meant we couldn't accept the Pope's requests—but this was no matter for her to decide unilaterally. "*Yeah, yeah, I get it,*" I responded with another glance, while making a note to myself to reconsider the issue with the Empress at a later date. It would be stupid to resist here and now anyway.

"Ahem," I cleared my throat before giving a collected response. "I see. Yes, honoring God is important indeed. We will consider it very seriously. I just cannot give you an answer right away without the Empress present. For now, please let's enjoy the tea toge—"

"We cannot overlook your insults toward Mulnite."

I immediately felt trouble brewing.

Caostel was standing right behind me. And it wasn't just him. The Seventh Unit's berserkers were all emanating a palpable aura of rage. *No. Please, no. Not now, for God's sake.*

"Excuse me? Are you unhappy with God's decisions?" Caostel asked.

"We couldn't be happier! Please ignore them and have yourself some tea!"

"We couldn't be happier?! Commander, what are you saying?! You're going to let her make fun of Mulnite?! That's not how a slaughter champion ought to act!" he said.

"Oh, I meant to say I couldn't be unhappier! Spica, you twerp! Don't you find it rude to force your religion on us at our first meeting?! At the very least, let us get to know each other first!" I said.

"Ms. Gandesblood, what are you saying?! Did you hit your head or something?!" Flöte asked.

No, but feel free to hit it and knock me out right now.

My subordinates backed me up: "She's right!" "The Commander's always right!" "Go away, crooks!" *Oops. I did it again.*

Flöte got up in my face and panicked.

"Don't do this now, Ms. Gandesblood! I'm not saying the Mulnite Empire would lose in battle against the Holy City, but we would sustain massive losses if war were to break out! And most importantly, we can't do this without speaking to Lady Karen!"

"I know! My mouth just blabbered away of its own accord!"

"Then let me chop it off for you!" Spica interjected.

"How am I supposed to eat then?!"

"Fair," Spica said, holding in her anger. Flöte and I turned to look at her at the same time, and she took a deep breath before continuing. "Yes, you are right. Perhaps it was too hasty of me to force religion on you when you know nothing about it. I will send you a million copies of the Holy Church Scripture for starters. Make it law that all of your citizens must read it. It's especially important that your children memorize it."

"Thank you. It should serve well as a picklestone," Vill said.

"Vill! Whose side are you on here?!"

"We don't need a pile of useless books! But since winter is coming, they could make great fuel for our fireplaces!"

Stop stirring the pot alreadyyyy!!

It was already over. Spica's glare was laced with murderous desire. I could tell she was already making up plans to annihilate Mulnite. I had to do something!

Just then, Flöte rose to her feet, face stiffened.

"Oh... Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! I am sorry, Your Holiness! Mulnite's Seventh Unit is famous for their lack of morals. Please don't listen to those uncouth barbarians. Would you care for another cup of tea?"

"You heard her, Mellaconcey. Get the Pope a fresh serving of black tea."

"Check it!"

A weirdo in sunglasses crept out from under the table. The Seventh Unit's bomber jumped gracefully on the table and tap-danced as he approached the Pope. A sight right out of your worst nightmare. I yelled:

"Caostel! Make him stop!"

"Make him stop? That won't quell the Seventh Unit's anger..."

"Ugh... Don't make him stop, then... Just make sure he doesn't go overboard... Don't make her angry, okay?"

"You heard the Commander! We got her okay! Mellaconcey, give our guest some tea!"

"Roger!"

The teapot was somehow already in his hand.

Spica appeared disturbed for the first time.

"Wh-what is it with this hooligan?! Commander Gandesblood, make him stop right now!"

"Mellaconcey, don't use any explosives, okay?!"

"Check it! Julius VI is in a bad mood, so I'll use this to fix her attitude. I like it better when they smile, that's just my very own style. Let's enjoy this tea party for a while."

He rapped as he tipped the teapot from way up high toward the cup in front of the Pope.

The beautiful, ruby-like liquid succumbed to gravity and... *bubble bubble splash splosh fzzz...* spattered everywhere.

The droplets fell on the Pope's expensive-looking clothes, staining them. Tea overflowed from the cup. "Unbelievable!" the cardinals exclaimed. As the Pope sat there paralyzed in shock, Mellaconcey whispered in her ear:

“Enjoy the tea, m’lady.”

Someone please stop him. It was, however, too late. I could hear the end of the world approaching.

Spica hit the table and stood right up. She shot me an absolute-zero glare that froze me in fright. I prepared myself for death as she smashed the lollipop in her hand and said:

“Fine. Very well. It seems I’m wasting my time trying to reason with you savages. No words will make you understand God’s greatness.”

“Please wait, Your Holiness!” Flöte stood up in a panic. “We will burn these heretics at the stake! Please, let’s just calm down and...”

“No, I cannot keep quiet any longer while you continue to humiliate us.”

“Check it! You don’t want a refill?”

“No, I do not! I know just how uncivilized the Mulnite Empire is now. There’s no choice but to purify it under God’s migh—”

Just then, an explosion sounded.

Something was going on outside. And it didn’t stop at one blast; echoes of intermittent, giant explosions shook the entire palace.

“What’s happening?!” the cardinals screamed.

I had a very bad feeling about this. I’d never had good luck with explosions.

“Wh-what is that noise?”

“Seems like they’re finally getting rid of it,” Caostel said, a triumphant look on his face.

“What’d you mean? Don’t tell me...”

“I asked my subordinates to destroy that giant eyesore. It’s in the way of our Terakomari Gandesblood statue. By the way, we plan on selling the remains for use in our Unit’s budget. Would you like to watch the demolition, Commander?”

“...”

It was so over. It was like it had never even begun.

The Seventh Unit guys were shooting magic at the statue from the Holy Church, and fierce blasts were echoing with every hit of their spell stream. The bronze figure quickly turned into a pile of rubble. *Oh, that's gonna be me next*, I thought the moment I saw them break its arm.

They truly feared no God.

Flöte's face was paralyzed in the expression of a Noh mask.

As for Spica... she looked like a gambler who had lost all her money betting on horses.

“That's... I sent that... I gifted that to Mulnite... to spread the word of God... and you treated it like garbage...”

“Oof... I'm sorry, Spica. We had no ill will, truly.”

“You think... that apology solves ANYTHING?!”

She grabbed me by the collar and gave me a violent shaking. She was crying tears of anger. *Oh, I'm totally getting killed right now*. Her face was so frightening, though, I couldn't even run away.

“This is the first time since I took over as Pope that I've been treated so terribly! How is it even possible to be this rude?! Don't you have a lick of common sense?! Answer me! Did you even receive an education of any sort?! Not even the actual animals of the Lapelico Kingdom are this feral! May the light of God shine upon you so hard right now that you evaporate, leaving behind only a stain on the ground!”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Seriously! Geez, it's like you're an entirely different person now!”

“How do you even expect me to keep up a front at the sight of this crap?!”

Then she shoved me away. Thankfully, Vill was there to catch me.

Spica clicked her tongue before getting another lollipop from her pocket. She put it in her mouth and apologized:

“...Excuse me. I lost my temper.”

Meanwhile, the demolition was still on track. Everyone knew it was no use trying to stop the Seventh Unit at this point. Intermittent explosions continued going off as Spica sighed.

“...The sweetness keeps my mind cool. Would you like to try it?” she asked as she offered me a lollipop.

Its red color reminded me of blood. I took a step back subconsciously.

“N-no, thanks. I’m good.”

“Wise,” she said, for whatever reason. She let out another heavy sigh before staring at the pile of rubble. “There was no point in me coming all the way here. The Chancellor only gave me creepy smiles, and the Seventh Unit insulted me with their every action. I should’ve simply waited for Her Majesty the Empress to arrive.”

“Yeah... I’m sure she’ll be here any minute now...”

Then Vill whispered into my ear, “Lady Komari, I heard Her Majesty isn’t anywhere in Mulnite.”

“Huh? For real?”

“Yes. I doubt she will be back by today...”

“I can hear you. Whatever, I imagined as much. The Thunderbolt Empress has a reputation for being quite the eccentric. We will talk in depth at a later date.” Then Spica looked straight at me and said, “But I cannot go back with my hands empty. It’s not that I need results from our negotiations, but you have hurt me deeply. I need you to take responsibility for it.”

“Aw... And what could I do to make up for it...?”

A boss was responsible for their subordinates’ failings, fair enough. But I didn’t know what she could be thinking. Nelia would’ve asked me to become her maid for a day,

but this was the pagan-hating berserker we were talking about. It wouldn't surprise me if she wanted one of my arms chopped off.

"Let's see..." Spica muttered deadpan. "You know not what love is. That is why you so easily damage what other people value—my own faith, in this case. It is my duty as a cleric to put people on the right path through divine punishment. I will teach you love."

"...So what do you want me to do, exactly?"

"I demand you give me what you value the most."

So that's how it is. An unreasonable demand, but I had to accept in order to avoid war. Better not resist.

What do I value the most, though? I'm not very greedy. I don't care about money, that's for sure. I value napping and days off, but that's not something I can give her.

There's also... my books? The Andronos Chronicles, for starters. But I wouldn't really say I'd be hurt deep in my soul if I gave them away. Nothing to do with love, really.

There was only one thing left I could think of.

"All right. You can have the pudding I've been keeping in the fridge."

"No, I don't want pudding. What you value the most is that maid of yours, Villhaze."

"Huh?" we both exclaimed in unison.

That totally came out of left field. I didn't know what to say.

"Love is something you realize upon its loss. You will know your sin once you have lost Villhaze. So I'm taking her with me."

"..."

What was she talking about? Taking Villhaze? She thought she could just do that? She was essentially the Seventh Unit's subcommander! She was *my* maid!

I mean, sure, her sicko behavior causes me trouble at every turn, and sure, I might be better off without her, but you can't just take her without her consent.

I glanced at Vill's profile. She shut her eyes in thought, but I knew there was no need to wait for an answer. Obviously, she would refuse, no matter how big a tantrum she had to throw to avoid it.

"...Very well. I will go with you, Your Holiness."

I couldn't believe my ears.

Vill walked up to Spica like it was nothing.

"Hold on! What's with you now?!"

"I can't refuse her request, or else there will be war."

I shut my mouth. She was right, objectively speaking.

But. But still. I couldn't accept this.

"Sounds great!" Flöte nodded in satisfaction. "A maid is a low price to pay to avoid war. Go. For the good of the Mulnite Empire."

"V-Vill! Are you... sure?"

"Yes. It is for your sake, Lady Komari."

"Bu—" I subconsciously reached for her, but I couldn't touch her. Her back turned to me, she refused any call.

I couldn't believe she would leave my side. The words coiled around in my brain but wouldn't leave my mouth.

Spica smiled. "Well then, Villhaze will be my maid starting today."

I felt like I'd been pushed down a flight of stairs.

I stared at Vill. My brain couldn't keep up with what was going on.

Finally, with her usual expression, as sharp and cool-headed as always, she said:

"It's been an honor. I will leave for the Holy City tomorrow."

Vexations

1.5 Predators Against the Imperial Capital

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

Snow fell on the Mulnite Imperial Capital.

Unlike in the Haku-Goku Commonwealth, the snow didn't usually stick before the end of the year, but the wind being funneled through the gaps between the buildings was cold enough to chill the southern folk.

"What am I doing here..." grumbled a Luna of Inverse Moon, Lonne Cornelius.

Cornelius was sipping wine at the Gates of Dawn, a bar downtown in the Imperial Capital that was currently without much clientele. She had planned to further her investigations into an enhanced shiitake mushroom variety, but that had been ruined by the terrorists currently sitting at either side of her.

"Oh dear! Why the long face, Lady Cornelius? How can you not enjoy the trip?! Here, take a bite of my deep-fried tofu!"

"No, thanks. Save it all for yourself."

"Oh, I insist. They're not poisoned, I swear. Here, say *aaah*."

"*Mgh?!*"

Fuyao Meteorite shoved the tofu into Cornelius's mouth and cackled.

Cornelius chewed while pondering, *I sure hope she's telling the truth about it not being poisoned.*

The fox-eared girl swayed her tail. Fuyao Meteorite had been promoted to Luna after

gaining Her Highness's favor. The perilous murderer had recently been beaten to a pulp by Terakomari and Karla Amatsu during the Heavenly Ball, but she hadn't learned the slightest lesson.

"I must say, this place is pretty different from the Heavenly Paradise. There's this, how should I put it... sanguinary air about the Mulnite Empire. Even the most common of the passersby thirst for blood. Does this just come down to a fundamental difference between the vampires and the Peace Spirits? I already foresee hardship in our ploys, Lord Tryphon."

"Any hardship is worth enduring so long as we obtain Mulnite's Dark Core," the man at Cornelius's left side said plainly.

He was a tall Sapphire. Unlike Fuyao, he hadn't ordered any food or drink. Cheapskate as he was, he refused to part with his coin on establishments that hadn't earned his recognition.

Tryphon was also a Luna, but Cornelius was especially wary of him. He was a pragmatist who stopped at nothing to achieve his goals. It was his fault they had gone to Mulnite, in fact.

"That's right!" Fuyao said while munching on her inari sushi. "But I'm bored staying behind the scenes. I don't think I'll get a chance to have a rematch with Terakomari Gandesblood at this rate."

"You are not powerful enough to stand against the Blood Curse yet. You must stick to a supporting role. And don't worry; everything is going according to plan, thanks to you."

Cloing. A switch flipped.

"Heh. It does seem like the Mulnite Empire got on Her Holiness's bad side. The pieces are in place for the Holy City to oppose them."

She changed so suddenly that Cornelius nearly dropped her glass of wine.

The vixen possessed a transformation Core Implosion called Inari-Avatar Reflection. Some said her personality had split as a consequence of mimicking so many people. Right now, the split was limited to two alters: her natural, warrior-like personality, and the personality of a treacherous retainer plotting to overthrow the state. But she

used to have over ten of them.

"So we only need to wait for them to destroy each other," Fuyao said.

"Yes. We've succeeded in removing Terakomari Gandesblood of her confidant. Core Implosion is a reflection of the heart—with the commander in low spirits, she won't be able to make full use of the Blood Curse. We'll take advantage of this to mobilize the Holy Church's followers," Tryphon added.

"We also got the Mulnite Empress out of the picture. The Crimson Lords won't be able to do anything without their head. Couldn't we just assassinate them one by one?"

"That arrogance will bring about your demise. They're still the strongest commanders in the Empire."

Tryphon and Fuyao argued vigorously with each other.

So basically, Inverse Moon was pulling the strings behind the scenes. Whatever, Cornelius just wanted to go home and coop up and do some research already. *Wait. Why did they call me here in the first place?*

"Hey, Tryphon," Cornelius asked timidly. "What am I supposed to do here? Where's Amatsu?"

"Kakumei Amatsu is not taking part in the plan this time around."

Seriously?

"We can't be sure of his intentions. I hear he even got in Fuyao's way during the Heavenly Ball. Better get rid of anything we can't control."

"Then what am I here for?"

"We want you to try out the weapon."

"Huh?"

"The Imperial Capital will transform into a battlefield in the final stages of our plan. The vampires will give their lives to try to avert their nation's doom, which is when you'll annihilate them with that magical weapon of yours."

“.....”

Well, that does sound interesting.

Not the massacre. Not the wiping out of a whole country. Just the chance to see the full extent of what her research could bring about.

“...Yeah. Hey, I’m already in a terrorist organization. Maybe I should try stuff outside of shiitake and novels.”

Cloing. Fuyao’s personality switch flipped again.

“I’d love to try your shiitake, Lady Cornelius!”

“R-really? Wanna come to my lab, then?”

“I can?! Yes, please! Lord Amatsu tells everyone in Inverse Moon they’re terrible, but I’d like to see for myself.”

“Huh...? He says that...?”

“Well, he didn’t say that to my face. I just heard the rumors.”

“...” *Ingrate. I’m not making you any more.*

Cornelius forced back her tears. Maybe she was getting drunk.

Tryphon sighed.

“Stop lying, Fuyao. You have to get rid of your habit of sowing discord wherever you go.”

“My! There I go, being a provocateur again. I’m so, so sorry. I just can’t help but pry into people’s relationships. Lord Amatsu said nothing of the sort, don’t worry.”

“...Ugh. Dastardly vixen.” Cornelius sighed.

Had Fuyao tricked Karin Reigetsu in the same way? *Not that I was tricked! Or that I care about what Amatsu thinks of my shiitake to begin with!*

Anyhow.

Cornelius decided to go along with Tryphon's plot for the time being. The Mulnite Empire was in for a rough time. A period that would light a fire in people's souls. The perfect opportunity to show off the full power of Core Implosion.

"...Hmm?" Tryphon noticed something. "I smell blood. It seems Her Highness has arrived."

"Her Highness? She's coming, too?"

"Yes. Our ultimate objective is obtaining Mulnite's Dark Core *and* installing Her Highness as Mulnite's Empress. We need her to take over the nation."

That sure was a plan. But Cornelius wasn't really shocked; it didn't matter to her what sinister plans Amatsu or Tryphon were cooking, so long as it didn't interfere with her research.

"Over here, Your Highness!" Fuyao said.

A chilly wind sneaked in as the doors of the bar opened. Her Highness, the Wicked God Slayer, took notice of them and approached with the innocent steps of a child. She flashed a broad smile as she saw her friends and tossed aside a blood-drenched corpse.

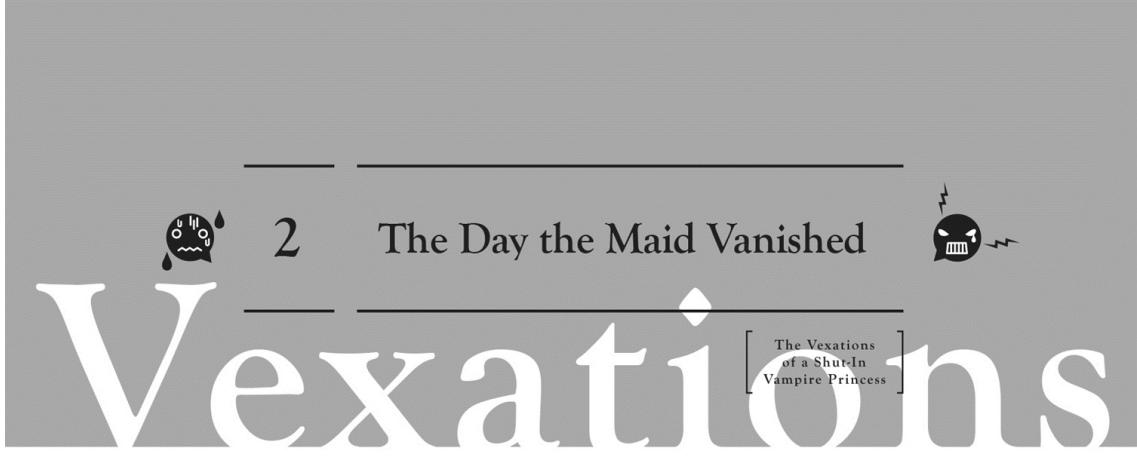
"You're all here! Okay, let's enjoy our lunch!"

Cornelius glanced at the floor. There were two corpses, actually. But not quite. They were still breathing.

It was the journalist duo who always followed Terakomari Gandesblood around. They must have tailed Fuyao to the bar since they knew her face. Fortunately, Her Highness had found the two and taken care of them.

Cornelius sighed and walked up to the pair of women. Sapphires and beast-folk wouldn't revive in the Mulnite Empire; that's why she hadn't finished the job.

What a merciful vampire Her Highness is... Cornelius sighed again before healing the two reporters' wounds.



Vexations

2 The Day the Maid Vanished

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

I was still fine on the first day.

I felt liberated, even. Now I didn't have to put up with the sicko maid's perverted advances. But that same night, I felt like something was wrong. My room was eerily quiet. Was it always like that? I grew restless. But this was how things had always been back during my days as a shut-in. I'd just regained the silence from before I became commander. So why not take full advantage of this opportunity and get to work in the quiet, like the scholarly intellectual I was?

So I grabbed my pen, though I was sure I was just putting up a front by that point.

Things started to go amiss, little by little, from the second day on.

First, I overslept. Vill would always wake me up every morning, so I wasn't used to getting out of bed by myself. Then I realized I had no breakfast. She would have made me some tasty toast if she were around. I gave in and went to the dining room on the first floor to have some salad with Lolo. She looked at me funny and asked, "What's up? Did you get your heart broken? Hmm?" with the biggest grin on her face, but I didn't have the mental energy to fight back.

Things only got worse once I showed up for work. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. Only then did it strike me that Vill was always bringing me assignments to take care of. I only followed her orders to *do this* and *do that*. I was helpless on my own.

The one thing that I knew had to be done was supervising my subordinates' training. But I couldn't communicate with them properly. I had no idea how to answer their questions. I mean, I never did, but at the very least, their eyes hadn't turned into question marks when I spoke to them before like they were now. I couldn't stop

infighting from breaking out, either, and by the end of the day, they blew up the roof of the Crimson Tower. I was sure Vill could've done something to reduce the damage. Bellius found my behavior strange and asked me if I was tired. I couldn't keep worrying my troops or putting my ignorance and powerlessness on full display for everybody, so I excused myself early by claiming I had stuff to do. It was bizarre that I even *could* excuse myself early.

To my shock, I received a paid day off on the third day after Vill's departure.

Still, I couldn't just enjoy it. The shut-in lifestyle I had yearned for was in my grasp, yet it didn't feel right. I tried writing to clear my mind, but the words came out all wrong. I tried reading, but I didn't process anything.

What was to become of me? The loneliness I so craved was in my hands, and I couldn't stand it. I had just lost one maid—I had only gone back to being the way I was before. So why did my chest ache?

I wasted the whole day until dinner time came. I ate separately from everyone else in the Gandesblood house, a vestige of my time as a shut-in. I opened the fridge and found some eggs in there. Had Vill bought them? I needed to eat them before they went bad. I decided to make omelet rice.

I followed the recipe Vill had left behind, but the finished product was unlike the delicious dish she prepared. It was ugly even on the outside. I grabbed a spoonful of it, nothing but the noise of my cutlery in the room, and tears came running down my cheeks as I tasted it.

Damn it. Keep it together, Terakomari Gandesblood.

You're the brightest mind of the generation. Why are you getting so mopey just because you lost one (1) sicko maid? You've got more time to invest in your art now! Shouldn't you be dancing for joy?

I went to sleep right after and had a dream wherein Vill made me omelet rice.

On the fourth day, Sunday, I achieved nirvana.

I felt like I understood why people turned to religion. They were all lonely. It was isolation that made us pray to God. Furthermore, it was their desire to break away from their unchangeable reality that made people follow His light. *Gosh, what am I*

thinking? I'm falling for Spica's trap!

But I really was just that desperate. I had been lying on my bed the whole time, staring at the ceiling. *That spot there sure looks like an elephant and a giraffe, huh? Man, I wanna go to the zoo now. Maybe I could ask Vill? Wait, she's not here. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.*

Just as I felt like I couldn't tell fantasy from reality anymore, I heard a voice:

“Ms. Komari? Are you awake?”

“Huh?!” I got up like a speeding bullet.

The silver girl was standing by the door to my room. Sakuna Memoir stared at me with worry.

“Um... Are you okay? Lieutenant Cerberus told me you were acting strange... Are you unwell? Should I make you something to eat?”

“Sa...”

“Hmm? Oh, here, I brought some snacks. How about we have these fi—”

“SAKUNAAAAAAA!!”

“KYAAAAAAA!!”

I threw myself into her arms.

The tears wouldn't stop. I'd finally gotten human contact for the first time in a while. I buried my face in her chest and threw away my shame and dignity and sobbed.

“Sakunaaa!! Vill... Vill is goooone!!”

“Bwuh?! Erm... Right! She went away...”

“She did! How heartless could she be?! She left me just because Spica threatened us! I've been paying her! I've been treating her right! I even forgave her for eating my pudding! And she... Bwaaaaah!!”

“Um... May I... hug you back...?”

“BWAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

“E-excuse me, then! Here I go... Hee-hee...,” Sakuna said as she brought her arms around my back.

Vill has a thing or two to learn from her. She noticed I wasn't okay and came here for me. She's hugging me to comfort me. Her breathing's getting strangely fast, but unlike you, traitor, she didn't abandon me! I yelled at my maid in my mind and wept for a while, letting out everything I'd bunched up inside.

“...I'm sorry, I lost my marbles.”

“Not at all! Don't worry about it.”

About five minutes later, Sakuna and I were sitting across from each other in my room.

She had come straight to me after hearing of my state from Bellius, snacks and books in hand. I had to thank him as much as her. That good boy was capable of concern, unlike the rest of the lot.

“I must say... I'm surprised the Pope would take Ms. Villhaze away.”

“Right? What's she plotting? What good is it for her to kidnap my maid? She smashes public morals just by existing.”

“What does she get out of it?” Sakuna muttered as she munched some chocolate. “I don't think it's about getting something out of it. I'm guessing she just wanted to annoy you... Though, s-sorry, I'm just speculating.”

That was probable enough. Spica wanted Vill as compensation for the Seventh Unit's insolence, after all. As much as it pained me, I had to admit her scheme was effective—taking my maid away had left my personal life in shambles.

But even then, I didn't point my grudge at Spica.

It was *Vill* who said she would “always be by my side.” Always going on about how her

dream was to marry me. Liar. I should've known. She had been deceiving me from the start.

"Damn Vill... She felt nothing when she left me for Spica... Couldn't she have been at least a little bit sad? I guess not... considering how I never did anything for her... I should've given her a bonus on top of her pay... She liked poison, so... maybe some nasty mushrooms and plants....."

"P-please don't cry! Here, have another biscuit!"

"Awww..." I ate the biscuit right out of Sakuna's hand.

Such a shameful display. And I dared call myself the brightest mind of the generation? If my sister saw me right now, she'd go on about how childish I was and that this was why I'd stay so short forever. Just thinking about it brought me to tears.

"It's okay," Sakuna said calmly all of a sudden. "I can't think Ms. Villhaze would want to be away from you. I mean, she... I'm sorry for saying this, but she's pretty much your stalker."

"You think?"

"Yes. There must be something going on. She's too smart for me to take a guess at what, but I'm certain of it..."

I couldn't deny the possibility. But still, bonds between people were quick to break. It could just as well be that she simply had gotten over me. You know what they say—even a hundred-year-old love is fast to cool off. Perhaps she was fed up with how big of a crybaby I was.

Then Sakuna grabbed my hand. For some reason, it set my heart racing.

"Ms. Komari, why don't you try believing in her?"

"But... who knows what she's thinking?"

"I could find out, if I killed her."

"Don't even suggest it."

"I-I'm sorry. But... even if Ms. Villhaze is gone, you're not alone."

"What do you mean...?"

"Um... I'm here for you. You can always count on me," she said shyly.

That was when it hit me. Sakuna was right. That maid wasn't my whole world. I had been blessed with many encounters over the course of the year. Too many to imagine back when I had been a shut-in. So many people had supported me throughout that time, and first among them was the very girl before my eyes. What was the point in brooding?

"...Y-you're right! You came here for me."

"Yes. Please tell me if you have any trouble. I'll do anything."

"Then... could you replace Vill?"

"Huh?" A question mark popped above her head.

I'm pretty sure I was already long gone by this time.

I pointed at my closet and said, "There's a change of her maid clothes over there."

"...Huh??"

"You said you'd do anything, didn't you?"

"....."

I hadn't become a maid fanatic like Nelia, but y'know, having one in my room made me feel at ease. Not that the uniform really mattered! I was ready to take it back if Sakuna so much as hinted to not wanting to do it. I stared intently at her.

She thought my request over in silence for a while and then, finally, she made up her mind. Sakuna looked me straight in the eyes and exclaimed:

"Got it! I would be v-very glad to do so! Hee-hee-hee."

She smiled (or rather, grinned) before walking up to the closet.



Crimson Lord Flöte Mascarail was at her wits' end.

Between Mulnite's friction with the Holy City of Lehysia and the ever-increasing power of the Holy Church, things were spiraling into an undesirable direction. The doomsday clock was still far from reaching midnight, but it was inching toward there without rest. She needed to revise the situation with the Empress, but Lady Karen was still nowhere to be found.

"The weather isn't looking good. The color of the sky reflects doom," masked vampire Delphyne muttered.

They were at the Fruits of the Land, a restaurant in the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

"They say it will snow again."

"That's not it. I'm worried about Mulnite's future. Even Terakomari Gandesblood is down after losing her maid, isn't she? What are we to do with our secret weapon in that state?"

"You overestimate her."

"I'm just telling it like it is. I don't respect her, but I can't deny her strength."

Delphyne raised a forkful of pasta, then remembered the mask on her face, and put it back down.

Terakomari Gandesblood was certainly unpredictable.

Flöte didn't like that insolent little girl one bit, but the power she'd displayed during the Six Nations War and the Heavenly Ball was too great to ignore. That was the very same Core Implosion the Empress talked about. Why did that girl possess such might? And what annoyed Flöte the most was that she seemed unaware of her own abilities.

"The Empress is a bit of a dictator in here, after all," Delphyne said while taking off her mask. "It's only natural the organization would weaken the moment she's gone."

"But we have the brilliant Seven Crimson Lords to support it."

“You and me aside, who else in the Crimson Lords can we trust?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you forgotten? One of our veterans, Odilon Metal, turned out to be an Inverse Moon assassin. The crafty bastards were able to infiltrate even the iron walls of the Crimson Lords.”

Delphyne became talkative when speaking with Flöte and Flöte alone. The latter had heard the former didn’t say a word in the presence of the Empress the other day.

“Sakuna Memoir came from Inverse Moon. Heldeus Heaven is a follower of the Holy Church. I’m not saying they’re plotting rebellion...” Delphyne smashed a tomato with her fork, sending red juice flowing all over her dish. “...but the enemy might be right around the corner. We should be careful.”

“You’re right.” Flöte nodded, then lapsed into thought.

Everything ought to resolve itself once Her Majesty came back. Their mission was to protect the nation. Whether they were up against terrorists or religious forces, the Crimson Lords had to give their hearts and souls to the fight.

Just as Flöte steeled her resolve, the doors of the restaurant opened with a swing.

“Lady Flöte! There’s trouble!”

Bachelard, subcommander of the Third Unit, rushed inside. Though this third son of an Empire aristocrat was quite the capable man, he always lost his cool whenever “trouble” arose.

“What happened? Keep calm, we’re having lunch.”

“I’m sorry, but I must report: The Church is causing strife at the outskirts of the Imperial Capital.”

Flöte shot up out of her chair.

“...What?”

“They’ve declared they’re ‘purifying the Empire.’ It’s only a matter of time before they

reach the capital... What should we do?"



The silver maid stood bashfully by the wall.

She was too pretty to look straight at her. Vill's maid uniform fit Sakuna too well. I had this perverted image of maids on my mind because of that sicko, so having someone as pure as Sakuna (she *was* pure, right?) put it on made for quite the refreshing experience.

"Um," she timidly said. "Was Ms. Villhaze never embarrassed about wearing this...?"

"No idea. She's weird anyway, so I don't think her feelings would serve as a reference."

"Right... Oh, should I do some maid work?"

"Huh? Right... I mean, you don't have to force yourself..."

"Don't worry! I just want to be of use to you. I'll show you I am capable of handling Ms. Villhaze's duties."

"Hmm..."

Sakuna doing Vill's work, huh? There was this kind of immoral quality about the idea... but it also seemed just right. I felt like her endless kindness could heal all of my wounds. Finally, the void in my heart would be filled.

"Y-yeah... I'd be glad if you could do some of her work."

"Hee-hee... I'm on it, my mistress."

"Vill doesn't say that."

"I'm sorry!! Lady Komari!!"

Sakuna began working in a flurry. First, she cleaned my room. It had turned into a unsightly mess over these past few days. She moved from here to there briskly and orderly, just like Vill did. I merely stared in wonder as the room became squeaky clean in the blink of an eye.

Next, she said it was time to make lunch. I'd had no idea Sakuna could cook. She went into the kitchen right away and prepared the ingredients she had brought with her. A tasty-looking serving of omelet rice came out just like that.

"Here you go. What do you think?"

"It looks nice. Let me take a bite."

I grabbed a spoonful and chomped down on it.

It was so tasty it seemed as though my cheeks would fall out. Sweet and soft and creamy. My sense of taste had finally been revived after a few days in the desert.

What the heck? Has Sakuna always been this good at cooking? And not just that. Her cleaning skills are impeccable. Could she be any more perfect?!

"So? Is it good?"

"S-super good! I had no idea you could make omelet rice this good!"

"I've been practicing. For you."

"Wow. You could sell this at a restaurant."



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"Hee-hee. Is it better than Ms. Villhaze's?"

".....Mm."

"Curses," she whispered. *Am I imagining things, or did I just feel shivers run down my spine?*

But after that thought, I lost myself again to the taste of the omelet rice. Sakuna wore a grin the whole time as she watched me scarf it down. Once I was finished, she told me to relax, then got to cleaning up after me.

"I've finished doing the dishes. Is there anything else I can do?"

"No... I think that's it..."

"I see. Well then, tell me if you need anything," she said before sitting down beside me.

She was too good at this maid stuff; a harder-worker than Vill, even. She would be the only thing I need to keep my life in order. And best of all, she didn't force me to work like the other maid had.

"Um, Ms. Komari. Is it impossible for me to replace Ms. Villhaze?" she asked abruptly.

I crossed my arms and pondered. Objectively speaking, Sakuna was doing a perfect job as replacement. Perfect cleaning, perfect cooking; she was a perfect maid.

But... But, I felt she lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Something important to cover all the bases of what made that sicko maid special.

"It's not enough..." The words came out of my mouth.

Sakuna looked like her world was ending.

"Erm... Was the dish not savory enough?"

"It's not that. You're lacking... in sicko factor..."

Sakuna's eyes turned into dots.

I had no idea what I was talking about myself. But there was this sense of

dissatisfaction within me. I clenched my fist and shook it as I stated:

“You can’t be Vill, Sakuna... You’re too pure and unperverted to be her!”

“?!?!?”

It’s not that I *wanted* Vill’s sexual harassment. But you couldn’t deny that the way Vill turned her perverted behavior onto me at every turn was what made her, her. Sakuna wouldn’t do that. Ergo, she could not heal this grave sense of loss in my heart.

Before I knew it, tears were spilling from my eyes.

Why must I go through this? Is it normal to yearn for what you found vexing when it disappears all of a sudden? Not that I’m yearning for her! I just feel empty. My life story as a Crimson Lord isn’t complete without her deviancy.

“U-um... Ms. Komari...” Sakuna’s voice trembled. She was a bundle of nerves. “I... I’m not the vampire you think I am. So, I think I *could* replace Ms. Villhaze... really.”

“Don’t worry about it. No need to force yourself. You’re not a pervert...”

“Ms. Komari...!” She widened her eyes in shock.

I know—anyone would be creeped out after hearing that. But I was totally serious. I was entirely sincere in my bizarre thoughts. Completely earnest as I told the cook of such great omelet rice that she wasn’t good enough because she was lacking in debauchery. Of course she would be disappointed in me after that... or so I’d thought.

“Very well. I’ll become perverted for your sake.” Sakuna shot me a passionate stare.

“Huh? What’d you mean...?”

“I mean I can replace Ms. Villhaze. So please don’t cry anymore. My chest aches when I see you sad.”

“Sakuna...”

She looked right at me, red in the face.

Normally, I should’ve loathed having Sakuna chase after Vill’s phantom; anyone could

have realized that she could only be herself. But her genuine desire to try and emulate Vill made my heart skip a beat. So against my best judgment, I ended up accepting her proposal.

“...All right. Become perverted for my sake.”

“Yes!” Sakuna smiled like a flower in full bloom. “B-but what should I do, exactly?”

“She usually tries touching me without reserve. So... perhaps that’s what you should do to imitate her...”

I felt I was going crazy as the words left my mouth. I couldn’t even look straight at her.

“Very well.” She nodded solemnly. “...May I touch you, then?”

I froze up for a second before nodding.

Slowly, she brought her tender hand toward me.

I glanced at her face. She was red as a tomato.

Sakuna's so pretty, now that I take a closer look at her... I thought, impressed, while gazing into her glowing, asterism-like eyes. It was then that the sudden suspicion that I was setting foot into lunatic territory crept into mind.

Hold on. Was it ever like this with Vill? This feels even more depraved than what that sicko maid ever did...

“Stay still, Ms. Komari...”

“Uh... Where are you gonna touch me?”

“In the most perverted spot.”

“S-Stop! Hold the phone! I know I instigated the whole thing, but let’s calm down for a second!”

I came to my senses in the last moment and scooched back.

Sakuna wasn’t listening, though. Her face, scarlet like an honest-to-goodness pervert’s,

inched ever closer. *She's really losing it to the pits of debauchery! This isn't how Sakuna should be! She should be so pure and graceful that she even puts flowers to shame! This isn't you, girl! Stay away! Listen to me, please!* And just as I was about to run away like a small animal sensing danger...

“Huh?”

...Sakuna stopped, noticing something. She looked out the window.

A chain of explosions went off. Echoes of the clashes of magic against magic. Sakuna stood right up, as though she'd cooled down with a cold-water shower.

“What is happening?”

“I dunno...”

Things were getting more and more cacophonous outside. Gandesblood manor servants ran every which way asking what was going on. It was a full-on state of emergency.

Just then, Sakuna’s Correspondence Crystal lit up. She stepped away from me and poured mana into it to answer the call. She only listened for a while, her expression turning darker and darker.

“Ms. Komari...” Her voice trembled after the call. “We’ve been summoned for a Crimson Council. We must go.”

“Huh? Wh-what happened?”

“The Imperial Capital is under attack. We’re sharing intel and prepping a strategy at the Council.”

I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. The idea was ridiculous. And the ludicrousness didn’t end there.

“We’re going up against... the Holy Church.”



Sakuna pulled me by the hand all the way to the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

Vill being gone didn't change the fact I was a Crimson Lord. No matter how depressed I was, it was my duty to attend the emergency meeting. Obviously, I didn't want to, but thinking about how Flöte would react made me go, albeit reluctantly.

We wound up in the same place where we'd quarreled with the Pope the other day: the Bloody Hall.

All the other Crimson Lords were already there.

"You're late!" Flöte scolded us the moment we entered. "You must gather immediately if you want to be considered proper Crimson Lords! Time is of the essence, and the Mulnite Empire is in peril at the wicked hands of those scoun—"

"I'm sorry."

"...Getting such an earnest apology from you actually feels revolting. Are you still feeling down?"

"No, I..."

I didn't have the energy to rebut her in Commander mode. My subordinates weren't there anyway, so I decided to just be myself for now.

I sat down in an empty chair, and Delphyne immediately shot me a weird look from my side.

"Hey, that's the Fifth Unit commander's place."

"Oh, right. Mine's over there."

I sluggishly stood up and moved to the other chair. It seemed like everyone was staring at me, but I couldn't care less. My goal here was surviving the council so I could hole myself back up in my room.

"Ahem." Flöte cleared her throat. "Let's set aside Ms. Gandesblood's low spirits and begin the meeting. According to the garrison's reports, riots are taking place in the Mulnite Imperial Capital."

"Do you want some water?" Sakuna, sitting beside me, offered me a cup.

I thanked her and grabbed it. I was like a houseplant, only drinking when I was watered. There was no point in me taking part in the conversation without Vill. Terakomari Gandesblood without her maid was no commander, merely a useless vampire.

“A mob of people are shooting spells to destroy the buildings. There’s about a hundred of them. Most of them seem to be followers of the Church from the lower wards, and their demands are simple: *Believe in God*. It’s a religiously-motivated attack. Lord Heaven, what do you make of this?”

“What do I make of this? I make that we put them down immediately!”

“I’ve already mobilized the Fifth Unit against them, but that is not what I mean to ask. I want your opinion on this as a priest of the Holy Church.”

“Hmm.” Helldeus nodded, then stared into nothingness. “The Mulnite Empire has always been a secular state. The number of churches in the Empire is one-tenth that of Aruka, for example. Vampires compose only five percent of the total clergy in the Holy City. So to be quite honest, I’m shocked that there’s a religious uprising happening here. Even God must be amazed.”

“Who are these people? Are you involved with this group, Lord Heaven?”

“Not at all. Churches in the Imperial Capital are horizontally connected, but the other clerics have persecuted me since the excommunication.”

“So you really were kicked out.”

“On the contrary! I excommunicated the Pope!” Helldeus complained in a shrill voice. “The current leader of the Holy Church, Julius VI, aka Spica La Gemini, is a barbarian. She knows naught about God! She won’t shy away from any method to spread her faith; it’s deplorable. She has forgotten the base atop which the Holy Church is built—love.”

“The teachings of the Holy Church aside... Why would someone like her become Pope?”

“I don’t know. I really have no interest in their power struggle.”

“Figures.” Flöte sighed. “Lord Heaven, is it possible these riots are connected to the

Holy City?"

"Very much so. First of all, it was the Pope's order to evangelize Mulnite in such a coercive manner. She's created a troop of unyielding followers by stooping to what amounts to brainwashing!"

"I've gotten a report from the Fourth Unit. The ringleader has declared this is the Pope's will," Delphyne said with crossed arms.

"Outrageous! Foolish!" Helldeus yelled. "That evil Pope wants to turn Mulnite into the Kingdom of God from the inside!"

"I have no idea what you mean by 'the Kingdom of God,' but you're saying this is retribution? Revenge for what Mulnite—the Seventh Unit, in particular—did to her the other day?"

"I don't know! I couldn't begin to understand what goes through a barbarian's mind. But I cannot allow this! She must be stopped! Don't you think so, Lady Gandesblood?!"

I was startled at the sudden address.

Helldeus stared at me with eyes clouded in zeal.

"I heard Julius VI robbed you of what you loved. It's this loss perpetrated by that pretender that's got you in unusually low spirits, isn't it?"

"..."

It looked like there was no hiding it from him.

Before I could say anything, Flöte stood up.

"Who cares about her? Let's focus on the matter at hand. So Julius VI is cunningly trying to crush the Mulnite Empire from within, and the riots are only part of her attempts. We must prepare for more revolts of this nature. There is but one thing we must do." Flöte looked at each of our faces before making a declaration. "Take control of the Church's forces within the Imperial Capital. That ought to take care of it."

"I don't think Karen would take such a roundabout path," the person sitting next to me said.

Everyone turned to look at a woman munching on sweet bean jelly as she hugged her knees on the chair. Her blond hair was in disarray, and her eyes looked tired.

Who's she? I thought, since this was my first time meeting her, but I could tell her identity from her place at the table. She was the strongest of the Crimson Lords—the Reckless Bomber.

“What do you mean, Lady Calamaria?”

“Don’t you get it? We know who the enemy is; let’s just blow them the hell up.”

The First Unit commander, Petrose Calamaria, got off her chair with an “Upsy-daisy”

She padded over to the window (she was barefoot, for whatever reason) and stared outside as she yawned.

“Taking control of the Church would take all day. What’re you and I here for? To kill. We Crimson Lords simply have to kill the Pope.”

“Wh-what!?” Flöte stood up, her eyes round. “We’d be cutting off relationships with the Holy City forever! It’d bring about real war!”

“Real conflict is already afoot. It started the moment Karen disappeared.”

“Wha...?”

I looked at Petrose in shock. *You mean... they killed the Empress?*

“That can’t be! Lady Karen would never...”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t know if she’s dead or not, but she disappeared without saying a word. That alone is proof of something being up.”

“We know that something’s up! Gosh. We will not assassinate the Pope. We’re cracking down on the Church forces. Mobilize the army all over the Imperial Capital and—”

“You’re too naive,” Petrose said with a sleepy tone.

I couldn’t believe this lethargic vampire had been behind blowing up the Aruka Executive Office.

"Mulnite is under attack. We must move now, or we won't even get a chance to enjoy dinner by tomorrow. How can you not understand?"

"What should we do, then? Give us your valuable opinion."

"Fight back, full force. Don't you agree, little Komari?"

My heart jumped out of my chest at the mention of my name. And... *little*? No one ever called me that.

Petrose hastily walked up to me.

"You've been doing a great job as the Seventh Unit's slaughter champion. Why not go berserk right back at them like always?"

"...I, uh..."

She knows who I am?

I didn't have the energy to bluff. And I had only come out alive after telling all those lies because of Vill to begin with. There was no point in going commander mode on them now; they'd only end up glimpsing my true self.

"Excuse me!" Sakuna butted in. "She's... missing Ms. Villhaze now, so..."

"I don't get it. I thought you were super strong."

Sporadic explosions went off in the distance. The riots were still underway. Would the Unit who'd been sent out to suppress them be okay?

Petrose took out another sweet bean jelly. Upon closer inspection of the wrapping, I realized it was from the Fuuzen.

"You have an amazing Core Implosion, which means you're stronger of heart than anyone else. All the military officers in Mulnite are soft as jelly, but I recognize your strength, and yours alone. When the terrorist attacked right after you were appointed, you went to that church downtown all by yourself. Karen and I smiled at that back then. It was like we were looking at a younger Yulinne."

I glanced up at her face on reflex.

Her listless stare pierced my eyes.

"But now you're like a wilted flower. If you don't like reality, change it. That's what your mother would've done."

"..."

I was stumped.

If you don't like reality, change it. The plain platitude rubbed salt on my wound. I'd known that from the very beginning. Spica and the Holy Church were at fault for taking my life away. It was they who were behind the riots at the Imperial Capital. It was their fault Vill wasn't here with me. And it was most likely their fault the Empress wasn't here, too.

But there was nothing I could do.

I had only been able to scrape by as a commander thanks to the assistance of my maid.

Change reality? What could this pathetic excuse of a vampire do? I couldn't think of anything within my power but praying to God. And that wouldn't solve anything.

I had but one choice—quit being a commander and go back to being a shut-in.

Then another, bigger explosion went off.

The doors opened with a blast an instant later. One of Flöte's subordinates rushed inside.

"Lady Flöte! The riots are expanding! Yet another church is rebelling!"

"Tsk... So the Fifth Unit isn't enough?"

"I'll go." Delphyne ran like the wind.



Everything got noisier. Real war was approaching.

Petrose sighed all of a sudden.

"Look, this doesn't mean anything to me, but *she'll* blow her stack if she catches you like this. She'll get disappointed when she sees her rival's turned into a husk of her former self."

"Who...?"

"Oh, speak of the devil."

Petrose spoke in riddles, but at least she wasn't as cryptic as the Empress or the Goddess.

Still, it didn't matter what she said to me. I would be less useful than a watermelon seed in cracking down on the riots. Just as I was about to throw in the towel...

"Wh-what're you doing here?"

...Delphyne exclaimed behind me. She was frozen in place near the door.

I felt someone approach.

"My." Helldeus furrowed his brow. Sakuna stood up and widened her eyes. I took a sip of water, ignoring their reactions, but the moment *it* fell on the table, I shrieked.

A corpse. A dead body in cleric vestments.

I was about to turn around to check what in the world was going on, when...

"Don't worry. I killed the ringleader."

...my heart escaped my chest.

I could never forget that cold voice; it was seared into my memory. Just recalling it

made me feel stinging pain. I forced my trembling body to turn around.

And there she was. The vampire who had turned me into a shut-in—Millicent Bluenight.

“The riots should blow over soon. The Fifth Unit is wiping them out as we speak.”

“Commander Bluenight... How grave are the losses of the Imperial Capital?”

“There are none. Everyone can come back to life, remember?” Millicent gave a cynical smile.

My jaw was on the floor. Flöte had just called her *Commander* Bluenight. There was only one possible explanation for this: None other than the blue terrorist herself had taken over Odilon Metal’s commandership of the Fifth Unit.

The events from this past spring came to mind. Millicent had seriously injured Vill and me—and I ended up taking a step toward a new life because of it.

“Lady Bluenight!” Helldeus screamed. “What’s with the body? This is a Holy Church cleric. And judging by his emblem, he’s the same rank in the priesthood as I am.”

“I just said he’s the ringleader. The believers attacked government buildings, but that’s not what’s important. Look at his right arm.”

Everyone focused on it. His clothes were torn, exposing his skin. Etched into his arm was an emblem in the form of a moon. I had seen it before. Sakuna had the same one on her belly.

Millicent’s voice overflowed with hatred.

“They’re with Inverse Moon. The organization is behind the riots.”

Unrest erupted. Helldeus and Flöte began noisily arguing about the revelation, but I couldn’t concentrate on that. The blue girl’s presence alone had my stomach shrinking.

Then Millicent turned to glare at me. I felt as though I was a frog staring down a snake.

“Terakomari. Long time no see.”

"Y-yeah..." I could barely speak. "...You been doing well?"

"Yeah, right. I've been through hell because of you."

No more words came out of my mouth. Telling her *my condolences* or something would get me killed.

I had practiced for the moment I would meet her again, of course. But why did it have to be now? She could've at least waited until I was better, mentally and physically. I had been hoping our conversation would be more relaxed, so we could slowly get to understand each other. So much for that.

"So are you thinking of doing something about this, or what?" Millicent asked.

"E-excuse me?"

"Inverse Moon's plotting something. Where's the slaughter champion? Weren't you going to turn the whole world into omelet rice? Or are you fed up with being a commander already?"

Millicent's barbed words tore my heart to shreds.

Sakuna hurriedly got between us.

"Ms. Millicent! Komari's tired. Would you mind bringing that up to her later?"

"Step aside, Sakuna Memoir."

"Ah..."

Millicent shoved her away and stood right before me.

Sakuna panicked. All the other Crimson Lords turned to look at us, too. The blue girl looked down on me with genuine disappointment.

"I heard they kidnapped Villhaze. So what're you doing moping around?"

"I... I... I don't have any power..."

"You have no power? What're you talking about?"

“I can’t do anything without her! I’m a sorry excuse of a vampire without her! What can I do *but* mope around?! I’m...”

“Stop your damn pity party!”

I saw sparks.

Sakuna screamed.

I bent backward from the sheer shock. My forehead hurt.

A moment later, I realized that Millicent had flicked me above my eyes. I was paralyzed. Then she yelled at me loud enough to smash stones.

“You have power! So why don’t you use it?! Don’t pretend you don’t know you have it! You won the Six Nations War and the Heavenly Ball!”

“...wa.”

“This country’s heading straight to ruin. Are you okay with that?”

“.....wwa.”

“Say something, Terakomari Gandesblood! Looking at you mope makes me sick!”

“Uwaaaaahhh!!”

“Stop crying!”

“How can I not cry?! You hit mee!!”

“Shut it!!”

She grabbed me by the collar, and my tears drew back in.

Helldeus rose to his feet. Petrose curled her lips into a smile. Delphyne was paralyzed. Even Flöte seemed worried. “Ms. Bluenight, you’re taking it too far...,” Sakuna said, pale in the face and trembling. But Millicent didn’t care about any of them.

“When I kidnapped Villhaze, you knew you were powerless, but you still came for her!”

“...”

“That quality of yours is why you can use Core Implosion! That’s why people follow you! What happened to the vampire I knew?! Don’t you want to get Villhaze back?! Answer me, Terakomari Gandesblood!”

My mind was blank. The look on Millicent’s face was terrifying.

But then I felt the haze clouding my heart clear up, little by little.

Millicent was right. I just had to take back what was mine. The same thing I had always done up until now. Never alone, of course—with the help of my friends. I had done that against Millicent; during the Crimson Match; during the Six Nations War; during the Heavenly Ball. Every time, I’d fought against being unjustly sucked dry.

“Have you finally opened your eyes, Terakomari?”

“...”

I felt like I was in a nightmare, to be quite honest.

But this was no different from the Six Nations War or the Heavenly Ball. Spica had stolen Vill from me. And sure, Mulnite was partly to blame for being blasphemous and spilling tea on her clothes and wrecking her statue, but that was no reason to allow her to take my precious subordinate away from me.

“Erm... Are you okay... Ms. Komari...?”

I was not okay. But I wiped my tears and looked Millicent straight in the eyes.

I’d been losing it the past few days. Nearly crushed under the weight of my despair. But that wasn’t right. I just had to knock my hopelessness right back in the face. Vill was essential to getting the peaceful shut-in life I so desperately craved. I had to take her back.

And besides, there’s no way she *wanted* to be away from me.

I should’ve realized from how devoted she’d been up until now. She was up to something. Maybe she’d gone to the Holy City as a spy. Whatever the case, I needed to go meet her and ask her. My mind made up, I was about to get to my feet, when...

"Good afternoon, people of the Mulnite Empire."

...I heard a familiar voice echo.

At first, I thought the corpse on the table was speaking, but no, the voice was coming from the Correspondence Crystal in his pocket.

"This is Julius VI, from the Holy City of Lehysia. How are you all doing? Have you finally opened your eyes to the greatness of God?"

"Julius VI?! What is this?!" Flöte stood up in a panic.

Spica giggled.

"I planted the Correspondence Crystal on him in anticipation of this. I assume it's about time the riots are getting suppressed... It seems you've all overcome the ordeal safely and soundly. Congratulations."

My jaw dropped. She was implying that everything was done on her orders.

"They're listening, right? Everything okay? Okay, good," she said to someone behind her before continuing, *"The Mulnite Empire must be punished for its slights against God. That is why we have passed holy judgment on you barbaric vampires."*

"Wha?!" I yelled and stood up. "What're you saying! You took Vill with you! Isn't that apology enough?!"

"Apology? When did you apologize?" Spica played dumb.

I was at a loss for words. Flöte yelled back in my place.

"Pope Julius VI! So you're behind the riots?!"

"I ordered no riots. The judgment the Holy City passed on the Mulnite Empire is but a simple one: We prayed to God for divine punishment. If your people rebelled as a result, then it is no act of mine, but the will of God. You have no reason to be mad at me."

"How does that make any sense?!"

"Oh, it does. And if Mulnite insists on behaving like this, then God's believers all over your

empire will rise up in revolution soon enough."

"Quit prattling on! What is it that you want?!"

"I've already told you, from the very beginning." She smiled coldly as she said, *"Allow the Mulnite Empire to come under God's wing. That is all."*

"You little..."

"Please, don't embarrass yourself." Petrose stopped Flöte from drawing her sword. She munched on jelly with annoyance on her face and said, "What are you really after, Julius VI? You should realize it's ridiculous to ask a whole nation to convert to your religion. Anyone sane person should."

"Whatever could you mean? I'm very serious."

"I agree, indeed! So Spica La Gemini is not sane. See, barbarian, faith isn't something you push onto people, but something they must feel from within. You only resort to violence because you can't understand that."

"Helldeus Heaven... you still pretend to be a clergyman after being excommunicated?"

"It was *you* getting excommunicated. You still pretend to be Pope?"

"In any case! We're not accepting those terms! Let's discuss this again once Lady Karen gets back! We can talk this out!" Flöte insisted.

"There is no need to talk, for..."

"Lady Spica, I brought you another lollipop."

"*Oh, thank you.*"

I felt like I was getting slapped. That was totally Vill's voice. I shouted at the corpse:

"Vill! What're you doing over there?!"

"Commander Gandesblood? What do you want?"

"I'm not talking to you! I'm talking to Vill! Put her on!"

Silence fell for a while. Maybe they'd gone on mute and were discussing it. Before long, the sound came back on, and my maid's familiar voice graced my ears:

“...Yes? This is Villhaze speaking.”

“Vi...” Tears welled in my eyes. I clenched my fists to hold them in. “...Vill! Are you okay?! Did she do anything weird to you?!”

“I’m doing fine. Lady Spica is very good to me.”

“Of course, for I am benevolent. I would never mistreat my maid. I’m taking very good care of Villhaze, so don’t worry.”

“Wha...”

“She tells me you didn’t treat her very well, Commander Gandesblood. She’s always complaining about you, aren’t you, Villhaze?”

“What’re you talking about...? Say it isn’t so, Vill...”

“It’s true. You never listened to my requests. No matter how affectionate I tried to be, you were always cold. The other day, you chased me out of the bath while I was still enjoying it. Oh, you were terrible, Lady Komari.”

“No, no, no! I chased you out because I was still in it, you peeping tom!”

“But that’s not all. You push me off the bed and rouse me from my peaceful slumber, forcing me to pass out on the cold floor without a blanket. Even though I give you my all... you let my body and soul freeze.”

“That’s not right, either! That’s because you hug me out of nowhere while I’m sleeping!”

“Poor Villhaze. But how about now?”

“I’ve healed, body and soul. Lady Spica is truly kind.”

“Yup, we bathed together yesterday.”

“I’m looking forward to rinsing your back once again.”

"As many times as you want. Oh, and the dinner you made last night was scrumptious. Your omelet rice is above what the bests chefs in the world can do."

"I am honored. I made it specially to your tastes, Lady Spica."

"Is that so? You really are the perfect maid. Good thing you got away from Commander Gandesblood. Now you get to make full use of your talents."

.....

...

...Hold the phone.

What're the two of them doing having fun?

Why's Vill making omelet rice for someone other than me?

"Oh, we've strayed from the point. Our requests are the same as before."

"Y-y-y-y..."

"Refuse to accept and the divine judgment will continue. We will begin by calling all churches in Mulnite to..."

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME!!"

I hit the table.

Sakuna shrieked and stepped back.

I didn't care about how everyone was looking at me. I leaned over the table and screamed at the corpse.

"Vill! Is this the thanks I get after how clingy you've been with me?! This is coming completely out of nowhere! I've never seen a betrayal of this magnitude! I always thought you were a liar, but I didn't imagine you were this heartless, and I had no idea how much you leaving would end up affecting my life, and I don't even know what I'm saying anymore! Point is, this is all your fault, so make up for it, sicko maid!!"

“Lady Komari, I...”

“I don’t want to hear excuses!! It was you who made me into the invincible Crimson Lord I am today!! And now you just up and leave?! I’m not letting that happen! God might forgive you, but you can be sure that Terakomari Gandesblood never will!”

“Calm down, Commander Gandesblood. God welcomes Villhaze’s conver—”

“I’m going to flick God in the freaking forehead!!”

Spica shut her mouth.

I paid no attention to her and kept talking, going on to declare war, for all intents and purposes.

“Just you wait, Vill! I’m going there to get you! I’m gonna take care of the religious forces pestering Mulnite! I’m gonna wipe out the Holy City’s army!”

“Ms. Gandesblood, please shut up. Don’t just start war of your own accord.”

“It’s fine, Flöte. Let’s let her take care of this.”

I paid no mind to Flöte and Petrose’s argument.

I just stated what came to mind without holding anything back.

“And you’ll be waiting there in silence!! Stay put!! Don’t make Spica any more omelet rice!! Got it?! I’ll take that as a yes!!”

“.....”

The other end of the line was quiet for a while.

So was the Bloody Hall.

Sakuna was staring at the ceiling in astonishment; Delphyne was as quiet as ever; Flöte was shaking, pale in the face; Helldeus was nodding in satisfaction; Petrose was calmly eating her jelly; and Millicent had turned her back on me for some reason, so I couldn’t see her expression.

Then my head started to cool off.

Wait... Did I just declare war of my own will?

Just as I started to feel like the anxiety would crush me, I heard muffled chuckling.

It was Spica. She was cackling heartily. I had no idea what was so funny, but she stopped right away anyway. Then, with enough pressure in her voice to kill an insect, she said:

"So you choose your own demise. Pitiful. Very well. The divine retribution will continue. The Holy Knights shall act according to God's will."

"...!"

Now my fate was sealed.

I didn't need to cool my head. I didn't need to keep quiet while Spica did as she pleased. I turned around and took wide steps out to the hallway, ignoring Sakuna and Flöte's voices coming from the Bloody Hall as I left.

Snow fell on the Mulnite Imperial Palace gardens. I looked up at the cold sky and yelled:

"Caostel! Bellius! Mellaconcey! Are any of you here?!"

"I am."

The stripped-tree man appeared from the shadow of a pillar, like a stalker. That ought to get him arrested under the right circumstances.

Still, I had no time to waste being caught off guard. I walked up to him and, without hesitation, gave him the order:

"Gather everyone from the Seventh Unit. I want to talk."



They all showed up in less than five minutes.

I stood atop the remains of the idol (still there, yeah) and looked down upon the five hundred members of the Mulnite Imperial Army's Seventh Unit.

This bunch meant nothing but trouble and danger to my own life, but in times of need, they proved to be one reliable pack of wild animals.

Sakuna wasn't the only person in my corner—I also had them.

"Commander, what will you have us do today?" Caostel asked with unbridled enthusiasm.

The rest of my troops had the same look on their faces, too. Perhaps they were giddier—and more anxious—than need be since I never summoned them for anything.

"Good to have you all here," I spoke with the gravest solemnity I could muster. There was no room for failure. Not now. Not without my maid. "As you all know, the Imperial Capital was just rocked by a series of riots. We believe they were carried out under the direction of the Pope of the Holy Church—Julius VI, Spica La Gemini. Actually, we had her confess to it just a moment ago. And according to the Fifth Unit's intel, the church is collaborating with Inverse Moon to take down the Mulnite Empire."

Then, commotion.

"What?!" "Those bastards..." "Wait, who's the Fifth Unit commander?" "This is why I can't stand religion." "Those terrorists again?!" "They won't get away with this!"

I spoke louder to drown them out:

"They must be behind the Empress's disappearance, too. The Mulnite Empire is in unprecedented peril, and we need to do something about it. Do you understand?"

"Of course! We must be firm and act with determination!" Caostel responded.

"He's right!" the rest echoed.

Their affinity for battle went beyond the comprehension of any normal mind. They would gladly take up arms the moment I requested they do so—but I couldn't just put this on them entirely. After all, we'd be doing this entirely of my own accord.

I waited for silence to return and then, hesitantly, I said:

"Actually... There's something I must tell you..." The vampires looked up curiously at me. "I've been feeling down the last few days."

"What do you mean, Commander?"

"I—I mean, it's nothing, really! But I've been out of it, and I may have given you some weird orders because of that. I want to apologize."

I bowed, and they all looked troubled. "No, don't worry, please raise your head, Commander!" "You put on an even stronger display of power than usual, in fact!" They said, uncharacteristically concerned. I felt this weird warmth in my chest.

"Thanks... Some of you may realize already why I've been like this—our special lieutenant, Villhaze, is missing. The Pope took our comrade from us, and she's now working as a maid in the Holy City..."

I cast my gaze down. I felt guilty about focusing on my own problems when the whole Empire was at risk, but I had to tell them this.

"So... I want to take her back. And I can't do this alone. I—I might be the strongest Crimson Lord of them all, but there's a limit to how many people I can kill in one session. Which is why... I, um, it might be weird of me to ask this, but uh..."

I raised my head and looked at my subordinates, then mustered my courage.

"I want to solve this issue with the Holy City and bring Vill back. So... would you please come with me...?"

.....

Painful silence.

I exhaled white breath as snow fell and melted on my uniform.

Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd frankly communicated my feelings to my unit. And it was to ask a favor, to top it all off. It was weird that I was speaking in front of everybody to begin with—maybe this was a sign of the end of times. A meteorite could very well strike tomorrow.

What did they think of my request? Were they disappointed that the slaughter

champion was getting so desperate for the sake of a single maid?

"Commander, you need not ask us. Simply give us your command," Caostel said out of nowhere. I didn't know what to say to that, and he continued, "But I will say, we can't let the Holy City get away with this. They're doing as they please and using religion as an excuse."

"Yes, they're making light of the Mulnite Empire."

"And they've abducted our precious comrade! Any of us would be mad at that! Isn't that right, fellow soldiers?!"

"You can say that again!" "They must pay for saddening our commander!" "The Holy Church is going down!" "I'm gonna kill them all." "I'm going to flip the bird at any mention of God from now on." "No one can replace our special lieutenant." "Check it! Seeing Caostel with the commander is wack. It should be Villhaze who has her back." "Our Unit's only a bunch of meatheads without her!" "The truth is, I've been in love with Villhaze this whole time." "God's not getting away with this!" "God's getting His own day of judgment!" "Time to kill!!"

Wait, hold on. I don't want you guys to put an end to the Church. I just want Vill back. And I'll be glad to be friends with Spica, actually... But they were beyond being reached with words.

"Commander! You have nothing to worry about! There is no enemy we can't snuff out when working together. Let us hand down judgment on that insolent clergy!"

"O-okay..."

They all looked at their commander with great expectations.

I felt courage budding from the pit of my gut. Despite the snowy weather, my body was warming up.

I had been sure they would ridicule me. *You want our help? Why can't Miss Slaughter Champion take care of it all by herself? Dunce!*" Then they would kill me.

But that didn't happen. Bunch of murderous vampires though they were, they'd shown their support, and I couldn't be happier about it.

Now it was my turn to give it my all.

I took a deep breath and looked at their faces. I raised my right hand high and called out to them.

“Let’s go, my dear soldiers! It is time to fight!”

After a single moment of silence:

“HAAIIILLL!!!” their usual yell burst all the way up to the winter sky.

I felt like my eardrums would burst, too. The typical Komarin call followed, as well.

“Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!”

So it was decided that Mulnite would confront the Holy City.

War was right around the corner.

Vexations

The Wanderer from the Netherworld

[The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess]

Her life began in the middle of a forest, among the thunder. That was her oldest memory—a roaring and booming like the end of the world.

She was still afraid of thunder due to the traumatic experience. Nothing she did could allay her fear. On that day, that rainy day, she sat in the mud in the middle of the forest, until a tall, old man wearing a silk hat saved her.

“I can’t believe it. So the Goddess really did come from the future,” the old man said, genuinely shocked. “Your injuries aren’t healed. You haven’t been enrolled into the Dark Core, have you?”

“I... uh...”

“Hmm?”

Her lips trembled as she pushed the voice out of her throat.

“Who... am I...?”

“That’s what I want to know. According to the woman from the future, you will eventually become a vital piece of a huge puzzle. I don’t mean to put you down as just a pawn, though. I hope you don’t take offense...”

“...?”

She couldn’t understand a single thing coming out of the man’s mouth, but she gathered on pure instinct that the vampire before her—a vampire just like her—was not her enemy.

If she hadn't met him at that moment, she would've succumbed to the bite wounds of a forest beast.

The rain washed away her memories. She knew not where she had come from, nor who she was. As she had nowhere to go, she accepted the old man's offer to live as his granddaughter. Although she couldn't deny that a part of her was afraid he was a monster who ate children, she figured it was better than dying in the forest. She didn't mind being tricked. For now, she chose to believe in his kindness. And so she left with him, with Clovis.

Clovis was one of the Seven Crimson Lords of the Mulnite Empire.

"You must be stronger than you look," she said with complete sincerity, and he replied with a smile, "I'm just there to fill in the gaps. My troops could mutiny against me at any moment."

They lived in peace.

She wasn't one to start their conversations herself, due to her reserved nature, but Clovis was considerate and would talk to her on his own. Although most of what he talked about was poison. He was an expert on the subject, and he would always go on hikes to search for precious plants and mushrooms that he could make into dangerous substances to use in war.

"Listen carefully. You grind blue moss bamboo into powder, mix it with black nettle-tree butterfly extract, and let it rest for a night. Then you mix in venom A and medicine C, and you get a poison that will blow up whoever drinks it."

"I'm sorry... but I don't get it..."

"Hmm, was that too much for you?"

But she didn't want to be left behind. She snuck into Clovis's lab and read all the documents, gaining knowledge on poisons little by little. In a month's time, she was able to concoct a lethal poison of her own, and Clovis was greatly surprised. "You must be a genius!"

Those days weren't fun, exactly, but they were like paradise compared to wandering the stormy forest covered in wounds.

"I just realized," Clovis said one day. "I've nothing to call you but *you*. I shall give you a name."

"I... remember my name."

"Hmm? You do?"

"Yes, it's written on my clothes."

She told him it, and he smiled in admiration.

"I see. Villhaze. In ancient Mulnite, it meant 'gem from heaven' or 'emperor's jewel.' You're destined for greatness."

"Is that so?"

"But you're missing a family name. Since I'll have you enroll in the Imperial Academy, how about you use your new grandpa's? My full name is Clovis Dodrens. Yours will be Villhaze Dodrens."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't sound cute."

"..."

She could still remember Clovis—her grandfather's sad expression then.

Ultimately, she decided to live without a family name.

These were Villhaze's oldest memories. From when she was still a lusterless little girl afraid of thunder. From before she met Terakomari Gandesblood and gained a new path in life.

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Her Majesty had commanded her to perform espionage.

Pope Julius VI was under suspicion of being involved in something dreadful. More specifically, she appeared to be working with Inverse Moon to try and take over the Six Nations. This was what the Empress said when ordering her to infiltrate the Holy City:

“Use any method you must. When Julius VI comes to visit, you must go back with her. Perhaps the fastest way would be to say you’re converting.”

And so Villhaze made arrangements to change teams. She bought holy water and vestments at the Imperial Capital church in order to join the faith, but in the end, all her preparations had gone down the drain the moment she actually came across the Pope. The Seventh Unit ended up provoking her ire, and Villhaze had offered herself as compensation.

It seemed all too convenient, but she couldn’t give up the chance. She consented to being whisked away to the Holy City.

To top it all off, Julius VI was intent on making Villhaze her own personal maid. It was the perfect situation for espionage, but she couldn’t help but that feel something was off.

“Commander Gandesblood is quite the girl,” Julius VI mused from behind her as she swayed the lollipop in her hand.

Upon closer inspection, Villhaze could see that her candy was composed of a mix of sugar and blood that had been solidified.

“She seems to value you more than I thought. She might try invading the Holy City, even though she can’t possibly stand a chance against the Holy Knights.”

“I... never imagined that Lady Komari could speak so sharply.”

“Good thing she’s got the energy, right? Though it’s obvious it’s only coming from a place of desperation.”

Villhaze was unusually worried.

She’d acted on a whim. The Pope didn’t realize this, but her heart was still with Komari. She ached to be reunited with her as soon as possible. Her need for Komari was so great that she was on the brink of losing her marbles and running screaming through

the hallways.

This was the consequence of her backup plan: putting some distance between her and Komari to try and make something bud within her master. Villhaze's insistence wasn't working, and Komari had been too cold as of late, so she'd thought that some time could bring their hearts closer together.

"Just you wait, Vill! I'm going there to get you!"

Villhaze had honestly been elated to hear Komari say that, but it only made her guilt stronger. She'd fought to keep herself from shouting, "It's all a lie, I still love you!" How was she supposed to act if Komari actually came for her? Moreover, wouldn't the Seventh Unit's invasion get in the way of her espionage?

She needed to reveal Spica La Gemini's secret, pronto. Then she would go back to the Mulnite Empire with Komari. Full of determination, she stared at the vampire with blond pigtails.

"Buhddabay," she mumbled with the lollipop in her mouth. "By the way, where in Mulnite are you from?"

"Me? Erm... The Imperial Capital."

"I see. Me too." Julius VI smiled amicably. "It's such a nice city, though it wasn't as big as it is now when I was born. It was just a little walled city in the middle of the prairie."

"If I may... How old are you, Lady Spica?"

"You see, I'm half-Immortal. I've forgotten exactly how many years I've been around, but it must be somewhere around six hundred."

That had to be a lie.

Immortals had long lives, but they didn't reach thrice the lifetimes of other species. Especially when they had a non-Immortal parent. Unless she had a special ability that prolonged her life, it was impossible that Spica was six hundred years old.

Villhaze's suspicions only grew as Julius VI went into a long-winded speech while swinging the lollipop in hand.

"You might not know, but six centuries ago, there was no Dark Core. Back then, people had to go to the underworld when their hearts were gouged out. It was survival of the fittest. People weren't sure they'd be able to survive on their own, so they began praying to God. The circumstances made the Holy Church much more popular than you could imagine nowadays. It must have had at least ten times as many followers. There were a lot more churches, too."

"I see... So you lost followers because of the Dark Core?"

"That's right. That special-grade Divine Instrument made people lose their fear of death. They forgot about God and started acting in self-indulgence. As a member of Mulnite's army, you must be aware of sports-wars, those barbaric events where people abandon themselves to the pleasures of killing each other. They're a showcase of how lightly people think of life. Don't you find it concerning?"

"Perhaps. Life *is* something to value," Villhaze answered half-heartedly while reflecting on her words. She'd heard the same idea elsewhere before.

"Oh, excuse me," the Pope apologized out of the blue. "I have the bad habit of rambling on without end. I think I got it from my days as an apprentice doing hardcore missionary work."

"Is that so?"

"I would like to ask one question, though. Do you believe in God?"

Her answer was obvious, one that reflected the title her master had given her—a liar of a maid.

"Of course I believe in Him. I love God."

"I see. Go back to your work, then."

Villhaze curtsied and went on her way.

She needed to make supper, but the truth was that she had no intention of heading to the kitchen. The Pope would be engaged in prayer with the cardinals before sunset, and she was intent on using the opportunity to search the Cathedral. It wouldn't be long before she found decisive evidence. She could feel it.

"Oh, also," the Pope said abruptly, her tone as casual as someone asking about the weather. "I heard you've been snooping all over the Cathedral."

"...!"

"I don't mind, but I think someone else might."

Villhaze's heart raced. Spica's starry stare glued her in place. She took a deep breath before responding.

"Whatever could you mean? I'm your loyal maid now, Lady Spica."

The Pope smiled.

"See, I'm not allowed to kill you. Apparently, your Core Implosion—Pandora's Poison—might prove useful. It's strange for them to take such roundabout methods, but I think I understand why."

"Wha—" She couldn't finish speaking.

Agony bloomed across her stomach. She fell onto her knee, drooling.

She looked down and saw blood gushing out. A dagger had flown into her side. *Impossible. There was no mana reaction. Who in the world coul—* Pain. Sharp pain.

"Please. The plan will go awry if we allow her to snoop around."

Villhaze heard a man's voice. She turned around in panic, and there she saw a tall Sapphire, his eyes glowing scarlet. Core Implosion.

Julius VI sighed and said, "I was only testing her skills as a maid. Playing around, that's all."

"The games have gone on for long enough. She was to be imprisoned from the very beginning."

Villhaze gnashed her teeth. The pain burned her insides like scorching flames.

"I'm sorry, Villhaze," Julius VI apologized insincerely. "This here is Tryphon Cross. He's been the captain of the Holy Knights ever since I took over as Pope. And he's also a

Luna—one of the top brass of Inverse Moon.”

Villhaze’s jaw dropped. She hadn’t been expecting her to just come out and say it.

The Holy Church really was colluding with those terrorists to destroy the Mulnite Empire.

She thought as fast as she could. Their motives were easy enough to imagine, especially since Julius VI had just said it herself—the Dark Core had made people lose their faith.

She couldn’t let herself be defeated now. Her hand trembled as she took out a powerful painkiller from her pocket and gulped it down without hesitation. The agony gradually subsided.

Everything will be over if I take the two of them out now, she thought before standing up. Only then, however, did she realize that something else was stabbing her ankle.

“Huh...?”

“It’s too late. We will be making use of your power now.”

A sword swung at imperceptible speed. She couldn’t dodge it.

Villhaze’s life came to a silent end.

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The terrorists lost no time in mobilizing.

Still, their opposition was moving just as quickly.

※

Meanwhile, at the Osui Palace in the Eastern Capital of the Heavenly Paradise.

Karla Amatsu was behind the bamboo blinds as always, taking a nap.

She wasn’t slacking off—she was resting.

Ever since she became Goddess, Karla had lost most of her private time. She rarely got any sleep since she also had to attend to the Fuuzen. There weren't many opportunities for snacking, either. How was she supposed to go on?

Certain that her lifestyle would lead to her demise, Karla had added napping as part of her duties as Goddess. Getting proper rest was part of the job. So no, she was not slacking off, not in the slightest. *I'll just rest until dinner for today...* she thought sluggishly as she clutched a pillow close to her chest.

"What're you doing, Karla?!"

"Uwaaah?!"

She woke with a leap upon hearing a voice in her ear.

She felt dizzy. Her eardrums throbbed in pain.

Who yells at someone sleeping? It could only be the devil itself! Karla thought as she turned around, tears in her eyes, to find the devil in question—one Karin Reigetsu.

"This sacred place is not for napping! Do your job!"

"Wait, don't pull me! You're taking my clothes off!" Karla screamed as she was dragged away.

Karin showed no restraint. She grabbed Karla by the ankle and tried hauling her all the way to the office.

"Let me go! I have a strict schedule of napping by the brazier for the rest of the day!"

"There's no time to lose! The project documents for rebuilding the Eastern Capital keep piling up! And you're going to take a look at each and every one of them."

"That's no reason to drag me around like luggage! Is this how you treat your sacred Goddess?!"

"No sacred Goddess would snooze behind some blinds!"

"You really think none of them have done this before?! I beg to differ! I'm pretty sure at least half of our past rulers must have done that at some point! And none of them

had insolent subjects that would dare take a peek without asking! You're the anomaly here!"

"Shut your trap! Wanna sleep? Then hit the hay after finishing your damn job!"

"But when will it end?!"

"Sometime, so long as you actually do it. It's only taking years because you're so slow."

"This is hell! Look at my eyes! I've got bags under them from the lack of sleep!"

They kept fighting on the floor.

After the Heavenly Ball, Karin Reigetsu had begun working as Karla's aide. Her exact position was that of Minister of the Right & Imperial Saber. Along with her pedigree, this made her both in theory and in practice the Heavenly Paradise's number two.

Only number two, so why did she have to push her number one around? Karla had been hoping that Karin would take care of all the busywork, but it turned out it was Karin ordering her around. Trying to bribe the girl with snacks hadn't worked one bit. In the end, Karla was still afraid of her.

"I just got a great idea! I hereby command the members of the Court to take a five-hour nap every day. That should help them relax and raise their efficiency. This is an imperial decree."

"Say that again, and I'll slice you in half."

"All right! Time to do some work!"

She couldn't keep resisting at the sight of her blade. Karla had no doubt that Karin was capable of cutting the Goddess in half.

They went to the office and, true to Karla's word, found an actual mountain of documents waiting to be checked. No end in sight. Karla probably wouldn't be able to run the Fuuzen for the whole weekend.

"...I have to go through all of these?"

"That's the Goddess's job. And you took over, not me, remember?"

“I guess...”

Karla had gained massive support after winning the Heavenly Ball, leading to her election as Goddess. This was the wish of the people—and most importantly, her own. She couldn't just insist she didn't want to do any of the actual work, otherwise she'd be ashamed to face her citizens, her grandmother, the former Goddess, and that courageous vampire girl.

“...Gee. Sure is hard being the Goddess.”

“I'll help you out as much as I can. I know you can't do it by yourself.”

“Right. You and I both know how useless I am.”

Karla grabbed the first document, all ready to get down to work, and... sighed.

“This won't do. It'll ruin the landscape.”

“Is that so?”

“You want a bathhouse there? There's no need for one in that zone, just going by the population's distribution. Now that we're rebuilding the capital from scratch, let's trim the fat instead of just rebuilding it as it was. Also, this project's just for pocketing a kickback. I'll have to establish a special bureau to take care of these things. I've also received complaints about the Ministry of Revenue being too stingy with funds, so remind me to talk to them later.”

“R-right.”

“I've also gotten reports about the Ministry of Works lacking personnel. Let's check their hiring situation. I've heard that some strikes are happening, too, so I want to open the treasury and give them a one-year raise, but I'm open to hearing counterpoints or alternatives. Oh, this is asking for an illegitimate subsidy. Where'd this private enterprise come from? Geez, they're making me lose sleep on this crap...”

“...Wait, you're just throwing the papers away. Are you sure?”

“No problem. I've got them all memorized and I'm giving instructions on the spot.”

Karla was sending all her decrees to the relevant departments using a Magic Stone

called a Shikigami.

She was already sick of her job. She wanted to go home now and come up with a new eastern-style snack... Just then, she felt a sudden flow of mana.

Someone appeared in a corner of the room.

“Lady Karla, you have a letter.”

It was a girl clad in black—the leader of Kidoshu, Karla’s own ninja squad: Koharu Minenaga. She always made a stealthy entrance. Karla kept her eyes on the documents as she responded to her subordinate.

“Thank you. Leave it over there. I’ll read it later.”

“I think this should take priority.”

“Why? Is it a special sale on sugar?”

“No.” Koharu shook her head. Karla felt the blood leave her body as she heard her next words. “It’s from Kakumei Amatsu, your brother.”

※

Meanwhile, at the Executive Office in the Metropolis of the Aruka Republic.

President Nelia Cunningham reclined in her chair as she stared at the man in front of her.

He had the same arrogant look in his eyes as always, but he seemed less detestable than he had been that past summer. Naturally so, thought Nelia. He had endured harsh punishment under the new Aruka’s law. He had changed his ways, if only a little.

“Um... Lady Nelia, don’t you think it’s too soon?” asked Gertrude, the maid at her side.

But Nelia smiled. “It’s too late, I’d say. When all is said and done, we need military power to rebuild Aruka. Outlaws have been running rampant lately, taking advantage of all the turmoil. I’ve been wanting a watchdog for a while.”

“But I don’t think the citizens will take well to this.”

"Do you remember the punishment he went through? They dragged him around the city in the nude. The judge sure wasn't merciful... But thanks to that, I think he's won more pity than hatred. People will be fine with him being reinstated. And whoever's not fine with that is going to jail. That's good with you, right, Rainsworth?"

The man before her, Warblade Pascal Rainsworth, had been Arukan dictator Madhart's loyal dog.

"Hah." He crossed his arms, a sulking frown on his face. "You're too naive, Nelia. You don't understand the depth of the people's hatred for Madhart. Appointing me will only tank your popularity."

"It's for the good of the country."

"Don't you remember what you said back in the golden plains? That Aruka doesn't need me?"

"Zip it. Don't you talk back to the president."

Nelia stood up from her chair and walked up to Rainsworth. He darted his eyes around as she smirked.

"I'm appointing you back to the Eight Illustrious Generals. You have no right to refuse. This is an executive order. But... if you really don't want to, then I might accept you as my maid. I'll have you call me Lady Nelia and take care of me like Gertrude and the others do. All while wearing the same uniform, of course."

"Wha...?! You're insane if you think I'm doing that!"

"Wow, you've got some dignity left after going around the city in your birthday suit? Either way, if you don't want to be an Illustrious General, your only options are becoming my maid or dying in prison."

"You've gotta be kidding me! That's blackmail—Guh!"

Rainsworth spun around before he tumbled to the floor. Nelia had swept at his legs with a mana-reinforced kick.

"You little...!" He yelled and tried getting up, but his efforts were fruitless. It was like he was sewn to the floor. "Wha?! What's going on?! The floor's all sticky!"

"Advanced-level adhesive spell: *Eternal Birdlime!* You're not getting away from this, Rainsworth!"

"Y-you weeeeeench!"

"I'm sorry, brother. I had to follow Lady Nelia's orders."

"Cry and beg! Say, 'I am so sorry, I've changed my ways, so please let me be an Illustrious General again.' Do it or I'll make you my maid. Gertrude, do we have a uniform that fits him?"

"I think we do, actually..."

"Hey, that's not what you said before! I'm not doing whatever you wa—"

"Shut up already!"

Nelia raised her foot to stomp the man's face, but then she reconsidered. Shoving her boot there would be a bit much. So she took it off and stomped his face in her tights, kicking him square in the side of the head.

"Beg. I'll forgive you if you beg for it with tears in your eyes."

"F-f-fuck off! I'm not taking this humiliation. I'll... I'll..."

"You'll *what?* Your life is in my hands. You should be grateful I'm allowing you to come crawling back. Or are you really so humiliated that you'd rather drop dead at this point? How's your former coworker's foot feel, eh? Are you enjoying getting trampled on while you can do nothing to stop it?"

"You...! You won't get away with this, Neliaaa!!"

"A-awawa! Lady Nelia, please have mercy! I'm so jealous right n... I mean, you must stop giving him the pleasure of your foot!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So, what'll it be, Pascal Rainsworth?! Illustrious General, or my new maid?!"

"Gwaaaaaaaah!" A shriek from the soul echoed throughout the Executive Office.

While tormenting Rainsworth, Nelia thought carefully: *I must appoint whoever's the strongest, even if they opposed me in the past.*

Aruka had lost much of its power after its tumultuous revolution.

In testament to the country's diminished presence, quite some time had passed since its commanders had participated in sports-war.

The seats of the Eight Illustrious Generals were nearly all vacant. Only Gertrude had kept her position from the previous administration. With the exception of Pascal Rainsworth, who would be re-joining today, the only other General was Nelia herself, juggling both positions of president and commander.

Nelia reflected on the grim prospects of her nation as she abused Rainsworth with her foot, until Gertrude exclaimed:

“Lady Nelia, look!”

“What? I’m almost done breaking his spirit.”

“What would be the point in that? Anyway, you have a call.” Gertrude pointed at the desk.

On it sat five Correspondence Crystals, each hotlines to the leaders of the other nations. The crimson one—Mulnite’s—was glowing.

Talk about a surprise, Nelia thought as she put her boot back on. She ignored Rainsworth’s nosebleed and walked up to the Crystals.

“Hello? This is Nelia Cunningham speaking.”

The connection went through after she poured in some mana, but she heard no response from the other end, only the buzz of static.

“——I——”

“Hello? Empress?”

“————Neli————pir——”

Was there an issue with the mana supply? But the Correspondence Crystals used in the international hotlines were items of the highest quality. Regular connection issues wouldn't create this much noise. Where could the Empress possibly be?

"Your Majesty, can you hear me? What is happening?"

Rainsworth kept grunting from behind, "You're not... getting away with this..." Gertrude silenced him by hitting him on the head with a frying pan. *Hope that doesn't kill him.*

After a while, the call finally stabilized.

"—*Can you hear me, Nelia?*"

That was the Mulnite Empress's voice, no question about it. Nelia sighed in relief.

"Yes, I can hear you. What's the matter?"

"*I'll cut to the chase. I want you to lend the Mulnite Empire a hand.*"

"Um... What's the problem, exactly?"

"*I messed up. Inverse Moon's on the move. Things are going to get ugly. I just want you to help Komari when the time comes.*"

"I don't mind, but I'd appreciate if you could fill me in on the situation."

"*I'd appreciate if you could find out for yourself.*"

Does... that make any sense? But then, the Empress said something much more shocking.

"*Sorry, I don't have the time. I've almost reached Yulinne.*"

Vexations

3 God's Territory

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

The Holy City of Lehysia. The Holy Church's headquarters lay in the middle of the Dark Core Zone.

The metropolis was twice as large as the Mulnite Imperial Capital. Just one glance at its stately architecture, replete with sharp, pointed spires, let one know this was a religious city. And in the heart of this mass of buildings, rising high as if to reach the heavens, stood the Cathedral where the Pope lived. One could see it from any point in the city. A Pope of the past had built it with the explicit aim of producing a "a castle that could touch God," and it was indeed a tall, grand structure.

The Holy City was covered in silver by December. The roofs of the churches strewn about were white with snow, and simply walking through the streets resulted in a gratifying crunch.

"What an amazing place. And it's full of people from the Church," Sakuna remarked with white breath as she walked by my side.

The streets were chock-full of people of different species, and it seemed at least 80 percent of them were related to the Holy Church, just going off appearances. Anyone who wasn't clad in vestments at least wore the religious symbol of a slanted cross struck by an arrow somewhere on their body. It felt like we were conspicuous without it.

"Let's not look around too much. The Holy Knights might be lurking somewhere," said Millicent sharply from my left.

I cast my glance down immediately. "I'm sorry."

“Geez. You need to be more careful.”

“I am! I’m so desperate to be careful that I keep writing triangles on my palm and swallowing them, but it doesn’t work no matter how many times I do it. Now I’m feeling full...”

“See? This is why they were able to take your maid away from you.”

I couldn’t say anything back. I simply couldn’t keep my thoughts in order when speaking to Millicent.

Petrose and my dad had divided us into groups, like we had done during the Six Nations War. Petrose, Helldeus, Flöte, and Delphyne would stay back in the Imperial Capital to maintain our defenses, while Sakuna, Millicent, and I would infiltrate the Holy City. We weren’t launching an all-out attack, though. The full one hundred-man forces of the Fifth and Sixth Units were staying back in the Imperial Capital, while my five hundred guys were to sneak into the Holy City from another route.

The goal wasn’t to destroy the Holy City. It was to march into the Cathedral and negotiate with Spica to broker a peaceful agreement. All while getting Vill back.

“Ms. Millicent, shall we survey the Cathedral’s surroundings?”

“The Seventh Unit’s going to be doing that. We just have to get their intel.”

By the way, there wasn’t a checkpoint or anything at the entrance to the Holy City. They turned no one away, for that was their philosophy (at least on the surface). Still, Sakuna and I were known internationally, so we needed to be careful. It’d all be over if their army, the Holy Knights, found us. So we were wearing hoods.

Millicent stopped all of a sudden and pointed at the entrance of a nearby restaurant.

“Caostel Conto should be arriving here. That’s where we’ll be sharing intel.”

“Huh? Really?”

“You haven’t been communicating with your subordinates? Are you even doing your job as Crimson Lord? Gosh, what a sheltered, useless vampire you are.”

“I’m sorry.”

“...Stop apologizing.” She frowned and turned around.

I still hadn’t gotten the chance to talk face-to-face with her. I wanted to have lunch together and feel her out, but I didn’t have the courage to ask her for that. What did she think of me? Did she want to kill me yet again? The hazy feeling in my mind persisted as Millicent confidently stepped into the restaurant. Sakuna and I hesitated for just one second before following her.

We sat at a table deep inside the restaurant to prevent anyone from overhearing us.

My tummy grumbled the moment I sat down. I was so worked up about this whole thing that I hadn’t been able to eat breakfast. In the end, no amount of triangles drawn into my palm could fill me up. I couldn’t face Spica on an empty stomach, so I grabbed a menu, but the moment I opened it, I despaired at the ruthlessness of reality.

“Sakuna! They don’t have omelet rice!”

“Ah... You’re right. They don’t have the Holy City’s famous ‘God-purified omelet rice.’”

“Why?! I was so excited for it... I read in a magazine the other day that it made you feel like your mouth was entering the Kingdom of God.”

“I think this restaurant’s targeting people outside the clergy. None of the dishes seem to have a religious flair to them.”

“Do you think they’d get mad at us if we left for another place?”

“Are you stupid? Forget how the staff would feel, that would ruin the whole plan. Don’t you get it?” Millicent shot me a thorny glare.

Right. It wasn’t realistic to change restaurants if Caostel was supposed to meet us here. But... perhaps due to my empty stomach, I felt the need to oppose her.

Millicent found fault with every little thing I did. Maybe everything she pointed out was true. Maybe I wasn’t acting the way a proper commander should. But I couldn’t stand her grousing any longer!

And hey, it wasn’t efficient for me to flinch at every single thing she did. She was only

my coworker. A fellow Crimson Lord. And we'd already argued with our fists, even—we were close enough to not need to be this reserved.

"...You don't get to talk to me like that." I crossed my arms and glared back at her. Her eyebrow twitched. "I'm just saying what came to mind. What's so wrong with that? I simply wanted to eat omelet rice."

"It's a waste of time. And what if people realize who you are from your voice?"

"You say that, but you also wanted a taste of that omelet rice, didn't you?"

"Huh?"

"I remember from when we fought in that underground church six months ago. You said you like omelet rice. Hey, how about we go have some together next time?"

"Keep running your mouth, and I'm gonna break your pinky finger."

"Wh-why are you so quick to resort to violence at every little thing?! You should know I really can kill five hundred vampires using just that same pinky finger! There's no one out there who tried to break it and lived to tell the tale."

"You insolent little—"

"Let's calm down, Ms. Millicent! We shouldn't fight!" Sakuna panicked when she saw Millicent rise from her seat.

She glared at me hard enough to kill somebody. I thought I was dead, for sure.

Upon further reflection, there was no point in provoking her. But it's just that... I felt like it was better for me to put on a bit of a strong front when facing her, instead of my usual timidity.

Millicent clicked her tongue and looked away.

"You sure haven't changed. You still piss me off."

"I—I have too changed. Now I can go to bed and wake up early."

"See? Same way of thinking. You call yourself a scholar, yet you have the brains of a

five-year-old."

"What?! I'm fifteen, I'll have you know!"

"Ms. Komari, calm down! Despite what she says, Ms. Millicent respects you. You were all she talked about when we ran into each other the other day..."

"Huh? Really?"

"Sakuna Memoir. One more word, and you're dead."

"Eek!" Sakuna cried. Even she was afraid of her. But unlike me, she kept trying to be friendly. "U-um, you see, she became a Crimson Lord to atone for what she did. She may act this way around you, but I think she feels sorry deep down... W-wah! Forget I said anything, I'm sorry!" Sakuna flinched at her glare.

Dumbfounded, I stared at Millicent. Sakuna was good at figuring out how people felt, so she was probably right. Millicent's position as Crimson Lord was proof that the Empress recognized her, for starters. Maybe she had changed, if only slightly.

"What are you staring at?"

"...You're not still a terrorist, are you?"

"No, duh. People change, okay?" She scowled. "I decided to live for my own sake. I'm going to take Inverse Moon down and reinstate House Bluenight. So I'm just working as a Crimson Lord for the time being. I feel no duty to the Mulnite Empire."

"So you don't mind me or Vill anymore?"

"I do. You messed up my life. But, well..." She took a sip of her drink and looked down. "I do feel bad about what I did. So yeah, I'm atoning, in part."

"Huh....?"

I felt a wind blow in my chest. What did she just say? It was like the haze enveloping my heart had just been cleared away. I was too stunned to talk, but I opened my mouth anyway.

"Uh, um... Then..."

“What?”

“You don’t want any more revenge?”

“I am going to kill you one day. Be prepared.”

Oh, for... How deep-seated can her grudge be?

On the other hand, I felt no resentment toward Millicent. I’d already made my peace with what had happened last spring. The Seventh Unit had given her a good beating already, and now she’d gone all the way to the Holy City to serve Mulnite. I wasn’t sure how Vill would react, but at the very least, I didn’t want to see her as my sworn enemy forever.

Just then, I noticed some people approach.

“Good to see you’re okay, Commander.”

Caostel and Bellius had no intention of hiding their identities. The latter was managing the survey, so I didn’t really know how the plan was supposed to go. It did make sense that Millicent would be mad at me because of this.

Caostel gave Millicent a weird look.

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “D-don’t worry, guys! She’s not a terrorist anymore! I understand you want to beat her up badly, but she’s on our side now...”

“Rest assured. We know the circumstances.”

“Huh?”

“In any case, we have intel to share. Let’s hold our strategy meeting and decide the steps to butcher and disembowel the loathsome Pope. We’ll start by telling you what we saw and heard about the situation at the Cathedral.”

I was impressed; maybe they had grown up, too. I was sure my troops would have tried pummeling Millicent the moment they laid eyes on her.

Then Bellius and Caostel took a knee with soldier-like motion. I mean, they were soldiers, after all.

Oh, guys, there's no need for that. Just sit down.

"The full five hundred-man force of the Seventh Unit scattered throughout the Holy City to gather intel. After obtaining the results of our survey, we've come to the conclusion that we can blow up the Cathedral with an expected success rate of two hundred percent."

"Uh... Where do I even start?"

"I think we start by blowing up the Cathedral."

"That's not what I meant! What did you guys even investigate?!"

"Caostel, stop confusing the Commander" Bellius sighed, then took over reporting the situation. "We surveyed the Cathedral's security setup. The full forces of the Pope's army, the Holy Knights, are stationed throughout the city. There's about three thousand of them. While there isn't a special barrier around the Cathedral like there is around the Mulnite Imperial Palace, we believe charging in head-on might prove difficult."

"Wait, you're saying the opposite thing Caostel said. What's the meaning of this?" Millicent asked.

"Please use your brain a little, Commander Bluenight," Caostel replied haughtily. *I don't think any of you guys have ever done that.* "We simply have to cause a disturbance in the city. Once a riot gets going, the Holy Knights will have to get on the move to suppress it, since they also serve as the police. Then we can poke a hole in the Cathedral's security, like taking candy from a baby."

The logic was sound enough, but would it really be that easy?

"After making our opening, we go into the Cathedral, blow it up, and emerge victorious. The false God will be driven away, and the Holy City will be ushered into a new age of enlightenment: the era of Commander Terakomari Gandesblood."

"No need to go that far... Commander, our objective is to pressure Julius VI into stopping the attacks on the Mulnite Empire, along with taking back Lieutenant Villhaze."

"Y-yeah... Bellius is right," I said.

"Thank you. I also have another report to make... Flöte Mascarail's subordinate, Captain Bachelard, informed us that the religious uprisings at the Imperial Capital are growing in intensity."

"Huh...? What do you mean?"

"The Holy City must have additional military forces outside the Holy Knights, which they sent to the Imperial Capital. The Mulnite police and the army are fighting back, but they say it's already resembling a civil war."

Sakuna gasped. My jaw dropped.

The riots weren't over. Was this also happening under Spica's orders? If so, then it seemed the Holy Church now saw the Mulnite Empire as an outright enemy.

"Interesting. So you're saying Mulnite might fall if we don't come to an agreement with the Pope," Millicent said.

"How is that interesting?! How am I supposed to go home if Mulnite falls?!"

"Ms. Komari, this is an unprecedented crisis..."

"Ugh... I know. I'll do something about it... Like cheer you on as hard as I can..."

"The Seventh Unit's bloodthirst and morale will be through the roof with your cheers to back us up, Commander! Anyhow, first we need to put Operation Snowball Fight in action."

"Operation what now?"

"Snowball Fight. We duel to the death, with snowballs."

"Is that supposed to be a plan?!"

"I think we should make the riot as fun and bloody as we can. The Seventh Unit will be holding a snowball fight tournament where anything goes. Buildings will collapse in collateral damage, so that should be enough to plunge the whole city into chaos."

"Are you sure we aren't the terrorists here? And wait, why is the first thing you come up with in-fighting? Why not have a barbecue contest in an off-limits zone or

something?"

Just then, an explosion in the distance shook me to the bone. I heard screams, too.

Everyone looked out the window. Followers of the Holy Church were running in a panic every which way. I had a real sinking feeling about this, but I still asked for confirmation about what had just happened anyway.

"...Um, Caostel, that explosion didn't have anything to do with us, did it?"

"Oh, that must've been Mellaconcey. Guess he's going all out."

"..."

Everyone reacted differently. Bellius sighed slightly. Sakuna escaped reality. "This water's so tasty, hm?" she muttered after taking a sip. Millicent froze, her eyes wide open.

The next moment, the doors to the restaurant flew open.

People of various races, all of them wearing armor, barged in.

That's gotta be the Holy Knights. The man at the front (likely a Warblade) of the group took one look at us and yelled:

"Terakomari Gandesblood! You will repent for rebelling against God by forfeiting your life!"

Wait, how did they find us? As I raised an eyebrow, Millicent pulled my arm. She pointed at the Holy Knights and muttered something.

"Light Spell: *Magic Grenade*."

"Wait, Millicent!"

But it was too late.

A lump of mana shot from her finger at imperceptible speed and set off a huge explosion the moment it touched the enemy. People went flying. Screams rang out. I fell onto my butt, only to be pulled back to my feet a second later.

"Let's go, Terakomari! They knew what we were planning all along!" Millicent shouted.

"What?! But we were perfectly hidden!"

"We have to retreat either way. Sakuna Memoir! Snap out of it!"

"Y-yes! Sorry!" Sakuna squeaked.

"No, wait! I haven't had lunch yet!"

"This's no time for lunch!!"

Millicent used her magic to blow up a window. Pieces of glass flew all over the place, and I shrieked and shrank back helplessly. Millicent pulled me out of the place.



"Her Highness is worried about you," Luna Tryphon Cross said flatly.

They were in the Cathedral's underground prison, which the Holy Church had once used to capture and torture heretics and apostates.

By the time the Dark Core resurrected Villhaze, it was already too late. She couldn't escape in handcuffs.

The Sapphire man was working on something at a shelf full of chemicals by the wall. His back was wide open, and yet, she couldn't attack. They had injected her with anesthetics, or something of the sort, that prevented her from moving.

"The Empress ordered you to infiltrate the Holy City, remember?"

"...I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your fate was sealed from that very moment. It wasn't Karen Helvetius who gave you that order. It was my collaborator, Fuyao Meteorite."

"..."

She had a feeling that might've been the case.

As Villhaze thought back on her meeting with the Empress, more and more inconsistencies came up. She hadn't doubted the woman she was speaking to was the real deal at that time, even though the "Empress" had used her teacup with the wrong hand. Her speech had also been unusually casual for a moment there. There were too many details that didn't line up with her usual self. Villhaze had been set up.

"Why are you doing this? What's the value in killing a single maid?"

"There would be no value in *killing* you." Tryphon turned around, a small needle in hand. "There are two reasons why we needed you out of the picture. One was to diminish Terakomari Gandesblood's strength. We knew that vampire would lose her mind without you."

"How vile! How dare you use our bond, deeper than a bottomless pit..."

"You're overselling yourself. But that's all well and good."

"And our relationship only goes on from there. I'll have you know that Lady Komari..." Villhaze hesitated for a second. "...Lady Komari is coming to the Holy City for me. I was surprised to see timid little her yell at me like that..." She grinned just from recalling the moment.

But at the same time, she felt remorseful. How was she to face Terakomari after she had failed at her task and gotten captured by the enemy?

Tryphon, on the other hand, wore an artificial smile.

"That's all part of our plan. I was always angling to get her out of the Imperial Capital."

"Wha...?"

"She could stop any riots or attacks we threw at her if she stayed there, you see. We needed you to lure her out here."

"I don't understand. What is going on in the Imperial Capital?"

"We've been sending believers from Inverse Moon there since August. Their mission is to destroy the Empire from the inside. It must be a sea of flames about now."

Villhaze gritted her teeth.

She wasn't sure how much stock she could put into what Tryphon said, but going off his demeanor, it was obvious that things weren't in the Mulnite Empire's favor. She doubted it had actually been turned into a sea of flames, but she could easily picture the Church's forces laying waste to the capital as they spoke.

"...So is that your second reason for capturing me? Leading Lady Komari away from the Imperial Capital?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, that's not what I meant. I suppose there was a third reason, then. And this third one is something I'm personally interested in."

Tryphon walked up to her, eerie needle in hand.

"By the way, Villhaze, do you believe in God?"

"I believe only in Lady Komari."

"I figured as much. Her Highness holds a similar belief. By which I only mean she doesn't have faith in God, of course. Why else would she be called the Wicked God Slayer?"

The Wicked God Slayer. Yes, the leader of Inverse Moon's alias. Villhaze had no idea they called this person Her Highness internally, though. Nor that she was a woman.

"Outside the context of the Holy Church, people tend to use the word *God* to refer to the Dark Core. And Her Highness's aim is to destroy it—obtain something beyond in doing so."

"Why so vague? Do you not know what she's after, Mister Top Brass?"

"Her Highness is quite chatty about trivial matters, but very secretive about what's important. I believe the organization's slogan, *Life is meant to be in the shadow of death*, is only a front. So yes, I am looking for what she truly wants."

"Why not ask her? And then you tell me. That would make for good spoils of war."

"You're a funny woman. But no, she won't answer me. Which is why I must find out incidentally," he said as he slowly drew the needle nearer to Villhaze.

That was no syringe. The object in his hand looked more dreadful, like a tool meant to

gouge human skin and flesh. Villhaze's voice trembled as she asked him about it.

"What is that?"

"It's a tool for viewing memories, developed by our head of tech. Now that we've lost the Wheels of Asterism, we've no choice but to rely on this. Odilon's caused nothing but problems."

"P-pervert. Why do you want to peep at this frail maiden's memories?"

"There are two kinds of people. The normal, and the abnormal. This is something I believe only I've noticed, but the latter cause a slight shift in spatial coordinates when activating Core Implosion."

"What are you talking about? Take that thing away from me right now."

"I know of three abnormals: Her Highness, one of my collaborators, and you. I believe you three are hiding something. Her Highness won't say a word about this, and my collaborator, Fuyao Meteorite, doesn't seem to know anything. So I've no choice but to experiment on you."

"Listen..."

"Don't worry. It'll all be over soon."

Tryphon brought the needle close and stabbed her mercilessly in the shoulder.

Villhaze screamed out in pain. And then the nightmare began.



I felt the stares the moment we went outside. Each and every one of the passersby were glaring at us. I immediately realized how they'd caught on to our identities. The citizens all acted as Julius VI's eyes and ears.

"Tsk! We have no choice, let's go to the Cathedral!"

"What?! What about the plan?!"

"The plan's ruined already! We gotta move or they'll crush us!" Millicent yelled as she

bore a hole through someone's brow with Magic Bullet.

Did you have to do that?! She did have to, as a matter of fact. The citizenry were coming at us with steel pipes and saws in hand, shrieking like crazy.

"God's judgment on the heretics!"

"Death to the heathens!"

"Waaah?!" I screamed as Millicent pulled me around.

"Die, demons!... Gweh!" A man came to punch us from the side, but he was struck in the face with a block of ice.

I turned around to find Sakuna holding her staff high, shooting spell after spell. I didn't even have the time to say thanks. The swarms of believers wouldn't stop coming. Somehow, all one hundred thousand of the Holy City's residents were against us now.

"Caostel! Where's the rest of the Seventh Unit?!"

"They're in a different area, holding the snowball tournament."

"Are they stupid?!"

"They really got into it. Half of them are dead already."

"AAAAARGH!!" I clutched my hair.

I couldn't count on those morons for anything. Were they ever gonna do their actual jobs? They could throw all the snowballs they wanted once we got back to Mulnite!

"Ms. Komari! Watch out ahead!" Sakuna yelled.

"Huh?" I turned back around.

Knives were spinning in the air, flying straight toward me.

It's over. I hope I get to go to heaven. I began praying to God, when Millicent yelled at me.

“Don’t close your eyes, idiot!”

Then I saw her throw a Magic Stone.

A gigantic, rumbling explosion went off an instant later. The Magic Stone contained an explosive spell.

Right before the gray gust enveloped us, Millicent pushed me away. I fell down helplessly and rolled on the snow. Just as I started to worry about transforming into a snowvampire, I crashed into a wall.

“Ms. Komari! Are you all right?!”

“U-ugh...” I gritted my teeth as Sakuna helped me get up. I had no time to waste on tears. “Wh-what about you, Sakuna? And Millicent?”

I knew the blue girl had pushed me out of the way to safety, but what about her? I looked around for her and found her holding off enemies on all sides of her with Magic Bullets and a knife. I sighed in momentary relief, but we had to do something to get out of this situation.

“D-damn it! What now?! They keep coming, like ants from their nest!”

“I don’t think it would be possible to attack the Cathedral like this... Perhaps we should retreat—”

“There she is!” “Terakomari Gandesblood!” “Savor your divine punishment!” Loads of believers ran at us, waving weapons in hand, before Sakuna could get back on her feet.

I was at a loss. I didn’t even know which way the Cathedral was.

Just then, countless daggers plunged into the ground around me. I yelped and fell onto my butt. Before I knew it, an armored group of people burst onto the scene. And they were no regular believers—it was the Holy Knights we’d ran into at the restaurant.

“It’s time for you to pay, heretic vampires. For the sin of defacing the Holy City *and* insulting God.”

“Wh-why are you doing this?!” I shouted as I shakily got off the ground. I couldn’t help myself; they were being way too violent. “The Mulnite Empire isn’t against the Holy

Church! I admit I was disrespectful to Spica... but we haven't done anything else!"

"So you say, but your subordinates are destroying our Holy City."

"..." I didn't have a rebuttal for that.

The Warblade Holy Knight sneered.

"This is an order from Her Holiness. We must purify the barbaric state desecrating God."

"C-cut it out! I won't let you lay a finger on the people of Mulnite!"

"Useless. The Holy Church has already turned the Imperial Capital into a sea of flames. And the maid you came here for... was already executed days ago."

"Wha...?"

"Though she revived through the Dark Core. She's now in our underground prison, undergoing torture at the hands of Captain Tryphon Cross. It's only a matter of time until she gives into the pain and converts."

I felt all the blood leave my body.

Was Vill okay? No, she couldn't possibly be. She was all by herself, smack dab in the middle of enemy territory. Was she suffering all because of me coming to the Holy City? What was Spica thinking? How were they torturing her? And who's this Tryphon guy?

I couldn't understand. Despair piled up inside me like a mountain of ash.

The Holy Knights and the rest of the believers drew closer and closer.

Then I felt a mana reaction right at my side. Sakuna was holding her staff aloft.

"I won't let you. I will protect..."

"Void Magic: *Fourth-Dimensional Blade*."

"...Huh?"

Blood spattered across my cheeks.

A dagger plunged through Sakuna's right wrist. She dropped her staff, and her dripping blood dyed the snow red.

"A-aaaah..."

"There is no concept of distance for God. Since time immemorial, the Holy Knights of Lehysia have specialized in fourth-dimensional Void Magic. And we here are the strongest troop in history, trained by Captain Cross himself. Don't think you're powerful enough to go up against us, you barbaric commanders."

Sakuna collapsed and convulsed atop the snow.

Everything clicked immediately—the dagger must have been coated with poison.

The Holy Knights approached, sword in hand. I held up Sakuna and tried to run away, but I was too weak to carry her and tripped. Covered in snow, I looked around. Where had my subordinates gone? It didn't take long to find them: Bellius and Caostel were far away, fighting off hordes of believers. They had no time to lend us a hand.

That was fine. I'd rather everyone care for themselves than focus on protecting me.

"Terakomari! Use your Core Implosion already!" Millicent screamed as she killed foe after foe.

Core Implosion. The power Vill so insisted I actually possessed.

I had seen the golden plains in the papers. I knew the Eastern Capital of the Heavenly Paradise had turned into wildlands. But if I had the power to make that a reality, then I wouldn't be in this predicament.

I still couldn't believe it.

I was a sorry excuse of a vampire. Always had been.

I could do nothing but watch in silence as the Mulnite Empire teetered on the brink of collapse. Just sit in place and see my allies get attacked. Even though I'd just learned that Vill was being tortured, I didn't have the power to break through the villains before me to go get her.

What could I possibly do?

Then Sakuna reached out to me, her hand quivering.

“Ms... Komari... My blood...”

“Huh...?”

“Drink my blood... then you’ll be able...”

My eyes were glued to the liquid dripping from her fingers.

Right. I lost my memories whenever I drank blood. Vill had warned me not to drink the stuff without precaution. She said doing so would activate my Core Implosion.

But that couldn’t possibly be...

“Pray to God as you expire!” A Holy Knight yelled as they attacked us.

There was no time to lose doubting myself.

I looked at the red blood. My most loathed drink.

Sakuna shivered. Then I lost my patience and put my mouth around her index finger.

The world immediately went blank.

※

She was out of painkillers.

Villhaze resisted the hellish agony with faint breath. The Sapphire man buried the sharp needle deeper into her shoulder, but that wasn’t enough for him. He stabbed her again in the neck. Then the abdomen. Then the fingertips and the thighs, without rest.

“Strange. I can’t extract your memories.” Tryphon shrugged in defeat.

Her pooling blood soaked the floor of the prison. She was crying and convulsing from the pain. Why did she have to go through this? Because the terrorists had tricked her, of course. Because she’d tried infiltrating the Holy City for the sake of the Mulnite

Empire and her master. And it had all blown up in her face. Pathetic.

"You're missing your earliest memories. The most important ones. Just like Fuyao," Tryphon said as he stared at the tip of the needle in disappointment.

She didn't care about how the tool worked. She had to come up with a way out of this hell, but nothing sprang to mind. The pain was impossible to think through.

"The data we got on you says you were born downtown in the Imperial Capital. Is that wrong?"

"I..." Villhaze spoke, hoping to get the enemy to drop his guard. "I wasn't born there. A Crimson Lord took me in when I was little. I think I was abandoned."

"So you don't remember. That's not good." Tryphon sighed and sat down in a chair.

He calmly crossed his legs and gazed at the ceiling. Villhaze wanted nothing more than to throw a kunai between his brows right now, but she could only grit her teeth and ask:

"What do you want? Why are you going to these lengths?"

"Inverse Moon hopes to take Mulnite's Dark Core in this operation."

"...That's not happening. The Crimson Lords and Her Majesty... Lady Komari won't let you."

"We took measures to ensure that the Crimson Lords, Her Majesty, and Lady Komari can't act," Tryphon said as he tossed the needle behind him. "Your struggle will be for nothing. We've arranged everything in our favor."

"The terrorists don't stand a chance against Lady Komari. Your arrangements will be for nothing."

"My, you sure trust Terakomari Gandesblood a lot."

"Of course I do. She has a strong spirit that will never extinguish, no matter the..."

Tryphon then put on a wicked smile.

"Aren't you putting too much on the shoulders of a teenage girl?"

Villhaze couldn't understand what he was saying. She only felt the blood running down her cheek.

"I see everyone praise her in the papers. They call her a slaughter champion, a hero, a savior, the Vampire Princess who will carry the fate of the globe... Since the Crimson Match this year, Terakomari Gandesblood's every action has influenced the direction of the world. And every single nation, starting with the Mulnite Empire, is trying to take advantage of this."

"We're not taking advantage of her. She deserves the praise."

"So you say. But how does *she* feel about that? I haven't met Terakomari, so pardon the speculation, but going off what she's said in interviews, I see she's not content with the way things are now. The most obvious example of this is her call to turn the entire world into omelet rice. You're her aide, so you must know. Does she ever say she doesn't want to go to work?"

Villhaze was at a loss for words. She hadn't expected him to come at her from that angle.

"Bull's-eye, eh? So Terakomari Gandesblood's being forced to act as the Empire's star. Against her wishes. She didn't want to fight in the Six Nations War or the Heavenly Ball, and yet, the extreme circumstances, or rather, radical public consensus, forced her onto the battlefield. You are one sinful woman. Are you aware of the pressure you are placing on her?"

"I..."

"People should all be equal. The world has no need for the rich or the poor. It is a fool's errand to place value on people according to their skills. I think Terakomari Gandesblood wants to live a normal, uneventful life, like any other teenage girl. Yet the people in her life won't let her do that. They force her to fight. Don't you find it pitiful?"

"..."

"The same thing is happening this time, too. You completely fell for our trap, and now she needs to risk her life invading the Holy City to get you back. I'm sure that she's frustrated with the situation deep down. And I imagine she's especially fed up with

you."

She couldn't refute what he'd said.

Komari was kind. No matter how much Villhaze pestered her, she would always forgive her with a sigh in the end. And Tryphon was right; Komari was always talking about how she wanted to hole up in her room.

Villhaze had thought there could be nothing better than Komari leaving her shut-in life behind to become a vampire for the ages. And so she forced her to go outside every day. She showed her how fun an eventful life could be. But that might've been only a bother to her. Maybe Komari actually hated her maid, even if she didn't say it out loud (though, sometimes, she did say things to that effect).

A black haze clouded her thoughts.

Did Komari actually hate her? No, she'd said she would take her back. But if that had been a front? A bluff for the people watching around her? What if she only spoke so decisively after being pushed around by the members of the Seventh Unit?

"...But anyway, I don't really care."

Tryphon was right in front of Villhaze by the time she came to her senses again, and he had an even thicker needle in hand.

"I found Cornelius's enhanced model. Let's see if this can get your lost memories back."

"A-aaah..."

"It's going to hurt a bit, but bear with it."

She could do nothing. Just thinking about how the master she loved might feel set her trembling in pain. Tryphon's cold stare pierced her eyes. He brought the flesh-gouging needle nearer and, just as she tensed up to prepare for another round of agony, she felt a huge torrent of mana.

"My." Tryphon glanced up at the ceiling. "The Blood Curse? Looks like we've got a little problem."

Villhaze relaxed. She was saved.

But that was a presumptuous conclusion to reach.

After all, Komari didn't want to fight. She must have been forced to activate Core Implosion.



A silver mana blizzard whipped up, blowing the Holy Knights away like paper dolls and caking the snow-covered ground with ice. At the eye of the storm stood a vampire, her hair silver and her icy glare trained on the Cathedral.

Millicent Bluenight planted herself down as she gazed at the view.

It was the same brutal force she'd faced that spring. No, in fact, the look in Komari's eyes was even deadlier than it had been back then. Her experiences had made her even stronger. Could Millicent ever hope to take her on someday?

"Th-there it is! Core Implosion!"

"Do not falter! We have the power of God on our side!"

The believers raised their arms and charged against Terakomari.

She didn't bat an eyelid.

"You're in the way," she said before waving her right hand.

The next moment, a violent mana explosion erupted. The believers and Holy Knights shrieked as they either froze over or were blown away by the snowstorm. And that wasn't the end of it.

"Wh-what in the...?! How're we supposed to fight her?!"

The Warblade tried to run away, but an icicle penetrated his skull, spattering bright-red blood all over.

The bodies piled up in a matter of seconds. The believers who witnessed the fates of those who'd challenged the silver vampire princess scattered to the winds.

Terakomari paid no heed to their retreat and rose gently into the skies with levitation

magic. Spells flying from every which way hit her head-on before puffing away without any effect. No damage.

“This can’t be...”

“Our spells aren’t working?!... Gweh!”

Terakomari blasted icicles at the Holy Knights crawling on the ground. Millicent had heard of this form. When Komari ingested Sapphire blood, the Blood Curse gave her a body as hard as steel. The Holy Knights lacked magic sufficiently powerful enough to injure Terakomari Gandesblood as she was now.

“Terakomari! What’re you planning on doing now?!”

Millicent’s question went unanswered. A giant magic circle appeared at Komari’s back.

The mana levels were outrageous—a presage of Effulgent magic.

“Komarin!” “Komarin!” Cheers came out of nowhere.

Millicent turned and saw that the Seventh Unit had halted their snowball fight.

“Give ‘em judgment, Commander!”

“Wipe them out, Commander!” “Show the Pope who’s boss!” “I’m getting all fired up!!”

Mana and cold gathered at the vampire girl’s fingertips as people in the vicinity screamed and prayed to God as they fled. There was only one thing in her eyes: the Cathedral. The headquarters of the Holy Church, where Pope Julius VI resided.

“Terakomari! Hold back a little...!”

“Perish,” she muttered.

Then the world turned white.

Terakomari shot a wave of energy so frigid that the air around it creaked as it pushed forward. People prostrated themselves as though in the presence of God.

Millicent stared in wonder at the magical light beam tearing through the skies. It was

like witnessing the end of the world.

The spell pierced the cathedral with a *bang*, and an earthquake followed. She'd torn a hole through a structure representing hundreds of years of the Holy City of Lehysia's history.

"Wha...?"

Her spell must have hit a load-bearing support. No longer able to support its own weight, the Cathedral let out a seismic roar as it crumbled.

The citizens shrieked. The savage members of the Seventh Unit clapped their hands.

Such was the power of *God's Ice Spear*, an Effulgent Ice Spell.

A legendary incantation plucked from the pages of myth. Millicent was at a loss for words. As for Sakuna Memoir, she had already blacked out on the spot.

Terakomari gazed at the mountain of rubble that was once the Cathedral and muttered:

"Wait for me, Vill."

Don't you think that might've killed her? Millicent refrained from putting the thought into words.

Terakomari spurted mana as she took off toward the Cathedral.



A cacophonous shock wave shook the underground prison. It was followed by the deafening sound of collapse. There was no need to confirm what had just happened—Komari must have hit the Cathedral with Core Implosion.

"Sounds like the building is down. Core Implosion does not disappoint." Tryphon grinned in wonder.

Villhaze felt a mix of hope and anxiety.

Komari could easily slay this man now that she had unleashed her power. However,

she felt bad about pushing the girl to use Core Implosion just to be saved.

She wouldn't normally have thought like this. Perhaps the torture had even worn down her morale.

"Why the long face, dear? What's got you in such low spirits?"

"...What's got *you* in such high spirits? You can't take on Lady Komari."

"Hmm. Yes, it makes sense you'd think that."

The next moment, the ceiling above them creaked. Soul-chilling icy air crept in through the gaps.

"She's fast," Tryphon whispered just before the ceiling crumbled altogether.

Bright, silver mana illuminated the darkness of the subterranean chamber.

Villhaze thought she was witnessing an angel descending from Heaven.

With the snow came a pale vampire—her beloved Crimson Lord, Terakomari Gandesblood.

Villhaze nearly passed out before the overwhelming mana.

Komari landed softly and raised her right hand at Tryphon.

"It's over for you. I'm taking back what's mine."

"Don't move." Tryphon held a dagger to Villhaze.

Villhaze clicked her tongue. His trite plan couldn't possibly work. Komari could easily take care of him with Core Implosion.

But much to her surprise, Komari faltered.

Powerful mana was emanating from her body, but she hesitated to shoot any of it at him.

"L-Lady Komari! Don't worry about me! Take him out, now!" Villhaze shouted.

"Seems the girl still has some sense in her. Yes, this is a Divine Instrument. My Core Implosion—Treason's Spirit Gate—can teleport any substance at will. Move one finger, and she's dead. I'll send this knife into her brain."

"..."

"Dispel your power if you don't want to lose your maid."

The silver mana grew weaker and weaker.

And then Villhaze understood.

Core Implosion reflected the user's spirit, so agitation would curtail Komari's power.

The Blood Curse had unparalleled strength in combat, but it had no effect against psychological attacks.

Tryphon's hostage gambit had succeeded.

All because he'd manipulated Komari's feelings for her maid.

That made Villhaze supremely happy—and helplessly sad.

Soon, Komari's hostility quelled. She lowered her arm. The strength left her eyes.

Eventually, the Blood Curse faded.

The blizzard subsided. The temperature began to warm.

Light came back to Komari's eyes. She rose her head softly, as though she was waking up from a dream, and looked around with worry.

"...Huh? Wh-what am I...?"

Villhaze screamed her name as Tryphon threw himself at her with furious momentum.



The world went blank the moment I drank Sakuna's blood.

My memories of everything from there were hazy. I think I was dreaming—flying in the air and shooting a white beam. It had to be a vision.

But even in my dream, I still burned with a desire to take back Vill. I didn't want to let Spica do as she pleased. That was the only thing on my mind as I raced toward her... but then I woke up in these dark ruins.

Snow was falling.

Everything around me was covered in rubble.

“...Huh? Wh-what am I...?”

I looked around and found something shocking.

Vill. She was being held prisoner, covered in blood.

“Vi...” I couldn't finish saying her name.

I felt a blow to my stomach. I couldn't even scream as I was blown away and crashed into the wall. What was going on? The punch was so powerful it numbed the pain. Dumbfounded, I looked straight ahead.

“Nice meeting you, Terakomari Gandesblood. My name is Tryphon Cross. I'm the captain of Lehysia's Holy Knights, and a Luna of Inverse Moon.”

“Wh-wha...?”

“At last, we've cracked your Blood Curse. Don't worry, I won't kill you with a Divine Instrument. You can be of great use to us.”

He grabbed me by the collar and pulled me up.

It was then that the pain hit. Tears fell from my eyes.

Why do I have to go through this? The question solved itself immediately—everything was for Vill. She was crumpled in agony by the wall, covered in wounds and bleeding out.

It was obvious who was to blame—the man before my eyes. He'd even introduced

himself as a member of Inverse Moon!

"Y-you! What did you do to Vill?!"

"I only drilled her a bit. But what are you getting so worked up about? Mulnite's Dark Core is still in effect here. What's the problem?"

"You don't see an issue?! How could you do something so terrible?!"

"For my ideals." Tryphon smiled. "Let me tell you them, as a parting gift. Inverse Moon wishes for a peaceful world without strife. This world of ours is filled with war, and the reason is clear: People are not equal. This is why I am rising up to spark global revolution that will bring everyone equity."

"Wh-what're you going on about...?"

"But there are forces that don't agree with my beliefs. The Mulnite Empire chief among them. So I must take away your Dark Core and use it to destroy any other nation that refuses to obey Inverse Moon."

I couldn't wrap my head around a single word coming out of this guy's mouth. But I understood one thing: he was evil. A hypocrite touting world peace while bringing harm to others. Anger, along with a desire to stop him, bubbled deep within my soul.

Suddenly, Tryphon gave me a look of pity.

"You must be hurting, Terakomari Gandesblood."

"Huh...?"

"I don't think you like the pain. I, too, would rather not take lives unnecessarily. Why don't you give in?"

I couldn't understand what he was getting at. Tryphon strangled me as he continued.

"Give yourself some peace. What's it to you if the Mulnite Empire falls? I don't even have to kill Villhaze if you don't want to. What's the need for you to go through so much pain? Come under Inverse Moon's wing and lead a life of tranquility. That's the wise move here. I mean, c'mon... you don't really want to be a Crimson Lord, do you?"

“.....”

His invitation was heart-meltingly sweet.

I did not want to be a Crimson Lord, as a matter of fact. I wasn't cut out for such a violent job. I was utterly lacking in magical and physical skills. A useless vampire like me was better off hunkering down to write some novels. And I was going to get published soon thanks to Karla.

Yeah. What was the point in fighting?

I had been getting swept away by the circumstances since day one, and I was always on the verge of death because of this. But if I was firm in my desire to coop myself up, then there would be no need for me to shed blood.

Getting blown up for ignoring my duties as a Crimson Lord? Being overthrown by my troops? Who cared! I could've just asked Daddy or the Empress to let me off the hook, and they probably would've done something about it. They always indulged me in the end.

I shouldn't have fought from the very start, if pain was the only thing that awaited me...

“Yes. You can live however you want. You can stay in your room, in the peace and quiet, away from the pain and suffering.”

Tryphon held a needle, like an icepick, in his left hand.

That means he's gonna kill me if I don't obey.

My belly hurt. Blood spurted out from my mouth. I didn't want to feel this pain any longer. I'd be better off shutting myself away, no matter how hard a tantrum I had to throw.

But just as my spirit was breaking, I saw Vill out of the corner of my eye.

She must've been half-unconscious, but she muttered something to me anyway.

“Lady Komari, please run...”

I was shocked.

Her frail voice shook my soul.

I was powerless. I had no way to escape from Tryphon. That much should've been obvious.

Her plea was as useless as a prayer to God. Which helped me understand just how strongly Vill was worried for me, from the bottom of her heart.

I felt something warm in my soul.

“So, what’s your answer? Will you surrender to Inverse Moon?”

“No.”

I answered him so clearly that even I was astonished.

Tryphon raised an eyebrow. I looked at the terrorist straight in the eye and yelled.

“No! I don’t want to shut myself in! Cooping yourself up outside of holidays means admitting defeat! Even if you put the whole world on its head, I’m not backing out this time! I won’t let you guys get away with what you’re doing! The Mulnite Empire will not lose!”

“Why hold on so stubbornly? You’ve already lost.”

“Because...” I swallowed. “Because Vill’s crying! Because you hurt everyone! I’m not gonna let you keep this up!”

“I see. Then I must kill you at once.”

Vill shrieked. I glared at the enemy, trying to stop myself from trembling. I had no regrets. I could never raise the white flag to these people. Criminals who hurt others without a second thought.

Tryphon raised his needle. He must’ve judged magic wasn’t necessary.

I’m not giving in, even if you kill me! I gritted my teeth in anticipation, when suddenly, I heard a gunshot.

“Gah?!”

The man was thrown to the side. He rolled across the snow dusting the prison floor until he landed facedown. Blood oozed from the side of his head. Fighting through a coughing fit, I raised my eyes. I was saved.

“What’re you doing, Terakomari? Save your provocations for when you have any chance at winning.”

“Millicent...!!”

The blue vampire pointed her finger at Tryphon. Then she slid right down into the prison, a terrifying look on her face, and ran up to Vill to break her shackles with Magic Bullets. The liberated maid widened her eyes in disbelief.

“Why... are you here?”

“No talking. Let’s go.” She lent Villhaze a shoulder.

Then I heard Tryphon wriggle in the corner of the room. He got to his feet with a wry smile. He didn’t look the least bit in pain despite having taken a magic bullet to the head. Then I remembered—Sapphires had durable bodies.

“...I let down my guard after taking care of the Blood Curse. I wasn’t expecting reinforcements. If it isn’t Kakumei Amatsu’s vampire.”

“Good-bye, Tryphon Cross.”

Millicent threw a Magic Stone, and suddenly, a puff of white smoke covered the whole area.

I couldn’t keep up with what was going on, but I had to get ready to make a break for it. Before I could steel myself completely, I nearly tripped—someone had pulled me by the arm.

“Let’s go, Terakomari! We don’t stand a chance against him!”

“Huh? Uh, but then what’re we...?”

“Retreat and regroup! Give your men the command!”

Millicent made her way through the smoke.

I followed her orders like a machine. I took a Correspondence Crystal from my pocket and poured in some mana. Tryphon wasn't going after us. He said he had the power to teleport anything, but maybe he couldn't use it if he couldn't see the target?

Wait... Why do I know about his Core Implosion?

That didn't make any sense, but there was one thing I did understand: Millicent was here to save us. Regardless, I had to think about escaping first.

I heard Caostel's voice come from the crystal.

"Commander! What's the matter?"

"W-we have to retreat for the moment! We got Vill! Let's ditch the Holy City!"

I gave the command as tears ran down my cheeks. Maybe I was happy to have barely gotten away.

I ran through the snow as Millicent pulled me along.



Tryphon, Luna of Inverse Moon, stood there in silence.

The smokescreen from the Magic Stone cleared up little by little, gradually exposing the ruined prison chamber, now useless without its walls and ceiling.

The Cathedral itself could no longer serve as the Holy Church's base of operations. In place of its high towers were piles of rubble.

"...My turn to go after them." Tryphon sighed before taking a step forward.

He couldn't have imagined his plan going awry like this. Millicent Bluenight was an unforeseen interference, but what truly surprised him was his own lack of foresight.

"Wait, Tryphon!" Someone called him.

He turned around. A golden vampire was sitting cross-legged atop the rubble.

"What is the meaning of this? The Cathedral is ruined. It's like that candy castle I

smashed when I was little!"

"My utmost apologies. I hadn't expected Millicent Bluenight to show up."

He immediately regretted giving that excuse.

"Don't worry about it." The Wicked God Slayer smiled innocently. "Ignorance is no sin. But it is unsightly."

"..."

Her Highness was as magnanimous as the sun but as cruel as the moon. He had no idea what could be going through her mind right now.

He had to follow Terakomari Gandesblood straight away. He tried calling one of his Holy Knights but found that his Correspondence Crystal was glowing already. Tryphon poured in some mana to answer the call.

"Lord Tryphon! Glad to know you're still kicking!"

"Fuyao? What do you want?"

"Hmm? What's with that growl in your voice? Are you in a bad mood? Did you fail to kill Terakomari Gandesblood?! Geez, you've really done it now!"

Tryphon scoffed internally. That vixen never let go of a chance to try and rile people up.

"Yes, I failed. And now I'm on my way to reclaim my honor."

"Well, have I got some very good news for you."

Fuyao spoke loudly. He could easily picture the wicked grin on her face.

"The Imperial Capital is on the brink of collapse. The conquest will be over within the day! Now, please bring Her Highness here. We're almost ready to crown the new Empress."

Vexations

3.5 The Sun Sets on the Empire

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

“Wake up, Thio, you absolute dingus!!”

“Meowah?!”

The whack to the head brought her back to reality.

Thio opened her eyes and saw the face of her mean boss, then realized she'd been asleep. She felt like she'd just had the worst nightmare ever. First she was killed off, and then she was thrown into a boiling pot, seasoned with ponzu sauce, and eaten whole. Her dreams had gotten nastier as of late due to the nature of her work, not to mention the deadly amount of extra hours she'd been putting in.

“Gosh! How can you fall asleep at such a critical moment! Have you no pride as a journalist?!”

“What? I mean, how can you expect me to stay awake after putting in a hundred hours of overtime this month? That has to be illegal. I'm going on paid leave for the da...”

Then it occurred to her what was wrong. Her sensitive nose picked up the smell of blood and flames. And she didn't even need to rely on her sense of smell to figure out things weren't all right—the situation was obvious just from looking around.

Buildings were on fire. People were running in a daze. She could hear loud religious hymns from every which way. The vampire army was getting beaten to a pulp by people in religious vestments. They were surrounded by spears.

“Wha—? Where are we? Hell?”

"A back alley in the Imperial Capital. The Mulnite Empire is on the brink of collapse."

Melka ground her teeth while glaring at the disaster.

Little by little, Thio remembered what had transpired before she blacked out.

They were investigating the religious uprisings in the Imperial Capital when they came across a familiar foxgirl—Fuyao Meteorite. The terrorist behind the trouble at this fall's Heavenly Ball. *She's pulling the strings again?!* Melka thought, excited for the scoop. "Please no, please no, please no," Thio had wailed as the Sapphire pulled her along by the tail. Fuyao was heading to a bar downtown, and Melka was sure they'd get to report the scoop of the century if they spied on her, so she dragged Thio along. And then a mysterious person attacked them from behind. They'd come to in this alley. The riots had exploded in intensity while they'd been knocked out.

"I don't get it."

"Think for a moment! This has to be one of Inverse Moon's ploys. And we got too close to the truth! We were about to take the perfect incriminating picture of the terrorists when we were found out! But then they healed us and threw us into the alley or something?! Do they think we're just a pair of powerless girls?!"

So what if we are? At least we're still alive.

Melka couldn't see it that way.

"They must pay... I'll show them the power of my pen!"

"Um... How about we go home already? I feel like we might actually die this time."

"Thio, do you remember the face of our attacker?"

"Don't just ignore me. And no, I don't."

"Useless kitty."

"Hey, you didn't see their face, either. But I think I got their scent..."

"Good job, Thio! What's it like?"

“They smelled very nice.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes.”

“You doofus!” She hit her head.

It's not fair. I'm definitely changing jobs this time.

Thio’s sniffing magic let her pick up on the race of her target from scent alone. She’d most likely smelled a vampire. And a woman, at that. A young one.

But she’d chosen not to tell her nasty boss that.

In any case... the Imperial Capital is in shambles. She peeped outside and saw two forces clashing: the Mulnite Imperial Army, and what seemed to be followers of the Holy Church... but they didn’t smell like regular believers. They were terrorists. Probably members of that dumb, stupid organization known as Inverse Moon.

Suddenly, flame magic burst right before her eyes.

Yeah, we're dead if we stay here.

“Thio, this battle will decide the fate of Six Nations News.”

“No, it doesn’t have to. Let’s go home.”

“Before our eyes spreads a domain where only the best of the best can survive. This is no place for rookie journalists. I’ve seen countless scriveners lose their lives because of their adamant competitive spirit. Yet will you follow me into this realm all the same, Thio?”

“What? No, thanks.”

“If you’re not mentally prepared for this, you better go home. I say this for your own good.”

“All right. Good-bye!”

“Don’t go!” Melka grabbed Thio’s tail. “This is where you should say, *I’ll follow you to the pits of hell!* Aren’t we a team?!”

“I’m not wasting my life for this team! Don’t drag me to hell, I can’t die yet! I have a sick sister back home I need to take care of!”

“I’ve seen your sister in perfect health killing people in the Dark Core Zone!”

As they argued in the back alley, they heard the rumble of something giant shaking the ground. Even Melka noticed this time. She pulled Thio by the tail into the street.

“Hold up, Ms. Melka! Why’re you going outside? You’re gonna get us killed! Let go of my tail already! I’m suing you if you pull it off!”

“Look at that, Thio,” Melka uttered in amazement.

She was pointing at a cannon being carried by a vehicle, which wouldn’t have been so unusual if the gun wasn’t so large. It was twice as long as Thio was tall. The muzzle was over three feet wide and shrouded in darkness.

Thio knew that could only mean one thing—danger. And it was aimed in the direction of the Mulnite Imperial Palace; the weapon was on the terrorists’ side.

“It sure feels good riding on the coattails of the riots.”

There was a girl in a lab coat by the side of the cannon, a Warblade wearing a beaming look on her face as she ranted and raved.

“There’s a special barrier protecting the Mulnite Imperial Palace, but my Ruin & Despair Cannon is theoretically capable of breaking through it *and* damaging the palace behind it. I never thought I’d see the day I could put it to the test!”

“Lady Cornelius! We’re ready to fire!” A man in vestments ran up to her.

So that thing really was a terrorist weapon.

“Good!” The girl in the lab coat—Cornelius—nodded in satisfaction. “Ignite it, then.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The man set fire to the fuse, and everyone immediately retreated to the shadows.

Thio flinched in place, but Melka grabbed her tail tight.

“You’re gonna get killed!”

“You’re ripping it off!” Thio yelled as Melka dragged her back into the alley.

Then the girl in the lab coat grinned.



“Time to put it to the test! And don’t worry, this is no Divine Instrument.”

Thunder shook the ground.

Thio felt as though her ears were falling off.

The mana shook the air as it flew. Seconds later, the sound of destruction reverberated.



The barrier around the Mulnite Imperial Palace was effortlessly broken, and the damage didn’t end there. The entire eastern half of the palace hiding behind the shield—the Empress’s luxurious castle—was torn away in the explosion that followed.

Flöte Mascarail turned back in disbelief.

The heavens burned red like blood.

The vestment-clad terrorists cheered in ovation. Flöte felt dread come over her, even as she struck down the vampires attacking her. Dead bodies were scattered everywhere. Blood. Eerie hymns shook the air around her. Nothing remained of the gallant and graceful Imperial Capital she once knew.

“Lady Flöte! We have a report from the Fourth Unit.”

“What is it?! I’m busy!”

“Commander Delphyne died from the blast just now.”

“What?! Del...”

The Fourth Unit, which had stayed behind to guard the Palace, was almost entirely wiped out.

Flöte ground her teeth. How had it come to this?

Millicent Bluenight had wiped out the first wave of riots without breaking a sweat. But the problems started thereafter. Their foes crept out from every nook and cranny, looking to destroy the Imperial Capital in unison under the auspices of “reforming the

heretical Mulnite Empire." It was insanity.

The rioters' attacks exceeded the Imperial Army's expectations. They were no simple believers. Most of them were warriors allied with Inverse Moon. To top it all off, they kept bolstering their own forces by hypnotizing Mulnite's soldiers. They destroyed everything on their path to the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

"Bastards! They won't stop coming!"

The terrorists yelled God's name with every strike.

They had yet to find whoever was leading the riots.

The Crimson Lords couldn't keep up against the guerillas and were drawn farther and farther in. A ceaseless series of explosions erupted in the distance, courtesy of the Reckless Bomber, Petrose Calamaria. She was trying to bring the leader of the insurrection out into the open, but it wasn't working.

"Lady Mascarail! Behind you!" a subordinate shouted.

She turned around right away, but it was too late. One of the rebels thrust their sword straight toward her throat. Just as she gritted her teeth in preparation to receive the attack, someone punched her opponent from the side, knocking them away.

"Are you all right, Lady Mascarail?!"

It was the Crimson Lord in religious vestments—Helldeus Heaven.

Flöte gripped her rapier tightly in relief.

"Thank you, Lord Heaven. I almost died back there."

"A rare sight to see you so distracted. But it's understandable. This is a bit too much." Helldeus crossed his arms. "What drives them to this degree? It's outrageous of those rebels to call themselves believers in this state. One can only imagine how poor the Holy Church's reputation will become once the strife is over."

"Let's think in the now before the future," Flöte said while looking around. "I don't get what's going on. Is it the Holy Church we're up against? Is it Inverse Moon? How deeply are the two organizations linked?"

"I don't know, but we can take it as a given that Julius VI is in cahoots with the terrorists."

One of the insurrectionists they'd captured had said they were operating on Julius VI's orders, but Flöte couldn't believe she was being driven by faith alone. The rebels had to be using religion as an excuse for some other ambition.

And their fangs had already reached the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

Would things be different if the Empress were here?

Then Flöte heard loud cheers ring out from up ahead. The terrorists were spilling forth in droves. She gripped her sword and clicked her tongue.

"What is the party who headed to the Holy City up to right now?"

"We just got a call. Lady Gandesblood managed to take Lieutenant Villhaze back, but that's everything I know."

"It'll all be for nothing if they didn't convince Julius VI to stop. That or finding out the real source of the riots and taking them out..."

"Right." Heldeus stood beside her. "By the way, Lady Mascarail, what do you think is the Holy City or Inverse Moon's ultimate goal?"

"What's there to question now?! They're obviously colluding to dismantle the Mulnite Empire. If only Lady Karen were with us—she would've taken care of things much earlier..."

"Hmm. The Mulnite Empire sure has been relying on her a lot."

Something felt off to Flöte. That wasn't something a Crimson Lord should be saying.

Heldeus smiled.

"Mulnite is a very fine country. Do you have the resolve to die for your fellow vampires?"

"Hm?... Naturally. It is a Crimson Lord's duty to lay down their life for the Empire. No matter the enemy, we must face them valiantly... and valiantly fall, if need be."

“I see, I see.”

The newer Crimson Lords were too soft. Terakomari Gandesblood was the worst in that regard, but that went for Sakuna Memoir as well. It was Flöte Mascarail’s role to show them how a commander ought to act.

Suddenly, Helldeus pointed in the direction opposite from the enemy and yelled.

“Ohh! Look at that! That’s incredible!”

“What’s incredible? What’re you going on abou—”

Cloing. A switch flipped.

Then Flöte felt searing pain in the pit of her stomach.

“Wha?” She looked down in despair. A sharp blade had been plunged deep into her midsection. Why? How?

All strength left her body and she fell to the ground.

It was then that she realized—Helldeus Heaven was holding the blade. Or rather, someone with the appearance of Helldeus Heaven.

“So easy. I didn’t even have to use the Null Night Blade.”

“Y-you...!”

A puff of smoke covered the surroundings, clearing away the vampires in vestments. In their place appeared a girl with bright red eyes.

A beast-folk with fox ears and tail. The terrorist who’d fought to the death against Terakomari Gandesblood and Karla Amatsu at the Heavenly Ball—Fuyao Meteorite.

She shot Flöte an icy glare, then calmly said:

“Helldeus Heaven is long dead. The only Lord remaining is Petrose Calamaria. Either way, the fall of the Mulnite Empire is at hand.”

“You... damn terrorist...”

"Just stay right there and die. This will no longer be a vampire nation by the time you wake up. Well... if you manage to wake up before we destroy the Dark Core, that is."

"W-wait..."

Fuyao Meteorite left with a spring in her step.

Flöte couldn't follow behind her.

Each and every vampire in her Third Unit was dead.

She couldn't move. She didn't even have the energy to cry sour grapes. All she could do was watch as the Imperial Capital plunged into ruin as her consciousness faded.

So it was that the Mulnite Empire teetered on the brink of collapse.

The Empress was nowhere to be found. The Chancellor was dead. Three of the four Crimson Lords defending the Imperial Capital had been defeated. The Elders had already fled to the countryside, their riches in tow.

The people did not pray to God.

What they longed for was a hero—for one of the remaining Crimson Lords to subdue the mayhem.

Vexations

4 A Voice Echoes in the Land of Night

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

We couldn't use teleportation magic.

Mulnite's Chancellor—my Daddy—had suspended the use of all Gates, presumably to prevent any further invasions. This was proof enough of how dire the situation was back home.

After escaping the Holy City of Lehysia, we arrived at a town in the Dark Core Zone. A fortified city under Mulnite's rule.

Only Sakuna, Vill, Millicent, and I were there. We hadn't been able to meet back up with my troops. I assumed they were wandering the Dark Core Zone, but I couldn't contact them through Correspondence Crystals anymore. Worse still, rumors were flying about the Holy Knights going around taking out vampires. I got chills just thinking about it. Would they be okay?

"Things are grim. The peddlers say the Imperial Capital will be down in no time," Millicent said with a sardonic smile.

It was night. We were in the cafeteria of an inn.

Vill reacted first. She stared daggers at Millicent and said:

"Why do you look so happy about it? Aren't you a member of the Imperial Army?"

"I don't care if the Empire goes down. It's not like I'm dying."

"Lady Komari, may I splat some mayonnaise on her face?"

“Relax! She’s not being serious!”

“Yeah, Ms. Villhaze. You see, Ms. Millicent is just... shy. She likes keeping up a cold front while being full of love on the inside,” Sakuna chimed in.

“I’m gonna kill you.”

Sakuna shrieked and trembled. Seemed like that girl only had hate on the inside.

“I don’t like her.” Vill puffed her cheeks.

The Dark Core had healed Vill after we escaped the Holy City. She could already move around without difficulty. We also told her about Millicent being appointed Crimson Lord. She seemed unable to forgive her; there was only disgust in her eyes whenever she looked at her, and understandably so. Letting go of what she’d done wasn’t easy.

Still, we were now allies. We had to stick together, or things would only get rougher. At the very least, Vill understood that Millicent had saved her, so she wasn’t going out of her way to criticize her...

“Lady Komari, I think we ought to send Millicent Bluenight to the grave.”

...or I guess she was. *Don’t just say that to her face, c’mon.*

“This bickering is a waste of time. We must go back to the Imperial Capital and get rid of Inverse Moon as soon as possible. We’re sitting ducks staying here.”

“Oh, so you *are* worried about the Mulnite Empire...”

“I am not,” Millicent said, a fed-up expression on her face. “Guerilla groups made up of Inverse Moon members and Holy Church believers are attacking the Imperial Capital, and they have the upper hand. The other Crimson Lords must be having trouble coming up with any decent strategy without the Empress.”

“I don’t think the others would lose so easily... Inverse Moon must have some tricks up their sleeve...”

“Probably, yes. They’re expert tricksters, after all. In any case, we have to go back ASAP and stop the riots. Either that, or directly defeat Tryphon Cross or the Wicked God Slayer.”

“The Wicked God Slayer? Who?”

“The boss of Inverse Moon.”

The boss? You mean someone even more insane than everyone I've met so far?

I was helpless against Tryphon; how could I hope to defeat his superior? *I wonder what that Sapphire is doing about now. Did he follow us? Go straight to the Imperial Capital?*

Then we heard a “Sorry for the wait.” A worker at the inn had brought us dinner.

“There's still much I don't know about the Wicked God Slayer. We didn't get a chance to meet back when I was in Inverse Moon. But they can't stay in the shadows this time. If we take the chance to kill—”

“Woah! Look, Vill. There's *two* Hamburg steaks on my omelet rice!”

“My, you're right. Will you be able to finish that? It's quite a lot.”

“I'm starving. 'Course I ca—”

“Listen!!” Millicent bopped my head. She was glaring at me like a bloodthirsty beast.

What's her problem? Though now that I thought about it, perhaps it wasn't the best of times to be having dinner. I said sorry before silently eating my omelet rice. It was so good. Omelet rice had the power to cheer me right up. To give me life.

Millicent maintained her icy glare.

“I have no attachment to the Empire, but you don't want Mulnite to fall, do you? You have to prepare yourself. You hold the key to solving this problem, Terakomari Gandesblood.”

“...” My hand froze midair as I was bringing my spoon to my mouth.

I hold the key? What's that mean? Then I noticed Vill clenching her fist under the table. She had this conflicted look on her face.

“...Millicent, you know I can't use magic and have no physical skills whatsoever. How is this useless vampire holding the key?”

"You're so stupid," Millicent asserted. "The people who change the world are strong of heart. And you have the potential. I mean, you've already transformed Aruka and the Heavenly Paradise. Don't you remember?"

"....."

That was because of Nelia and Karla. I hadn't done anything. It was just a big misunderstanding.

I knew something happened whenever I sucked blood. But so what? Could that save Mulnite from disaster? No way. I was no warmonger. I was a scholar and an intellectual. My real job was eating some nice omelet rice and escaping reality.

Then Millicent stood straight up.

"The people of Mulnite are praying to Terakomari Gandesblood. It is your duty to answer them... I'm going to my room," she said before leaving.

In the end, she didn't have anything for dinner. *How can Millicent hope to do anything on an empty stomach?* I thought to myself, looking away from my worries.



We'd only gotten two rooms for the night. One for Vill and me, and another for Millicent and Sakuna. I was worried about those two, but Sakuna told me, "It's no problem, we were allies once before." Maybe they actually had lots of things to talk about.

Vill and I went to our room after dinner. It was already dark outside. We were supposed to head over to the Imperial Capital early the next morning. Were the Crimson Lords doing okay? Was my family all right?

As anxiety ate me alive, Vill, sprawled out on the bed, called my name.

"Lady Komari, how about we play cards? We still have some time before we need to sleep."

"Fine, if you want... Don't you find that posture a bit sloppy, maid?"

"Sorry." She got up with a deadpan look on her face.

Then she turned her green eyes directly toward mine.

"Wh-what?"

"Nothing. I was just... thinking about how I haven't thanked you or apologized. Thank you very much for saving me," Vill said.

"Uh, so what's the deal here?"

"Sorry," she said again, casting her glance down. "The truth is... I left with Julius VI under the orders of Her Majesty. She told me to go spy on the Holy City. But it all turned out to be part of the enemy's plan... Regardless of the circumstances, I ended up causing you concern by staying quiet about this. I am very glad you came for me after falling for their trap."

I was shocked. To be quite honest, I was expecting Vill to confess to something more... perverted. I sat down on the bed with a smile.

"I'm not mad. But why didn't you tell me? You could've said something. I was worried sick... And y'know... it was all so sudden that I was at a loss for a while there."

"I did it to get your attention..." Vill said timidly.

So she'd wanted me to worry. Geez, there was no end to my maid's nasty ploys. And worst of all... it worked. My whole life had been turned on its head just by losing her. My men would've killed me sooner rather than later if I'd kept doing my job as commander like that.

"...My, what a naughty maid. You shouldn't be doing those things behind my back."

"Please punish me. Make me get in the bath with you and have me wash your every nook and cranny. Force me to kiss your feet... or, indeed, lick your toes clean."

"What am I, candy?! No, thank you! Gosh!"

She didn't feel like she had her usual energy. Despite her words, she had been wearing a long face this whole time. Something must've happened to bring out this change in her.

"It's my fault you found yourself in such danger!"

"Hey, it's the same thing every time. I narrowly avoid death pretty much every day because of you."

"And I'm so sorry about that... Have I been nothing but trouble?"

My jaw dropped. Had there been some weird mushrooms in her dinner or something?

"You say you don't want to work. You always talk about how you want to coop yourself up. But I keep pulling you outside, thinking it's for your own good. That you need to be out there to fulfill your duty as Crimson Lord. But... you've gotten hurt so many times because of that."

Vill was right. I had been badly injured after the Crimson Match, and the Six Nations War, and the Heavenly Ball. The worst murderers you could imagine beat me up every single time.

"If it weren't for me, you'd be leading an uneventful life. You wouldn't be getting hurt. Like what happened again just now... If you're opposed to it, I won't force you to fight. I will take you somewhere safe."

That was an alluring proposition.

Honestly, I had no idea what was going on in the Mulnite Empire, but one thing was for sure: I'd end up badly wounded, or worse, if I went to the Imperial Capital. My tightly trained sixth sense was yelling at me, screaming that I would die. My scholarly intellect said the wise choice was to run far away with Vill.

"And... once you're safe, I will disappear from your sight."

"You idiot. What're you saying?" I stared straight at her.

I didn't know what to do about the matter at the Imperial Capital, but I knew it wasn't right for my maid to vanish out of guilt.

"Lady Komari, I..."

"To be honest, I was fed up with you forcing me to work. And that's nothing new—I'm always saying it. You're never stop pushing me to the brink of death."

"..."

Tears budded in her eyes. Perhaps I was too harsh. I grabbed Vill's hand in a panic and, looking away from her, added quietly:

"But I am who I am now thanks to you."

"Wha...?"

"It happened with the Crimson Match, the Six Nations War, the Heavenly Ball. Every time you roped me into things, I ended up gaining something precious. I would have missed out on meeting so many people if I'd stayed a shut-in."

"..."

"And... hey, you're... precious to me, too. So don't go disappearing ever again. I don't think I can go on living without you. My room's a mess, I can't get up in the morning, and my men would probably kill me if you weren't around. I end up unleashing the full extent of my uselessness when you aren't by my side."

"B-but..."

"B-but don't get the wrong idea! This is no confession of love. I just need a maid, is all, and I don't want to hire someone else... So... Um..."

I didn't know what I was saying anymore. It felt like my body temperature had risen for some reason. My cheeks were burning. Vill gave an emotional stare that bore straight through me, and I couldn't take it anymore. I looked away at the wall and said:

"...Anyway, I'm just glad you're okay, Vill."

"Lady Komari!"

"Wah?!"

My maid jumped at me so suddenly I couldn't resist, and I fell down on the bed. She brought her elated face right next to mine. She was actually crying. Her tears fell on my lips.

"Lady Komari, may I hug you?"

"You're pretty much already doing that! Get off me! Shoo!"

"I won't leave you again. You said you needed me. I will serve you and stay by your side in sickness and in health and in death."

"You're too heavy, in both senses of the word! Gosh! Fine, already!"

"As your maid, I will bring you heaps of work from now on. I will give you all my support to make you the best Crimson Lord there is. You said it yourself, and I memorized every single word: *I ended up gaining something precious every time—precious like you, my beloved Vill.*"

"I didn't say that last part! And I didn't ask you to give me more work! I mean, I kinda said something that could imply that? But no, I still want more days off! Where's my paid leave?! I know it's the law that I have to get at least a few days to myself every year!"

"I've been filing paid leave for you on days you go to work."

"That's beyond evil!"

I kicked and screamed, but no matter what I did, I couldn't escape the weight of my maid.

Vill then put on an artificially deadpan look and said:

"To tell the truth, I haven't drunk your blood yet."

What's this all of a sudden?

"So what?"

"May I?"

"Huh?"

"Traditionally, masters and servants who share a close relationship will exchange blood. Of course, I can't let you drink mine, or you'd level this whole area, but I would like to taste yours at least..."

Level this whole area? No way, you're blowing things out of proportion.

In any case, I never thought I'd be in a situation where someone would suck my blood. I felt like that could only ever happen in novels or my own imagination... *Crap, I'm getting nervous now. Get a grip, Miss Brightest Mind of the Generation! Honestly, it's not like I really mind...*

"I can't...?"

"No, I, uh..."

"If you say no, then I'll puke blood and die."

"Waaah! Okay, fine! Do it! Do as you please!"

I couldn't say no after that.

Vill softly smiled in relief, for some reason.

"Well then... Excuse me."

"G-go ahead."

Vill slowly brought her face closer.

Why? I'm just getting my blood sucked, but my heart's beating so fast. My little sister Lolo had said the blood of the person you liked tasted sweet. I wondered what Vill's impression of mine would be. Sweeter than cake, maybe?

I stared at the stains on the ceiling while those incoherent thoughts went through my mind.

I could hear her heartbeat. Maybe she was nervous, too.

Soon, her lips reached my neck, and then...

"Ms. Komari! There's a guest looking for you!"

Vill scrambled off me at the speed of light.

Sakuna had opened the door without knocking. It looked like she'd just gotten out of the bath. Her skin was flushed, and her hair was wet. She was ten times prettier than

usual.

“...? What’s with you two?”

“N-nothing. Right, Vill?”

“I messed up! This was the perfect opportunity to show Lady Memoir that Komari is mine and mine alone, but I got so nervous I pulled back on instinct!”

Slow down.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sakuna said, changing the subject. “But there’s someone who wants to talk to you two. They’re waiting in the lobby on the first floor”

I glanced at Vill. She raised an eyebrow, too.

We had no idea who could possibly be looking for us right now.



We found an unfamiliar man waiting for us. He was the only person there, so it had to be him.

He was sitting at a mahjong table, fiddling with a tile. His eyes were sharp as a knife, while his clothing was frilly—traditional Heavenly Paradise clothing. He had to be a Peace Spirit.

“Oh.” He raised a hand as soon as he saw us. “Miss Gandesblood, thank you for coming. Take a seat.”

“O-okay...” I did as told.

“Watch out, Lady Komari. He might be one of those perverts people always talk about,” Vill said as she sat at my left, seemingly unaware that *she* was one of those famous perverts.

The Peace Spirit man just stared at me for whatever reason. It made me uncomfortable. At the same time, looking at him gave me this sense of *déjà-vu*. He had this cold, sharp air about him... it reminded me of the way Karla had acted when we

first met.

“...Why did you call us here? Take your lascivious gaze off Lady Komari, or I’ll pepper spray you.”

“Stop being so hostile! I-I’m sorry, my maid’s a little short-fused.”

“I don’t mind. I understand my call came out of nowhere.” He looked down at the mahjong tiles. “I’m Kakumei Amatsu. You know Karla. She’s my cousin.”

“Huh...? Are you the guy she called her brother?”

“I imagine... By the way, keep my presence a secret from Millicent. It’s very likely she’ll try to kill me if we meet now”

I wasn’t following. What did he do to her?

“Up for a game of mahjong? I have a tournament coming up for a coworker’s promotion. I want to get in some practice before that happens. Don’t want to lose all my money,” Amatsu said.

“Sounds good. Let’s play strip mahjong. Just you and I, Lady Komari,” Vill suggested.

“I’m not doing that! Sorry, really, I have to decline. I don’t really know the rules...,” I said.

“It’s fine. I don’t really know them, either.”

What a weird dude.

Then Vill got impatient.

“Lord Kakumei Amatsu, please cut to the chase. How did you even know we were here? Were you following us?”

“I had a subordinate tail you.”

“So you’re a stalker. I’m calling the police.”

“Go ahead, if you have a death wish. I don’t mind. But if you want to do something to

stop the fall of the Mulnite Empire, then I advise you to listen to what I have to say.”

Amatsu produced a Magic Stone from his pocket.

Vill stood up on guard. However, Amatsu showed no intention of attacking us. He handed me the Magic Stone.

“This is a teleportation Magic Stone. The Mulnite Imperial Palace Gate is offline now, but I got my subordinates to get through the battlefield and assemble a new one. You can get to the Imperial Capital with this right now.”

“Um... Why are you giving me this?”

Amatsu scoffed.

“I don’t care what happens to the Mulnite Empire, but someone asked me to... And I must say, I don’t want you losing to the Wicked God Slayer like this.”

“Please elaborate. How much do you know?” Vill asked.

“I can say for sure that many people will die if Terakomari Gandesblood doesn’t take action.”

I didn’t understand. Neither did I want to hear such awful things.

“...Why do I need to act? I mean, I’m...”

“Why are you here, then? Weren’t you looking for a way to get to the Imperial Capital?”

“Well, I...”

Even I didn’t know. I’d just let Millicent drag me all the way here. I hadn’t thought about what to do next. Rather, I didn’t want to think about it. I just had this vague, useless hope that everyone would be okay regardless.

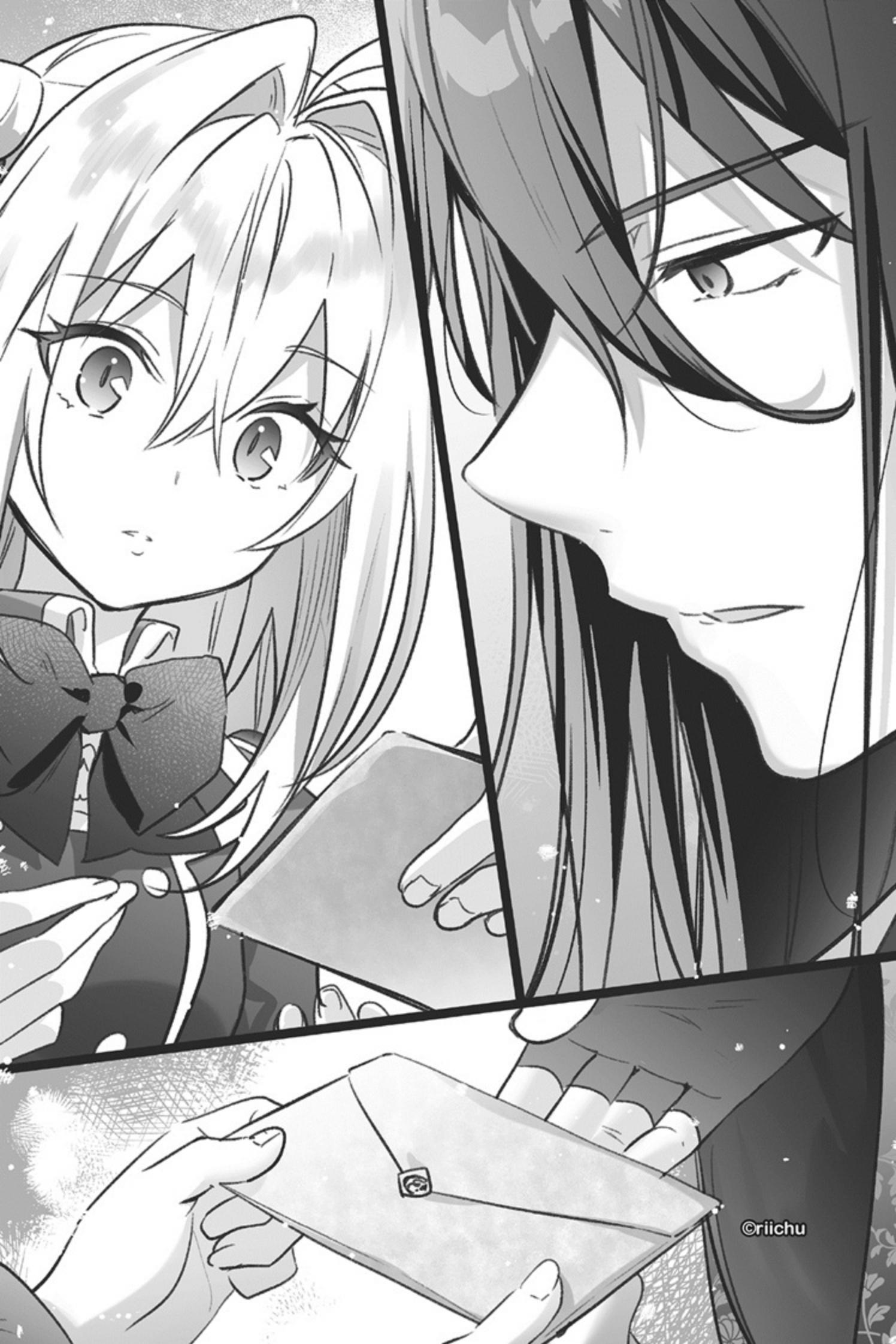
Amatsu sighed. His demeanor resembled Karla’s.

“I see you’re not determined yet. Fine. You’ll understand soon. The world’s headed for doom if you don’t do something. I know I don’t really have the right to say this, but it’s the truth.”

"Lord Kakumei Amatsu, we can't force Lady Komari to—"

"I know. She has to want to do it herself, or nothing's getting done. Look... I have something else for you. Give it a read later."

He handed me an envelope. It had no sender or destination. *I guess just reading this isn't too much of an ask.* I tried opening it, but then Amatsu stood up in aggravation.



©riichu

"I must go before Millicent finds out I'm here. Farewell."

I could only stare as he walked off, unsure if I should say good-bye or something. As soon as he got to the door, he turned around.

"By the way, thank you for helping out Karla. Figure I should say that, as her cousin."

His cold face didn't look very grateful.

Amatsu said nothing more and stepped into the dark outside.

Vill puffed her cheeks and grumbled, "What's with that man? He shows up out of nowhere, starts lecturing us, then goes away without explaining a thing. He has no manners. At least treat us to some ice cream or something. But above all else, I can't stand that he got in the way of me sucking your glorious blood."

"I'm more in the mood for something warm, not ice cream... But that's beside the point. Let's give this... letter(?) a look."

"So can I still suck your blood later? Actually, can I suck it now?"

"Hmm, yes, this has to be a letter. Just one sheet, huh?"

"Lady Komari, are you listening? Lady Komari?"

Who sent it, though? I casually opened the piece of paper folded in three. That instant, I felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest. My throat went dry. I was sweating out all the liquid.

The content was brief. A most ordinary message. But the strong, yet gentle handwriting... I recognized it. I could never forget it.

Dear Komari,

Please take care of Mulnite. Keep the world close to your chest.

Mom

“...Lady Komari? Where are you going?”

I couldn't be here. The text was faintly imbued with mana. Her mana. My late mother's mana.

I dashed out the door. The cold wind slashed my body.

Where did Amatsu go? Could I manage to catch him? I needed him to explain this to me.

Then I saw glowing red substance pour deep into the town.

I heard the sound of something breaking, followed by yells. Highly concentrated mana wafted all the way to me. Someone was destroying stuff with magic.

“Terakomari! The Holy Knights caught up with us!”

Millicent, Vill, and Sakuna dashed out of the inn.

My jaw dropped. Tryphon's pursuers had already gotten all the way to us?

“Wh-what now?! We have to run... But Amatsu's...”

“They appear to be killing everyone indiscriminately in their hunt for you,” Vill said while holding a pair of binoculars to her face. “They're true barbarians. How shameless of them to invoke the name of God while doing this.”

“Why...”

Then I heard a yell behind me.

“Don't move, Terakomari Gandesblood!”

Armored soldiers appeared in droves.

They approached us slowly, glowing bloodlust in their eyes. There had to be over fifty of them. I turned around to run away, but then I saw the Holy Knights closing in from that direction as well.

We were surrounded. I hid behind Sakuna, thinking it was over, this time for real.

Millicent stood in front of us with a hostile look on her face.

"What's this? You really needed this many people to get us? Heh."

"Surrender, foolish vampires," said the Warblade man at the front with a sneer. "We've captured the members of the Mulnite Imperial Army who Terakomari Gandesblood brought in. All five hundred were killed and imprisoned in the Holy City. They will rot in there."

"Wha...?! You bastards!" I jumped out from behind Sakuna. I couldn't stay still after hearing what they did to my Seventh Unit. "Give them back!"

"We don't follow your orders, only Captain Tryphon Cross's. And do you really have time to lose worrying about them? We have you surrounded."

I couldn't say anything back.

Screams and cackles resounded from all over town. Then I saw someone getting killed out of the corner of my eye. The Holy Knights were gutting my fellow vampires with spells. Blood spattered. Corpses piled up. All while they shouted in God's name. It didn't feel real.

"Wh-why are you doing this? Those people have nothing to do with anything..."

"This fortified city is under the Mulnite Empire's control. It's only natural that they, too, receive God's judgment."

"You..."

"This is only the beginning. We're going to attack every town in the Mulnite Empire. We're simply cleaning up now that the Imperial Capital has fallen."

"?!"

What did he just say? The Imperial Capital... fell?

While I stood there paralyzed in shock, I heard a voice come from the sky:

"Good afternoon, citizens of the world! This is Melka Tiano, reporting for Six Nations News!"

I looked up in surprise. There was a screen projected into the night sky, and on it was that journalist, the Sapphire Melka Tiano, speaking with a desperate look on her face.

"I've got breaking, urgent news! Feast your eyes on this disaster! It's an absolute wreck! You may not believe this, but I'm coming to you live from the Mulnite Imperial Capital! Terrorist group Inverse Moon and the Holy Church are behind this tragedy!"

The screen showed the city in ruins.

My jaw was planted on the ground. There were piles of dead bodies everywhere. The beautiful scenery of stone buildings I knew was nowhere to be found, replaced by flames and rubble as far as the eye could see. The Artois Plaza Clock Tower was broken in half. How did the city center end up like this? Even Vill and Millicent widened their eyes in shock at the sight.

"The terrorists have defeated the Imperial Army and taken over the Mulnite Imperial Palace! Only Crimson Lord Petrose Calamaria remains in the fight, but rebels keep popping up from all over the city to oppose her! The Empire is headed for doom! The people clamor for a hero to defeat this evil! I ask you, citizens of the world, can you sit by and let this happen?! I don't think I can!"

Melka's speech was more fervent than usual. She held her mic tight as she explained the situation.

"Honestly, I can't bear this anymore! Which is why I took it upon myself to spread the word across the globe! First, I'll be going to the Palace and—"

"Hey, that's the Six Nations News reporter! Cut the broadcast!"

"Wh-who are you?! Stop, let go of me! Violence against reporters is prohibited by law! Hey, Thio, you dolt! Don't just run away! Hey, stop! S-someone help! Commander Gandesbloooooood!!"

The camera started to bob through some back alleys in the middle of their exchange. Evidently, the catgirl recording everything had made a break for it, and she even hurled the camera away somewhere down the line. The broadcast switched to a snowstorm before cutting off. The mana feed must have stopped.

A starry winter sky returned to view.

"Pesky journos. But now you understand what's going on at the Imperial Capital," boasted the Warblade knight. "You can't escape divine punishment. There's no averting the Mulnite Empire's downfall."

"Divine punishment my ass. Don't you realize that Inverse Moon's just taking advantage of you? Your captain, Tryphon, is one of their members."

"We know. But Captain Cross is a God-fearing man before he is a member of Inverse Moon. Everything he does is for the sake of spreading the word of God."

"That's a load of bull. There's not a shred of faith in that man."

"Enough of your blabbering. Fellow blessed soldiers! Capture the villains!"

The Holy Knights yelled and attacked.

"Lady Komari! Behind me!" Vill countered the knights with her kunai.

Millicent and Sakuna also responded with their own weapons, but even I could tell it would be hard to get past this many opponents.

Cries. Cheers. Yells. Explosions. Dread echoed throughout all corners of the city.

I could only watch as my friends fought. I was frozen in place, thinking about the nightmarish scene of the Imperial Capital that played moments before. Melka had asked me for help at the end of it. And it wasn't only her. It wasn't lost on me who she was talking about when she said "the people clamor for a hero."

But I lacked the courage. Vill, Sakuna, Millicent, and everyone back in the Imperial Capital were getting hurt, while I was still cowering in full shut-in mode.

What should I do?

What do I even want to do?

"Guh...?!"

Then I saw an enemy soldier drive their blade into Sakuna's shoulder. She cried out as

red blood spurted from the wound.

I was about to run up to her, when suddenly, Vill grabbed my arm and yelled:

“Lady Komari! We can’t defeat them! We must use our last resort!”

“L-last resort?! What is it?”

“The teleportation Magic Stone you just got. Lady Memoir! Blue girl! Come here!”

Both of them picked up on what she was planning and immediately pushed back the enemy before retreating.

I was as still as a statue while Vill shoved a hand in my pocket and pulled out the Magic Stone Amatsu gave me. She poured mana into it without hesitation.

But I still wasn’t mentally prepared.

I also knew the Holy Knights would only hurt the people of this city even more if we left. They were even more violent than my Seventh Unit; I could easily imagine them getting more brutal as some sort of revenge. We had to defeat them first.

No... what am I thinking? I can’t do anything myself. I’d only be making my friends get hurt more.

In the end, I couldn’t say anything until the Magic Stone began flashing.

“Vill, wai—!”

“Hold on to me! Time to make our triumphal return to the Imperial Capital!”

She grabbed me by the scruff, and Sakuna and Millicent held tightly to her. The Holy Knights immediately realized what we were doing and charged against us, shouting like mad animals. But the teleportation was slightly faster.

White light enveloped our surroundings, and so I was sent back to the Imperial Capital, irresolute.

※

Meanwhile, at the Federal District of the Haku-Goku Commonwealth, the nation otherwise known as the Polar Union.

The northern country's air was bone-chilling in December. If a savanna beast-folk from the Lapolico Kingdom were to visit this time of year, they would instantly freeze.

Sapphires were absurdly resistant to cold. Their hard bodies allowed even the children of the Polar Union to frolic outside in this temperature, frigid enough to make a banana as hard as a nail.

However, every rule had an exception. In this case, the outlier was Commander Prohellya Butchersky. This member of the Six Arctic Masters was implausibly sensitive to cold.

She always wore winter clothes, no matter the season. She had a pocket warmer—a heating Magic Stone—on her at all times. Today, too, she sat before the fireplace, exclaiming like a curse, “It’s freeeeeeeeeeeeeeezzing!” How she wished winter didn’t exist. The world would be so much better if it were summer all year round.

As she rolled into a ball on her chair, like a cat, Melka’s emergency Six Nations News broadcast began.

The sight of the burning Imperial Capital was projected onto the annoyingly bright starry sky of the Federal District.

Then Prohellya burned with rage—enough to make her forget about the cold.

She had always despised senseless violence and malice. Her eyes were glued to the projection as tragedy unfolded in the Mulnite Empire. It was clear as day that the terrorists were making even unrelated people suffer.

Prohellya immediately called the General Secretary. She had to report to her boss before taking any action, after all.

“Yes, this is the General Secretary of the Communist Party.”

“Sir! I want permission for my army to mobilize!”

“Calm down, Prohellya. It’s cold outside.”

"This is no time to be shivering inside. The terrorists must be stopped. You don't want the Mulnite Empire to fall, either, do you?"

She heard him snort. His leisurely attitude only poured fuel into Prohellya's fire.

"Do we have any duty to go help them?"

"This isn't about obligation. Inverse Moon is also an enemy of the Polar Union. We can't let go of an opportunity to crush them after they've shown themselves in the Imperial Capital."

"The Mulnite Empire is not our ally."

"That doesn't matter! First of all, we can't hope to make them our allies if we don't lend a hand! This is exactly why we're a friendless nation!"

"Cool your head a little. First of all, consider the pros and cons of building an allyship with the Mulnite Em—"

"Aaaaargh!! I've heard enough!!"

Prohellya turned to the fireplace to hurl in her Correspondence Crystal, but before she did, she heard the General Secretary speak again.

"Hold on, don't throw away the crystal."

She took a deep breath. Raising her voice like this was against her ladylike ideals.

"I apologize. However, I am outraged at your reaction."

"I appreciate your sincerity. Fine, as General Secretary, I command you, Arctic Master Prohellya Butchersky, to sortie to the Imperial Capital."

"Right away, sir."

"Wait."

What a chatty man.

"What is it?" Prohellya asked while preparing to leave.

"You can go to the Imperial Capital, but you can't use teleportation to get there. The Chancellor blocked all the Gates."

"No problem. I'll just fly."

"Also, Tryphon Cross is among the terrorists over there. This man has always been my political opponent. He has the power to teleport matter, so be careful."

"Roger."

"Also..."

"We're not done yet?!"

Prohellya put on her coat. She grabbed her weapons, wallet, and rations (liquid pudding). All set to go. Now she just had to call her subordinates.

"Nothing, forget it," the General Secretary said after a moment of thinking. *"Don't catch a cold."*

"Thank you for your concern, but the strong never catch colds."

"I think the saying goes, idiots never..."

Prohellya hung up and left her room in a hurry.

It was cold outside, but that was no matter. She had heard of Inverse Moon acting in the Polar Union as of late. They could target the Federal District next if she didn't do something about them in the Imperial Capital.

And besides, if the Mulnite Empire fell, she wouldn't get a chance to do sports-war with Terakomari Gandesblood. That would mean Prohellya wouldn't be able to challenge the girl to a bet where the loser had to do anything the winner says, so that she could get back her polar bear plushie. That she could not allow.

※

Meanwhile, at the Mulnite Imperial Palace in the Imperial Capital of the Mulnite Empire.

Tryphon Cross silently waited for the Empire's fall in the Audience Room.

The Empress had not been on the throne. She was someplace far away, thanks to the Wicked God Slayer's plot. He hadn't heard the details, but apparently, she'd caught the Empress off guard with some special tool.

Now the Empire was practically in Inverse Moon's hand.

Her Highness had allowed them to send their full forces to the Imperial Capital. About five thousand troops. No matter how powerful Mulnite's commanders were, they were physically incapable of handling so many rioters. As a matter of fact, most of the Crimson Lords who'd stayed behind to guard the Imperial Capital were already dead; the Imperial Army was already virtually defeated.

"Soon, it will be over! We just have to find the Dark Core!" Fuyao Meteorite exclaimed as she wagged her tail with a smile on her face.

The attack had been carried out almost entirely under Fuyao's command. Tryphon once again admired the Wicked God Slayer's sharp eye in her choice to appoint this girl as a Luna.

"Where could the Dark Core be, though? Odilon Metal said not even the Chancellor knew, didn't he?"

"Her Highness said she would take care of it. Let's just put our faith in her and wait."

"I see. Though that begs the question—who exactly is this Wicked God Slayer? She looks like any normal vampire, but..." Fuyao trailed off.

"I reckon she's just like you, but perhaps she doesn't realize."

"???"

Fuyao was confused, understandably so.

Tryphon fiddled with the needle in his pocket as he thought things over.

The Wicked God Slayer's true identity wasn't very important now. The crucial matter was what to do after taking over the Mulnite Empire. After obtaining the Dark Core and making Her Highness the Empress, how would she go about revolutionizing the

world?

Cloing. A switch flipped.

“I’m bored. There’s nothing left to do?”

“We just have to let Her Highness take the throne, and it’s over. Perhaps Terakomari Gandesblood isn’t coming. All of the Empire’s Gates are closed, after all.”

“Hmm... Yeah, boring.”

Fuyao turned around.

“Where are you going?” Tryphon asked casually.

“Just taking a stroll,” she said before leaving right away.

That vixen’s job was already done. *I’ll let her off for the moment.*

Then a Sapphire man rushed in, as if he were trading places with Fuyao.

“Lord Cross! Urgent news!” Tryphon’s subordinate courteously bent the knee. “Our lookout has just confirmed that Terakomari Gandesblood’s group teleported in.”

Tryphon groaned. *I thought the city was blocked off. I can’t believe that vampire’s spirit remains unbroken.*

“We don’t know how they did it, but this must mean the Holy Knights back in the Dark Core Zone let them go. What shall we do?”

“Simple.” Tryphon put on a faint smile. “Have all our forces, save for the troops fighting Petrose Calamaria, head their way. Oh, and now that she’s here, there’s no use keeping the Gates shut. Open them and call the Holy Knights.”

※

The Magic Stone brought us to the Imperial Capital.

We were in some back alley, and I knew something was wrong the moment we materialized there. It reeked of blood.

"I can hear their voices. The thoughts of everyone in suffering..." Sakuna said while healing herself with magic.

"Are you okay?!" I rushed up to her. "I'm fine," she replied with a smile. And indeed, she was a great healer—her wounds completely closed in a matter of seconds.

"Don't worry about me... Worry about the city... We need to do something quickly..."

"Y-yeah."

I took a peep out of the alleyway.

The scene looked just it had in Melka's broadcast. Piles of rubble and corpses. The buildings that hadn't collapsed were on fire. It was a landscape right out of a nightmare. What was Inverse Moon thinking? What did they want so badly that they had to cause this much suffering to get it?"

"Terakomari, get over here!"

"Huh? Gweh!" Millicent pulled me by my uniform abruptly.

Just then, a group of vampires in religious vestments walked right by us. Clearly no regular citizens. Terrorists. They laughed, waving blood-soaked swords as they walked away. They were violence incarnate. Vill kept her voice down and said:

"This is bad news. From how they're walking around like they own the place, the Imperial Army must be virtually, if not entirely, defeated."

"Those vampires are on the hunt for survivors. They must be killing anyone they find," Millicent added.

"Wha...?!" I opened my eyes wide. "What the hell...? The Crimson Lords lost? Flöte and Helldeus... Even Petrose...?"

"They wouldn't be roaming about if the Imperial Army were still standing. And look at the state of the city. It looks like even the Mulnite Imperial Palace has been conquered." Vill pointed in the direction of the palace.

It wasn't there. At least, not as I remembered it. The eastern half of the structure was nowhere to be found. And there was an odd flag on its tower. A slanted cross pierced

by an arrow. The Holy Church's emblem.

The dreadful sight announced the Mulnite Empire's defeat.

Before I knew it, I was running out of the alleyway.

"Don't be rash, Lady Komari!" Vill shouted desperately.

I'd only seen this part of the Imperial Capital. Surely there was still peace in some other area. I ran with such escapist hope in mind, but no matter where I went, I found only ruins. Explosions went off in the distance now and then. Were people still fighting despite the already terrible amounts of destruction?

Then I smelled a dense concentration of blood.

I stopped. I saw a small church; a temple of the Holy Church, like any other. But for some reason, it was full of holes. Wrecked by a barrage of spells.

I saw people on the ground before it. Dread welled up inside me.

Even after I lost Vill, *she* had kept going to church. I could try convincing myself there was no safe place anywhere in the Imperial Capital to begin with, but...

"...?!"

...I saw her blond hair among the piles of bodies.

I ran up to her, filled with despair.

My little sister, Lollocco Gandesblood, was on the ground, her head bleeding, just moments away from drawing her last breath.

"Lolo! Stay with me! What happened?!"

".....Koma?" she whispered.

She didn't look entirely conscious. She gazed up at me with empty eyes, as though lost in a dream. I stared at her as tears welled up in my eyes.

"Are you okay? N-no, I know you're not. But what can I do...?"

"It hurts. It hurts so much," she moaned.

Then I noticed the slash wound on her shoulder. No wonder she was in pain. She had been going through hell right here this whole time. I wept just imagining what she had gone through.

"Lady Komari! What in the world is...?" Vill gasped the moment she saw it.

Sakuna and Millicent also stopped in their tracks, grimacing.

I screamed immediately, "Sakuna! Heal her...!"

"Y-yes! Core, Dark Core..."

Sakuna's shining mana enveloped Lolo's body. That must've eased her pain, for she softly opened her mouth.

"...I was at church when people in vestments attacked us."

Millicent ground her teeth.

Sakuna shed tears while pouring her mana into her.

"I thought I'd be safe here... They were attacking everyone who ran... But... they also got the father... Now my favorite clothes are covered in blood."

I was totally shocked. Weren't the rebels advocating for the Holy Church? And yet they still attacked regular folk taking shelter in the church?

Corpses littered the area. Praying to God saved none of them.

This could not stand.

"...Koma." Lolo struggled to speak.

I wiped my tears with my sleeve and looked at her pale face.

"What is it? Don't speak, you're in pain..."

"Koma, please do your job."

It felt like I'd been stabbed out of nowhere.

"My job...? What do you mean..."

"Your duty as a Crimson Lord. Please... save everyone..."

"...!!"

I was losing my mind.

The Seven Crimson Lords were duty-bound to protect the nation. I couldn't stand by while the Imperial Capital was thrown into chaos. I didn't have the right to shut myself in.

But... the Empress was missing. Some of the other Crimson Lords were defeated. The Imperial Capital was in ruins. I didn't have the courage to stand up against this threat amid such dire circumstances.

Tryphon had said shutting myself away would let me escape from all this suffering. Vill had told me I didn't have to force myself to fight. But Amatsu had claimed the world would head straight for doom if I didn't do something about it. Millicent had said something to the same effect. And now even my cocky little sister was asking me to save everyone.

I knew there was this power hidden within me, but when I'd tried using it in the Holy City, the next thing I knew, Tryphon had captured me. In the end, I was just as useless as I thought.

Then I heard moaning. Other people were still alive. "Commander Gandesblood...!" they exclaimed as their eyes lit up at the sight of me, like I was their savior.

"Commander...! Please save Mulnite!"

"Lady Gandesblood is here. We're finally safe..."

"Please, Commander. The Mulnite Empire is in your hands..."

The prayers spread in waves.

Where had they been hiding? Suddenly, I was surrounded by vampires asking me to

save them.

I shivered.

Don't. I can't even bluff now. What if you catch the enemy's attention? I don't even have the power to defeat Inverse Moon. I can't take responsibility for this. You're putting your hopes in the wrong place. I can't do anything...

Then Vill put a hand on my shoulder. "Lady Komari, let's go home."

I stared at her in disbelief.

"You don't have to force yourself. This enemy is too much for even the Blood Curse. You don't have to sacrifice your body and soul for the sake of the Empire."

"Villhaze! What're you saying?! We can't defeat Inverse Moon without her!"

"Silence, Millicent Bluenight. Core Implosion is a reflection of the user's spirit. If Lady Komari doesn't wish to fight, then she won't be able to use the Blood Curse to the fullest," Vill snapped.

"...Terakomari! Do you understand the situation?! The Empire's going to..."

"Ms. Millicent! It's no use being forceful!"

"She's gonna go back to being a shut-in if we're not forceful!"

"Do you have any right to say that? You pushed her into being a shut-in..."

Sakuna and Millicent began arguing.

Vill paid them no heed and whispered into my ear:

"I can't stand to see you get hurt. Let us leave this place."

"But what then? Mulnite's over."

"There's many other places to go. It's a big world out there."

"But..."

Vill wore a soft smile.

Her uncharacteristic consideration shook my soul. The sicko maid always forced me out of my room and into work, but in the end, deep within her heart, she really was worried about what I felt.

Which was why her following words hit as hard as they did.

“Lady Komari, you’ve done a great job up to now.”

The whole world felt upside down.

Vill’s words had come from the kindness of her heart, but something seemed wrong. I was uneasy, like I was being fed poison.

There was no denying I was a useless vampire, a shut-in to the core.

But I was a bit different now, and it was all thanks to her.

I defeated Millicent, became friends with Sakuna, exchanged blood with Nelia, talked about our dreams with Karla... I’d evolved to being just *half* a shut-in.

Vill was as kind as a person could possibly be. It wasn’t right for me to repay her kindness by giving in and holing myself up.

If I didn’t do my job now, then I would go back to being the completely useless vampire I had been before meeting Vill. I was still plenty useless, sure, but if I did that, I would be an absolutely hopeless shut-in. And that, in essence, meant I would be denying our time together up until now.

I looked around. The vampires were staring at me like I was some sort of deity.

Geez, I’m nothing like that. Where did you even get that idea?

“...I don’t fear pain.”

I wiped my tears and looked straight into Vill's eyes.

She opened her eyes wide in shock.

"After losing you, I realized. At the end of the day, I think I do enjoy being a commander. I don't like getting in danger, obviously, and I still want more days off. But I've met so many people thanks to you. I've grown. Because of you, Vill."

"Lady Komari..."

"And I don't want your kindness to amount to nothing. So... I can't go back to being a shut-in like this. Besides, I can't just let that buncha idiots who hurt everyone in Mulnite go scot-free. I won't be able to eat my omelet rice in peace if I don't do something about this."

Vill stared straight back at me.

That was enough for her to understand everything I was thinking. She wasn't my sicko maid for nothing. She stared at me frozen in place for a few moments, until she bowed deeply.

"Very well. If you that is what you wish, Lady Komari. I will follow you until the very end."

"...Thanks."

Now I was ready... Okay, I was actually still scared. My knees wouldn't stop shaking. My feet were practically sewn into the ground just thinking about the pain that awaited me.

Still, Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood would make no other choice.

I wasn't doing this for the Mulnite Empire. I was doing this for my friends. For Vill, more than anything. And for tomorrow's omelet rice. I had to prepare myself for even death in order to protect them all.

I glanced at the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

Right then, I saw a huge army coming toward us from an alleyway.

"O-oh, no! Inverse Moon is here!" Sakuna exclaimed.

Millicent started shooting Magic Bullets at them before the words left Sakuna's mouth. But there were too many. Our foes were unfazed as their allies fell, and they let out a war cry that shook the air.

"Tsk! We have to get out of here! The four of us can't take care of all of them!" Millicent shouted.

"Wait. The Holy Knights are on our other side," Vill said.

"What?! What are they doing here?!"

We turned around and saw the armored soldiers teleport there one after the other. The Gates must've been restored without us knowing. It made sense. Now that the Imperial Palace was in enemy hands, they could freely use our routes.

"Die, Terakomari Gandesblood!!"

Holy Knights in front of us, and Inverse Moon behind us.

We were doomed. Their spells flew mercilessly and set off huge blasts right beside us. I shrieked as I was blown away, then went rolling on the cobblestone. Vill screamed my name from behind.

It hurt. I was crying already. I think I grazed my knee.

But I couldn't give up. I'd been thrown into battle against my wishes every time before, but not now. This time, I decided to fight for myself.

Suddenly, I felt my hairs stand on end. I looked up in palpable hostility.

"Go to hell."

The Holy Knights were already on me, raising their swords aloft.

I could do nothing but observe from the ground.

My life didn't really flash before my eyes. I just felt rage at the terrorists whirling inside me.

"Run, Terakomari!!" Millicent yelled. I also heard Sakuna and Vill scream.

I was scared. I wanted to run away, but my feet wouldn't obey. I couldn't let my panic take over. I couldn't let my foes win in spirit. Even if it cost me my life, I had to get back up as many times as necessary and drive them away from Mulnite.

I stared at the sword falling down on me with unwavering determination, and then a pink wind blew.

"What?"

I couldn't tell who'd said that.

The next moment, someone slashed the shoulder of the soldier who was about to kill me. Bright-red blood spurted from his body, and he fell to his knees before collapsing entirely.

"Diverse Divide."

I couldn't believe my eyes.

Before me stood a girl. Her back was turned to me, and her pink pigtails swayed with the wind. In her hands were her teacher's twin swords. Her body glowed under the moonlight, enveloped in charming peach-colored mana. How appropriate for a girl whose alias was the "Moonpeach Princess."

She turned around, a beaming smile on her face that brightened my spirit.

"Komari, I'm glad you're okay."

It was Aruka's president, and my blood sister. Nelia Cunningham.

I stared in wonder into her scarlet eyes.

What're you doing here? This is the Mulnite Empire. Not Aruka. Not the Dark Core Zone.

My brain froze. Then I felt heat over my head. I looked up in shock. There was a teleportation gate open in the sky, out of which poured a swarm of Warblades. They descended on the Mulnite Empire with a valiant roar, pointing their weapons at the Holy Knights.

I stared at the battle unfolding before me, forgetting that I had been saved in just the nick of time.

“Wh-why are you doing this...?”

“Heh. This is no time to falter, Terakomari Gandesblood.”

Before I knew it, there was a Warblade with a lizard-like face standing right next to me.

Pascal Rainsworth—the man who had once done terrible things to Nelia.

“Get up already. I can’t have my killer losing to these small fries. I’ve been training ever since that day you defeated me at the golden plains, and you’ll see...”

“Brother! Enough talking and more fighting! The enemy’s coming!”

“I know, damn it!”

Rainsworth obeyed his sister Gertrude and charged against the insurrectionists.

I felt like I was dreaming. The Warblades, who had once been our enemies, were now fighting by our side for the sake of the Mulnite Empire.

“Thank you...,” Vill said in astonishment. I was just now realizing that she was also at my side.

“Komari, get up already. The fight’s not over yet.” The peach girl smiled at me.

Her words brought me back to reality.

“Nelia! What’re you doing here?”

“I’m here to help, of course,” she said, as though it was a foregone conclusion. “I knew you were in peril. I couldn’t stand back and do nothing while the Holy Church teamed up with some terrorists to take down Mulnite.”

“But! But...”

“What? What’re you getting so teared up about? Isn’t it only natural that I come here

to help out a friend?"

"But! Aruka's Dark Core doesn't reach all the way here!"

"Oh, that?" Nelia's smile deepened. "It doesn't matter. They don't care either, do they? And everyone said they wanted to fight for you. I mean... everyone in Aruka is in your debt."

The Warblades swung their swords as they shouted:

"Save Mulnite!" "Aid Commander Gandesblood!" "Kill the nasty terrorists!" "Show them Aruka's strength!"

I thought I was done crying, but just hearing them brought fresh tears to my eyes. I couldn't be happier.

"N-Nelia..."

"Hmm? What's up? Hey!"

Pomf! I jumped onto her chest. I couldn't hold it in anymore. I wailed like a little baby.

"Th-thank you! Thank you so much, Neliaaaaaaa!"

"Huh?!?! Wai...! Hold on, um, so you're finally deciding to become my maid?!"

"Lady Komari! I understand your commotion, but you must get away from Lady Cunningham at once! If you're going to be someone's maid, then at least be mine—you'll be a hundred times better off!"

"WAAAAAAAHH!!" I kept on wailing even as Vill pulled me back.

I felt like I was using up a whole year's share of luck at once.

"Dummy," Nelia said with a smile. "I'll do anything I must to help you. Plus, I'm not the only one here for you. Look."

"Huh...?"

I turned around as Nelia suggested and then, I felt a tremendous rumbling. I was only

able to stay on my feet thanks to Vill propping me up.

The next moment, the earth cracked. Inverse Moon's troops were sucked into a hole. Their remaining forces retreated, leaving behind only the dying screams of those who were too slow to escape. What in the world was going on?

"This is Kidoshu's specialty: Earth Jutsu." I heard a voice right beside me all of a sudden.

A girl in a ninja getup was standing right next to me. It was Koharu Minenaga, leader of the Kidoshu, the ninja squad of the Heavenly Paradise's First Unit.

Then more ninja girls materialized from the shadows. They rushed silently against Inverse Moon, swinging their *wakizashi* swords with imperceptible speed.

My jaw was on the ground. I was moved to the core yet again at the Heavenly Paradise's aid.

"Wait here," Koharu said in apologetic tone. "My Goddess is still as much as a coward as ever."

"Huh...?"

Koharu approached a pile of rubble. She crouched down and rummaged through it. Then I heard a familiar voice come from right beside her:

"Hey! Don't pull me, Koharu! What if I get hit by a stray spell?!"

"Terakomari's here. Stop embarrassing yourself."

"I know! I get it! But this is too much! I'm gonna die out there!"

"All right, then stay under the debris and get crushed to death."

"Fine, I'm getting out."

A girl wearing a kimono, the traditional garb of the Heavenly Paradise, crawled out of the wreckage. It was Karla Amatsu, the current Goddess and my trusted friend. She wiped the dust off her clothes and walked up to me.

In sharp contrast to the nightmarish battlefield, she wore a peaceful smile. Her bell chimed.

“It’s been a while, Komari. Would you care for a snack to ease the tensions?”

“Ah...” I could only hold back tears as I saw the sweet bean jelly she offered me.

How many times would I have to cry today? I was going to be sixteen next February! I accepted the confection and wiped my eyes.

“My brother told me about the situation in a letter. I can’t believe the terrorists were planning something like this. I wish I could’ve gotten here sooner...”

“Don’t worry. Thanks, Karla. I’m glad you came.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” She smiled, blushing a bit. “I actually haven’t done anything worth thanking. And you’re my friend. You backed me up and helped me realize my dream, so it’s only fair.”

I didn’t know what to say.

Karla understood and grabbed my hand.

“Now we must make your dream come true. You’re going to be a novelist. And we can’t make that happen if you lose here. I offer you my full strength, however little.”

“K-Karla...!!”

“Don’t worry. The terrorists won’t stand a chance against the army of the Heavenly Paradise. Koharu! Karin! Show them they have no place here!”

“Karla! Don’t just dish out orders—fight!” yelled Imperial Saber Karin Reigetsu as she swung her sword.

Her samurai troop was here, just like Karla’s ninja squad. Karin and I had clashed back during the debate and stuff at the Heavenly Ball, but now even she had come all the way here for us.

“...Very well. Although I can only offer support.”

Then Karla's eyes shone red. She unleashed her Core Implosion, the same she had during the Heavenly Ball.

"Waving Moment. We can do it all over again, as many times as needed, so long as I'm here. This is how life ought to be, I think—with a few retries."

Then she went back to hiding in the rubble. *I think you're more in danger over there. Also, your butt's sticking out.*

In any case, the fierce battle was still raging, and yet I felt this fullness in my chest. My eyes were burning at the sight of the Warblades and Peace Spirits coming here to help me.

Nelia and Karla had risked it all to come to my rescue. And this scene of so many people joining hands was only possible because of how I'd lived my life. I'd made all the right choices up until now. I couldn't have ever felt this sensation if I'd stayed a shut-in.



©riichu

“Komari! You head for the palace!” Nelia shouted. She spun her twin swords around as she slashed the enemy in an acrobatic display. “Armies like these collapse the moment they lose the head. That’s your objective! Go get the enemy commander!”

“R-right!”

I let my allies take care of things here. I had to fight my own fight.

Still, it seemed unlikely that I would be able to open my way through this chaos. Heading straight for the palace would obviously put me in the crosshairs of everyone on the way there... Just as I was thinking that, the Warblades started yelling in confusion.

“What’s that?!” “It’s coming!” “Get out of the way!” They scattered to the sides of the street.

Then I also saw it: a beast rampaging from the back of the alley, dashing toward us and running over Holy Knights on its way.

I was speechless.

The moment the creature saw me, it came to a sudden stop, cracking the pavement.

A sudden gust of wind blew. I almost fell on my back, but Vill managed to prop me up. I just stared at it in shock.

“Bucephalus?! What are you doing here?!”

Pure-white body. Gentle blue eyes. It was my companion who’d fought alongside me in the Crimson Match.

He slowly walked up to me and brought his snout close and whinnied.

Vill looked up at him in admiration and said:

“They say a steed knows when its master is in trouble and runs to help them. It seems the Crimson Mizuchi has remembered its role after evaporating from our last couple adventures.”

“He didn’t evaporate! I’ve been taking care of him every week!”

"Right. I suppose the keeper left the stable open. Now then, Lady Komari, let's go. Charge toward the Mulnite Imperial Palace, where our foes await," Vill said while getting on Bucephalus.

Something wasn't sitting right with me, but this wasn't the time for nitpicking.

I got up with Vill's help and looked around. The Warblades and Peace Spirits were wounded. I had to put an end to the fight ASAP.

"Ms. Komari! We'll follow after you in a moment. G-good luck!" Sakuna looked at us, staff in hand.

Only two people could ride Bucephalus at a time. I gulped down my fear and smiled.

"Yeah. I'll take care of the enemy boss."

"You've got something else to do first—lift the spirits of the citizens." Millicent tossed me a Magic Stone. I just barely caught it. "That'll let you spread your voice. Commanders are also responsible for keeping up morale, you know."

"Wha? Morale?"

"No matter how super powerful or cunningly smart one may be, that's not enough to move the hearts of the people. That's why I find you so... Nothing. Forget it."

Millicent went straight back into the fray.

I sensed slight jealousy in her face. Maybe I was just imagining things. What was there to envy about me?

"Lady Komari, let's use that Magic Stone for *that*."

"What is *that*?"

"The usual. Your specialty: bluffing. Although you won't just be doing it for the Seventh Unit this time, but all vampires in the Imperial Capital."

I see. So I just gotta cheer everyone up.

I held the Magic Stone tight and poured in some mana.

There was no need to prepare my speech beforehand. This was how I'd survived up until now—coming up with stuff on the spot. Though things were a bit different at this moment.

This time, there'd be no lies. No bluffs. I was going to say nothing but the truth.

Bucephalus dashed ahead. I held on tightly to Vill's belly in a panic, and she whispered to me, as calm as always, "It's okay, Lady Komari. I'm here with you. Let's give it our all."

"Yeah."

I had my maid to back me up. There was nothing to fear.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and then, in my usual commander mode, I gave a loud decree.

"Can you hear me, vampires of the Mulnite Empire?!"



A round moon hung in the night sky above the Imperial Capital.

The Mulnite Empire was often called the land of night, due to the vampire's nocturnal nature. They had recently gotten more active during the day to accommodate trade with other countries, but back in the day, they were only truly active under the veil of night.

That old liveliness was nowhere to be found in the capital now. The buildings were in ruins. Bodies lay everywhere. Flames engulfed the surroundings. The people could only stare blankly in despair as the Mulnite Empire headed toward doom.

The Empress was absent. The Crimson Lords were defeated. The only path left was praying to God.

The terrorists were merciless. They would not hesitate to attack even when the citizens showed no intention of resisting. One could only imagine the nightmarish hell that would await if they took over the country.

And still, no one had the guts to resist. Even if they did, they only ended up captured

and killed.

The vampires had no choice but to wait silently for their demise.

They had no power. Not in body, not in spirit.

But then a voice echoed across the city, loud enough as if to smash the moon.

"Can you hear me, vampires of the Mulnite Empire?!"

The people looked up in surprise.

Someone was transmitting their voice across the Imperial Capital with magic.

And every single vampire knew whose voice it was.

"It is I, Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood! I'm sorry I made you wait! Are you all okay?! No, I know you're not... But I'm here! You're safe now!"

The people stirred.

"Is it real?" "Is Lady Gandesblood here?" Finally, the slaughter champion who had left for the faraway lands of the Holy City had returned.

"As you must know, a band of wicked terrorists are invading our Empire! I hear they've already taken over the Mulnite Imperial Palace! They've wrecked our beautiful city! I can only imagine how acutely you've suffered while I was away... Clouded by a whirl of despair, desperately looking for hope among the darkness... I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me for making you go through all this. I apologize."

People collapsing on the side of the road. People hiding inside their homes. People packing up their things to escape the Imperial Capital. They all equally sent their hearts out to this girl, whose voice seemed to pull them from their nightmare.

Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood's valiant address slashed through the twilight.

"The despair is over now. But isn't Her Majesty still missing? Aren't the other Crimson Lords defeated? Doesn't the city lie in ruins? So what! I'll turn everything back to normal!"

People shouted their savior's name in prayer.

Komarin. Komarin. Komarin. The usual ovation became a bridge that connected the people of the Imperial Capital amidst the darkness.

"Now listen! You just have to sit tight, wherever you are! I'll take care of everything! I will put an end to this! Those bastards won't get away with everything they've done to you! The strongest Crimson Lord of them all, Terakomari Gandesblood, will give them their just desserts! I swear I'll bring light back to the Mulnite Empire! Can you hear me, terrorist jerks?! Send out your Wicked God Slayer or whoever the hell you want! I can wipe out the entirety of Inverse Moon using just my pinky finger! So quiver in your boots waiting for me to arrive! You'll regret making me mad!"

Yells roared from all across the city in response to her speech. Screams welcomed their hero. They all shouted in a frenzy: "Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!" Some of them shed tears, some of them danced in a frenzy, some of them cast their gazes down as they were overcome with emotion. And the moment she said her last words, the vampires' excitement reached its peak.

"Don't think I'm gonna be a shut-in forever! It's time to fight back!"

Then:

"HAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIILLLLLLLL!!!!!!" the vampires hollered. Even those who had died returned to life to shout, "Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!" There was no stopping them.

No one but Komari could light a fire in the Mulnite Empire like this. Everyone trusted her—they had faith that their hero could save the Empire. Only she could route their anxieties and lift their spirits.

The darkness clouding the Imperial Capital cleared away, as did the gloom inside the people's hearts.

She was a hero like no other. Perhaps one to surpass even Yulinne Gandesblood.

Deeply impressed, I headed to the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

The fierce fight between Warblades and Holy Knights, Peace Spirits and Inverse Moon was still unfolding before my eyes.

Harmony amongst all peoples.

Only Terakomari's kindness could have realized this bright accomplishment.

However, that didn't mean the alliance could drive the evil away.

No one was aware of my presence.

They were all engrossed in killing the foes right in front of their faces. They wouldn't notice a little vampire girl striding confidently down the street.

I looked up at the night sky and smiled. The moon was so beautiful it hurt.

If only I could flip the moon on its head and drop it to the ground. Just how good would it feel?

I skipped through the streets, the smell of blood in the air.

Then I finally decided to drop the act. Pretending for such a long time was proving to be tiresome.

"You're such a sincere girl," I'd been told since I was little.

"Hee-hee. Things are finally getting interesting!"

Terakomari was strong, in the truest sense of the word.

But I wasn't about to lose.

Amatsu, Fuyao, Cornelius, even Tryphon—they were all *wicked* because of their powerful convictions.

My heart was racing. I felt like sucking the blood out of each and every person I came across.

But I had to keep my excitement under control for now and hurry to the palace. I didn't really get why, nor did I have any interest in the position, but Tryphon had said he was making me Empress.



“Don’t think I’m gonna be a shut-in forever! It’s time to fight back!”

The girls reached the Mulnite Imperial Palace by the time Komari’s speech was over.

Komari panted as she put the Magic Stone in her pocket. Villhaze was amazed at how easily she had said all of that. She got off Bucephalus after a moment.

The maid lent a hand to her master, who smiled while giving her a “thanks” as she alighted her steed.

As soon as Terakomari Gandesblood was on the ground, she looked up at the ruins of the Mulnite Imperial Palace and said:

“They’re all cheering for me. I’ve gotta pull this off.”

Not even a speech from Her Majesty the Empress would have so roused the citizenry’s sprits. Villhaze was certain this girl had been born to unite the hearts of the people.

“What? What’re you staring at?”

“Nothing. I’m just in awe of your greatness.”

“Yeah, right. I’m not that special. I’m only here now thanks to everyone else. I can only do this because of the support they’re giving me.”

“Does that include me?”

“...” Komari looked away, blushing. Then she bluntly whispered, “Yeah. Maybe you’re number one, actually. I can only get out of bed because of you. I wish you’d fix your sicko ways, but I can’t deny that you’re too good of a maid for me.”

“...!”

“Thank you, Vill.”

Komari’s sincerity confused Villhaze at first. But that initial feeling quickly gave way to overwhelming joy.

A maid could wish nothing more than for her master to need her. However, she felt this little wasn’t enough to repay Komari for how she had pulled her up from the pits

of darkness. So Villhaze put on a cool face and said:

"No, I should be the one thanking you. Although the battle isn't over yet."

"Right. Still, I think I can do anything with you by my side."

"Lady Komari, may I hug you?"

"Wha?" She looked appalled.

Oops. Keep it down, Villhaze. I gotta fix this habit of harassment. Take it too far and she'll hate you.

But then, Komari approached her.

"Huh?"

Villhaze couldn't process what her lady was doing.

She felt warmth spread throughout her chest. Her heart was about to explode.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you doing, Lady Komari? This is sexual harassment!"

"You don't get to say that. And... I have to do this. Okay?"

"Um, uh, ah, erm..."

Then Villhaze understood. Everything clicked once it was already happening.

Komari's breath caught on her neck. Then came prickling pain. But this soon changed to pleasure. Komari lapped at the blood that gushed out.

Villhaze was paralyzed the whole time. She stood there frozen in place, shocked that her mistress would suck her blood so boldly.

But more than shocked, she was happy. It was obvious she was imitating what she'd read in novels, for she had never really sucked anyone else's blood (let us forget about Karla Amatsu and Nelia Cunningham). Komari stood on the tips of her toes, restlessly moving about her tongue in such adorable manner. Yet she was oddly good at it. *What is the meaning of this, Lady Komari? Are you just a blood-sucking genius?*

Villhaze's thought process went entirely off the rails, and she let her mistress handle the rest.

"...Sweet," Komari whispered.

The next moment, a vicious mana storm brewed.

Its sheer power knocked Villhaze off her feet.

The wind swirled around like a tornado.

The black sky broke; the night was dyed red.

Cheers abounded from the city: "*Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!*" They were everywhere.

Terakomari Gandesblood, the Vampire Princess tinted red, took a step away from Villhaze.

Tears welled up in the maid's eyes at the sight of Komari's scarlet gaze. At the sight of the hero who would pull the entire world forward.

Then she felt heat pool in her own body. The heat of her own Core Implosion: Pandora's Poison. Her power, which activated by sending her blood into her mistress's body.

Villhaze's eyes, too, glowed scarlet as data from the future rushed into her.

"Let's go together, Vill." Komari held out her hand.

Up until now, Villhaze had always been out of commission by the time the battle reached its final stages. She was more elated than ever to get to be by Komari's side at the end this time around.

I'll follow you to the ends of the world, Lady Komari.

A smile drew itself on Villhaze's face as she grabbed her hand.

Their bloodlust was directed at a single place—the half-destroyed Mulnite Imperial Palace, where the demons who'd wrecked their home lay in wait.



Vexations

5

The Shut-In Vampire
Princess Stands on the
Battlefield

[The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess]

"Please take care of Mulnite. Keep the world close to your chest."

I'd heard the words before.

My mom used to smile at me and tell me I'd pull the world forward. As a kid, I had no idea what that could possibly mean.

She rarely played with me. She was a Crimson Lord, and next in line for the throne. Most of my memories of my mother were of her running off to the battlefield, neglecting her home for work.

And still, I loved her.

On the rare occasion she came home, she would indulge me, playing with me until she fell asleep from the fatigue.

My mom gave me so much during that short period we were together. She taught me to empathize with people, to think about their feelings. She taught me to be strong, to never give up. I think I wanted to become just like her—someone everyone respected, someone they called a *hero*.

I still remembered her last words. She'd called me over and told me she had a very important fight the next day.

"If anything happens to me, I want you to take care of Mulnite."

I was confused. Why was she talking like she wouldn't be coming back?

Yet she smiled valiantly and softly patted my head.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.”

“But...”

“You’re such a worrywart, Komari. Here, you can have this.”

It was a pendant that glowed blood-red. “What is it?” I asked, and she only smiled suggestively.

“It’s very important. Keep this around your neck, and it’ll be just like having the world on your chest.”

“...?”

Then she left.

That was my last memory of my mom.

The pendant had been glowing on my chest ever since.

※

Lonne Cornelius was on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital.

Her experiment was complete. The weapon of mass destruction she had been working on for a year, the Ruin & Despair Cannon, had been as powerful as her calculations predicted. It had effortlessly destroyed the Mulnite Imperial Palace’s barrier, then decimated the Imperial Capital in six more blasts.

Her calculations showed that the city could be leveled in thirteen extra shots, but that was a bit too unrealistic to actually put into practice. Now that the Peace Spirits and Warblades had infiltrated the fight, people would die for real if she went too far.

“All right, time to go back to the hideout.”

Cornelius’s lab coat fluttered as she turned around. She looked up at the full moon in the sky.

She couldn't stay there for long with Terakomari Gandesblood on the scene. Tryphon had some sort of plan in the works, but she doubted the Blood Curse would be that simple to subdue. Regardless, her own safety was the priority here. She turned to look at her subordinates.

"Our work here is done! Get the Ruin & Despair Cannon outta here!"

"Yes, ma'am!" exclaimed the Inverse Moon elite.

She'd gotten good results from her experiments today. It was time to go back, implement some improvements, and do some maintenance.

"...Hmm?"

Suddenly, the moonlight darkened.

Cornelius turned around nonchalantly, and her vision went orange.

A beat later, an explosion of apocalyptic magnitude went off. The wind howled. Cobblestones were blown upward. The air turned scorching hot.

Cornelius shrieked and fell on her back.

The Ruin & Despair Cannon was exploding before her eyes.

"Wh-what the helllll?!"

Scratch that—it had already been blasted to smithereens.

Her subordinates were all blown away in the blast.

She couldn't believe it. She hadn't felt even the slightest of mana reactions. None of her calculations had predicted something like this happening. So why?

"Finally found you. So it's you who's been destroying the city, hmm?"

A vampire stepped in front of the flaming remnants of the cannon.

Her eyes glowed scarlet, and she had the glare of a killer.

Then Cornelius understood. It was her. She was responsible for this.

"H-how are you going to pay for my cannon?! That's one of my masterpi—Gweh!"

The woman grabbed her by the neck. Tightly, like a vise. She lifted her up in the air. Cornelius flapped her limbs in resistance, to no avail. She was in the tech division, not the fight division.

"You. Do you know what you've done?" the vampire muttered in a choked voice.

Cornelius then realized who she was dealing with. Those sleepy eyes. That golden bedhead. The Full Moon emblem on her uniform.

"P-Petrose Calamaria...?!"

"In the flesh. And you've done it now, terrorist. It sure was a pain catching you, what with you warping around everywhere with the Holy Knights' teleporters. So tell me—how are you gonna make it up to me? I'm all tuckered out thanks to you. And the Imperial Capital is a total mess."

The scarlet glow in Petrose's eyes made every hair on Cornelius's body stand on end. Her powers were outlined in Inverse Moon's Implosion Exegesis.

Petrose had the power to cause explosions in any place she'd ever been to, at any time.

This vampire could blow up Cornelius down to her molecules without breaking a sweat.

"Are you ready? I'm going to combust every single bone in your body, one by one."

"W-wait! A-a-are you sure you want to kill me?! I'm in the top brass of Inverse Moon! I'm a Luna!"

"Who cares? I certainly don't. Killing everyone's the quickest. Saves me from more work."

"How can you be so barbaric...? Where's the beauty in that...?"

"Beauty is the word you use for the moment when everything in creation crumbles. And what's more beautiful than an explosion, which paints the world with flavor? Now

c'mon—let me get that delicious blood of yours bursting.”

“...”

This woman's crazier than anyone in Inverse Moon.

Cornelius ground her teeth and gulped down her fear. As a member of Inverse Moon, she couldn't back down now. She came up with a plan to save herself at the speed of light.

“Let's begin. How about we start with your coccyx?” An atrocious grin came to Petrose's face.

“Y-you're gonna regret killing me!”

“Still babbling, are you? Give up already.”

“The Empress! I'll tell you where the Empress is! You'll never find her if you blow me up!”

“...”

A cold wind blew.

Hesitation bloomed in Petrose's heart.

※

Fuyao Meteorite was delighted.

Terakomari Gandesblood had returned to the Imperial Capital. The moment the vampire's voice echoed in the night sky of the Mulnite Empire, Fuyao's golden ears perked right up, pointing to heaven.

This was no time for a stroll. She threw away the inari sushi she'd stolen from a street vendor and leaped across the ruins of the houses, rushing toward her bitter enemy.

It was time for revenge.

Time to make Komari pay for what she'd done to the Heavenly Paradise.

She needed to break through the Blood Curse in order to stand at the top of the world.

Bloodlust surged inside her.

Fuyao jumped onto the roof of a crumbling building, then heard a gunshot.

By the time she heard it, the bullet had already grazed her cheek and flown off into the distance. She wiped the blood and turned around.

"You're that fox who made a whole mess back during the Heavenly Ball! What great luck I have! Let's play an overture to the beat of your screams."

An ivory girl was floating in midair. A Sapphire wearing thick winter clothing and armed with a gun. One of the Six Arctic Masters of the Polar Union—Prohellya Butchersky.

Behind her were lines of uniformed Sapphires, all glaring at Fuyao. What an unpleasant development. She didn't have the time to waste on these losers.

Fuyao gently placed a hand on the hilt of her katana.

"...What do you want? This is the vampire's country," she spat.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You're funny. Aren't you a beast-folk? What are *you* doing here? Surely not plotting something stupid like an invasion, right? Haven't you learned your lesson after your defeat at the Heavenly Paradise? Just grab some fried snacks and get on your way home already."

Cloing.

Her consciousness was driven from the *core* of her heart.

An alternate self took control of her body.

"It's racist to tell a fox-folk to eat fried food! But if you want a fight, you've got one. Seems like you're itching to be buried in the Imperial Capital anyway."

"Come at me!"

Prohellya shot at Fuyao immediately.

So began the clash between Sapphires and the beast-folk.



Tryphon Cross could feel the cogs getting out of order.

Terakomari Gandesblood should have been incapacitated back in the Holy City, but Millicent Bluenight had thrown his ploy off course.

His backup plan to capture Komari once she teleported back into the Imperial Capital had already failed. Sending the full forces of Inverse Moon against her should have worked. The Blood Curse caused great damage, and Komari was naive, so Tryphon had assumed she wouldn't want to activate it while there were so many civilians around. But then Nelia Cunningham and Karla Amatsu threw a wrench into everything.

Now he couldn't even get in touch with the other Lunae.

According to his reports, Cornelius had been captured by Petrose Calamaria.

He had nothing confirmed yet for Fuyao Meteorite, but it appeared she was fighting Prohellya Butchersky, who had come all the way from the Polar Union.

"Is this all a coincidence? No, this was inevitable. Everything is happening as it's supposed to happen."

Terakomari Gandesblood hadn't planned any of this. She just had that many people who wanted to help her.

Then the palace ceiling creaked.

Tryphon looked up calmly and realized that dense mana was gushing in from above.

"She's here. To think she would destroy the palace."

Tryphon took some needles out of his pocket.

The ceiling caved in with deafening roar.

Along with the rubble descended a vampire with golden hair and scarlet eyes who was enveloped in intense, bright-red mana—Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood.

“Die, terrorist.”

Tryphon dodged her swift kick by a hair.

The moment her feet touched the ground, a disastrous mana explosion went off. The floor erupted in a crimson blast. Tryphon covered his face with his arms and braced himself. The volume of mana was abnormal—this was the true power of the Blood Curse.

“Impressive. But my Core Implosion will...?!”

Before he could process what was going on, there was already a fist in front of his face.

Dodging the punch would be impossible. Tryphon immediately went on the defensive and braced himself for the impact, but it was all for naught. Terakomari’s fist crushed the bones in his arms and sent him flying.

“Gwah!”

The air left his lungs as he crashed into the wall.

Much to his surprise, that didn’t kill him. But he hadn’t felt pain like this in years.

Tryphon wiped the blood from his mouth and stared straight ahead.

The scarlet mana had changed the palace entirely, as though they were in another world. And in the middle of the glow, the crimson girl stood proudly. The sight of her bathing in the moonlight, exuding bloodlust from every pore, embodied the very image of the *slaughter champion* her fellow vampires clamored for.

It was no use facing her head on.

“Amazing. The world could easily be yours with such power. Why do you content yourself with being a commander of the Mulnite Empire? If you wished for it—”

“We don’t need your advice. No one cares what you have to say.”

A maid with scarlet eyes stood at Terakomari’s side. Villhaze. Her Core Implosion was active, too.

"I see. Pandora's Poison. You know what will happen next, don't you?"

"Yes, of course." Villhaze put on a faint smile. "Your defeat."

"Indeed," Terakomari said.

Intense mana. Countless magic circles appeared behind her.

Then a barrage of spells rained down without warning. Each and every one of them contained enough energy to kill a person.

Tryphon's spirit was paralyzed in the face of their overwhelming hostility. His body propelled him away from Komari's attack purely on instinct.

The spells that didn't hit him pierced the walls and disappeared into the darkness. The luxurious palace was turned into a beehive.

Tryphon activated his Core Implosion, Treason's Spirit Gate. He could teleport anything he touched. A power of rejection, born from his belief that people could never understand one another.

In his hand were the needles he always used as weapons. He could easily teleport them to Komari's brain and be done with it. The Blood Curse couldn't save her from being destroyed from the inside.

"Lady Komari, to the right."

But it turned out that hitting her would be no simple task.

Terakomari moved to the right at the speed of light. Tryphon's needle was transported into midair a second later, immediately clattering uselessly to the floor.

Villhaze was using Pandora's Poison to predict where his needles would land. Tryphon continued to narrowly dodge the mana projectiles coming for him, all while activating Treason's Spirit Gate time and time again.

"Another on your right." "Coming from ahead." "From above." "Right." "Go down." "Now left." None of them hit.

Villhaze predicted the location of every last needle, and Terakomari moved swiftly in

midair without rest. The motion, coupled with the scarlet mana trail she gave off, resembled a heavenly dance. But there was no time to be impressed.

Pandora's Poison was foiling his plans. He'd send a needle right in front of a pillar, but somehow, it would end up six feet away.

Villhaze was no regular maid.

Tryphon needed to kill her first, then. He gritted his teeth and put a hand in his pocket but then it dawned on him: he was out of needles.

"...You're such a bother, you know?"

His ice-cold heart burned in desperate anger.

This moment of fury cost him his life.

"Die."

"?!"

A torrent of mana raged at him.

Tryphon immediately tried to turn and dodge out of the way, but he couldn't. Something was grabbing his ankle.

"Wh-what magic is this?!"

A flock of hands composed of coagulated blood was growing from the floor.

Fear took hold of him. He had to shake them off. He concentrated all of his mana to cast a barrier spell.

But Komari's scarlet mana broke through his Barrier Wall.

"G-gwah?!"

Not even his hard Sapphire body was able to stand the rush of her power.

He was blown backward. Tryphon skidded across the floor and puked blood, already

half-unconscious. He tried getting up, but then he came to a dreadful realization: His left arm was nowhere to be found. The limb tapered off around its halfway point.

The terrible smell of charred flesh clued him in to the fact a spell had just burned his arm away. This was the last coherent thought he was able to form. Pain like he had never experienced before crept up his spine.

“G-guh...” He swallowed the scream trying to escape his throat.

The agony. It was too much. Inverse Moon couldn’t rely on the Dark Core, so he couldn’t heal. Had everyone who’d died up until now gone through this? Yes... This...

This would let him grow.

Fuyao had said it herself. “Pain makes you flourish.”

“Guh... Heh. Heh-heh-heh. It hurts. Oh, this torment... I see...”

“Give up, Tryphon.”

The scarlet monster was upon him in the blink of an eye.

Just looking at the massive amount of mana she was pumping out made him dizzy. No wonder Fuyao hadn’t been able to lift a finger against her. How could anyone hope to match her in raw power?

“This is the end of the line, Tryphon Cross.”

Beside Komari stood her blue-haired maid—Villhaze. She took a kunai out of her pocket and looked down on him with a frigid smirk.

“Shall I send you over to the Dark Core Zone? Your arm will heal then.”

“...Oh my. I’ll take you up on the offer.”

“No.” Terakomari took a step forward. She shot him a glance full of pity. “You did terrible things to everyone.”

He could barely hold back his laughter. This girl was naive to the very end.

Terakomari Gandesblood was always acting on someone else's behalf. And because of that, she had forgotten about being manipulated in the Cathedral. What a guileless vampire.

"So I will put an end to..."

"I see. May I say one last thing, then?"

Tryphon tottered up, holding back the pain.

Terakomari stopped. Just as he expected—she showed empathy even to her enemies. Just put on a sad face and plead, and she would let down her guard.

Villhaze furrowed her brow.

"What is it? Leave begging for your life for after you're dead."

"No, I was just thinking I should tell you my objective. You wouldn't be satisfied killing your foe without knowing why he did all this, would you?"

"..." No objection.

Tryphon put his right hand into his pocket and spoke.

"First of all, Inverse Moon's goal is to destroy the Dark Core. However, I am of a different mind about it than my fellow Lunae. I would rather make use of the Dark Core, not destroy it. It is a special-grade Divine Instrument the likes of which have never been seen before. In the right hands, it could give its wielder unlimited power. I want to use that power to bring harmony to the world."

Advocating for world peace all while killing people in the process. Tryphon's ideals were so contradictory that they robbed people of their capacity to think.

A puzzled look came to Vill and Terakomari's faces.

"I seek a society in which everyone is equal under the Dark Core. You feel it too, don't you? That this world is far too unjust. People who live in peace have their lives abruptly snatched away. There are the strong and the weak. The rich and the poor. The talented and the untalented. The beautiful and the ugly. Nightmares are born from these unequal distinctions. I want the Dark Core's power to homogenize the world. All

people must be handled equally. Then there will be no need for anyone to suffer futile strife."

Tryphon spoke with utter sincerity. The Polar Union had aimed to bring revolution to their country, but he wished for one on a grander scale—a global insurrection. That was his ultimate goal.

"I'll start by ruling the Mulnite Empire. After this nation goes down, perhaps I'll go after Aruka next. Eventually, I will take over the Six Nations and the Dark Core Zone, and my utopia will become reality. Don't you see the appeal of the world I'm after? You wouldn't have to keep working as a commander in it. You'd be free from such trite problems..."

"Enough. I cannot accept your ideals." Villhaze glared at him.

It's about time. Tryphon put on a wry smile while moving his middle finger inside his pocket. His little chat had given him time to gather enough mana for a spell.

"Why? Don't you think such a world would be better?"

"Ridiculous. If Lady Komari won't do it, I'll poison you to death."

"I see... Though I think you'll find that the tables are turned."

"Huh?... Wha?"



Plop.

Vill fell helplessly to her knees. I looked down at my side in wonder.

She was pale in the face and had brought a hand over her mouth.

Then a gush of bright-red blood escaped from her lips.

"Wha...? Wh-why...? Lady Komari..."

My maid was drowning in a puddle of blood. Scarlet mana. She convulsed repulsively. Palpable hostility emanated from my body. My maid looked up to me for help.

What was happening? What was I doing?

"I planted it on her back at the Holy City. Not so much poison, per se, but rather, a small bomb. I saved it right until the very end." Tryphon smiled.

Then it came back to me. I was there to defeat this guy.

But why? He was already down an arm and hurting. Had I been fighting him just now?

"Stop your Core Implosion, or I will activate another bomb."

"..."

"Did you hear me? Your dear maid will be blown to smithereens. Are you going to let that happen? You'll lose her for real this time."

"....."

Tryphon's words gouged into my heart.

Lose Vill? I could never let that happen.

She was writhing on the floor. There was a blood stain on her belly. Had he really planted bombs inside her? If I lost her. If I really lost her forever...

I... I...

Would I go back to being all alone, shut up in that dark room?

My heart was leaping out of my chest.

My mana subsided.

Almighty power left both my body and spirit.

My hazy consciousness began to clear.

"Wha...?"

It felt as though I was waking up.

I immediately shifted my gaze to my maid, who was collapsed at my feet. A shriek escaped my throat.

“Vill?! What happened to you?!”

“L-Lady Komari...”

Tears streaming down my face, I grabbed her.

She burst into a coughing fit. Blood left her mouth and splattered over the floor of the Audience Room. Dizzying despair coursed through my body as I listened to her labored breathing.

Why? How did this happen?

“The Blood Curse is gone. This really is the most effective way.”

I turned around.

Tryphon was cackling like the devil.

It was him. This was his fault. He hurt people like it was nothing and felt no remorse for it. This monster of a man was at fault for leaving the Mulnite Empire in ruins.

“Villhaze is your weakness. I’ve proved that your Core Implosion dwindle when you get scared of losing her.”

“S-screw you! Why are you doing thi— Guh!”

My vision went blank after he kicked me in the head. Before I knew it, I was on the floor next to Vill. My head rang loudly. Blood flowed from my mouth.

But I couldn’t falter. I fought through the pain and stood up.

Tryphon was standing right in front of me.

“Unlike Kakumei Amatsu, I don’t care for battle. Graciously admit your defeat, and I will refrain from any further violence. What do you say?”

“I say you’re crazy! I’m not... I won’t...!!”

"Shall I activate the second bomb, then?"

"S-stop it!" I screamed immediately.

I couldn't stand to see Vill suffer any more.

Plus... there was no guarantee these explosives weren't Divine Instruments.

Actually, that didn't even matter. Vill had her Core Implosion active. If something happened to her, it couldn't be undone.

"Then what are you going to do, Terakomari Gandesblood?"

"Stop... Don't kill Vill..."

"Heh." Tryphon chuckled. "You were able to get back on your feet thanks to the support of the people you love. But if you had to choose between them and the Mulnite Empire, which would it be? Make it clear."

My head was leaden. *Why are you making me choose?*

I decided to fight for my loved ones—for the sake of Vill and everyone else.

But I also promised the people of the Imperial Capital that I would save the Mulnite Empire.

I had to think of a way to break through this.

Vill was wincing, curled up in a ball right beside me. She must've been hurting everywhere. How could she not be, with all the blood she was losing?

Right. Blood. I'd lapsed into that dreamlike state after drinking Vill's blood. During that time, I'd beaten Tryphon to a pulp and wrecked the Mulnite Imperial Palace. If I could just get another sip of her blood...

"Gah?!"

He stomped on my hand as I reached out for her. Tremendous pain surged through my body.

“Please.” Tryphon sighed. “Do you still not comprehend the position you’re in? You’ve already lost.”

“Vill...! Vill...!!”

“It’s no use. I suppose she’s lost her mind.”

My dear maid was expiring right before my eyes. And I could only shed tears.

Ultimately, not even my Core Implosion could defeat the terrorist. I couldn’t keep my promise to everyone in the city. I was just a useless vampire who could accomplish nothing at the very end.

“Oh. Welcome,” Tryphon said.

I wasn’t paying attention to what he was saying. I had to think of a way to save Vill. A way to get out of here with her. A way to apologize for being unable to save the Imperial Capital.

But then I heard *her* voice.

“Tryphon! You want to crown me in this mess of a palace? Don’t be ridiculous.”

Someone approached with soft steps from behind us.

I looked up. I was shaking. Prickling malice ate into my soul. Darkness shrouded the Mulnite Empire once again.

Tryphon bowed respectfully.

“I apologize. The battle proved fiercer than I anticipated.”

“And this whole thing is way below my expectations. Woah, what’s with that wound?! Where did your arm go?! You can’t fix that without the Dark Core!”

“I was thinking of using it to heal.”

“I’ll allow it!”

Her cheerful voice made for quite the contrast.

I felt my heart almost give out from sheer fear. Dread in my chest, I turned around.

There stood a girl. A vampire with golden hair, shining like the sun, tied up in pigtails. About my own age. She had a merriness about her, as if her joy knew no bounds. Atop her head sat a strange brimless hat emblazoned with an upside-down moon symbol.

“Wha... Spica...?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. What was she doing here?

And why was her every word and gesture so different from the girl I knew?

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Terakomari?”

Something was off about her glowing smile.

She spun her bright-red lollipop around in her hand and introduced herself, much to my dismay.

“Or should I say, nice to meet you? I’m Spica La Gemini—the boss of Inverse Moon! They also call me the Wicked God Slayer!”

This couldn’t be real. Was I being shown an illusion?

“Wh-why...? Aren’t you the Pope of the Holy Church?”

“That was only a facade. I am Julius VI, but she’s not the real me. When the previous Pope quit, Amatsu and Tryphon did everything in their power get me the position! But I’ve grown tired of that stuffy religion. Everyone’s shouting ‘God save us!’ all the time, when there obviously isn’t one. Snacking is a better use of your time than praying, and a more relaxing pursuit at that. Don’t you think?”

I didn’t understand the slightest thing about the situation, save for the fact that the girl before me couldn’t possibly be my ally.

She—Spica La Gemini—was behind the misfortune being spread throughout the

world.

"Tryphon, was it okay for me to blow my cover as Pope? I guess I am becoming Empress of Mulnite. But can you really crown me now?"

"Of course. We'll gather our men and hold a ceremony straight away."

"All right. Then I guess I should put this on."

"Huh? What's that...?"

Spica spun a crown around her finger.

It took me a moment to realize that it was the same one the Empress always wore.

She showed Tryphon the shiny object and smiled innocently.

"This is Mulnite's Dark Core."

I felt like I'd been shot through the heart.

The Dark Core? The foundation of the Mulnite Empire?

"I snatched it off the Empress's head. I knew she would have it on her. I wonder if the leaders of all the other nations do the same. On that note, I think I have some ideas about the form each Dark Core takes. That bell Karla Amatsu wears on her wrist has to be one."

"Your Highness, is that true? That's Mulnite's...?" Tryphon asked.

"You doubt me?"

"No. I would never." Tryphon bowed deeply.

The Wicked God Slayer hummed as she walked farther into the Audience Room. "There we go," she said as she sat down on the throne and crossed her legs.

Then she placed the Empress's crown on top of her hat.



“What a nice view! Look at those piles of rubble.”

“I apologize. Should I get them cleaned up?”

“Let Amatsu take care of it. I heard he’s been getting in your way, right?”

“He won’t weasel his way out of this one. That man is no loyal member of Inverse Moon. I reckon he deserves harsher punishment than cleaning up this mess.”

“I agree! How about having him eat red bean paste until he dies? That’d be fun!”

“Well, that’s not exactly...” Tryphon walked up to the throne.

The two were chatting merrily, but none of it reached my ears. I wept while crawling to Vill. I had no idea how powerful Tryphon’s bombs were, but she was already on death’s door.

“Vill...”

She didn’t answer my call.

I tried shaking her shoulder but stopped. Her face was devoid of color.

It was only a matter of time before she died. This couldn’t happen. I couldn’t let my maid die, even if I had to turn the world on its head to prevent it.

Then the crumpled-up letter fell out of my pocket. I saw my mother’s note.

“Please take care of Mulnite. Keep the world close to your chest.”

“...”

My chest ached. What was I supposed to do with this?

I couldn’t become my mother. I couldn’t be as great as the golden vampire who’d accomplished so much on her own around the world.

The fate of the Mulnite Empire was a burden too heavy for me to carry. It was too much for a sad excuse of a vampire like me.

“Say, Komari, do you love her?”

Spica’s quiet whisper pierced my eardrums.

She was staring at me.

I glared back at her, grinding my teeth.

“Of course I do, she’s my dear...”

“Then give up on the Empire. Tryphon doesn’t like killing. We could’ve gone way easier on you if you didn’t get in our way. I’ll be as sugary-sweet to you as this lollipop!”

“What...?”

“Hmm, actually, that wouldn’t be fair! You’ve already hurt my comrades! I can’t keep just let you get away with chopping off my underling’s arm! Okay, how about this? You kowtow and ask for forgiveness, and I’ll grant it. Rub your forehead on the floor and say ‘I’m sorry!’”

“...!”

Spica cackled, reclining against the throne. *Where do you get off being so arrogant? That’s not your seat. It’s the sicko Empress’s.*

Bitter tears poured from my eyes.

Was there any limit to how awful these two were? I’d seen a few evil people over the course of this year, but none of them were as terrible as this.

But there was no value in keeping my pride. I couldn’t let them keep harming my friends.

I had no power. At the end of the day, there was nothing I could do to save them. But... if lowering my head was all I had to do to earn their forgiveness...

“So? If you’re not gonna do it, then Tryphon’s doing away with you and your maid.”

“...”

No choice.

I forced my pain-racked body off the ground.

I'm no commander. This is what suits me best. Groveling, begging for forgiveness, then shutting myself in. The only thing that's changed is that now I need to do it before Spica instead of Millicent. Then history will repeat itself. I'll lose motivation and spend the rest of my days hugging my knees in that dark room.

Just as I was lowering my head in abject despair, I heard her voice:

“Lady Komari...”

She placed a hand on my shoulder.

I looked up in shock.

Vill was on her feet and by my side.

Blood dribbled from her mouth as she spoke.

“You... already found your answer to that question. You chose to live, not as a shut-in, but as a commander. You can't go back on that now... It would be disrespectful to everyone, don't you think?”

“V-Vill...! Are you okay...?”

“Honestly, the pain is killing me... But I can't let myself kick the bucket now.”

Vill strained to remain tottering on her feet as she took a kunai out of her pocket and pointed it at the throne. Then she looked at me and smiled.

“It's too soon to give up, Lady Komari.”

“...It's no use. They'll kill you if you keep fighting... You're hurting already... Give it a rest...”

“If that's your answer, then I'll fight on my own.”

“...?!”

Just then, it felt as though lightning coursed through my veins.

Vill was serious. She genuinely wasn't even considering backing down.

"I'll confess. I've loved all the time I've spent with you. I can't let it come to an end here. So I'll drive these terrorists away, no matter what it takes."

"But..."

"Did you not enjoy those wild days you spent with me?"

No, I didn't dislike them. Vill and the Seventh Unit and Sakuna and Nelia and Karla had all pushed me to grow as a person. These past six months had been incredibly fulfilling.

"It looks like you've already found your answer." Vill smiled. Then she grabbed my hand gently and said, "I can see the future. Our victory is certain."

"...!"

A light shone upon the path I had to follow.

Her words resonated deeply within me. I could feel the weight being lifted from my shoulders.

If Vill said so... I could believe her. We would be fine.

Certainty budded within me.

This maid was always propping me up. Even here at the eleventh hour, I was a total good-for-nothing without her. I was no commander when she wasn't by my side.

"All right. I'll do my best."

"Yes. Let's."

I had nothing to fear now. With Vill right there with me, I could defeat any enemy.

That was when Tryphon noticed us.

"You still haven't given up? Activate Core Implosion, and I'll set off the bombs inside Villhaze. Do you want her blood on your hands?"

A mischievous smile crept across Vill's lips.

"I don't see that future. You only planted one bomb inside me."

"Why you...! Then I'll destroy the Dark Core. Don't take even one more step," Tryphon threatened.

"Don't worry, Lady Komari. That's not the Dark Core," Vill told me.

"Your Highness?! Is she right?!" Tryphon asked Spica.

"No use pretending anymore. Yeah, I said that to push her into despair," Spica admitted.

Tryphon shot us an explosive glare.

Then he kicked off the floor and dashed right for us. I froze on pure instinct. Just as I thought I was dead, *BANG!* I heard a deafening gunshot.

"Gah....?"

A magic bullet tore through Tryphon's shoulder. His body twisted around in midair as he was blown back. Even Spica gasped in surprise at this. I turned around in awe, and there I saw...

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! That was close! Are you unharmed, Terakomari? Nope, I can see you're not! Sorry for being so late!"

...Prohellya Butchersky. The Sapphire's silver hair fluttered in the night wind.

What is she doing here? The question passed out of my mind the next moment, when she threw what she had been dragging alongside her.

A wounded body fell to the floor with a thud.

That got Spica panicking.

“Fuyao?! Why...?!”

“This bellicose fox was looking for a fight, so I hunted her down. Sadly, most of my lovely subordinates were knocked out in the interim.”

“Wh-what...?!”

Fuyao Meteorite. The foxgirl who'd tried plunging the Heavenly Paradise into chaos now lay butchered and unconscious at our feet. *What? Prohellya took her down?* Before I had the chance to get my bearings, the silver girl's stormy voice echoed once again.

“Terakomari! Look up! Stay sharp!”

“Huh...?”

Then a shrill voice echoed from the night sky.

“*Can you hear us, Commander Terakomari Gandesblood?!*”

Melka appeared on a screen in the sky. She clutched her microphone tightly and spoke effusively.

“Everyone in the Imperial Capital is cheering you on! And not just them... The armies of Aruka and the Heavenly Paradise have beaten the terrorists and the Holy Knights to a pulp and are now heading toward the Mulnite Imperial Palace! They've also reunited with the Empire's Seventh Unit, along with Commander Millicent Bluenight, Commander Sakuna Memoir, and Commander Petrose Calamaria, plus their respective Units! It's a lot of people, I tell ya! They're gonna crush the whole place!”

“Eek! Let's get out of here before they trample us!”

“Don't run, Thio! It's our duty as reporters to broadcast battles until their end, even if it costs us our lives!! Anyway, Commander Gandesblood! Show the terrorists the full extent of our hero's power! Rout them from the Mulnite Empire! It is none other than Terakomari Gandesblood who will lay the foundations of the new era!”

I stared at the broadcast of the city, dumbstruck.

Loads of people showed up in Melka's feed.

Vampires, Peace Spirits, Warblades, Sapphires—people from all across the world were coming to the palace. The lackeys of Inverse Moon and the Holy Knights were nowhere to be found.

And all around the city, people were shouting my name: “*Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!*”

It was all quite embarrassing. But at the same time, nothing made me happier than seeing this many people care for me.

I couldn’t hesitate any longer.

Vill turned to me, a smile on her face.

“Lady Komari, I can see our victory.”

“Yeah. You’re right about that...”

I slowly approached her.

Vill didn’t resist. She knew what had to be done. Honestly, I still couldn’t believe in my own powers. My consciousness went hazy the moment I sucked blood. I had no idea what went on after that. But everyone was waiting for me to use Core Implosion.

So I had to believe in them. And hey, it couldn’t be so bad having faith in someone other than myself every once in a while.

I brought my face up to her pale neck and bit in.

Vill moaned. Her fresh blood moistened my dried mouth. I usually hated the taste, but for some reason, hers was sweeter than any juice.

“Learn your lesson already. The mercy stops here...,” Tryphon growled.

“Wait, Tryphon! Don’t move, they’ll kill Fuyao,” Spica shouted.

“Huh?!”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! That’s right! If you don’t want this fox’s brains decorating the floor, then stay as still as bear in his cave waiting for spring. Don’t move a muscle until Terakomari finishes activating her Core Implosion,” Prohellya taunted.

“Cheeky little...!”

“Oh, you don’t like it? But isn’t this the same thing you just did?”

“.....”

They were arguing behind us, but I didn’t care.

My mind was entirely set on sucking Vill’s blood. Her sweet, delicious blood. I didn’t want to ever get my tongue off her... But then I felt a prickling pain on my neck.

“Huh? Vill...?” I widened my eyes.

She was holding me tightly.

It took me a moment to realize the prick was from a bite wound. My blood flowed straight into her mouth. I froze, falling into panic.

Then she let go of me with a smile of satisfaction on her face.

“Thank you for the meal. It was delicious.”

“Ah...”

I felt searing mana welling up deep within me.

The world turned red and blue.



Core Implosion strengthened with the mental state of its user.

Just as Karla Amatsu had learned to travel across time after two years, everyone had equal capacity for improvement.

Villhaze had simply done the same. Her feelings for her mistress evolved. Upon seeing Terakomari Gandesblood’s determination, she too decided to give her all the support she needed, forevermore.

A mana torrent of colossal proportions engulfed the Mulnite Imperial Palace.

Terakomari Gandesblood stood in the eye of the scarlet vortex. Her power, brought about by the blood of her loyal servant, gave her the ultimate in physical and magical capabilities—the strength to destroy anything and everything. It was the peak of the original Blood Curse, the same one that had once dyed the skies of the Imperial Capital crimson.

And inside the blue vortex was Villhaze. Her trusty kunais were glowing from the mana imbued in them. She'd activated an advanced form of her power to glimpse into the future—Pandora's Poison—through imbibing the blood of her beloved mistress.

"Lady Komari, let's drive them out of here."

"Yes. Together, we shall."

Everyone present gasped.

The air creaked. The rustling of both intense springs of mana echoed throughout the Audience Room.

Tryphon, Prohellya, and even Spica La Gemini were all overwhelmed by the extraordinary aura of their hostile energy.

The first to come back to his senses was Tryphon. The man had survived countless clashes back in the Polar Union. He could keep his head cool even in the face of a Core Implosion matching the power of thousands. That was why he had been given the title of Inverse Moon's strategist, for he could stay calm and analyze any situation, regardless of who he was up against.

Then a bunch of things happened at once.

Tryphon dashed. He was set on annihilating his enemy before they could make a move. But he couldn't use Treason's Spirit Gate thanks to Villhaze's Core Implosion. Somehow, she was messing with the world's coordinates.

Prohellya reacted next. The moment she saw Tryphon dash, needle in hand, she mercilessly forged a bullet of white mana and pulled the trigger.

A gunshot echoed. The magic bullet flew at the speed of light.

Right before it connected with Tryphon, he activated Treason's Spirit Gate without

setting any coordinates. Even if he couldn't control where he teleported things, he could still use his Core Implosion to get rid of enemy attacks. The bullet disappeared from view.

And it rematerialized right before Terakomari Gandesblood. A miracle. A prank from the heavens.

"Wha...?"

Her scarlet eyes shook.

Tryphon curled his lips in joy.

"Sorryyyyy!!" Prohellya screamed.

"...Lady Komari?!"

The bullet struck Komari square in the chest.

The sound of something breaking echoed in the room. Everyone widened their eyes in shock. The noise had come from the pendant she always kept on her, which was now fractured.

An instant later, light surged from between the cracks.

No one could do anything.

In the blink of an eye, the world was bleached out. And the three of them disappeared without a trace.



Vexations

6 Pandora's Poison

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

"Your political opponents won? You've got nowhere to go?"

"What can you even do about it?"

"I see. You'll look for the Dark Cores with me? Then I'll take care of you in return!"

The Wicked God Slayer's voice wouldn't leave his head.

The girl had found him after he was exiled from the Polar Union's government. That must've been her modus operandi—gathering outcasts. Not out of a demand for gratitude—Spica La Gemini was simply kinder than anyone else. But this quality of hers did cause everyone in Inverse Moon to give their life and soul fighting for her.

Tryphon Cross was no exception.

Inverse Moon was far from a monolith. The organization consisted of far too many factions for the word to be applicable. Fuyao Meteorite, for example, couldn't have cared less about the organization's goals. The only thing she was concerned with was getting stronger. Lonne Cornelius was in a similar position. She was only motivated by her research into the truth of this world.

Yet despite the great variety of philosophies in Inverse Moon, the lone wolves who filled its ranks would happily band together for the sake of Her Highness. Even Kakumei Amatsu—who frequently acted in ways that were hard to understand or even borderline treasonous—would join in.

Perhaps it was because of her charisma.

It is she who should rule the world, Tryphon thought.

Her opinions about what to do with the Dark Core differed from his, but he was certain that putting Spica at the top after the revolution would only be good for the world.

And for that reason, he fought.

For the world. For Inverse Moon. And for Her Highness.

Which was why he needed to get rid of anyone who stood in their way.

Like Terakomari Gandesblood.

The only vampire Spica recognized as extraordinary.

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Prohellya Butchersky was confused.

The Mulnite Imperial Palace was in shambles, like a tornado had blown through. And the two people who were standing at the center of it all had disappeared—but not just them. The Sapphire terrorist who'd attacked them was also nowhere to be found. He must've been that Tryphon Cross fellow the General Secretary had mentioned, but Prohellya didn't really care about him.

“What the...? Where'd they go?!”

“They vanished. To the Netherworld. Which means... that was the Dark Core,” the vampire sitting atop the throne said with disinterest.

Then she crushed the crown on her head with her bare hands. It shattered into tiny shards all across the floor.

Prohellya observed the girl with caution. She knew her face. It belonged to the Pope of the Holy Church—Julius VI. Spica La Gemini.

And also the leader of terrorist group Inverse Moon.

But what was with her wicked aura? Even though Prohellya was one of the six Arctic Masters, the strongest people in the Polar Union, she couldn't help but find something eerie, something ominous about Spica's mana. She looked like any other cute girl, but just facing her had Prohellya's hair standing on end. Excitement welled from deep inside her at the sight of such a powerful foe.

And yet Spica was still innocent to her core.

She yawned like a bored child.

"I think it's time already. I'm all out of candy."

"What do you mean? Do you think I'll let you go?"

"I don't think Tryphon can defeat Terakomari in his state. He had a surprisingly decent run... but in the end, conquering the country was too much for him to handle."

"Are you listening to me?"

"Oh well. Time to go home."

The Vampire Princess didn't give the Sapphire girl the time of day.

It was like Spica didn't even care that she was there. Prohellya was usually quite tolerant, but even she got mad at being ignored. How dare she be so rude to a great Arctic Master? This girl had earned a lesson.

"Spica La Gemini! I'm talking to you! Listen up, or I'll blast a bullet through your sku—"

Then it happened.

"Ugh?" Prohellya grunted. Before she knew it, she had dropped her gun and fallen to her knees. She couldn't process what happened.

Her belly hurt. As though it had been slashed with a blade. Because it had.

A knife was sticking out from her gut.

"Guh... Ah... Wh-what... is this...?!"

"I'm only imitating Tryphon! Mine is just regular Void Magic, though."

Spica was already upon her. The girl looked down on Prohellya with cold blue eyes.

She put on a smile as bright as the sun and said:

"I thought about it some more, and I think it'd be too sad to go without any accomplishments. I'll be taking your head back with me as a souvenir. I also have to take revenge for you hurting Fuyao. She's my friend, you know? Are you going to make up for that? We were gonna hold a mahjong tournament for her, but now she won't be healed in time for it!"

"....."

Prohellya reached for her gun, but it was too far away, and she was too weak to move toward it.

"Give up, Prohellya Butchersky. I'll make you regret ever coming to the Mulnite Empire! Your sense of justice was all for nothing!"

She couldn't understand. Where had Terakomari and Villhaze gone? What exactly was this girl's goals? Why did she have to endure this pain?

She hated it. She hated everything.

She was too proud to come to such a pathetic end. Much less at the hands of a despicable terrorist.

It was then that lightning pierced heaven and earth.

Lightning? How is that possible? The skies are clear. You can see the full moon.

"What...?" Spica looked to the source of the electricity in wonder.

Prohellya followed her gaze. The beautiful blue moon peeked in from the hole in the ceiling, casting soft light all across the Audience Room.

Just as Prohellya wondered if she was hearing things, a voice sharp like thunder echoed.

“You’ve done terrible work of *my* garden, terrorists.”

Then world-shattering purple thunderbolts rushed all over.



Snow fell.

The wind was cold. The world was quiet, like it was dead.

“What... is this...?”

Tryphon looked around in awe. It seemed to be the Mulnite Imperial Palace garden.

But he’d just been in the Audience Room. Had he been teleported here with magic?

Too much was off for that to be the case.

Since when had it been snowing? And there was enough on the ground to leave footprints behind. The palace was in perfect shape, too. It stood proud, like nothing had happened. And the cityscape was awfully quiet. There were no signs of conflict. No smell of blood.

Then Tryphon realized. The moon in the sky was gone. It wasn’t hidden behind clouds. He confirmed its absence upon closer observation—the full moon had been replaced by a new moon.

It was as though he’d wandered into another world.

In any case, the cause was obvious.

“I see... I see. A new power of her Core Implosion.”

Mental growth led to the evolution of Core Implosion. This phenomenon had to be the result of Terakomari Gandesblood’s, or Villhaze’s, maturation.

Tryphon did not understand the details, but he knew this was a great power.

He had to get rid of those girls. They would cause even greater damage in the future if he didn’t kill them now to curtail their growth.

No one would come to his aid here. Treason's Spirit Gate would probably be useless, too.

His chances of victory were slim to none—but he wouldn't be a Luna if he couldn't overcome those odds.

“Found you.”

Just then, he heard someone mumble.

Great mana rained on him. Blood-curling hostility.

The red and blue vampires descended from the darkness of the moonless sky.

Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood. And clinging to her arm, her maid Villhaze.

There was no sight more dreadful. How long had it been since he'd been forced to go through something like this?

Tryphon forged mana, using advanced molding magic to create an ice blade. A weapon strong enough to kill two people. He smiled as he held the blade aloft and pointed it at the vampire duo in the sky.

“You will pay for getting in my way. My plan was this close to completion and you...”

“Die.”

A magic circle appeared, and mana poured down on him relentlessly.

The barrage of bullets blew the snow away. Tryphon withdrew frantically while closely observing his opponent's movements. But they weren't moving. At all. Terakomari stood in place like a cannon the moment she touched the ground, simply shooting at him with reckless abandon.

The fountain behind him was blown away.

A stone shard hit his right hand by coincidence, and he tried sending it into Terakomari's brain with Treason's Spirit Gate, but it warped far behind her instead. He still couldn't use his teleportation powers for whatever reason.

Or rather, he couldn't calculate where he would teleport things. Perhaps because this was a different world?

"Foolish tricks!"

He rolled to dodge the bullets coming at him.

Their attack showed no relent. Mana shot at him with monstrous mass and speed. All Tryphon could do was dodge as the buildings in the area sustained more damage with every shot. Giant explosions erupted in all directions, blasting rubble away.

He lost focus for a moment, and mana grazed his shoulder. It slashed his skin, and a stream of blood gushed out. But he didn't stop to wallow in pain. This wound was light enough to heal on its own.

"Impertinent. Little. Tricks!"

Tryphon ground his teeth and concentrated.

Nothing would change if he stayed on the defensive. He had to do something. Komari was certain she had the upper hand, and he could use this self-conceit to his own benefit.

Tryphon tightened his grip on his ice sword.

Elementary-level acceleration spell: *Gale*.

It was one of the most basic incantations, but the perfect way to close the distance with the enemy. Tryphon dodged the hail of mana faster than it could pelt him and closed in on the scarlet vortex.

Komari and Villhaze's murderous aura would have scared a regular person into unconsciousness, but Tryphon kept his fear at bay out of sheer mental fortitude as he dashed desperately toward them.

Almost there. I've almost got her.

A giant mass of mana headed straight for him.

He withdrew his blade at an angle, diverting the huge bundle of power ever so slightly

away from him. The scarlet mana slid off the ice sword and shot into the sky behind him.

“...!” Terakomari showed a moment of distress.

He held his sword high, aimed for her neck, and began a horizontal swing, when—

“...?!”

Thunk. Something collided with his foot.

The world turned on its head all of a sudden. Tryphon was sliding and spinning on the snow. How had this happened? The ice blade was no longer in his hands.

Just barely managing to regain his balance, he looked down at his feet in terror.

Like a sleight of hand, he found a kunai plunged deeply into his foot.

“Wh-what in the world?!”

This wasn’t the work of Terakomari, nor could this have been done with magic. A feat like this could only be pulled off with an ability comparable to Treason’s Spirit Gate.

“How do you like the taste of your own medicine?” She chuckled.

He turned around in disbelief.

By Terakomari’s side was a girl in a maid outfit. The vampire was scattering mana as intense as her master’s. Villhaze stared at him from within the blue vortex, smiling.

“Though unlike you, I’m not using teleportation. I simply planted a bomb in the path you were destined to take.”

“What does that mean...?”

“I don’t quite understand it myself. But I can tell each and every move you will make.”

She took a few kunais out of her pocket.

They all disappeared in midair.

He could imagine where they were sent.

Pandora's Poison let Villhaze see into the future. She had already correctly ascertained how many bombs he'd planted in her body.

If what she said just now was correct—and if Tryphon's conjecture was, as well—then Vill had sent those knives off to *the future*.

He couldn't stand it. How in the world were they able to get such powerful abilities?

Tryphon pulled the kunai out of his foot in annoyance.

Blood gushed from the wound. Pain raced through his brain. But so what? He couldn't give up here, or his ideal world would never become a reality. Inverse Moon needed Tryphon Cross.

"Your little tricks... will not be the death of me!!"

Tryphon used Gale again, leaving a trail of blood as he accelerated.

Terakomari kept on stubbornly shooting her scarlet mana. It might have been powerful, but her attacks were too straightforward. Dodging them was easy once he got the pattern down.

Tryphon focused his mana at the tip of his lost limb and shot a volley of Magic Bullets from it.

It didn't even manage to keep her in check. The bullets vanished into the darkness of the barrier all around her.

She really was no ordinary vampire. He cursed himself for letting her get this far.

"I must kill her..."

Explosions went off behind him as he dashed through the snow.

His whole body was racked with agony. The pain fueled his wrath.

He had to put his enemy in the ground, no matter the cost. He had to get rid of these fools who opposed Inverse Moon—who opposed the Wicked God Slayer.

"You don't have a chance," the blue girl whispered victoriously. "You'll lose in five seconds."

"I will change that future!!" Tryphon roared as he charged.

He was close to figuring out the rules. His usual coordinates calculations were of no use in this world. But that simply meant he had to adjust them to the environment. Where did he have to aim to pierce the enemy's brain? Just calculate and simulate and try, try again.

"Scram."

A mass of mana flew at him.

Tryphon waited until the last moment to dodge.

"I will never!!"

"Four"

A fantastical scene unfolded before his eyes.

Mana red like fresh blood. Mana blue like the raging sea. At the epicenter of it all, two vampires danced.

Tryphon was charmed for a moment. What beautiful strength of spirit... He shook his head to snap himself out of it. This scenario was ridiculous, and he wasn't about to follow the script.

He forged mana again to create another ice blade.

I'll throw it right at them. The moment the thought came to mind, excruciating pain ran across his right hand.

Villhaze's kunai plunged into him.

His face twisted.

"Three. You should give up already," the blue maid said.

“...!!”

He could never.

Having lost the ice blade, Tryphon gathered his mana on pure instinct and shot Magic Bullets. None of them hit. Terakomari's thin scarlet barrier stopped all of them.

Aiming for Villhaze didn't work, either. Terakomari had given her servant a shield of her own.

All hope was lost.

There was no guarantee that approaching to attack would bear any fruit.

“Two.”

The entire world moved in slow motion.

Memories flashed before Tryphon's eyes.

The day Her Highness brought him under her wing. The day he began work as a member of Inverse Moon. The day he was promoted to Luna. The day he met Lonne Cornelius, and she cried because she found him so scary. The day he got into a fistfight after drinking with Kakumei Amatsu, because they couldn't agree on who'd won at arm wrestling. The day Fuyao hurt his feelings when she told him he was a buzzkill who was depressing to be around, a full smile on her face. The day Her Highness congratulated him on his work and gave him a blood lollipop as a reward, which he honestly wasn't sure what to do with.

“It's preposterous... This isn't happening...”

Am I going to die?

What am I getting sentimental for? I haven't lost yet. I still have much to do...

“One.”

Tryphon gathered all the mana in his body and created a third ice blade.

The world took shape from the mind.

Following that, so long as Tryphon Cross's conviction surpassed Terakomari Gandesblood's kindness, then his blade should theoretically reach her throat.

"Die! Terakomari Gandesbloooooooooooooood!!"

Shouting at the top of his lungs, he took a powerful step forward.

The enemy was right before his eyes.

Komari's magic stopped only a moment against his surprisingly strong spirit.

His mind sped up. His thoughts accelerated. Soon he would bathe that tiny girl in blood.

The calculation was complete.

Tryphon activated Treason's Spirit Gate.

His eyes burned. Even now, he didn't have a full grasp of the coordinates' makeup in this world. He could only send things within a sixteen-foot radius of him.

He was close enough.

Tryphon's ice blade vanished from his hand. Everything was about to end. As soon as it entered Terakomari Gandesblood's body. But...

"Just as expected, Lady Komari."

"Yeah." Komari moved ever so slightly.

The ice blade slashed the void and fell to the ground.

"No..." Tryphon stared at it, dumbstruck.

Nothing worked. No attack of his could evade her predictions. He was always one step behind.

Terakomari Gandesblood's destructive energy was absolute. Villhaze's precognition was flawless.

The mix was demonic. How was he supposed defeat this?

As he fell into the bottomless trenches of despair, he felt sharp pain run across his whole body again.

“...?!”

His nerves were ablaze. Villhaze’s Pandora’s Poison struck once again.

Kunais stabbed into his hands and feet.

Unable to bear the pain, he lost his balance. He was about to fall to the snow, but he couldn’t possibly let himself be defeated. Not here. Not now. He just barely kept himself up, but then, he heard her whisper:

“...Zero.”

She announced the end of the battle.

“Lady Komari, it’s time.”

“Repent, Tryphon.”

Murderous intent emanated from the Vampire Princess’s every pore.

A scarlet beam shot at prodigious speed from her fingertips.

It was unavoidable.

“Your Highness...”

No one heard his last whisper.

Tryphon unfolded layer after layer of Barrier Walls in a panic. He knew it was fruitless. He only forged the mana subconsciously, out of sheer survival instinct.

And indeed, it was all for naught.

His vision went crimson.

Terakomari's spell easily broke through his makeshift shield, forging ahead until it pierced right through Tryphon and his ideals.



The scarlet flood swallowed Tryphon Cross and rushed forward, destroying the walls of the Mulnite Imperial Palace before finally disappearing into the night sky. No trace of their opponent was left behind, but Villhaze knew he couldn't have survived it.

Silence fell on the world beneath the new moon.

Villhaze's power to see the future faded away. The blue mana dissolved progressively into the air.

The same thing happened to her mistress. Her work done, the flames of the Blood Curse extinguished. Little by little, her bloodlust and the scarlet mana subsided.

Soon, she returned to her usual self.

"...Huh?"

Komari staggered.

Villhaze dashed to prop her mistress up.

"Are you okay, Lady Komari? You're not wounded anywhere?"

"No... I am hurting all over... but I think I'm fine."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"I have this feeling I did something amazing."

Her eyes wandered. She couldn't tell what was dream and what was reality. She was starting to retain some of her memories from when she used Core Implosion, but it seemed she still lost a few of them. Villhaze sighed in relief.



“You defeated Tryphon Cross. You and I.”

“...I see.”

Komari put on a faint smile.

She didn’t doubt her powers now.

“It doesn’t really feel like it... But Mulnite is safe now, yeah?”

“Most likely.”

“But what about Spica? She’s still...”

“Lady Cunningham and Lady Amatsu were heading to the palace after stopping the rioters. I doubt even Spica La Gemini would be able to defeat those two.”

It was all thanks to Terakomari Gandesblood’s accomplishments.

Even with the Empress missing, she had unleashed the full fortitude and kindness of her spirit to drive terrorists away. She’d taken a stand for everyone, and the people around her had taken up arms to support her. Commanders from the Aruka Republic, the Heavenly Paradise, and the Polar Union—they’d all ran to her aid because they recognized her virtues.

Villhaze was filled with renewed confidence that Komari would pull the Mulnite Empire forward into the future.

“Anyway... If it’s over, then thank goodness. I think this earns me about half a year of shut-in time, don’t you think?”

“What are you saying? Work will only be getting busier from here on out.”

“Please, no! I’m tired!”

“But didn’t you say you wouldn’t coop yourself up anymore?”

“Argh... No, I didn’t quite mean it in that way, you see...,” Komari mumbled for a while. But in the end, she found her determination. Heaving a heavy sigh, she looked up at Villhaze and said, “...Anyway, I guess I’ll be fine so long as I have you. And hey, we didn’t

die this time. Let's keep it up, Vill. Together."

"Am I correct in taking this as a marriage proposal?"

"Where'd you get that idea?!"

Komari looked away. It felt like it had been a long time since they'd engaged in this sort of banter.

In any case, they'd taken care of the threat. They had to go back home, with everyone.

Um. Wait.

Where are we?

"...Hey, where's the moon?"

"You're right. This is weird."

This wasn't the Mulnite Empire they were in just moments ago.

Snow was falling. The full moon had been replaced by a new moon. The boisterous city in chaos was as quiet as the grave. It looked like the Imperial Capital, but it couldn't be.

And yet this place filled Villhaze with a strange nostalgia. The smell somehow made her homesick. It felt as though she was visiting her long-forgotten homeland. But that couldn't possibly be. She had no homeland.

What was this phenomenon?

At first, she'd thought for sure it had to be a byproduct of Tryphon Cross's powers, but that turned out to not be the case.

I remember a white light. Tryphon Cross teleported Prohellya Butchersky's bullet and it hit Lady Komari's pendant.

The rest of her memories were vague.

"Lady Komari, do you remember how we ended up here?"

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH?!”

Villhaze's shoulders jolted in response to Komari's abrupt shriek.

Her mistress was holding her pendant in hand, wearing a look on her face like it was the end of the world.

“I-it's broken...”

“What?”

“It's broken! Look at this! My mom's keepsake is all messed up!”

Sure enough, the pendant was fractured.

It must've been the result of Prohellya's bullet hitting it... Then Villhaze came to a realization. The white light that brought them to this place had come from the pendant itself.

“Oh no... She's gonna kill me...”

“Don't cry, Lady Komari. We can just ask Lady Amatsu to fix it.”

“R-right. But I don't wanna inconvenience her...”

“There's something very special about this pendant, so I think she will understand. But first, we have to think of a way to get back to the Imperial Capital. Let's look around...” And so they did.

The snow-covered Imperial Palace was shockingly quiet. Was this really the Mulnite Empire? It felt like being in a dream... Suspicious, Villhaze took a step forward, then felt a twinge in her belly.

Right. Her wound from the bomb hadn't healed yet. The adrenaline rush from Core Implosion had only eased the pain.

“...I'm sorry, Lady Komari. Can we rest for a while?”

“Huh? O-oh, sure! You're wounded! How're you feeling?!”

"This should heal itself. I don't think it was made with a Divine Instrument."

Villhaze crouched on the ground.

Something wasn't right. The Dark Core should have started to reverse their wounds already... Why was the pain only getting stronger?

Komari looked at her with tears in her eyes.

"Are you really okay?! Damn it, if only I could use healing magic."

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Take it easy. I'll go get some..." Komari trailed off.

Villhaze casually turned around to look at her and witnessed something truly shocking.

Komari was on the ground, vomiting blood. With each of her coughs, the snow grew redder and redder. She had a hand to her chest, and her breathing was heavy and whistling.

"H-huh...? Why... am I feeling... weak...?"

Her mind went blank.

Villhaze rushed to her mistress's side, but the pain in her abdomen was too much. She fell to the ground.

Her mistress was panting in agony right before her eyes.

"Lady Komari...!!"

A wound must have opened up. Blood was flowing ceaselessly from her chest, dyeing the snow a brighter and brighter shade of red.

Villhaze couldn't process what she was seeing.

She knew the Blood Curse took a heavy toll on Komari's body. It would drain all her mana, forcing her to be hospitalized.

And she'd activated it three times today already. Villhaze should've expected that to break her.

"Lady Komari... Lady Komari..." She called her name in delirium.

This couldn't be. This wasn't what was supposed to happen. They defeated the terrorists and would live happily ever after. Wasn't that the script? They were supposed to go back to Mulnite together!

Unable to get rid of her sinking feeling, Villhaze surrendered herself to despair.

Her belly was racked with agony—pain that wouldn't heal.

Maybe, just maybe, they were outside the Dark Core's area of effect.

"Vill..." Komari's face twisted in pain as she looked at her maid.

Her eyes were empty. She was barely conscious.

And Villhaze wasn't doing any better.

Blood was seeping into her maid uniform, and it showed no sign of stopping. Her vision went blurry.

Slowly, she reached out to her mistress.

She had decided to live for Komari; to help her on whatever path she took. At first, it was only to thank Komari for what she'd done for her. But as the days went by, the feeling inside her gradually changed and grew.

Villhaze wanted to see the gentle world that Terakomari Gandesblood would certainly build.

She wanted to stay by her side forever. Support her forever.

Everything she had done was to that end. And she'd finally felt their hearts connect this time around. So how could it all end like this now?

Her body was torn to shreds.

Komari was gasping and wheezing. She couldn't speak anymore.

The snow fell quietly.

Villhaze was in too much pain to even feel cold.

But her heart was rapidly freezing. Enveloped by the frost of despair.

"Lady Komari..." Villhaze called out hoarsely.

She couldn't allow things to end like this. She couldn't let herself and her mistress die.

She was supposed to spend the rest of her days with Lady Komari; they couldn't be cut short like this.

She looked up at the heavens and prayed.

Then she heard a thunderous step.

Her vision was too blurred to make out who it was. But she knew there was someone out there.

"Look at how much you two have grown."

Perhaps it was a hallucination.

Perhaps her senses were playing tricks on her since she was on death's door.

But the woman's voice was too kind to be an illusion.

"But you can't come here yet. I'll show you the way back home."

She already had one foot in the door. The pain was fading away.

The next moment, bright light illuminated the world.

The darkness was driven back, and noise returned to the silent realm.

"Who are you...?" She forced out the question.

Villhaze received no answer from the woman, save for a faint smile.

Before long, the question running through her head was swept away. Villhaze let go of her consciousness as warmth surrounded her.

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Six Nations News, December 12th Morning Edition

CHAOS IN THE MULNITE EMPIRE! COMMANDER GANDESBLOOD EMERGES VICTORIOUS

IMPERIAL CAPITAL—BY MELKA TIANO AND THIO FLATT

The riots perpetrated by the Holy Church and Inverse Moon in the Imperial Capital were contained on the 20th thanks to a response force led by Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood. This incident (henceforth referred to as the Vampire Riots) were orchestrated by the 99th Pope of the Holy Church, Julius VI, aka Spica La Gemini (age unknown). Otherwise known as the Wicked God Slayer, Spica also is also the leader of Inverse Moon, and she infiltrated the Holy City three years ago to hatch her plot.

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The battle in the Imperial Capital was fierce, but things tilted in Mulnite's favor when Karla Amatsu, Goddess of the Heavenly Paradise, and Nelia Cunningham, President and Illustrious General of the Aruka Republic, led the armies of their respective nations to the city in support. In the end, Commander Gandesblood eradicated the terrorists with her Core Implosion, the Blood Curse. We are seeing Commander Gandesblood's policy of world harmony, which she spoke of during the Six Nations War, come to fruition. The Cathedral of the Holy City of Lehysia is taking this matter seriously and announced plans to hold an election for its next Pope—the Holy Endurance Test—before the end of the year.

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Vexations

0 Epilogue

The Vexations
of a Shut-In
Vampire Princess

Inverse Moon had dealt a heavy blow to the Mulnite Empire.

It was the first time in the long history of the vampires that the Imperial Capital had experienced devastation of this scale. The extensive damage was proof of the underhandedness and severity of the enemy's attack.

Many people suffered pain and sadness during the crisis, but at the same time, they experienced great hope.

Crimson Lord Terakomari Gandesblood had saved the Imperial Capital with the help of Nelia Cunningham, Karla Amatsu, and other heroes from foreign lands. Her victory showed that people had the ability to route the terrorists, no matter how powerful, when they joined hands.

The vampires sensed the arrival of a new era—a heartwarming world where people wouldn't hurt each other, but instead join hands against evil. They could feel the peaceful world Commander Terakomari Gandesblood was (assumed to be) pursuing come into being.

“Komari saved us this time around. That girl is full of surprises.”

Some time had passed by since the all-night fuss.

Mulnite Empress Karen Helvetius let out a heavy sigh as she arrived at a room in the Mulnite Imperial Palace. A gesture most uncharacteristic of hers, thought Chancellor Armand Gandesblood.

The skies outside the window were clear. Despite the frigid wind, the snow that was

piled up around the city was beginning to melt away.

"The Imperial Capital has sustained severe damage, but I don't think it should take much time to repair. Our Minister of Construction says we could gather as many workers as needed if we get Commander Gandesblood to ask for help."

"Exploiting Komari and her popularity, huh? No wonder she's always complaining about how unethical the country is."

"Unethical or not, we need to rebuild as quickly as possible. What if the terrorists decide to stage another attack?"

"I don't think they will for a while. After all, their members are..."

"Karen, can we just get to the point already? I'm getting sleepy," said the girl sitting on the chair by the window, yawning.

There were three people in that room: the Empress, the Chancellor, and Crimson Lord Petrose Calamaria.

The top three of the Mulnite Empire were holding a meeting.

The Empress herself had summoned them in order to make plans for the future. She was to explain what happened this time around from her point of view.

"Fine, fine," the Empress said, exasperated. "I can't let you doze off, so I'll keep it brief. As much as it pains me to admit, I fell into Inverse Moon's trap, which is why I wasn't around during the whole disaster. An embarrassment to my title, I know. I must come out and apologize to our citizens for being unable to protect them."

"What was this trap of theirs? Surely they didn't just catch you by surprise—you wouldn't fall for that."

"Actually, the attack itself was nothing special. They just caught me while my back was turned. But they used a very special item to lure me in," she said, taking a piece of paper from her pocket.

A letter? It didn't look like anything special.

Armand stared flatly at the sheet of paper as the Empress threw it on the table. A

moment later, he was struck by shock stronger than any he'd known.

"This is... Yulinne's handwriting....?!"

"Correct. It's even laced with her mana. She says she's doing fine in the Netherworld."

"I don't get it. What does she mean?"

"She means what she says. She's in the Netherworld."

Armand was at a loss for words.

Komari's mother, Yulinne Gandesblood, had traveled around the world, fighting a fierce battle against terrorists before disappearing, engulfed by the flames of war. Officially, the Mulnite Empire had declared her dead. Armand had told their children, quote, "Mom went somewhere far away."

But now there was this letter.

The contents were bizarre. She couldn't have written it before her disappearance.

"I think she's trapped in this *Netherworld* place."

"Karen, did you hit your head or something?"

"They did hit me in the head, actually. Anyway, someone added another message to Yulinne's letter, saying they'd be waiting for me somewhere in the Dark Core Zone. This was how Inverse Moon got me to fall for their trap. Normally, I would have seen through something like this, but I let my excitement over seeing a trace of Yulinne's presence get the better of me. So I went to the specified location all by myself, and they whacked me from behind. Once I woke up, I found myself in another world that looked just like Mulnite."

"??"

"The realm I ended up in wasn't the afterlife or anything. I believe it's another world that exists parallel to ours. And there, I found someone who I think was Yulinne."

Armand was completely lost by now. He tried calming down and furrowed his brow.

"Let's say you really went to this other realm you call the Netherworld, Your Majesty. Was the woman you met really Yulinne? Couldn't it have been some sort of mistake?"

"No, I could never mistake her. We even talked."

"Geez. I think you're just going senile," Petrose said.

"You want to die?" the Empress asked.

"Sorry."

For a second, Armand thought she was really going to kill Petrose.

"But how did you even get there in the first place? And how'd you get back? You don't have that sort of power, do you?"

"Like I said, Inverse Moon sent me there. They have the ability to travel back and forth from that world. Or rather, the Wicked God Slayer has it, I believe. I'm sure that Spica La Gemini sent me there. It was on a night of the new moon."

"And how did you get back?"

"Yulinne told me that Mulnite was in danger. This was the only conversation we had, actually. When I tried asking her for more details, the entire world was bathed in white light. Then I was transported to the ruins of the Mulnite Imperial Palace, where I found Spica La Gemini sitting on the throne like she owned the place, plus Prohellya Butchersky on the verge of death."

Armand had been dead around that time, so he didn't know all the details about what had gone down. However, he did hear that the leader of the terrorists had said something to the effect of, "I'll let you off the hook for today" the moment she saw the Empress before making a break for it. Armand wanted to tell the Empress that she should've captured the girl if she'd really given her that much trouble, but he ultimately decided against it. Better to keep his head on his shoulders.

Petrose munched on sweet bean jelly as she spoke:

"Then Yulinne really wrote that letter?"

"Unless Inverse Moon used some sort of special technology to forge it, yes. In all

likelihood... she wrote it to tell everyone in the Mulnite Empire that she was fine. But somehow, it ended up in the hands of Inverse Moon. And they used it to trap me."

"..."

There were too many questions he wanted to ask, but if the Empress was so sure about this, he couldn't ignore it. What exactly was the link between the Netherworld, Yulinne, and Inverse Moon?

"...Right. Maybe you're correct, Karen."

Petrose threw away the wrapper from her confection. *Please put it in a trash can.*

"I met one of the terrorists' leaders. A Warblade wearing a lab coat... I think her name was Lonne Cornelius. She said something similar. I should've killed her, but she teleported away the moment I took my eyes off her."

"You should've captured her, not killed her. But either way, that's all in the past."

"She also told me something else. Apparently, the Dark Core is the key to opening the door to the Netherworld."

The Empress kept silent.

Armand couldn't keep up. He had never seen the Dark Core, much less the Netherworld; he wouldn't be able to grasp this all without seeing it for himself first.

"I see." The Empress nodded with a blank look on her face, looking at the snow out the window. Then, nonchalantly, she added, "The Mulnite Empire's Dark Core is Yulinne's pendant."

"What?!" Armand felt like he had been struck on the head. He stared at the Empress's profile. "...Huh? It's the Dark Core? Why is Komari hanging on to it?"

"Because she should. But don't tell her about it yet. Though I will say... how did you not put two and two together, 'Chancelor'? You really are dense, Armand."

"..."

How was he supposed to know about that? The Empress always did everything all on

her own. *Don't you agree, Commander Calamaria?* He glanced at the Reckless Bomber for support, but she wasn't the least bit surprised; she just kept on devouring her jellies.

Was I the only one here who didn't know?

The Empress ignored Armand's shock and continued:

"We must launch an investigation to determine what the Dark Core really is."

"Investigate what? How? We can't experiment on the thing, can we?" Armand asked.

"There are many ways. The fastest would be to ask someone who knows... like, say, the Wicked God Slayer" She grinned.

And so the Mulnite Empire came ever so slightly closer to revealing the mysteries of Inverse Moon and the Dark Core.

Things are only going to get busier, huh? Armand sighed.



"So you've finally accepted it, Lady Komari."

"..."

"You remember things this time, don't you? Your spirit has grown."

"..."

"Are you listening, Lady Komari? Don't you dare tell me you forgot."

"...Fine. I'll admit it. I got my..."

"Thank you. I'll never forget how you whispered into my ear, *Vill, let's get married.*"

"What're you talking about?!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

It was December 24th. I was in bed. At the hospital. The usual.

There was no surprise to be had at this point, but it sure was scary how I'd gotten used to this hardcore tradition. I just wanted to live in peace and quiet.

But at the same time, I had given up on that. I knew I would never lead an uneventful life so long as I was a Crimson Lord. And everyone was expecting great things from me.

I still had my memories of that night.

Of course, I had no recollection of asking Vill to get married. The sicko maid just made that all up. But anyway—I remembered activating my Core Implosion, the Blood Curse.

On that full moon night, I fought Tryphon of Inverse Moon.

I remembered that my mana went scarlet, and Vill's blue.

Honestly, it felt like it was just a dream. Pieces of the event were still hazy. But I was certain I'd faced my foe with the full intent to kill, much to my surprise. Somehow, I could vividly remember that emotion. I'd wanted to fight for the sake of everyone, and that was the only thing on my mind.

“...What happened after that?”

“Her Majesty chased off Spica La Gemini. As for Tryphon Cross, he's missing. The forces of the Imperial Capital eliminated the rest of Inverse Moon's members.”

“So the Holy Church was Inverse Moon all along?”

“Not quite. Julius VI was appointed Pope three years ago and used her new authority as she pleased, but she was criticized inside of the Church, too. There are numerous factions who oppose her in the Holy City. And they are now holding a ritual to select their new Pope.”

“Hmm...”

“In any case, it's over, for now. The terrorists have been driven away, and peace has returned to the Imperial Capital.”

So it ended in total victory for the Mulnite Empire.

Vill assured me that the ruins of the city would be rebuilt and that most of the rioters had been captured. I imagined they would go through terrible stuff like questioning and torture, but hey, that had nothing to do with me. No need to dwell on it.

That got me thinking. In the end, what did that Vampire Princess want? What had Spica been hoping to accomplish by taking over the Imperial Capital?

I kinda remembered Inverse Moon's philosophy being something along the lines of yearning for death, but she didn't seem to be acting out of pure violence. She had this kind of positive energy about her. But oh well, I supposed there was no finding out unless I asked the girl herself.

"...I want to talk with Spica again."

"You haven't changed, Lady Komari. People like her ought to be crushed, no questions asked. And besides, there's something else that interests me more than Spica La Gemini."

"What? Today's dinner?"

"I will be making omelet rice for tonight."

"Really?! Hell yeah!!"

"Yes... And although dinner is a most important matter, what I meant was that new moon world we wandered into."

"New moon? Ohh..." I remembered.

The new moon world—an inverse realm that was the spitting image of the Mulnite Empire.

A white light had enveloped Vill, Tryphon, and me all of a sudden and transported us there. I had a hunch about what happened: I'd heard the sound of a door opening the moment Prohellya's bullet hit my chest.

I looked down in the same place and saw my glowing bright-red pendant. Karla had fixed the fracture. Honestly, I didn't want her using Waving Moment, but for whatever reason, she'd insisted that it needed to be fixed no matter what, so I gave in.

"That world must have been a different dimension, outside the reach of the Dark Core. I had no idea how to go back home from there... but then, I heard a voice."

"A voice?"

"Yes, and it was very warm. I think whoever it belonged to sent us back to our world, where the Dark Core saved our lives."

"..."

I knew Vill wasn't lying or hallucinating. I'd gotten a very similar feeling back there. My consciousness was hazy, but I saw a glow, sort of like moonlight, pierce through the darkness. Then I'd heard a very gentle voice. I felt nostalgic, even, somehow. It was warm enough to blow away the cold of the snow.

"...Mom..."

Vill raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, she smelled like a mother."

"..."

Even I didn't understand what I was saying.

My mother, Yulinne Gandesblood, was supposed to have died in battle six years ago. If the woman who'd appeared before Vill was her, then that would mean we'd had one foot in the land of the dead.

There was something else that was bothering me. Kakumei Amatsu's letter.

Did my mom write it when she was alive? I mean, obviously, that had to be the case, but I felt like there was a secret lying behind all this.

"Keep the world close to your chest."

What did that mean?

Was my mother actually alive?

Faint hope budded within me... although it would probably be for the best to not to set my expectations too high.

"Regardless, I don't think we can solve this mystery just pondering about it. Let's be glad we managed to get back in good shape for now."

"Yeah."

I stared blankly out of the window.

The surroundings of the infirmary (aka the morgue) were relatively unscathed, but there was wreckage a short walk away. It sure was impressive we had managed to survive that whole thing.

"I gotta say thanks to Nelia and Karla. I think I should give them a present. What do you think they'd like?" I asked Vill.

"Lady Cunningham would be pleased with a maid outfit."

"Yes, we should send her one in her size. That'll show her how it feels to be made into a maid. Heh. Let's ask for her measurements later."

"By the way, mine are..."

"I didn't ask! Now, what about Karla?"

"I think she would enjoy homemade sweets. Made by you, obviously."

"Ohh! That sounds good. Yeah, let's make her some cookies."

"Lady Butcher from the Polar Union also showed up to help."

"Right. She's a little childish, so how about a seal plushie?"

"I think she would lose her mind if she heard that."

As I was thinking about how to thank all of them, I realized how blessed I was.

I wouldn't have been able to survive on my own. It was all thanks to Nelia, Karla, Prohellya, and everyone else who showed up to help that I was still standing.

"You must be very glad, Lady Komari, to get to strengthen your friendship with all of them."

"Yeah. I gotta help them at the speed of light if they're ever in trouble."

"So we'll get to see your gallant fighting again if Inverse Moon ever attacks Aruka or the Heavenly Paradise, eh? I look forward to it."

"Please, no. I think another war like this would actually kill me."

"You won't die. You have the power of Core Implosion."

I didn't know what to say to that.

I looked away from her and muttered, "...Well, I know I accomplish some incredible feats out there, but I'm still pretty sure at least half of what went down was due to a meteorite. Or maybe God possessed my body and did all that in my stead. I think I'll go donate a pudding to the church once I get outta here."

"You're still saying that? There are loads of battles awaiting you from here on out. We've got declarations of war from the chimpanzee piling up."

"Tell 'em to go hibernate! I'm gonna hibernate myself, too!"

"I won't let you. You said you wouldn't isolate yourself anymore. My memory is very sharp, I'll have you know. I don't forget a thing."

"Ugh... You know, I... I didn't mean that literally..."

I was still a shut-in to the core.

Sure, I was motivated and determined this time around, but no amount of motivation could last forever. I guess I could get back my can-do attitude if the Mulnite Empire was ever in danger once more.

But for the time being, I was intent on requesting three months' vacation.

Any person, no matter how great, needed rest. The guys from the Seventh Unit said otherwise, but they were crazy and didn't count as people.

"I'm kidding," Vill said. "I understand how you feel now. I won't force you."

"Good. At the end of the day, you really are my loyal maid."

"Indeed I am. Which is why I'm making preparations for work after new year's. I already have fifteen sports-wars booked for January, and I'm sending out nonstop declarations of war around the world for February at this very moment..."

"You don't understand how I feel in the slightest, do ya?!"

Vill chuckled. *What's so funny?!*

"Don't worry. I'll be with you the entire way."

"..."

Cheeky girl.

But well... all my growth was thanks to her. I'd defeated Millicent and won the Crimson Match in spring, forged a friendship with Nelia during the Six Nations War in summer, doubled down on my dreams during the Heavenly Ball in fall, and now realized what it is that I had to do during battle against the terrorists in winter.

Even if something were to happen again, I felt like I could overcome it with Vill at my side.

"...You won't leave me anymore, will you?"

"Never. I will stay by your side forever. Our relationship has already been cemented by blood."

"Yeah. Now that you mention it."

"How did my blood taste, by the way?" Vill inquired.

You're asking that now?

"Um... I don't know."

"Yours was really sweet. What about mine?"

"U-uh... It wasn't bad, I guess..."

"Not bad? But what did it taste like?"

"I-it was fine enough for me to drink! That really shocked me, considering how much I hate blood."

"I'm glad. But what did it taste like? Tell me."

"Shut up already! Does it matter that much?!"

"Yes. So?"

She brought her face close. I retreated on top of the bed by pure reflex.

Unlike this sicko, I was a bad liar. I couldn't keep a secret if it cost me my life. I knew she would make fun of me no matter what I said. So what now? *What can I possibly do? Gosh, this is so embarrassing...* Just then, I got a great idea.

I just had to change the subject!

"Th-the answer is simple! Your blood had the taste of a bright future!"

"What? What does that mean?"

"My body is smaller than people my age because I haven't been sucking blood. But for whatever reason, I can drink yours just fine. So, if I keep on ingesting your blood, then I'll grow as tall as a tree!"

"No, you won't."

"How'd you know?!"

"I saw it with Pandora's Poison."

"..."

Why do you have to be so mean?

Now what? She's seen the future. All hope is lost.

Just as I started tearing up, she furrowed her brow and said:

“Don’t worry, Lady Komari. You’re the type whose nutrients go everywhere else but her height.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?!”

Now she’s telling me drinking blood will make me grow sideways? Could it get any worse?

I hate blood! I refuse to drink it anymore. Wait... not that I could do it without activating Core Implosion and causing meteorite-scale disasters.

Vill giggled.

“But I am glad to know you don’t dislike my blood.”

“I’m never drinking yours again.”

“Don’t say that. Once you’ve got Core Implosion under control, we’ll suck each other’s blood every night.”

“No way!”

I looked away and plopped back on the bed.

What an unpleasant maid. Who’s she taking her master for? I wrapped myself under the blankets, fuming.

But then again, the truth was I couldn’t go on as a commander without her. And I’d only grown so much because of her.

So I decided to forgive her rudeness. At the end of the day, everything she’d done was for my sake. And she was making me omelet rice. And she made sure I wasn’t reprimanded for my mistakes. And most of all... I really appreciated her.

Then the door flew open.

“Commander! I have a report to make!” Caostel entered, yelling out of nowhere.

I sat up in a panic and struck an arrogant pose. I couldn't let my underling see me sulking under the covers. Why was he barging into his boss's infirmary room all of a sudden, though? Had he no courtesy? Had he no common sense? What even was the matter?

"What's up, Caostel? I was just lustng for some blood, but the infirmary staff won't let me leave. Let's save war for another ti—"

"That's not it. I'm here to report that the Terakomari Gandesblood statue is complete."

"What?"

What's he talking about?

"Fantastic," Vill said in a calm tone. "What the Mulnite Empire needed was not a God statue, but one of Lady Komari. Let's go see it right now, my Lady."

"Huh? Wait, don't pull me! I gotta change first!"

She pulled me out of bed.

I had a terrible feeling about this.



And I was right. Caostel teleported us to the ruined Mulnite Imperial Palace. Snow was piling up in the hallways, exposed under the broken walls and ceiling. It was a truly awful sight... but I didn't care about it right now.

The Terakomari Gandesblood statue caught my eye.

Yup, the name was definitely spot-on.

Where Spica's idol had once been stood mine. A giant replica of myself, making peace signs with both my hands for whatever reason.

And there was an audience. Lots of sightseers surrounded the bronze statue, exclaiming:

"Wow!" "She looks just like her!" "Let's take a picture." "It is the birth of a new Mulnite

attraction." "Oh, dear God... dear God... Please bring peace to the world..." *This last guy seems very confused. That's me, not God, fella.*

"...What in the world is this?"

"A statue of you, Commander"

"That much I can tell! What's it doing here?! Don't you find it weird?!"

"Did you forget? We were building this statue to show the entire world your glory. By the way, we improved it as per Lieutenant Villhaze's request, so it shoots beams out of its eyes."

Now that you mention it, I do remember you talking about it.

But that doesn't change the fact it's embarrassing as all heck! Take it down, please. Why...?

Just imagine foreign officials visiting and being all like, "The hell is that?"

My face wasn't just burning—it was about to combust.

Then the people noticed my presence. It was then I realized some of them were from the Seventh Unit. They all smiled and ran up to me and yelled, "Commander!!" the moment they saw me.

"Commander! Great job as always!" "You saved the Empire, Commander!" "The real Commander is much more beautiful than any statue!" "Look at all the people coming here to celebrate you!" "Check it! A new era has begun. The Church has been shunned. The Commander won!"

My shame had reached its breaking point.

I yelled just to dispel some of the embarrassment.

"M-Mellaconcey! You love blowing stuff up, don't you? I won't say where exactly, but don't you think there's a perfect, bronze target right around here?"

"I would never blow up the statue of our God."

“Why’re you always so well-behaved when I don’t want you to be?!”

No one listened to my wishes.

They began cheering like idiots. “Komarin! Komarin! Komarin! Komarin!” The Seventh Unit’s vampires smiled at me. *Geez, what a noisy bunch*, I thought, all the while feeling strangely warm inside.

I felt my life was finally back to normal.

Perhaps it was for this feeling that I fought. I mean, I didn’t want anything to do with violence, but maybe it wasn’t so bad putting in a little effort for the people who trusted in me...

“Lady Komari, I hope you’re ready to get slaughtering tomorrow.”

“NO WAY!!!”

Never mind, it was bad.

The scream of my soul melted away in the winter sky.

Ahh...

At the end of the day, I was better off staying inside.

The vexations of this shut-in vampire princess were far from over.

(FIN)

In the end, we couldn’t conquer the Mulnite Empire.

I gallantly backed out this time around.

There was something moving about Terakomari’s efforts. I had to doff my hat to her strong spirit, along with her overwhelming charm that affected both ally and enemy. She deserved one of my blood candies as congrats.

But anyway.

Enjoy your coveted shut-in life for the time being.

We'd lost most members of Inverse Moon, and the Mulnite Empire had captured the rioters. It would take a while to restart our operations.

"...I think I should take a rest, too. Not that I ever do work."

I stared into the night sky and took out a new lollipop.

The full moon shone brightly. A golden gem fitting for the land of night.

Just looking at it made something well up inside me. It made me sentimental. Would the day my dreams came true ever arrive?

Of course it would.

I had my friends on my side. Just as Terakomari had hers, I had my own allies who believed in me.



It was all over by the time Tryphon Cross woke up.

Terakomari Gandesblood had retaken the Mulnite Empire. The Imperial Army caught the Inverse Moon members attacking the Imperial Capital. And the Wicked God Slayer had lost her Cathedral hideout after the anti-Julius VI faction decided to elect a new Pope.

Utter defeat. My ideals are far out of reach yet again... Tryphon sighed.

"...I suppose I'll consider myself lucky I'm alive."

He found himself lying on a bed when he came to. His lost left arm had been healed thanks to the Dark Core. Her Highness told him she'd transported him all the way to the Dark Core Zone.

Tryphon sighed yet again and looked out the window.

It seemed he was in another of Inverse Moon's hideouts, a renovated old castle. But there was no one else there. Most of the others were likely in Mulnite's prisons.

Tryphon walked down the hallway feeling a twinge of sadness.

“Snow’s piling up outside! Wanna make a snowman?”

“...Your Highness.”

Before he knew it, the Wicked God Slayer, Spica La Gemini, was right behind him. She approached him, eyes sparkling like stars and the usual blood-colored lollipop in her mouth.

“You okay now? All healed up?”

“Thanks to you, yes. I can fight again.”

“Cool. But Inverse Moon is in bad shape thanks to you.”

He felt his mouth go dry.

Inverse Moon’s state was Tryphon’s responsibility. He had promised Spica he would break through the Blood Curse. And he’d managed to do it two times, but not a third. In the end, he tasted bitter defeat.

He deserved death at her hands.

“I will make no excuses. Do with me as you please. All responsibility for this disaster lies with me...”

Pat. Spica placed a hand on his head. He was at a loss for words.

She stood on her toes to gently stroke his head, as though she were comforting a child. He was frozen in shock.

“Um... Your Highness...”

“You did great! Our organization is in shambles, but we did a ton of damage to the Mulnite Empire. And that’s all thanks to you, Tryphon!”

“But...”

“*Inverse Moon shows no mercy to failures...* That rule is from thirty years ago, right?

The Lunae from back then came up with it, not me! I've been telling you to leave it behind, but you just won't let it go. I don't think human resources should be that expendable. Also... would you mind crouching a little? My feet are hurting already."

"I'm sorry."

Tryphon crouched as told and did some thinking.

He couldn't see through Spica. Did she really mean what she just said?

His mind swirled with doubt as Spica continued patting his head. Finally, she beamed like the sun and stepped back. She swung her bright-red candy and said:

"...Inverse Moon is in shambles. You will keep on working to fulfill my dream"

"I understand. I will do anything I can."

"Good! Your loyalty deserves a reward!"

"Huh? Guh!"

She shoved a lollipop into Tryphon's mouth. The same kind she was always eating.

He grew nauseous as the taste of blood spread in his mouth. Vampires were insane to eat this stuff by choice.

"It's awful...", he ended up choking out.

Spica's eyes glowed sharp.

"What did you just say?"

"Nothing."

"Okay. Let's have a meeting, then!"

"A... meeting?"

"I think it's about time I told you exactly what my goal is and where I come from. After what went down this time, I think you Lunae deserve to know... Oh, and speak of the

devil! Fuyao!"

A foxgirl came up to them from the other side of the hall.

"Oh," she said sullenly the moment she saw Spica. "What is it? Make it quick."

"Are you doing okay? Prohellya Butchersky sure gave you a butchering back there."

Fuyao's ears twitched.

"It was no big deal. First of all, I wouldn't have lost if it had been *me* back there. But *she* had to get in the way."

"Still, you lost."

".....I know. My priorities have changed. I must kill that cheeky Sapphire before Terakomari Gandesblood."

"Cool! Good luck."

Fuyao grimaced in annoyance.

"So what do you want? I'm busy."

"I'll give you all the details once Amatsu and Cornelius get here. I'm going to tell you why Spica La Gemini is Inverse Moon's boss—which means I'm going to fill you in about the Netherworld and the Dark Core."

"If it's gonna take a while, just do it without me."

"Fuyao, you shouldn't be so selfish," Tryphon said.

"I don't mind. I like that impatient side of hers. Oh well. You know what? I think Amatsu and Cornelia already have a vague idea about things, so I'll tell you two the gist of it here and now."

Spica smiled in satisfaction.

Then, like a child revealing the plans for a prank, she said:

“My goal is to destroy the Dark Cores and open the door to the Netherworld. I want to take all of the world’s shut-ins outside!”

Inverse Moon was hamstrung after what went down.

They wouldn’t be able to do pull of any large-scale operations to go after Dark Cores for a while.

Terakomari Gandesblood was sure to get a moment of peace.

But it wasn’t over yet.

Spica’s spirit wasn’t broken. And so long as it wasn’t, the fight would continue.

The day when the shut-in vampire princess could finally laze around to her heart’s content would never come.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. It's Kotei Kobayashi. I'm writing this afterword at the last minute, so I can't come up with anything to write about (not that I ever do). So I'll tell you what my favorite scenes from this volume are. There will be spoilers, so I apologize to everyone who likes reading this section before the story.

1: The little sister reveals herself! Lolocco's name had been dropped multiple times up to this point, but she hadn't made an appearance until now. I love innocent yet cunning characters like her.

2: Sakuna becomes a maid! A mirage Komari desperately pursued after losing Vill. Sakuna is often described as a very beautiful girl, so seeing her as a maid sure had all sorts of confusing effects on Komari.

3: Millicent returns! Komari and Millicent hold complicated feelings for one another. One can feel their budding friendship that can never really be. I hope they will be able to be more sincere with each other after what they went through this volume.

4: Everyone is here! We see Komari's efforts come to fruition as all her friends come to the rescue. I had the most fun writing this segment.

5: The final battle! Vill and her mistress fight in complete sync. She's supposed to be the main heroine, and yet she was always knocked out or left behind by the end of Volumes 2 through 4, but here, she finally gets to fight alongside Komari. What a beautiful relationship between master and servant.

6:... I think I'll avoid making the book thicker by going on and on. (There are many, many more scenes I like, but I'll refrain from writing an essay.)

The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess has finally reached Volume 5, thanks to all of your support. We can take the end of this volume as the end of the opening phase of the story. Komari has grown a lot from who she was as a shut-in. But something tells me she'll continue yelling about staying inside for a long while yet. I hope you'll continue to join us on her journey.

By the way, the basic concept of *Vexations* is a story that mixes the soft and the

hardcore, but as of late, I get that feeling that it's been just hardcore squared. I'm hoping to make the next volume soft and crunchy—a more relaxed story. She needs a rest from time to time, after all...

Now, the thanks section.

Thank you to riichu for the cute and cool illustrations as always. Thank you to Ryo Hiiragi for the gorgeous and classy designs of the books. Thank you to my editor, Yoten Sugiura, for all the passionate advice you give me from the early stages of writing. And thank you to everyone else involved in the creation of this book. And of course, to you, who holds it in your hands this very moment! My deepest gratitude to all of you!! See you next time.

Kotei Kobayashi

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