



BlazBlue
PHASE SHIFT 2
フェイスシフター

原案・監修: 森利道 (アークシステムワークス)
著: 駒尾真子

意識を取り戻したとき、
ジンは見知らぬ部屋のベッドに寝かされていた。

「ハルヒが、ムリだ……。」



BLAZBLUE
ULTIMATE
PHASE-SHIFT 2
CONTINUUM



セリカの膝が崩れて折れた。
吸い上げられるように、意識が遠くなっていく。

（駄目……気を失ったら……
ラグナに、会えない……）



立ちほだかるように現れた二組の男女に、
ナインは不機嫌げに声を低めた。

「エイト、セブリン……」



PHASE SHIFT 2

Prologue

The stars were lovely.

Feeling the cold lawn on his back, he muttered into the emptiness.

Even now, the stars, which appeared to be falling, kept flickering.

The sky looked deep and distant, as it always was.

It was not something that could be grasped just by reaching out your hand. Even if it had been possible, his battered body, which had been lying on top of a hill, didn't have the remaining strength to lift his arm.

His blue clothes were torn. His white cheeks and golden hair were covered in dirt. His body had already been losing its ability to function for a while. Under this moonlight, his fleeting consciousness would disappear before long.

He was sinking to his death.

Even as the stars were lovely, the moon was dazzling.

...As if it was falling down.

He hated that moon. Wanted none of its bright light, he dragged his dead arm up to cover his eyes.

Cold drops from the corner of his eyes were falling down his cheeks.

Suddenly, the wind stirred. It was only strong enough to flutter a dress, but it was enough for him to notice that someone was present.

"...Who's there?" He asked faintly.

The arm that had been covering his sight, slipped down to his chest.

A large umbrella intercepted the moonlight. The person who had been standing by his side was actually a very young girl. Luxurious black dress. Golden hair tied up to two parts. Her age seemed to be 10. ...No, she might be about 6 or 7 years old. Didn't she have an umbrella, too?

The spectacle appeared right before his eyes, yet the details were fuzzy and incomprehensible.

The only certain thing was that the girl wore big ribbons similar to a rabbit's ears. She also had red eyes.

The girl looked into the distance and whispered to no one.

"...Soon, it will be born."

It was a very ominous voice, but had a strange kind of affection in it. As if she knew that it was the beginning of something about to be born.

He understood what she said. Even when that *something* had not been explained, he knew what it was. It had to be killed by his hands no matter what.

The girl, the scent of flowers wafting around her, slowly turned her face to him. A pair of crimson eyes looked down on him. A cold gaze unlike that of a little girl's, yet similar to moonlight.

He recognized those eyes. It was in his distant memory but seemed almost as if it was yesterday. But that memory quickly disappeared, like a frozen flower broken into pieces.

"Mr. Hero."

The girl's lips teasingly spoke.

"How would you like to become a real hero?"

The wind blew through the girl's hair.

For him, it was a moment of one's end, and one's beginning.

Before long, a rumble could be heard from far away.

It gradually grew larger and more violent, shaking both the night sky and solid earth... and became a beast's roar that was thundering throughout the world.

It was a roar that made every existence shiver. The being that would be called *Black Beast*, a monster that drove the world to destruction, let out its first cry.

Chapter 1 - White Blade, A Flower

Part 1

In the center of a dim room, a pale white light had been lit. It was a transparent sphere floating in empty space and was about the size of a human head. Rather than electrons, the borne light was made by magic utilising alchemical techniques.

The sphere, which was hanging in the air as if set on an invisible pedestal, was surrounded by five figures.

One was a petite girl wearing a full length robe. Beautiful platinum blonde hair was overflowing from the hood she wore, sparkling like sunlight as it was struck by the bland light.

Standing next to her was an even more petite silhouette. Its height was about that of a human child, but its appearance was like a bipedal cat. The tail protruding from its back was long, the odd thing was that it branched into two.

The third figure, in contrast to the other two, was a tall, middle-aged man wearing a grumpy look. He was wearing a refined attire including a high quality shirt and vest, but they couldn't hide the glimpses of the sturdy build underneath.

Standing in line with him was a tall man of a similar height, but with a far thinner figure. Standing with both hands inserted into the pockets of his long coat, he wore a low hood that meant even his eyes were hidden in shadow.

And then giving each of them glances as they stared at the sphere, another girl stood. Long hair crossed over her waist, her skin was white enough to be called transparent. Her most obvious feature was the large triangular hat placed on her head.

Her name was Nine.

The thin man was Yuuki Terumi.

The middle-aged man was Valkenhayn R. Hellsing.

The cat with two tails was Jubei.

The platinum blonde girl was Trinity Glassfille.

They stood silently in thought while staring at the sphere. Inside it, the shifting images of the current world situations were being projected.

"...So far, the representatives of many nations which have met with catastrophe are currently taking refuge in Ishana. There are preparation to devise a plan for the cooperation of each nation, with Ishana as the focus."

In the silent room, Trinity began to talk in her slow, soft voice that was like a ripple unfolding on water. Responding to her voice, the images of those catastrophe ridden countries were floating and disappearing in turn.

Frowning with a sad expression for a moment behind those spectacles, Trinity pushed up her large round glasses up her nose a little and continued on.

"However as for the countries with relatively low damage, the nations are being cautious to ensure they participate in the efforts centered on Ishana. As yet, discussions are still ongoing and have yet to reach a conclusion as there are countries that do not deign to participate in the congress. No, if there's still no conclusion, then it's still okay but..."

"So a confrontation is growing between the countries that have representatives in Ishana and those that don't. ...Even though this isn't the situation for quarreling between mankind."

Taking over Trinity's sorrowful words, Valkenhayn spoke with a grimace. Looking at him with his large eyes, Jubei's cat mouth snickered.

"There ain't gonna be any fair arguing. They're the lucky chaps. It's just natural."

There was a degree of discomfort in the clear male voice of the beast, but no one in the room took it to mind.

Gazing at the shining sphere, the bridge of Jubei's nose wrinkled.

"They ain't gonna understand unless they see with their own eyes. About the terror... of *The Black Beast*."

The Black Beast.

Seven years ago... between 2099 and 2100 AD, it appeared. A monster similar to a gigantic mass of shadow.

Together with the appearance of the Black Beast, the world was filled with substance called *seithr*. Guided by seithr, the Black Beast's destructive scars were marked all over the world starting with Japan.

Without any means to fight, humanity was driven back. In merely six years after the Black Beast's appearance, the total population of the world was decreased by half.

But last year, the last day of 2106 AD. At the very same day that marked seven years had passed since the Black Beast emerged. As quickly as the monster which terrorized the world emerged, it was suddenly gone.

"It has been eight months since the last appearance of that monster. This long absence of its activity must have dulled the nations' judgment. Among them, there are people beginning to appear who say the Black Beast is no more."

Valkenhayn lowly groaned as if to suppress his resentment.

Trinity gently pressed her chest and slightly drew her chin.

"The threat hasn't disappeared yet... Even now the seithr mist is still blowing throughout the world. The remnants of the Black Beast are also still threatening people..."

"Not gettin' the cooperation of the countries means the cooperation between Ishana and United Nations ain't going well. The investigation for the missing 'Kushinada's Lynchpin' is still going on. But since the UN's planning to do it their own way, gettin' intelligence is complicated."

Jubei spoke in words mixed with sighs while the long tails on his back swayed, alert. At the same time, the floating lengthy image stirred in the sphere.

"...Eight months."

A noise from the five extending shadows resounded. A sharp, cold voice muttered. A large triangular hat stood out. It was Nine.

Staring at the sphere floating in the air, Nine folded her arms under her voluptuous chest and supported her chin with her fingers as she pondered.

She recalled a certain man. Eight months ago, they met on the day of Black Beast's last appearance and parted with him on the very same day.

The man had spoken. That the Black Beast's activities would be halted for one year.

—*—One year. During that time, get the strength needed for humanity to battle the Black Beast.*

Nine remembered clearly the words she had heard eight months ago, down to his tone of voice. No, those words didn't become clearer as the days went

by. Day by day... as the period where the disappearance of Black Beast continued, she realized that he spoke the truth.

There were still four months until the pronounced one year ended. If a year passed, it would likely, surely appear.

"No conventional weapons could be used against Black Beast. Even if in the future some immensely powerful weapons were made, they wouldn't hurt the Black Beast. ...Isn't that so?"

Nine's sharply pointed voice was like putting ice on the stretched string of the room's tension.

Beside the owner of the voice, stood a man. He wore a low hood that hid his expression and he hadn't opened his mouth until now. He was Yuuki Terumi.

His mouth, his only facial feature exposed by the dim light, began to speak.

"Yeah, that's right."

"With the exception of *magic*, hurting that monster requires utilizing seithr."

"Eyyup. ...Also, don't make me explain the same thing over and over. You getting senile, bitch?"

He spat out a curse since he was getting tired of it. Then Nine scowled sternly and shot him a death stare.

But she immediately shook off the fury from her gaze and turned to the other direction, her hair spinning.

"The means to attack Black Beast by utilizing seithr, *armagus*, is almost complete."

"Armagus... If I remember correctly, it could make normal people who ain't a mage able to use magic. "

"It's a little different."

Toward Jubei's admiration, Nine slightly slackened her mouth and answered.

"The fundamentals of magic and armagus are different. Magic borrows the spiritual power that's originally present in nature and then puts that to use. In regard to armagus, it's invoked by utilizing seithr. If there's no seithr, it can't be used. Since ordinary people can't handle seithr, a *grimoire* is necessary to make it feasible."

"Grimoire?"

The one who tilted her head slightly as she asked was Trinity. Nine slightly nodded.

"Although I said grimoire, it doesn't mean that's the real form. It changes the gathered seithr in the armagus, kind of like a converter. Anyway, it makes it possible for even people outside Ishana to attack the Black Beast."

Answering without pause, Nine shifted her gaze for an instant, stealing a glance of the man next to her.

The development of armagus had begun approximately half a year ago. Nine was the one who had fabricated armagus' base theory, but Terumi was indispensable in completing it in such a short amount of time.

Terumi possessed massive knowledge regarding the Black Beast and seithr. It was because of that knowledge that establishing armagus' form was possible.

Again, Nine recalled the words of the man she had met eight months ago. He had also said something else. That she should watch out for Yuuki Terumi.

Nine had heeded those words, yet she had taken Terumi out from the deep basement of a certain castle. She also had firmly applied *Mind Eater*, a magic that made him completely unable to defy its user, controlling over his will.

"But although I said ordinary people can use it, it doesn't really mean that anyone can do it. An aptitude is required in themselves. The manufacturing of the grimoire is going well, but there's an insufficient number of people who could use it. If it remains as it is, the counter measure for Black Beast would be imperfect. If possible, it should be a powerful measure, rather than being able to exhibit strength without having to be bound with seithr. For example..."

"Like the weapons we use?"

Jubei held out a single sword on his back. The sword that came out of the dark had been given to him by Nine about one month ago.

Of course, it wasn't an ordinary sword. It was a specially made article that had alchemy and magic's techniques included in its making. Instead of clearing away a certain mass of seithr, the sharp blade could cut it up.

Similarly, Trinity also held out the specialized weapon Nine had developed. The small cane could transform by taking the nature of magic Trinity wanted to use in mind.

"Yes. But even then, they're still weak. It shouldn't be like armagus which is only a substitute for magic or those prototypes given to you guys... We

require weapons that have a more specialized ability in order to defeat the Black Beast."

Nine spoke stubbornly as if burdening herself with a new task.

Toward her, a small laugh interrupted from beside her.

"Weapons... huh."

There was no wondering about the owner of the voice with the ridiculing tone. Nine looked at Terumi with cold eyes.

His slender body was turned toward the sphere floating in the room like always, but the glance that had a suggestive indication drifting about was aimed at Nine.

"You okay not telling our dear friends the details? It's looking like you're making the weapons in the dark here~ ...You hear me?"

"I don't need you to interrupt this conversation. Be quiet, Terumi."

As she spoke with a tone of voice as if holding him down, Nine hit the floor with her high heel. The rough but somehow graceful noise rang sharply around the room.

If Nine told him to be silent, Terumi would do so. Mind Eater was that kind of a magic. Terumi was silent, but he stood while still grinning like a maniac.

Drawing her gaze from the face that looked like it was holding back a burst of laughter, Nine sighed in annoyance.

As if to calm the irritated Nine, Jubei made a bitter smile. He then shrugged his small shoulders.

"So as of now, there's only one way to effectively attack Black Beast. If the weapons Nine spoke of have been completed, we'll be able stand on equal ground with that monster and challenge it."

However, that speech resulted in a new irritation for Nine.

Playing her fingers around the brim of her large triangular hat which stood as a symbol of wisdom, Nine pointed her chin toward the space between Jubei and Valkenhayn.

"...And? Where's the only person who has the means to attack Black Beast, Hakumen, gone?"

The empty spot where the harsh words were thrown to was supposed to hold a sixth person standing together with them.

Part 2

Ishana, an island floating on ocean.

The island was painted with lush green nature and a lovely townscape. It was known as *The Mage's Guild* outside the island.

On the other side of history, the Mage's Guild had constantly influenced change in the world. The organization existed to protect and enhance alchemy and magic, the techniques that should have been forgotten in ancient times. They didn't belong to any country nor bend to anyone. At present, there was a grand academy established in the center to pass down the continuously inherited ancient wisdom and vast knowledge to the next generation.

In the academy's courtyard, she stood alone.

The raised tall trees were sparkling, bright green from the summer sunlight. Between those trees, the white sunlight filtering through and fell upon the small stone pavement that was like stitching on the ground.

Although its vicinity was encircled by buildings related to the academy and Mage's Guild, this place didn't have a very enclosed feeling at all. Rather than a courtyard within a school, it appeared more like a hidden garden.

Sitting on a deserted bench set under the shade of a tree in the corner of the garden, Celica A. Mercury was swinging her feet.

The academy uniform in shades of white and black had a magician's motif on it. The short mantle on her back was fluttering in the wind. Her thick, light brown hair that was tied in a high ponytail and the treetops of the courtyard were rustling together, making refreshing noises.

"Looks like Onee-chan isn't done yet."

There was a brick building belonging to the Mage's Guild at the end of a path close to her. There was a meeting being held inside a council room which had barrier that wouldn't let any voices or information leak out. Celica's older sister, Nine, was participating in the meeting.

Celica was waiting for her sister and her companions to come out after the meeting ended.

The wind carrying the scent of greenery was softly blowing through.

"...It feels good."

Celica straightened her posture and lifted her head. The sunshine passed through the trees next to her before shining upon her cheeks and forehead.

Today, like always, Ishana's air was clear without any stagnation.

Seven years ago, along with the appearance of the Black Beast, seithr had overflowed throughout the world and polluted the atmosphere. It lessened the wind, weakened the waves, and made the soil barren. The seasons lost their characteristics as the weather became disturbed. The creatures that were constantly exposed to thick seithr would lose their original form and go mad, destroying everything.

However, Ishana wasn't like that. The island that was managed by magic was protected by an invisible barrier. The air, water, and soil were pure, uncontaminated by seithr.

As a matter of fact, there was an incident last year when the barrier had been damaged, resulting in seithr entering the island for a short period. But Celica didn't know much about that as the incident occurred immediately after Celica slipped out of the island on important business. When Celica returned to Ishana, the barrier had already been repaired completely.

With the infiltrating seithr purified, Ishana was now thoroughly clean without any glimpse of the incident.

Celica deeply inhaled Ishana's air into her chest.

"I wonder what his face would look like if I brought him to this island."

While narrowing her eyes to block the sunlight shining into them, she smiled gently.

What she was picturing beyond the light and green curtains was the face of a friend important to Celica.

...Friend might not be correct. To tell the truth, Celica didn't know what she should regard him as. She didn't have a formal relationship to refer him as an acquaintance, but he wasn't what she would usually call a friend either.



In just a few days, he became awfully close to her. He had helped her. He had supported her. He had protected her.

He was... such an irreplaceable person.

"Fufu, I'm sure he'd be amazed. Ah, but he might have actually seen a similar place. After all, he knew so much about magic even though he's not from this island... He's such a mysterious person."

Without realizing, she actively talked to herself in this place devoid of other people.

She met him eight months ago, during the end of last year. He was tall, had white hair and a green eye just on his left side. He was rough around the edges, but very kind.

Since they parted so suddenly he had never told her much about himself, Celica didn't get to know him well enough. But a lot of the strength he'd given her was always burning inside Celica's chest.

There was never a moment when she forgot about him. He was important, precious...

Suddenly, a light was glimmering at the edge of Celica's gaze.

It was probably the sunlight filtering through the trees. But when the light blinded Celica for an instant, her sight was completely engulfed in the next moment.

(Eh...!?)

Her shout of surprise didn't manage to escape.

As if the world had been turned inside out in the blink of an eye, Celica's surroundings turned to bright white.

The courtyard's wind and rustling branches were no more. All sound and smell disappeared, it was hard to grasp which direction was up or down. She was even uncertain as to whether gravity existed. Inside the completely white space, only Celica remained.

No, there was something else. A mirror. When she turned her face around to look at the surroundings, the rectangular mirror had stood there unnoticed, reflecting Celica's whole body.

(Where's this? Why is a mirror here...?)

She should have been able to form the questions as words, but somehow her voice couldn't come out again. It felt like everything had been sucked up and vanished.

The bizarre thing was that she wasn't terrified.

Rather, Celica was drawn by curiosity and took a step toward the mirror.

On the other side of the mirror that looked as if it had made a rectangular cut across the room, Celica's amazed figure was reflected. Then she unconsciously tried to touch it.

But just before Celica's fingers touched the mirror, suddenly it felt like she was smelling something.

It wasn't so much a smell as a familiar sensation.

It was more similar to the warmth of family sat around the table with her, or the calmness she felt when passing time alone, absentmindedly at her favorite spot.

A burning feeling in her chest that spontaneously bubbled up when she was with someone special.

Celica knew this feeling. She remembered.

Celica gently caught her breath as if waking up from a dream.

That moment, a gust of wind swept away the mist in the world. Quite naturally, the scenery returned.

The pouring sunlight filtering through trees, branches rustling in the wind, the fresh and earthy smell of midsummer. The feel of the bench placed under the shade of a tree in the courtyard of the academy she commuted to everyday.

Without looking at them, Celica stood up while looking around. After that, she began to run.

She returned to the school building after leaving the academy's courtyard. Then she left the school proper, leaving the academy behind her. As if drawn by an invisible thread, Celica hastened her pace without so much as a look over her shoulder.

Her chest throbbed. She herself understood what she was expecting.

After all, this impression was... his.

As though she was being guided by something, she went up the slope beside the academy before going around it to a hill located at the back. She reached her destination in no time at all. At least, Celica felt only a few seconds had passed.

There was a little surprise in the corner of her mind that the hill was so close to the school's courtyard. It would usually take much more time.

She ran up to a gentle slope that was covered with grass.

The hill was slightly elevated; it was possible to see all of Ishana's townscape. White clouds, separating the sky from the sea, were floating in the distant blue sky.

Someone was stood at the hill's summit.

The street, sea, clouds and city. With the scenery of Ishana's calm afternoon at her back, Celica shouted with all her might.

His name.

"———RAGNA!"

The first time she saw him was at the entrance of a deserted village inside a forest.

Sat leaning against the trunk of a tree, he had been gravely injured. On top of that, he had lost his memories. At first he could remember nothing but his own name.

Together with him, Celica traveled to Japan... and encountered the Black Beast.

Celica couldn't do anything. She couldn't stop him. He had directly challenged the Black Beast, and then disappeared along with it.

He had said the he would return.

He had promised.

So Celica waited. She kept waiting because she wanted to meet him again.

Responding to Celica's voice, the shadow standing atop the hill turned around slowly.

A gust of wind whirled past, disturbing the lawn, flowing through her. Celica endured the wind, slightly buffeted by it, holding her disheveled hair while raising her face.

"Ah..."

After she observed the figure once more, Celica involuntarily raised her voice.

The figure was a tall man whose silver hair fluttered in Ishana's clear wind.

However even though his figure resembled a human, it also looked odd.

His body was wrapped in white and black with something that might as easily have been clothes or armor as it could have been skin. The eyeless, earless, and mouthless face was concealed with pure white mask. Red orbs had been embedded around his body. The orbs might be the substitute for his barren face as every single one of them stared at her like eyes.

On his back, there was a long sword sheathed diagonally that was probably as long as he was tall.

"Hakumen-san..."

Celica awkwardly called out the strange man again. A slight disappointment seeped in her voice.

Hakumen was Celica's acquaintance. Together with her sister Nine and her close friend Trinity, he was one of the warriors who had gathered in Ishana in order to defeat the Black Beast.

The eyeless face and countless red orbs gazed at Celica indifferently.

"...So it is you, Celica A. Mercury."

What was heard from behind the white mask was a low tone of voice that concealed his emotions.

To cover her slip up for mistaking him for another person, Celica scratched her face and laughed.

"I'm sorry for shouting at you so suddenly. Umm... I thought you were one of my friends."

After bowing slightly, Celica soon took several steps toward Hakumen.

Hakumen just looked at her from the edge of his vision. Then just as he had been before Celica addressed him, Hakumen turned around to face the townscape.

Celica stood next to him.

"Are you observing Ishana?"

From on top of the hill, one could look down on Ishana with ease.

Basked in the gentle midday's sunlight, the green and blue roofs, and the white walls supporting them, shone brightly. There were people living on the island going back and forth on the gentle stone-paved pathways. A thin forest surrounded it as if protecting against the outside world.

Furthermore, the forest was also encircled by a vast sea.

Looking at Ishana from here truly made it look just like a painting.

The scent of grass riding on the fresh wind floated past. While tucking her wind tousled hair behind her ears, Celica gazed at the city and smiled.

"This place is nice, isn't it? I come here from time to time. Though sometimes I get surprised by the sudden strong wind."

Hakumen didn't reply, choosing to remain silent.

There was a weighty feeling about the suffocating silence, but Celica didn't pay it any heed even for a bit.

They didn't often talk, but Hakumen was always like this. Basically, he would just respond to unnecessary talk with silence. He would only speak if it was about the Black Beast.

Celica raised her chin and looked up at Hakumen. He was fairly tall compared to Celica. Looking at him for a long time would make her neck sore.

The white mask must have noticed Celica's gaze, but he didn't turn his face. He faced Ishana in silence as though he was a decoration.

"But... it's strange."

The lawn rustled by wind urged Celica to continue her muttering.

"Why did I mistake Hakumen-san for him? Your appearance and atmosphere are completely different."

But there was something similar. She wondered what it could be.

She would have a bit of trouble answering if she were asked what that was. The voice, demeanor, and body language were different. The resemblance was more obscure, an awfully subjective one.

If she really tried to put it into words... it was his scent, possibly his warmth.

If she said that, even Hakumen might laugh at her thinking she was a dog or something. Celica had never witnessed him laughing. Surely no one else ever had.

Immediately imagining it, he surely would look clumsy. Celica spontaneously giggled at that thought.

As if responding to her voice, Hakumen made a slight motion as he turned his neck. The white mask was looking at Celica.

"——Ragna."

The muffled voice resounded in a low tone.

Celica stared in wonder.

He repeated the name Celica had mistakenly called him. He had only spoke, and yet it sounded like there was a hidden emotion in the name he muttered that didn't suit the expressionless swordsman.

Fixing the angle of his head toward Celica, Hakumen asked assertively.

"I've heard you say the name before. Did you mean *Ragna the Bloodedge*?"

"Bloodedge...? Nope. I only know him as *Ragna*."

"Nevertheless... You did meet a man called Ragna, didn't you?"

"Yup, I met him. I don't know if he's the same person you're thinking about, but he's tall and has white hair. It seems he could only see with his left eye, but his eye color was clear green."

Mixed with the gentle wind that flowed, she could hear that Hakumen inhale slightly.

Celica reflexively opened her eyes wide. It was the first time she had seen Hakumen astonished.

"Perhaps Ragna is your acquaintance?"

Pressing her inquiry, Celica watched for Hakumen's reaction, deeply focusing on his white mask.

But without saying anything, Hakumen averted his face from her. He once again faced the city, remaining silent. Viewing his face from the side, it seemed he refused to give an answer.

Celica had a slight wry smile. This behavior was more what she was used to. But since he didn't leave, perhaps it meant that there was no problem in her continuing to talk. Since he indicated no readiness to reply, Celica continued on her own.

"By the way, I came here since I felt that Ragna was here. Since I can't sense people's power like Onee-chan can, I wonder what's actually happening... I suddenly felt a warmth like the feeling that Ragna had."

Celica gently put her hands on her chest. The feeling she sensed back at the courtyard was still lingering there. With just that small feeling, faint happiness soaked in her whole body. It made Celica spontaneously smile broadly.

"Since Ragna always kept his chin up at all times, doesn't that mean he's the sort of person who always looks forward? No matter how strong the wind was blowing, his feet stayed firm and wouldn't move even a step. That's my image of him. That's why just thinking that I'm next to him makes me feel like i'm being protected."

After her short speech, Celica gave a small laugh. Her ponytail drawing an arc, she looked up at Hakumen.

"Oh, what am I saying? I'm the only one who thinks about him. He actually did protect me once, too. I wonder if the Ragna you know is someone different."

If possible, she wanted to hear what Hakumen thought of Ragna.

However, she didn't sense anything from Hakumen besides his slight breathing. He was absolutely still as if he were a sculpture erected on top of the hill. On the contrary, his long silver hair, which waving slightly as it was blown by the wind, looked out of place.

"Hakumen-san?"

She asked again to be sure. But the response was still obstinate silence.

Celica suddenly noticed. Hakumen was no longer looking at the city.

His face was facing the beautiful cityscape, but his chin was retracted. His appearance was that of a man sequestered in deep, deep thought.

Part 3

The noise of the wind and the voice of Celica who was speaking right beside him didn't reach Hakumen.

His hearing only picked up the one name that had been mentioned several times. It made a ripple on the surface of the water of his thoughts.

Ragna.

Ragna the Bloodedge.

It was a name that couldn't be forgotten even if he tried to. A name that had been etched on the basis of his memory.

If he had the face of a human and eyes at the appropriate place, Hakumen would have frowned.

(Why... Why was Nii-san here? In this age...?)

The man he had once called brother. Ragna the Bloodedge.

In this time, he definitely shouldn't exist.

——It was the time when Hakumen was not *Hakumen*. Perhaps his last consecutive memory.

The last memory of the time when he was once named *Jin*.

The recollection began with scorching red.

Whirling flames, surging heat. Although he was showered by the scattering spray of lava, they oddly weren't hot.

In a place deep underground where an artificial volcano named *The Cauldron* was created, he——Jin threw himself into said Cauldron. For the sake of saving a person who had fallen.

"NII-SAN!"

With his beautiful golden hair disheveled, with his jade eyes burning in flames, his voice broke as he shouted. Pushing his way through the heat, he extended his arm.

There were silhouettes ahead of him in the direction he sought. The body of a large man and one of a small woman. The two of them were lying on top of another as if caught in an embrace. They were connected by a huge sword, piercing their bodies like a giant stake. Similar to a gliding bird, they went into freefall.

Jin wanted to stop the man. But his voice was swallowed by the roaring wind and his flailing arm couldn't reach him.

The woman was smiling. That woman had snatched the man Jin called brother.

He wasn't close enough that she could see him, yet her red eyes were glaring and looking up at Jin. Her face twisted into something hideous while letting out a shrill laugh. The deafening voice echoed inside his skull.

Shut up. Stop laughing.

Jin cried as he was engulfed in roaring wind and flame. Hatred and murderous thoughts gushed up from the bottom of his stomach.

"I will never... ever forgive you! NEVER!"

The apparently endless fall suddenly transformed.

The figures that were solid until then melted and blended into one. The man and woman who were united by a sword lost their features and transformed into a black, writhing mass. Gradually swelling, it expanded and swallowed the surroundings. Inside the darkness, bright red eyes that shone in a sinister fashion could be seen.

As soon as he saw it, a needle of ice penetrated Jin's spine.

At the same time, countless words of denial rushed through his mind.

Inexcusable.

It mustn't be allowed to exist. It mustn't be deemed to exist.

The denials were the impulse of his instinct. In the accumulation of them, his will and ego were crushed to nothingness.

In the end, the mass that contained his brother and the hated woman tried to take the shape of something...

Jin, together with the black mass, fell down into the blazing flames.

Lured by the cold wind, he opened his eyes. There were no flames nor heat... What appeared before his eyes was the stretched, emotionless sky full of stars.

The figure of his brother was nowhere to be seen.

The same for the red-eyed woman, and the black mass he had seen.

But there stood a girl beside him. A girl that resembled the moon.

"Mr. Hero. How would you like to become a real hero?"

Jin didn't know how to answer the enigmatic question. He couldn't recall the correct words.

But when the girl expressed a bewitching smile that didn't seem to match her girlish appearance at all, she summoned a suffocating scent of roses and whisked Jin away from that place.

Teleportation——.

The moment he felt it, Jin lost consciousness once more.

When he regained consciousness again, Jin was lying in the bed of a strange room.

In the forefront of his vision was a dull colored ceiling, harmonized by a chandelier that seemingly had a flower and ivy motif.

The room was spacious. It was furnished with moderately luxurious but good quality furniture. The faint scent must have been roses. The bedding was also considerably first-rate, it bore the illusion that one would sink if they were to lie there for too long.

The air fluctuated suddenly.

Along with the sound of a door opening, someone entered. There was only one set of footsteps. Slipping through the door, a quiet wind and rose fragrance entered the room.

The footsteps stopped beside Jin along with the sound of wheels turning. After a short pause, a hoarse voice spoke gently.

"It seems you have awakened."

Barely hearing it, Jin tried to move his neck. He found he could only look around by moving his eyes.

There was the figure of an old man beside the bed. A wrinkled face with a long white beard, and lengthy grey hair in addition.

The old man was severely thin and looked very tired. His neck and arms looked like dead branches and his cheeks held the moss. That said, the old man was wrapped in noble attire that was breathtaking.

He was sitting in a wheelchair. The sound of wheels Jin's ears picked up earlier must have belonged to it.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Clavis Alucard. This man is my butler, Valkenhayn R. Hellsing."

A voice that shook the air gently, like a ripple on the surface of water.

With red eyes filled with the accumulated wisdom and dignity of many generations, Clavis hinted toward the restrained, well built man stood behind him.

After that, he proceeded to reach out his hand to a tiny silhouette at his side.

"This child is Rachel Alucard. ...She is the one who brought you to this castle."

Clavis put his hand on the shoulder of the girl. It was the bewitching girl who had smiled before Jin lost consciousness, below the starry sky and annoyingly dazzling moon.

But something was different. Jin thought instinctively.

It could be the appearance, the age, or even her very existence. He was certain that she was the girl from that time, but he had a feeling that something was fundamentally different.

Jin gathered a little strength and knitted his brows.

It wasn't just the girl. This place was anomalous. These people, the drifting air... even the flow of time.

"Where am I...?"

Placing his jarring arms to each side of his body, Jin tried to get up. However, even though his arms were moving, they slipped, unable to achieve any power as if they were hollow pipes.

It wasn't just his arms. It was like his whole body had been replaced with wooden doll. He even had to muster his whole strength just to move his lips.

Toward the appalled Jin, the gentle voice spoke again.

"You ought not do anything excessive. Let alone getting up, your body cannot move as you please. It is quite amazing just for you to have woken up in this short period of time."

"Short period of time?"

"It should be seven days in human time... When you were carried to this castle, you were gravely injured. The external wounds were treated by Valkenhayn, but you slipped into a comatose state due to your injuries."

After speaking that much, Clavis smiled and looked at Jin with eyes like he was admiring a kitten taking its first steps.

"Do not force yourself. Try not to get up."

He lectured Jin once again.

For a moment, a glint of clear irritation passed over Jin. But looking at Clavis' peaceful gaze made his body lose its strength. Jin sank into his bed as if giving up. His fatigue and dizziness gave him the impression that it would be futile even if he struggled.

After being certain he had relaxed, Clavis answered Jin's first question.

"This place is my castle. It does not belong anywhere in the world. It is also connected to every dark night of the world... A place that exists but is also nonexistent. Similar to the other side of the moon."

The words he spoke were too obscure even for a fairy tale. But mysteriously they managed to sound logical for human interpretation.

At the very least, Jin had a vague understanding of it. Taking a deep breath, he spoke his next question.

"...Why am I here?"

"Well, then. I do not know the details either. But young man, it appears that you have crossed the Boundary. The remaining damage to your flesh are all the result of crossing over it."

"Boundary..."

Just what is the Boundary? It seemed to be a word he should have known, but Jin didn't understand much about it for some reason. No, that was incorrect. He knew the 'information' regarding the meaning of the word Boundary. How could he know about it? Where did he obtain that knowledge?

In the first place, just who was he? Clavis said that he arrived here after passing through the Boundary. But where was he and what was he doing before then? ...He didn't know.

His mind was blurry. He wanted to put his hand on his forehead, but the hand wouldn't move.

He heard a sympathetic sigh from Clavis.

"Are your memories in chaos? Perhaps that is also because you have been heavily affected by the Boundary. There is an enormous amount of information drifting in the Boundary. When your spirit connected with it, your individual memories as well as personality were swept away by the excessive knowledge. To put it simply, you cannot remember yourself well enough."

With the noise of clothes rustling, Clavis lightly moved his hands from the wheelchair's handles onto his knees.

Looking away from the sluggish gesture, Jin turned his gaze toward the ceiling. The light of the chandelier was awfully distant. It made it feel lifeless.

Clavis' drowsy voice continued.

"Crossing the Boundary is very dangerous. It is a wonder for an ordinary man to even retain his flesh. Even if it remained, one would lose himself as his will became engulfed by the Boundary. ...It appears that you possess a very strong spirit."

Strong spirit. Those words were oddly amusing. Jin spat it out by taking a breath.

If he truly possessed that thing, then —— wouldn't be ——.

(...Who... What was it?)

The floating thought dispersed at once before it formed a shape inside his mind. He couldn't grasp it. It was just he felt that he had lost something... Something that absolutely mustn't be lost.

His head was heavy. He spontaneously closed his eyelids. With his vision shut in the dark, a spectacle was resurrected as if it had been waiting patiently.

Red flames, burning air, falling figures... and then red eyes.

For the present Jin, it was his last and only clear memories.

"Black... I saw a black mass. Where is that thing?"

That's right, a black mass. At the same time as he remembered, the emotions he had when he witnessed it were overflowing, gushing forth anew.

That being shouldn't be allowed to exist.

Jin's spine was shivering as his memories, along with thought, got swept away. Even his ego was engulfed by the impulse. It wasn't because of terror. If he put it into words then it would be murderous intent.

"That being is the Black Beast... It materialized from the Boundary. A being that is destroying the world."

Clavis' voice gently wrapped up the burning negative feelings.

"It seems it appeared in this world one month ago. After singlehandedly forcing a small island country into catastrophe, it presently rampages around the world searching for further destruction."

"It must..."

Slipping from his thoughts, Jin's mouth moved on its own and spoke. The words didn't completely sound; they didn't even reach Jin's ears himself. But as for the meaning of the enveloping emotions, it was too obvious not only to Jin, but also Clavis.

It must be killed.

Jin clenched his teeth. His molars grating against one another made a noise. The inner corner of his eyes were burning.

It was terribly confusing. Merely yielding to that confusion made the desire to immediately rush away from this place rampage inside his body.

He himself didn't have any kind of intention, but he felt bad as if his body was taking control and doing as it pleased.

His head aching, Jin grimaced severely.

Watching the situation quietly, Clavis continued to speak.

"Young man. This is still the time for you to recuperate. If you take a rest for a little bit more, you will be able to get up. Perhaps some of your memories will also return. If the time comes, if you still have the will to stand... there is a place I intend to show you."

"What...?"

"Until then, please rest to your heart's content. The reason you're here is because your destiny has not yet concluded."

After he said that, Clavis casted his gaze to the silent Valkenhayn at his back as if urging him.

Still with a gloomy expression, Valkenyhayn handled the wheelchair with a delicate manner that didn't suit his build and left the room with Clavis.

The girl who was following, Rachel, silently halted her feet in front of the door for a moment. With the ribbons in her long golden hair swinging, she looked back at Jin.

The big red eyes of a doll were staring at Jin.

But without saying anything, the girl's eyes continued to gleam with that cold color. Then a wind blew unexpectedly and in a flash the girl vanished to the hallway.

With the door closed the room was peacefully silent.

Jin glared at the solid wood of the door from his bed.

I couldn't—

The broken thought came in contact with the broken memories, revealing a whisper of regret.

Your destiny has not yet concluded.

Clavis' words echoed deep within his chest. Feeling annoyed by it, Jin fell asleep before long as if fainting.

"...n. Hakumen-san!"

What had pulled up Hakumen from sinking endlessly into the lake of thought might be the voice of the girl who seemed to repeatedly calling to him while lightly hitting his arm, or perhaps it was the chimes of a bell sounding that the time was 3 o'clock before vanishing as if absorbed by the distant sky.

While his five senses were readjusting to the here and now, Hakumen turned his face toward the worried girl stood next to him who was looking up at him.

As he moved, Celica sighe a breath of relief and smiled.

"Thank god. I thought something was wrong since you were completely still."

After she said that, she noticed that she was still touching his arm. Then Celica retracted her hand behind her back while making a mischievous face.

Not minding it, Hakumen turned his head. What the white mask was seeing was the Mage's Guild that was located at the center of Ishana's townscape.

"...It seems to have ended."

Lowly murmuring, he turned on his heels with the long silver hair on his head fluttering. Each time he stepped forward, the lush lawn made a noise.

Before he went too far, Celica immediately chased after him.

"Wha, wait up. You're going to Onee-chan's place, right? I'll go with you!"

Hakumen didn't give a reply, but he slightly shortened his large steps. Stepping after him, Celica jogged to catch up with a light trot.

As if urging both of their shadows to leave the hill, a strong gust of wind blew through.

Chapter 2 - Purple Ones, Their Theory

Part 1

Most of the children who lived in Ishana attended an academy located at the centre of the city. It was adjoined with the Mage's Guild.

The U-shaped buildings were built facing each other. There was a thick green garden of a courtyard interposing, connecting the two establishments. It was possible to go back and forth there.

Even if she had a day off from the academy, whenever she had business with Mage's Guild, Celica always entered through the academy's main gate. But since the circumstance was quite different today, she entered using the gate to the Mage's Guild.

The reason was her companion. Her companion wore a faceless white mask and odd white clothing. He, Hakumen, was also outfitted with a long sword that was as long as he was tall. Since she was taking him along, she couldn't go inside the academy as her classmates might be there.

To quickly avoid any unnecessary stiff atmosphere, she started to run toward the courtyard that was also connected with the academy.

When she got outside, the smell of nature hit her all at once. The refreshing wind made Celica stop walking reflexively and took a deep breath of air.

Then, some familiar figures caught her eye.

On the other side of the shrubberies she could see several men and women walking.

When she noticed the woman wearing a large triangular hat walking at the front of the pack, Celica's face suddenly lit up.

"Onee-chan!"

While frantically waving her hand, she sprang into a run.

She proceeded, taking a large detour around the shrubberies. The owner of the triangular hat spread both of her arms, waiting for Celica on the other side.

The woman's long hair flowed down her back, and her supple legs stretched out from her tight skirt. She was a girl with glamorous proportions that would easily charm any man without trying. She was Nine.

"Celica!"

She firmly seized the rushing Celica in both arms. Then Nine embraced her younger sister into her voluptuous chest. At the moment, most of Celica's face was buried in the soft cushion.

"Puh. Onee-chan, I'm in pain..."

"Good grief, where did you go? I was worried when I couldn't find you. I thought I told you to wait for me while I was conducting business. Are you okay? You didn't meet some vulgar man, did you?"

"Mmmmmph~~~~..."

"Hahaha, you're at it again."

The three men and the woman who had accompanied Nine came along. Among them was a cat-type beastkin, recognisable by his high-set triangular ears and two long tails. His right eye was covered with an eye patch. The beastkin, Jubei, let out a cheerful laugh.

Together with him was Valkenhayn, a man with a fearless face and sturdy body who kept his identity as a werewolf hidden. Next was Yuuki Terumi, a man whose eyes were hidden by a hood; he was silently keeping his distance from Celica and Nine. Behind him was a girl in a full-length robe who was wearing round glasses, Trinity.

Peeking at Celica and Nine from the side, Trinity quietly giggled.

"Oh my, Nine. Celica-san's going to cease functioning."

The cotton candy-like platinum blonde hair spilled from the hood she wore. Each time she moved, it sparkled as it reflected sunlight.

The sweet voice sounded slow and carefree. Lectured by it, Nine finally relaxed her arms.

Like a small animal, Celica slipped through the opened gap.

"Puhaa. Sorry, Onee-chan. I was with Hakumen-san up on the hill."

"With Hakumen?"

"Yup. We talked for a bit."

"...I see."

Nine, who had been looking at Celica affectionately, suddenly shifted her gaze to a completely different look. Although she had been calmly watching Celica in fascination, her stare was now like an ice needle.

Not a speck of kindness remained in her sharp gaze. The daggers in her eyes were pointed at Hakumen where he stood behind Celica, acting like he had nothing to do with her.

"The schedule of the meeting must have been reported to you, Hakumen. If you're in Ishana, then why didn't you attend?"

Nine spoke as if interrogating him. A tension began to stretch over the group.

But Hakumen didn't respond or even move.

His attitude made Nine's irritation take a sudden turn. Everyone there felt it, excluding Hakumen.

Celica's smile stiffened as she looked at Nine and Hakumen alternately. A bit to the side, Jubei and Valkenhayn looked astonished and exchanged worried looks.

High heels roughly clattering against the stone-paved path, Nine took several steps forward.

"You're the key piece in our strategy. If you're not there, then it's out of the question. Even someone like you, who can't comprehend anything other than swinging a sword, should have understood."

"I do not recall ever being your pawn."

Without making any movement, Hakumen replied indifferently.

The fire in Nine's eyes burned brighter.

"You're less than a pawn if you can't even abide simple instructions. Listen. Next time, you absolutely have to come here at the designated time. Don't keep doing the same thing every time. I don't have the spare time to babysit you."

"There is no meaning in attending a gathering with nothing but tedious talk. My soul yearns only to slay my foes."

"You may be okay with that, but it puts me in serious troubles!"

"Now, now. Don't raise your voice like that~. Look, Nine. Celica-san is frightened."

Before anyone had noticed, Trinity had moved near Nine and Hakumen. She gently forced herself between them. Before, the place was filled with a

tension that could freeze the wind. That moment, the original calmness of the courtyard, matching the touch of the warm sunlight, returned.

Nine reluctantly stopped venting her anger. Seeing this, Celica felt relieved. She scratched her cheek apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I was the one who kept Hakumen-san. If only we had intended to head for the meeting instead..."

"Celica didn't do anything bad Spesialo (talk). You never intended to attend the meeting. Rather than for the meeting, you should be apologizing for making my cute Celica look sad. Like, right this instant."

"O, Onee-chan..."

Out of character for her normal professional attitude, Nine kept spoke using the pampering voice only those closest to her knew.

Even if she had grown accustomed since Nine always did it, Celica let out a wry smile. She was happy of her sister's excessive love. But she was also worried when it occasionally went on a rampage.

"Geez... What a noisy sisters."

Valkenhayn looked astonished as he turned his head toward the voice.

As if reapplying tension that had slackened off once, a harsh laughter could be heard.

It was Terumi.

He was standing casually with both hands inserted into pockets in an unambitious manner. Then he tilted his head back while his thin shoulders shook in extreme amusement. He didn't even try to hide the laugh that he ridiculed them with. He didn't think the sisters' conversation was charming even for a bit.

"Something amusing? ...You puppet."

Revealing her discomfort, Nine coldly questioned him. The degree of coldness was different from what she had been directing at Hakumen.

But instead of backing down even a little, Terumi shrugged his shoulders and continued to ridicule her.

"Nuh-uh~. It's just funny seeing you guys making idiotic faces."

Interrupting Terumi's laugh, a white arm extended toward his throat and roughly grasped his collar.

Hakumen pulled Terumi toward himself and stared at him with intimidating silence. Terumi glared at him like a venomous snake creeping out from darkness.

"What... Don't just casually touch me. I said something that hurt your feelings? Aah? Man, you just have to answer honestly."

The white mask remained silent. But the hand that grabbed his collar wasn't gentle; it was wrenched violently.

Although he was trying to tear off the arm, Terumi grinned and provoked him even more.

"Hah, what's with you? We're friends, aren't we? Let's get along, Hakumen-chan. Or what? You can't talk since you got no mouth?"

"You..."

"Okay, stop!"

Celica's voice suddenly cut in, interrupting Hakumen's words and freezing Terumi's grin.

"Quit with the fighting. You're getting into another argument so soon, even though Trinity-san just ended the last one?"

"Good grief," said Celica as she grabbed both tall men's shoulders, urging them to separate.

But before he could be pushed aside, Terumi twisted his body forcefully to get away from Celica and Hakumen's grasps. He turned his face away and faintly clicked his tongue while backing away, moving a great distance from them.

He was obviously avoiding them. But even if she was aware of it, Celica just held herself back and made a wry smile for a moment.

Every time Terumi happened to be near Nine and Hakumen, a quarrel would develop. Terumi's reaction was always the same. For some reason, Terumi had a weird dislike of being touched by Celica.

Then Trinity clasped her hands together delightfully. She made a peaceful and earnest smile.

"Everyone~, why don't we have a tea now?"

The voice that had the sweet scent of butter and sugar drifting about made Jubei scratch his head with a puzzled face.

"Tea, huh... Just like you to propose that, Trinity, but we're doin' it with these guys? It ain't like we're just goin' to fill a table and get along now, is it?"

"Isn't it fine? I'm hoping we can spend time quietly together taking a graceful tea."

While fixing his collar, Valkenhayn took a step ahead. Following him, Trinity urged the others on.

"...I sure hope the coffee will taste good."

Nine grumbled dejectedly, dropping her shoulders along with a sigh. Celica hugged Nine's arm to her chest and smiled gleefully.

"This is the first time everyone will be having tea together, right? We've got quite a number here, but let's just go to the usual shop!"

"Celica, are you serious? I don't want to see these guys' faces in that store... Ah, of course Jubei's a different case."

"H-Hey. Stop talkin' like that in a place like this..."

Jubei looked downward as Nine made a surprise attack with her charming smile. His ears which usually stood straight up were also seemingly bending down.

Nine, Celica, and Jubei followed Valkenhayn and Trinity who had gone ahead. Hakumen and Terumi also stepped forth without saying anything.

However, before they could go any further, a heavy noise resounded as the gate that led to the courtyard from Mage's Guild opened.

"Oh my~, everyone's present."

Together with the charming provocative voice, long boots' heels, which were even taller than Nine's, clacked along the courtyard's path.

The woman entering the courtyard was wearing a dress that had a large gap at the torso, complete with long mantle decorated with extravagant fur. Her lips, thick with lipstick, and the gorgeous necklace decorating her chest were eye-catching. Her suggestive attire hinted at a slender, well kept figure.

Beside her stood a man with silk-like blonde hair that had been grown long. With such a truly stylish outfit, he looked like some kind of royalty.

"It is not admirable of you bringing outsiders inside the guild, Nine."

The blond man put out a modest smile along with calm tone of voice that had thorns of rationality in it. The cool ice-blue pair of eyes looked at the

lined up faces in the courtyard in turn. The thin frame of his glasses emphasized his intelligence and dignity.

"Eight, Seven..."

Nine dropped her voice in displeasure at the pair who were now standing in her way.

Eight was the eighth and Seven was the seventh.

Along with Nine as the ninth, they were Sages just like her. The proof was the conspicuously large triangular hats placed atop their heads.

The Ten Sages——the honored people were outstanding magicians even among the Mage's Guild. They held the positions of highest authority over Ishana. The maximum number had been decided as ten people. But it was less than ten people right now. There were missing numbers as some positions in the Mage's Guild weren't filled.

Seven, Eight, and Nine's ages were relatively young among the Ten Sages. The three of them also stood out in their abilities. But it was a well-known fact that Nine was especially young and blessed with a special talent.

"Trinity. Sorry but go ahead and take Celica and the others."

Without taking her eyes from the two Sages who stood on her way, Nine spoke in a terribly calm voice.

Trinity nodded quickly.

"Understood. Everyone, let us go~."

"Is everything alright?"

Jubei was giving a concerned frown, but Trinity smiled to assuage his fear. Then she dropped her voice a little as she whispered into his ear.

"It's okay. It'll be inconvenient if we have to leave the island for carelessly meddling in the Ten Sages' affairs~. Other than matters regarding the Black Beast, getting too deeply involved with Mage's Guild would put us into trouble."

"I see..."

He was still not yet fully convinced, but Jubei swung his tails in the stead of nodding. The only people who had as much interest in the Mage's Guild and Nine as Jubei did were Celica and Trinity. Without needing to be urged by Trinity again, Valkenhayn, Hakumen, and Terumi promptly exited the courtyard.

Afterwards, Jubei, Trinity, and Celica followed. ...But as Celica passed Seven, he grabbed her arm.

"Hey!"

Nine shouted in anger. On the spur of the moment, Trinity stopped walking and Jubei put himself on guard.

But Seven didn't release any strength from the grip that held Celica.

Celica stared at Seven in wonder. It wasn't like she knew him well, but Seven was someone who gave the impression of a gentleman with a polite demeanor and gentle attitude. It was surprising for him to rudely seize someone's arm while displaying such an awfully stern face.

Still grabbing Celica's arm, Seven loudly spoke.

"You have an involvement in our discussion. You will have to remain here."

"Me...?"

"Listen to me. Just go, Celica."

Unable to just watch, Nine stepped up and roughly separated Seven's hand from Celica's arm. Since she took the opportunity to let a light electric current flow, Seven of course removed his hand.

But from the side, Eight interrupted with frivolous talk while fiddling with her hair which was spilling from under her hat.

"Hmm? Why are you keeping your sister away? Don't you feel sorry for hiding such an important thing from her?"

"Eight, you have nothing to do with this."

"Oh, but I do. Right, Celica-chan?"

While replying with a carefree attitude toward the furious Nine, Eight looked at Celica.

Celica got the feeling from Eight's suggestive look that Nine knew something that Celica wasn't aware of. Now, she was desperately trying to keep Celica away from it.

Once she thought about it, she couldn't keep quiet anymore.

"I will stay. Trinity-san, Jubei-san, you two can go ahead."

"Eh, eh, but..."

At Celica's flat declaration, which showed no hint of hesitation, Trinity got flustered and then looked to Nine. Without saying anything, her gentle green eyes conveyed her uncertainty.

Nine held her head. Nine knew Celica's personality better than anyone. When Celica looked up straight and spoke frankly like now, it would be futile for anyone to oppose her.

"...Trinity, Jubei. Celica and I will join you soon, so please take care of the others. Leaving them on their own will just give me endless anxiety."

"If you say so... then okay."

"We'll wait at the shop. Come quick."

Trinity bowed to Seven and Eight. Jubei didn't bow but shot them a suspicious glance. Together they turned and left the courtyard.

When the gate to the Mage's Guild's buildings had completely closed, Nine moved next to Celica. She pushed her long hair onto her back, still visibly irritated. After she spat out a sigh, her resentful gaze became filled with an unshakeable composure.

"Now, I'll listen to your business. Though, I never thought this story of yours would be anything of interest."

Part 2

Nine with Celica, and Seven with Eight. The cold wind in the courtyard blew through the gap between them as they stood facing each other.

Nine stood with her arms folded in a manner that suited her overbearing beauty. Next to her older sister, Celica was alarmed as the tension grew more violent bit by bit.

She normally paid it no heed, but Nine, who had received a large triangular hat, was a Sage. And Seven, together with Eight, wore the same hat, signifying that they were also Sages.

The Ten Sages had a completely different status within the Mage's Guild's members. Their positions were far higher. Even the thickheaded Celica could recognize their heightened status and other social standings. The three of them stood in the same position as the people who had the highest authority in the guild. It felt like they were sticking out like a sore thumb somewhat.

Celica was restless and kept checking the surroundings. Despite this, Eight looked toward the gate that led to the guild before cynically raising her lipstick-red lips and flashing a smile.

"You're just like a queen being followed by attendants like that. Though, this place is the majestic Mage's Guild, not your castle. So don't be mistaken, okay?"

"They are an essential force to battle the Black Beast. In other words, my comrades-in-arms. Calling them outsiders or attendants... I wonder who's the one mistaking Mage's Guild for their palace?"

In no time at all, Nine had coldly rebuffed the provocation with sarcasm.

Eight was at a loss for words. But she immediately pulled herself together and smiled. Then she moved her hands from her waist to her chest, folding her arms and embracing her body.

"Hmph, comrades-in-arms? If we remove Trinity, the rest are just suspicious people. There's a beastkin, werewolf, and two others who aren't even human. I've always considered you to be a strange person, but it's still a surprise to see you have a penchant for keeping non-humans in your service~."

Offended by her manner of speaking, Celica took a large step forward.

"Excuse me! I don't think it's like you've just said. Jubei-san, Valkenhayn-san, Hakumen-san, and Terumi-san are trying to beat the Black Beast with their utmost effort. I really don't approve of you... making a fool of the people who fight together with us!"

For Celica, the people Eight regarded as non-humans were her precious sister's comrades.

Celica didn't have enough power to save her sister. That was why Celica honestly had a great respect for them. Nine had approved their strength. They would wield that same strength to fight together with her. Celica felt a deep gratitude toward them.

It was unacceptable for people who barely knew them to insult them.

Nine put her hand on one of Celica's tense shoulders before speaking indifferently.

"Celica, you shouldn't speak too much with that woman. ...You might get infected with her worthless pattern of thinking."

"Wh-What did you say!? Hey, Nine. Is that how you talk your senior!?"

"Being polite is meaningless when the other party has spent their life pointlessly."

"Pointless... You're the one who's pointless!"

"Leave it at that, Eight. We have an important business to do, don't we?"

Seven's composure cut through the sparks building between the women like a knife cutting through butter.

As her partner didn't look even slightly disturbed, Eight made an effort to regain her composure and cleared her throat.

"I, Indeed. You're right. Nine... this has to wait until that thing's test run."

Slowly, Eight spoke directly to Nine as if the hysteria so far hadn't happened.

That thing. The words made Nine's face changed.

"Causality weapon..."

Celica turned around as her sister involuntarily muttered the phrase. Her breath taken away, Nine cast her eyes down slightly. Her mouth seemed stiff.

Nine lightly made fists and then raised her gaze, looking from underneath the wide brim of her hat. It wasn't an expression of anger. If anything it was a look of contempt.

"Stop the development. Don't make me say it over and over again."

"...The same to you, don't make me say it over again. It is indispensable for humanity."

Even if he was aware that there was contempt in Nine's eyes, Seven, with his detestable calmness, kept his elegant smile.

Beside them, Eight flicked the crystal on her earring before she spoke.

"The preparation for its activation is about to begin soon. But a problem remains in the control system. It could be easily solved if Celica A. Mercury was involved."

Upon hearing her name, Celica jolted and pointed to herself.

Eight gave an exaggerated nod to persuade her.

"Yes. With your power, we can put it into combat. Will you cooperate?"

"No."

Nine declared strongly enough to cause the illusion to quickly break as if slapped by her voice.

"If it can't be controlled, then it should be disposed of. From the beginning, its existence was a mistake. I won't let Celica get involved. Ever."

Different from the sharp gaze that had been directed at Seven and Eight until now, there was now an invisible, surging vigor rampaging within her.

She gave the oppression life through her aggressive tone of voice. It made both opposing Ten Sages wince unintentionally. For just a split second, a humiliating fright showed on each of Seven and Eight's faces.

Looking at them from the side, anxiety stuck in Celica's mind. Just what was *that thing* that made Nine so strongly reject it like this.

She had a guess. Perhaps it was really terrifying. Or maybe it could expose Celica's life to danger.

Back then... back at the Black Beast's last appearance eight months ago, there was something like this, too.

There was a device called *Kushinada's Lynchpin* in the underground of a certain research establishment. If it had been activated, it could have halted the Black Beast's activity. However, the activation required Celica's life.

Nine yelled that she absolutely objected in utilizing it. Celica said that she wanted to use it.

Nine's expression currently held some resemblance to the expression she had back then.

(...I think back then... it looked more like... she almost cried.)

Celica mumbled as she thought about it.

Interrupting Celica's sentiment, Seven held both his hands out wide. It seemed like he was about to give a speech.

"Nine. You truly don't understand. How many people do you think have lost their lives and live in fear due to the Black Beast? This isn't a circumstance where you should put your self-interest as priority."

Taking over from Seven, Eight talked passionately.

"I admit that the Armagus you've created is a superior measure. It's come to form because of the foundation you designed. I know that it'll be even more diverse later on, but humanity needs a decisive weapon that's more reliable!"

Celica could see that they seriously meant what they said from the bottom of their hearts. But even then, both of them couldn't ignite passion in Nine's eyes, which were staring at them with intense coldness.

"Dispose of it. That is an order from my position as someone who has complete authority regarding the Black Beast's engagement."

"What authority!? My rank in the Ten Sages is higher than yours!"

"My rights were decided in the meeting of the so called Ten Sages, Eight. Talk to the other Sages if you have complaints. And..."

Nine spoke on and on quickly. Her determination itself was unshakeable and unstoppable. Expressing her point even more heavily, Nine added a final remark.

"From now on, do not ever approach Celica again."

Celica stood dumbfounded unable to grasp even a fragment of the conversation. Then Nine grabbed her shoulder and quickly started to lead her away.

What stopped her feet wasn't the bewildered Celica, but Seven with a calmness that hid his real intention.

"I will say this once. Both Eight and I were reluctant in deciding you were the Sage who should possess complete authority in this matter. You are certainly talented. But handling an army is another kind of talent."

"...Then I will also say this once. The opponent we have to defeat is the Black Beast. Not someone with insignificant jealousy. And certainly not the world."

After leaving behind those words, this time Nine took Celica and got out of the courtyard.

Stiff noises rang within the Mage's Guild's hallway in a fast rhythm.

Nine's pace was usually fast. But it now, like it did at times, particularly made unpleasant footsteps.

Celica's flustered footsteps did their best to keep up.

"Onee-chan, Onee-chan!"

She had called out countless times. They got out of the Mage's Guild's main entrance with Nine's feet continuing at that rapid pace. Then Celica pulled her sister's arm firmly and forcibly stopped her.

"Onee-chan! I told you to wait, why don't you answer?"

"...You should know my answer if you listened before. This is all for you."

Without shaking off Celica's arms, Nine reluctantly stopped walking. Then she let out a sigh of resignation.

Celica's ponytail sprung as she quickly nodded.

"I did hear it. What's *that thing* that Seven-san and Eight-san were talking about earlier? What did they mean by "needing my power"?"

Even if someone had natural talent in magic, fitting training was required to handle it. But Celica was able to use healing magic from the beginning without any practice.

However, her healing magic wasn't the important one. The power gifted to Celica when she was born had more to do with her physical constitution.

Celica could suppress seithr just by being near it. In addition, she could also stop seithr from re-entering a place, allowing it to be completely cleared of seithr.

Celica didn't really understand her odd physical constitution. But she herself had vaguely guessed that her body was seemingly a bit peculiar.

She had thought that that was why what Eight said about *your power* was probably something no one but her could do.

"...It's better for you not to know."

Nine shook her head. She was slipping out of Celica's grasp, Celica hurriedly grabbed Nine again.

"You covering it up again! You're always like this!"

"Celica..."

The worried voice of the older sister reprimanded her.

Celica tightly grabbed her sister's hand in both of hers and looked up at her.

An honest determination dwelled beyond the pupils that had the color of wet soil. She stared so intensely that it was enough to pierce the person she was looking at.

"See, I know that you're thinking a lot of things regarding my safety. I'm happy that you're concerned and worried about me."

She must have already known what Celica was going to say next. Inside the stern eyes were trying to avoid her sister's gaze, a kindness she wouldn't give to anyone but Celica passed over Nine's eyes, as well as a frail and vulnerable look.

She noticed it, but Celica didn't hesitate to continue. After all, it was unmistakably her true feeling. She couldn't lie about her feelings to people important to her.

"But I'm not sure if I'll be happy not knowing about it. So even if I regret it, even if it puts you in trouble, I just can't comprehend it if I don't see it myself."

"I do know your personality. But I can't tell you anything about this case. I can't let you know about it. You can't even get involved with it even for a moment."

Nine didn't relent even in the wake of Celica's resolve. While pressing her forehead with her fingers like she had headache, Nine put her unshakeable resolution into words.

"Why are you so...!"

Getting irritated because Nine wouldn't reveal what she had been keeping from her, Celica's words turned sour in her protest.

However, something came to mind immediately. Nine had always been thinking about Celica. She knew about it as her protective actions had been accumulating from when they were children.

That was why if Nine told her to stay out so forcefully, then it must be something unfavorable to Celica.

"Is it something dangerous?"

Perhaps it concerned not just Celica, but something even more expansive.

Suppressing her childish selfishness, Celica lowered her eyes in worry.

Giving it a thought, Nine's sharp but also kind eyes were directed to somewhere distant.

"They're just desperate people wanting to utilize a failure. It's just a boring rivalry of adults. ...That's all."

Those words couldn't have been a lie. But for Celica, it didn't feel like she would tell the whole truth. Nine had always been concerned about Celica. She always had something she hid.

If Celica were to speak her intention, she wanted to ask what Nine was hiding and why she hid it. She wanted to know about all the circumstances. But Celica gave up on pressing her for a moment.

Her sister was just as stubborn as her. If she had decided not to, then she wouldn't yield so easily. Besides... considering Nine had been busy with strategy meetings and weapon development every day, Celica felt guilty if she ended up increasing her sister's burden with her selfish words.

"...You see. I'm not strong and not really good in using magic to fight. But I will do anything if I can be useful to you. That's why, tell me when the needs for my strength arrive."

Surely she would be excused if she was only this selfish. Celica looked forthrightly at Nine while telling her.

Nine's mouth began to open and made a slight smile. She gently released Celica's hands and then used her freed hands to wrap Celica's cheeks.

"Celica. You don't have to worry about anything. I will definitely protect you."

"Onee-chan..."

It by no means satisfied Celica. Because it meant that her sister didn't want her to help.

But her decision had supported Nine somewhat. If that could help her, then it was fine for now.

Celica put on a bright smile to cheer her up while thinking about it.

Since Nine and Celica had left, Seven and Eight were left in a courtyard filled with rich summer greenery's scent. With the same stern gaze, they stared toward the gate leading to the Mage's Guild.

Eventually, Eight rudely stomped the stone pavement under her feet with the heel of her long boot in annoyance.

"Huh, what's with that woman!? Even though she's a newbie, she acts as if she's in control of the Mage's Guild, including us Ten Sages. She should act her tenure and show us some respect!"

As the single hit to the ground didn't relieve her of the resentment inside her stomach, Eight gnawed at her lipstick covered lips and walked around.

Looking from the side at the woman's long mantle as she paced around, Seven breathed a sigh while wrinkling his forehead. Lifting the thin frame of his glasses with his middle finger, he stiffly shook his head.

"Dispose of it...? That is no joke. Roughly speaking, it was us who constructed it until this stage. Not her. While it may be true that she assembled the foundation, it is annoying that she's acting like she owned it all this time."

"Hey, Seven. You don't really mean you're going to get rid of it, do you?"

Rushing over, Eight put her hand on Seven's shoulder, raising her eyes on him, demanding an answer.

"It is a hope. Humanity's... no, our hope! Sure, the Armagus is amazing, but it won't give us victory against the Black Beast. It's not significant enough to test out the difference in power with the monster!"

"I know. I am not planning to have it disposed of before my eyes. If it were fully realized, we could show the world Nine's shallowness."

A while after the heated discussion, Seven's tone of voice took a steep turn downward. The easy-going ice blue gaze looked dull.

"However... it cannot be used as of now. We need Celica A. Mercury."

"Can't we just use it without her?"

"We cannot as it is too dangerous. Calm yourself a little. Do you want to bear the stigma of killing your allies?"

"That's true, but do you think we can deceive Nine's eyes? Unless fortune's on our side..."

"——It seems there's an interesting discussion going on here~."

All of a sudden, a third voice interrupted.

Startled, Seven and Eight's bodies stiffened.

There shouldn't be anyone in the courtyard. Seven and Eight had been checking for intruders with their magic. Before the moment they heard the voice, the courtyard was supposed to be clear of any visible creature other than insects and birds.

Eight rocked her large earrings as she turned around. Seven just glanced toward the voice.

Both of them recognized the man. At the same time, they both grasped the reason bit by bit. That's right. Since he was the man who followed her personally, it was no wonder if he could slip through the Ten Sages' eyes.

Step by step, the man drew near.

"Hey... tell me the details."

As if crawling out from the distinct shade of trees, the voice made a chill run up Seven and Eight's spines as he spoke.

Part 3

There was a house that served as a coffee shop on the sideways of Ishana's main street.

The shop had a lovely atmosphere with clay ornaments arranged along its white wall. White and light brown planters were placed around the entrance. Together lined up with them was an easel with a small blackboard leaning on it. The blackboard had today's recommendations written.

The time was three and a half in the afternoon. It was a bit late to have a tea.

Running and skipping up a short set of stairs that only had three flight of steps, Celica entered the shop along with Nine. The ringing door chime above her sounded refreshing.

"Let's see..."

Trinity and the others had gone on ahead of them, so they should have arrived much earlier. Celica looked inside the store that had the sweet aroma of butter and sugar. Then, she saw a platinum blonde girl stand up and wave her small hand.

"There! Trinity-san, sorry to keep you waiting!"

As her footsteps made quiet tapping noises on the wooden floor, she went inside while leading Nine along.

Trinity and the others' table was next to a tall decorative plant. But before she pulled up a chair, Celica looked puzzled as she saw the faces there.

"Huh? Only you two?"

Only Trinity and Jubei were seated there. Valkenhayn, Hakumen, and Terumi, who should have left the courtyard with them earlier, were nowhere to be seen.

The cat at the table answered Celica's question while resting his chin on his hand.

"Valkenhayn and Hakumen said they have other appointment. Terumi said somethin' about goin' to the toilet along the way and disappeared on his own."

"Eeh!?! Just when I thought everyone would finally have tea together..."

Dejected, Celica dropper her shoulders. She thought her longtime dream would come true today. But then she pulled herself together from the disappointment and raised her cheerful face before sitting down beside Jubei.

If they had errands, then there was nothing she could do. Starting from today, the base of operations was Ishana. There should be another chance later.

Nine also pulled up a chair. The white thighs peeking from her miniskirt rubbed together as she crossed her legs. Even Celica took notice of it. She sat on an open seat between Trinity and Jubei.

Calling a waitress who was waling past, Nine ordered iced coffee and chocolate mousse.

"Ah, I want a cold lemon and... mille-feuille!"

As she wrote Celica's order, the waitress with a bob cut replied with a smile and turned back toward the kitchen.

"You should have eaten first. Both of you are really principled."

Facing Trinity and Jubei, Nine dropped a smile.

Both of their orders were already placed on the table. Before Trinity was a hot royal milk tea and baked cheese cake. But in front of Jubei was a cup filled with green tea and pound cakes with green tea powder. There were traces that they had drank for a bit, but their cakes remained untouched.

"There's a green tea menu here, huh? First time I saw it."

Celica curiously looked at the cup in front of Jubei. Jubei twitched his whiskers to humor her.

"Seems it's a new menu. It's thanks to the increasin' flow of goods from various countries."

"But you put cold water in it, didn't you."

From the next seat, Nine lightly poked fun at him. There was no steam coming from the cup. Beside the cup, there were several glasses that had previously been filled with water placed on the table.

Jubei's face started to look a little embarrassed.

"Can't help it. It's too hot."

"Fufu. You like tea but can't drink it hot. So cute."

Nine used her finger to poke the white fur on Jubei's cheek. Then, Jubei suddenly sprung up.

"Cute...!? Like I said, please stop sayin' things like that in public..."

"Oh, it's fine. There's only Celica and Trinity here."

"That's not the problem!"

"Ufufu, please don't worry about us~. Right, Celica-san~?"

Nine stared at the beastkin with a girlish look that would make the people in Mage's Guild who barely knew her stare in disbelief. Jubei's pointed ears kept twitching as he couldn't calm down.

Trinity nonchalantly brought her cup to her mouth while seeing their exchange.

Celica raised both hands and rested her chin there. She kept nodding with her face filled with a smile.

"Yup. I really like seeing Onee-chan and Jubei-san getting along. Although sometimes I get embarrassed, too."

"Y-You're wrong. I don't really... Uhhh..."

Jubei waved his shaking, bulky hand in the air.

Interrupting his excuse, the waitress finally came carrying Nine and Celica's orders.

Not wanting to expose himself anymore, Jubei pulled his head in toward his neck and tried to appear as small as possible. He lay in wait, concealing his sigh behind the sound of the orders being placed on the table.

After a while, the Mercury sisters drew each of their drinks toward themselves. When he heard the noise, Jubei could only let a sigh of relief and raised his face.

Then he dejectedly lowered his whiskers.

"...Of course, you're doin' it."

He dropped his voice as he muttered.

Not understanding at first, Celica followed Jubei's gaze and understood why.

Nine's supple fingers picked up a pitcher filled with gum syrup that was served with the iced coffee before pouring its entire contents into her glass. When the clear fluid finally depleted, this time she tilted another pitcher filled with milk in the same manner. The white fluid quietly muddied the iced coffee.

"Ah, can I get another gum syrup?"



Without even a questioning look, the waitress Nine called immediately came with a spare pitcher.

Of course, she also poured it into her glass without leaving a drop.

The water level of the coffee that was now corrupted with syrup and milk had increased almost to the glass' edge.

Using a straw, Nine skillfully stirred the near overflowing iced coffee.

"I've said it already but... it's bad for your health."

Jubei knew it was pointless from the start. It was obvious from the way he sounded like he had given up.

Acting like it didn't concern her at all, Nine calmly drank the abnormally thick iced coffee.

"Actually, it'll be good for my health if I ingest a moderate amount of sugar."

"Uh. Is that... moderate?"

"Jubei. You don't like sweets that much? "

"It's not like that... Nah, it's fine. My bad."

After his doubtful eyes glanced at the empty pitcher again, Jubei seemed to avert his eyes and then sipped his warm green tea.

Contemplating the banter, Celica exchanged a look with Trinity. They both burst into laughter at the same time.

Reacting immediately, Jubei stared at them with a bitter look on his sullen face.

"...What. Why are you laughin'?"

"No, no. Nothing at all."

"Ufufu. Please don't mind us~."

Playing dumb, Celica and Trinity spontaneously hid their suggestive smiles with both hands.

For several months, Nine and Jubei had noticeably been getting close. It wasn't an exaggeration saying that they had become intimate. Celica was happy with it.

Everyone had been commenting on Nine's natural gift and her abilities. Moreover, they also said Nine had a violent temperament and that she wouldn't go easy on anyone. Trinity was the only friend that had become close to her older sister. It had even been years since Celica had heard tale of Nine being approached by any guys.

For her sister to be acting this lovey dovey with someone while having tea was... Rather than a younger sister, the delight she felt was like what a mother would have.

Nine drank her iced coffee while watching every single move from Jubei. Meanwhile, Jubei kept getting flustered even though he was going out with her.

While watching both of them, Celica cheerfully ate her mille-feuille. The light pie and strong taste of the custard cream's egg now seemed to taste even better.

Then, Trinity suddenly half-rose to her feet.

"Ah, Kazu... Terumi-san."

Blending in with the friendly chatter inside the store, a small and sweet voice called the name.

As Celica turned around, she saw a tall man wearing a low hood approaching them. He didn't really seem to fit with the fairy-tale atmosphere of the store.

Instead of calling to him, Celica waved her hand. Terumi abruptly stopped for a moment. But without making the previous action look obvious, he came close to their table.

Just after that, Nine's eyes sharpened.

"Where did you go?"

As if reflecting her doubting voice, the atmosphere stiffened.

But Terumi didn't pay any attention to the change in the atmosphere. He simply laughed. Avoiding the empty space next to Celica, he sat down beside Trinity.

"Toilet, toilet. You heard from them, didn't you?"

"You'd better stop just doing everything as you please."

"Hmm, so you'll wait for me whenever I go to toilet? Nice hobby you've got there."

Nine's look grew even sharper. The atmosphere made it felt like she was about to grab him by the collar. Celica placed both hands on the table as if to interrupt them.

"Onee-chan, Terumi-san. Let's stop this already. We're having tea now."

Without attracting the attention of other customers, Celica put on a reproachful tone.

Taking the opportunity, Terumi raised both hands; as if to indicate that he surrendered.

"Hey, you're doubting me too much. Forgot? I can't *lie* to you. You're the one who cast that annoying spell on me."

Terumi had been inflicted with *Mind Eater* by Nine. It made him unable to disobey Nine's command, neither could he lie to her.

"You're wasting time doubting me. Don't you hate doing pointless things? Miss. Ten. Sages."

His sarcasm made Nine's eyebrows twitch. But before she could answer, Jubei interrupted.

"Don't get too sensitive, Nine. Mind Eater's working. Has he actually gone against your order once?"

Nine could just find his whereabouts if she felt like it. Even when earlier Jubei told her that Terumi was gone, Nine should have searched for Terumi's location. As its result was that she knew he was heading to the store, she didn't look deeper into it.

Both Jubei and Celica gave a soothing look at Nine. Then she put it aside and sighed.

"...Oh well. It's not good arguing here."

Averting her eyes from the gazes, Nine scooped her chocolate mousse with fork.

Seeing the conversation was over, Terumi greatly tilted his chair and stopped an unfortunate waitress from passing by.

"Hey, miss. Get me the usual black tea and a hardboiled egg."

As he arbitrarily made an order, Terumi returned the chair to its original position with a slight scraping noise.

Trinity just watched the scene quietly beside him.

Whenever Trinity looked at Terumi, sometimes, just sometimes, she would make a pained look. Even Celica knew the reason. Terumi really resembled him. A young student who was very close to Trinity that unfortunately had disappeared from the academy unnoticed.

Their behavior and expressions were completely different, but their voices and presence were surprisingly similar. If he were to remove the hood he always wore, she wondered if the face of her friend would appear.

That was why when Terumi was here, Trinity was always reminded of that friend of hers. Even though it had been eight months, Celica could still remember Ragna on a whim.

When she thought about him, a suffocating sensation arose in her chest.

"Okay!"

Determined, Celica suddenly raised the corners of her eyes and struck the table with both hands.

"Let's talk about something fun!"

The atmosphere had been somewhat gloomy for a while. Heavy. Painful.

In this tea time that was supposed to be fun, Celica wanted for everyone to get along more and get to know each other. Fully embracing that belief, Celica haphazardly stood up.

However, during that moment, Celica plunged forward too far and her feet connected with the table's leg.

"Wha, wha..."

As the momentum ruined her balance, Celica began to tip backwards.

"Look out, Celica!"

Jubei immediately reacted. He stretched his hand to support Celica from the side. Jubei's hand supported Celica... or as it would have if Celica hadn't made the poor decision to grab the back of the chair where Jubei had been sitting.

Celica's hand firmly grabbed the back of the chair and grasped it strongly. Along with Jubei's tail.

"UGYAAH!?"

A terrible scream the likes that no-one had heard before escaped from Jubei's mouth. The small furry body jumped on the spot with a jolt.

With incomparable strength, Jubei's knees hit the tabletop. The table rose in a big way from the impact. Nine was surprised. Then the iced coffee she held leaped out of her hands...

The spilling mixture of iced coffee, gum syrup, and coffee milk was now all over Trinity's face.

"Ah..."

The small voice was Trinity's.

Then a painful silence flowed into the ears of the people sat around the table.

Even the gentle friendly chat around the shop, which should have been present, seemed to completely vanish.

Eventually, Trinity gently removed the glasses that were soaked with the thick liquid of Nine's coffee.

Her expression was hidden by the fluffy hair flowing from her fringe and both sides. However, there was no doubt that the mood had shifted.

"...It seems my glasses are stained."

The sweet echo sounded the same as ever. Contrary to its calm tone, fear clouded Celica and Nine's hearts as they began to understand the situation.

"Uh, umm, Trinity-san...? So-Sorry. I, um, never thought this would happen...!"

"Let's talk it through, Trinity! We surely will come into understanding!"

"Wh-What? What's going on?"

Though he grasped the tension of the situation, seeing Celica and Nine apologizing profusely, Jubei couldn't understand what was happening. He became flustered while still holding his aching tail.

Nine then grasped his hand.

"I'll tell you the reason later. But for now, we should apologize. You too!"

Turning around far enough that his neck clicked, Terumi, who was stretching his hand to get the black tea that had just come, raised his face.

"Huh? Me too!?"

"Just apologize!"

"Tch, dammit. What's with you? Her glasses are just dirty, so..."

"'Just'? Did you say 'just'...?"

Trinity's whisper silenced Terumi's abusive words as he started to grumble. Normally, it wouldn't happen. But currently, Trinity wasn't her usual calm self.

In the end, Trinity slowly took a breath.

"...Everyone, I have to tell you something."

Her smile was kind enough to be horrific.

Part 4

The moon was once again full in the sky of the endless night. It looked like a giant water basin.

The silver light pouring forth from the white disc was serene and cold. It illuminated the castle which stood beautiful but solemn within a vast rose garden. It was like something from a fairy tale stood there alone in the silence.

A place belonged to nowhere, yet connected with every dark night of the world. Existing but nonexistent. Similar the dark side of the moon... Once, this place was described as such by the lord of the castle. The castle once belonged to a vampire who spent his life watching over the people of the world.

Her predecessor, Clavis Alucard, had died around eight months ago, Rachel Alucard presently acted as the castle's lady. Still a young female vampire, this torn, small world recognized her as its new master. It was painted in the bountiful red of roses, befitting the youth of the castle's lady.

The spectacle of the garden was magnificent to behold, as could be seen from a long vertical window installed at the front of the castle.

Rachel touched the cold windowpane with the young fingers peeking from the sleeve of her black dress. Slipping away from her favorite scenery, she averted her gaze from it and elegantly turned around.

"...I see. You can't remember it still."

Following the girl's movement, her golden hair, tied at high position on both sides, swayed along with its large decorative ribbons.

A faint magical light flickered inside the room, revealing two figures beside Rachel.

Sweeping over the tall man with the muscular body. The rose red pupils of the adolescent girl fixed on a taller figure. Illuminated by the faint light, the emerging white figure looked just like a ghost.

"It appears that we cannot depend on your memories, Mr. Hero of the Future."

Putting aside her slight disappointment, Rachel addressed the ghost.

The ghost's name was Hakumen.

"...Do you know what he intends to accomplish?"

He stared directly at Rachel without making even a slight movement, questioning her in a muffled voice. Those who didn't know Hakumen would think he was a talking sculpture.

Amused, Rachel slowly blinked her doll-like large eyes.

"Compared to you who doesn't remember anything, I would say so."

"Then, is that man really scheming something...?"

Between Hakumen and Rachel, the other man asked a little bit over-eagerly. When he took a step forward, the long hair tied at his back swayed anxiously. He was Valkenhayn.

Toward the question from the loyal butler who had been serving since her father, Clavis' time, Rachel answered not with words. She turned toward the window again and only responded with silence and a distant gaze.

In his regret, Valkenhayn tightened a fist in front of his chest.

"Regardless, that man has the scent of danger. He shouldn't have been released before... It is not too late. While Mind Eater is still in effect, I shall take his life!"

"You must not, Valkenhayn."

With the coolness of the north wind, Rachel severed the butler's fierceness. Contrary to their young appearance, her eyes contained deep wisdom. The blood red pupils faintly wavered.

"That man must not be killed. He still has some value. No, his help is indispensable. If not, then there will be no significance in anyone's struggle."

After speaking that much, Rachel briefly sighed. When she closed her eyes, her long eyelashes made shadows on the pale skin around her eyes.

"...Besides, we are not able to kill that man."

The whisper slightly shook the air under her breath.

Groaning, Valkenhayn turned silent. Hakumen just stood there quietly.

Without looking at either of them, Rachel lightly bit her flower bud-like lips.

Her eyes were watching everything in the world. Her ears were hearing everything in the world. Her mind was memorizing everything in the world. However, her hands couldn't change the world. Even if she knew what awaited in the future.

"It is humanity's choices that will decide the future. It will never change now and forever. That is why, it is not something we can change."

The red eyes looked at the white face. They held some sympathy.

There was a deteriorating sweet scent in the flowing silence. It might have come from Valkenhayn's master.

Eventually, Hakumen moved and turned his back from the young lady of the castle. The tall, large sword he carried bore some kind of dignity.

"If that is your conclusion, then I will not oppose you. However, whether you choose providence, reasons, or neither, I have a different belief than yours."

"You spoke of interesting thing. Will you try and do the impossible?"

"My blade is to slay my enemy... the Dark One. I would cut reasons to carry that purpose if I had to."

After leaving those words, Hakumen took a large step forward. With the long silver hair at his back swaying, he left the dim room.

Watching over the retreating figure from behind, Rachel gave a weak smile. But her eyes were far from smiling as they gleamed with cold light.

"...Cut reasons... Then you would sever this tale? Would you, Mr. Hero?"

The moon in the sky of the rose garden didn't reply. Of course, Rachel didn't have the answer to her own question.

There was only her incomparably loyal butler bowing to her before exiting the room to brew her tea.

While listening to the departing footsteps, Rachel opened the window wide. As she did so, the scent of the night and roses surged in.

In the mood of the night. In the empty mood of the night, she longed to drink Valkenhayn's black tea.

Chapter 3 - Scarlet Guardian, the Doll

Part 1

Before they noticed, the sun had sunk into the western sea. The lights in Ishana's city started to flicker on, triggered by magic in the twilight.

When the sun had almost set, the change from noon to night on this island happened almost instantly. Disrobing from its cloak of sun, the wind dressed itself in night and ran through the town as if on a whim.

While hearing the happy sound of the door chime, Celica stepped out from a familiar coffee shop. The cold wind caressed her cheeks. As she viewed the western sky that was tinged with pink, Celica sighed while seemingly looking sad.

It had been while since she'd had such a thrilling tea time like today.

Earlier before, Trinity slowly stood up and started to talk while smiling as her irritation manifest itself. Celica had hoped someone would stop her. She wondered what would happen if someone had tried. Since she had personally experienced Trinity's anger... Celica didn't think she could have stopped her.

"...indeed. The world is brimming with sad events. There is sorrow from being unable to stand up against threats, and also from inescapable destiny. But is it really just in the human's mind? Even when people, even when fellow people take each other's hands, share their grief, and rejoice together, their minds are able to drown in the distant sea of deep sorrow. Aah, that in itself is such a sad thing. Do we just, without thinking much about it, just think 'The world is full of sadness, if at least one person is made happy, it's good'? The reason of why people pray in the first place is to..."

There was one thing people couldn't forgive and one thing people had to endure no matter what. Starting from that topic, Trinity's lecture moved to why people get angry and sad before finally changing to her personal opinion about how sadness was born.

It wasn't clear what route she took as it subtly developed into religious studies before finally ending in some kind of dissertation. ...No one really remembered how it went anymore.

But the overwhelming amount of words and confusingly fast pace held the power to completely blow the listener's train of thought within ten minutes. They shouldn't wade in deeper than that. That kind of thought was currently brewing in Celica's mind.

Now, while feeling the cool night wind in front of the coffee shop, although she only briefly recalled what happened just before, the inside of Celica's mind was bubbling and made her fall into a deluded state.

As the door chime rang again, Nine, Jubei, and Trinity exited the store. At the end of the procession was Terumi. Fed up, he hunched his thin shoulders.

It wasn't just Celica and Terumi. It being his first experience, Jubei was shocked. Also Nine even though she had grown more accustomed to it than everyone else. She could only make a stiff smile given her exhaustion.

"I'm truly sorry, everyone~. It happened again... but at least we've finally had tea together~."

The only person who didn't show any signs of fatigue, Trinity, lowered her eyebrows in shame. She wrapped up both of her cheeks in her hands and dropped her shoulders.

Although Celica wore a bitter smile, she waved her hand to say it was okay.

"Don't take it to heart. It was my fault to begin with."

"No, please don't be mistaken~. I wasn't angry because you stood up, or because Jubei-san's feet hit the table. That was just an accident. Rather, I'm worried that the two of you may have hurt yourself~."

"A, ahaha. I'm okay, I'm okay. Despite the loud noise, it wasn't painful at all."

Yes, Trinity didn't get furious because the table was shaken or because Nine spilled her coffee.

She genuinely had lost control of herself simply because her glasses were stained.

They were only glasses, but they were Trinity's glasses. Because she lost herself over a single item that was nothing but a trifle ornament for most people, Trinity's wrath was frightening... or so Celica thought.

"Is it truly okay?"

It seemed she became worried when she recalled it. Trinity's apology had a different kind of worry as her eyes looked at Celica's feet.

When her wrath lessened, Trinity returned to her usual gentle and slow self. Nonchalantly throwing away the fear and fatigue that had been present until now, Celica smiled cheerfully.

"Yup! Look, there's no wound!"

While saying that, Celica lifted her skirt to show her unharmed thighs. Nine instantly slapped Celica's hands. A sharp noise rang out.

"What have you done!? What are you going to do if you catch the attention of some lecherous men passing by!? Consider your vulnerability and cuteness more!!"

"Ouchie~. You don't have to hit me. I wasn't particularly showing my undies or anything."

"Undies!? ...Excuse me, every living man in the world is just a creature obsessed with indecent fantasies from the time they were a brat. They're a lump of wild lust and perverted thoughts. Because your fair skin robs the eyes of those near you, you're surrounded by many shameless fantasies... Aah, it's disgusting to even think about it. Listen, watch out the next time you do something thoughtless. I'll make sure none of the passing men are able to feel lust any more!"

"...Ain't your head itself got quite a few of those shameless fantasies?"

Terumi muttered at a spot several steps away. With force enough to dishevel her hair, Nine turned about. Her high heels clattered toward him. Quick as a flash, Nine kicked Terumi's stomach with the tip of her toe without hesitation.

"Gueh!"

"I have to find way to make men lose their function as a man. Should I practice on your body?"

"...I'm...against...violence."

Holding his stomach with both hands, Terumi crumpled and fell, starting from the knees. His groan could still be heard as he sunk to the floor.

Flustered, Trinity rushed over. Terumi responded by whispering something to the anxious Trinity. However, Celica and Nine didn't hear what he said.

"Well, time for me to go."

As the passing twilight wind rustled his whiskers, Jubei looked at each of them as he spoke.

Nine raised her face and tucked back the hair that was flowing on its own.

"Oh, already?"

"I've been requested to investigate more of Eastern Europe. Incidentally, there seems to be some information circulatin' in Ishana. I'm goin' lookin' for it."

"I see. Get in touch if something happens."

With the face of the commander of operation against the Black Beast, but also the face of a young lady, Nine sent off Jubei with a smile.

"Later," said Jubei as he turned back. Celica also frantically waved him off.

"Take care!"

His two tails swayed at his back as if returning the gesture.

As Jubei vanished around the street corner, the presence of the surrounding night became even more intense. When Celica looked up at the sky, distant stars started to blink.

"I should return home soon. Are you and the others still having a meeting later, Onee-chan?"

Celica linked her hands behind her back as she asked the question.

Trinity, who was lending a hand to Terumi as he got up, gently shook her head.

"The meeting is already over. And since I have heaps of documents to write, I'll be taking my leave for tonight."

"I'm gonna go home too. I have an assignment given by that hysterical woman."

No sooner after he spoke, the hem of his long coat swept past. Rough footsteps hit the stone pavement as Terumi walked away. He was heading to a housing complex managed by the Mage's Guild. Because of the Mind Eater, the scope of Terumi's ability to act alone was limited. The complex was also where he spent most of his time by himself.

While pinning down her hood so it wouldn't get blown by the strong wind, Trinity gracefully smiled and went on her way after exchanging farewells.

Standing on tiptoe, Celica waved her hand to her older sister's close friend. After the fairy-tale like figure faded from sight, Celica turned to Nine.

"Then let's go, Onee-chan. Ah, do you have to go back to the guild?"

"No, I'll return home. ...But Celica, can I have a moment?"

With a peaceful smile, Nine asked Celica while walking as if urging her to return home.

After catching up to her, Celica looked to her sister. It was rare for Nine to speak like that.

"Okay. But what is it? Is something wrong?"

The footsteps of both Celica's leather shoes and Nine's high heels beat the same rhythm as they hit the stone pavement.

Even without the fast pace, Nine's glossy hair drew a beautiful and gentle waves from the petty wind.

"I have something I want you to see."

"Something for me to see... Is it a present?"

Half hoping and half joking, Celica's eyes were gleaming. Nine narrowed her eyes gently at her.

"I'll tell you more later. Anyway, we should get back home... Come to my workshop."

The informed words made Celica unintentionally stumble before stopping. She couldn't quite breathe out the air she had involuntarily swallowed.

Nine's workshop. A place where none was permitted to tread with the exception of Nine herself.

Part 2

Nine's workshop was located in the basement of their home.

The room was previously used by Celica and Nine's father as his laboratory. But about two years ago, Nine remodeled it into her personal workshop. It was done immediately after the simple funeral for her missing father was over.

Its entrance was installed at a hardly visited corner at the house where they lived every day.

Their father had prohibited the children from entering the laboratory. Nine also didn't normally let any visitors enter the basement.

Since before their father had left, Celica had never opened the door. Passing through it, Celica followed Nine's lead to a solid staircase descending into the basement.

The staircase was surprisingly broad and went deeper than she had thought. There were magical lights furnished at regular intervals on the wall. The white lights burnt orange in the middle, illuminating their

destination. Celica more or less could no longer comprehend that this place was under her own house.

Nine's high heels made loud steps each time she stepped down. With each step, tension piled up inside Celica.

Generally, a magician wouldn't show their own workshop to others, even if the other party was their family or lover. Furthermore, her sister's workshop contained research that shouldn't be spoken of.

It must be something significant since Nine was personally bringing Celica to her sanctum.

While being conflicted over whether to be hopeful or uneasy, Celica finally arrived at the end of the stairs.

Another door awaited there.

Not only did it have countless magic circles floating on its surface, it was also furnished with an electric panel on the nearby wall and what appeared to be a tiny surveillance camera on the ceiling. There might even be more devices that Celica hadn't noticed yet.

A secure entrance to her workshop was very fitting for Nine.

"I've said this before, but inside it's quite messy. Be careful not to step on something weird."

Looking over her shoulder as she spoke, Nine held her hand out to the door.

She spoke several spells without pause. Each time, various size of magic circle came apart before vanishing.

Fiddling with the electric panel, she chanted another spell. Then finally, the workshop's entrance opened with a slight noise.

"Ex... Excuse me."

Discreetly muttering, Celica went inside, following after Nine.

Then immediately, she stopped in the entrance.

The room inside was filled with lights similar to those on the staircase. All four walls were stone brick; the floor and ceiling had been solidified with stone.

There were large tables placed on both sides of the entrance. Various tools and equipment were crammed onto the tables. They ranged from things Celica recognized to some that she couldn't tell the purpose of. Further inside, there were two bookcases, which reached up to the ceiling like

pillars, and also a writing desk and chair that didn't seem to be anything special.

The so called wall in the room was entirely covered in the countless memos stuck to it. Nine had a strong habit in scribbling. They were messily written on those rectangular pieces of paper. If it weren't Celica or Trinity, the scribbles might look undecipherable.

"This is... Onee-chan's..."

The workshop of Nine, the ninth of the Ten Sages.

Thinking about it, this was the first time for Celica to enter a magician's workshop. She wondered if other magicians' workshop would be like this, too.

When Celica looked inside the room, Nine had already gone inside the room unnoticed before turning around with arms folded.

"This way. And don't touch anything on the desk. They'll be hard to find if you rearrange anything."

"Ah, okay."

Although she was still puzzled, Celica quickly made her way between the desks and bookcases before jogging toward Nine.

There was another room in the back. Rather than feeling messy, the room had another kind of atmosphere in it. Its wall was obscured by large machinery and complicated devices. It wasn't a disordered room.

In a corner of the room, stood a large doll.

"Wha..."

Spontaneously, a surprised voice leaked from Celica's lips.

It was taller even than Hakumen, the tallest person Celica knew. But if Celica had to say something, the doll had slender limbs. Its metallic face was modeled after a lady in her middle age.

Judging from the face, as well as the clothes it was modeled with, something like a dress with long skirt, the doll must be a female type.

But its body was a bit large for a doll. The body proportions were also strange as its arms were big and long.

"You wanted to show me this?"

Still wide-eyed, Celica's gaze repeatedly darted back and forth between Nine and the doll.

Nine gazed at Celica with a warm look. She assured her by nodding and then moved her gaze to the doll.

"You see, this doll would act with the purpose of 'guarding' a predetermined person. It'd protect them from danger and then lead them to escape. Depending on the situation, it would chase away the attackers."

"Ooh, like a bodyguard."

"Yes. She's a bodyguard. Your bodyguard."

"Eh?"

Unable to grasp what Nine had just so calmly said, Celica asked again with her mouth half-opened.

Wondering if it sounded odd, Nine gave her a light smile.

"From here onward, the state of things in the world will get worse. My remaining time in Ishana keeps decreasing. Even when I'm staying on the island, my time with you is quite limited. That's why I made a bodyguard for you, to prevent any unexpected occurrence while I'm not at your side."

"Aha... But whatever the circumstances is, don't you think it's too exaggerated?"

Celica gave her a wry smile.

Nine worried too much about Celica. She was thankful for the thought, but Celica didn't expect Nine to go as far as to make a bodyguard.

"I'm not really in that much danger. And in the any case, I won't be leaving the island with you and the others. I don't think there's anything here that I need to be protected from."

Ishana was referred to as *the world's safest island*.

The island was guarded by an invisible magical barrier. It could even handle physical attacks, like stopping a missile barrage for example. Anything trying to enter the island was examined by the barrier to see if it contained any risk related to organic or inorganic matter. Even leaving the island required a number of procedures.

Naturally, the possibility for seithr and seithr-induced mad creatures to get inside and harm the people in Ishana was equal to zero.

In response to Celica who was comfortably laughing, Nine on the contrary knitted her eyebrows to stress her concern.

"You leaving the island or not is a different story. I wholeheartedly reject the opinion that you are not in danger."

"Eeh, why!? I'm not particularly at risk or anything."

Growing slightly more sullen, Celica argued with her. When she did that, Nine severely sharpened the glint in her eyes and frowned.

"Who was it again that slipped away from the island unauthorized without going through the proper procedures? Who was it that could not be contacted for a month because of it, before finally getting stranded in the middle of a mountain? Hmm, I wonder who~?"

"T-That was, umm, a coincidence. It's because there were unclear circumstances..."

Still fresh in their memories, the incident that had developed into a quite a dangerous experience was being brought up. Celica blatantly averted her eyes and her awkward smile.

Since that was when she had met Ragna, the incident was a trigger that led to very profound memories for Celica herself... But in Nine's case, it must be a matter that had shortened her life span considerably.

Nine brazenly let out an astonished sigh.

"It's not just that. Tomorrow morning, the threat to your daily life we spoke of will be about to begin."

"Aha... I get it. Are you worried?"

"By all means, please be aware that I am."

Celica scratched her cheeks since she absolutely couldn't declare that she didn't remember. With a pompous manner, Nine displayed a composed smile to her.

After that, anxiety flashed across her eyes, just for a moment.

"...It's fine for you to think I'm worrying too much. But four months time, it's hard to predict what will happen to Ishana. Don't you agree?"

"I see... Only four months left."

The Black Beast was being stalled for a year. Four months from now, that peace would be over.

It was something Celica was fully aware of. In preparation for that day, Nine, Trinity, and the others were giving their all to work hard every day.

But the thing was, Nine had always been prone to worry to the point that it astonished the people on her surroundings. It was easy to imagine her worrying about Celica even though she was being occupied.

Perhaps this doll might be the older sister's anxiety that had taken a form.

By thinking about it while looking up at the bodyguard she met for the first time, a warm feeling gradually filled Celica. Then she began to smile broadly.

People saw the beautiful and terrifying Nine of the Ten Sages with awe. And yet in the back, she had been afraid for the people close to her getting hurt. The anxiety she felt had always been unbearable.

Celica also loved the fragile part of her persistent sister from the bottom of her heart.

"Got it. Well then, I guess I'll take the bodyguard since it's already done. You've made it especially for me, after all."

After doing a hop toward the doll, Celica turned her face at Nine.

Standing with arms folded below chest like usual, Nine let out a sigh of relieve and relaxed her eyes.

"That's right. I've created it for you, to protect you. Something I made to protect my dear family."

"Thank you, Onee-chan. Actually, I've taken a liking to this girl from the first time I saw her. She's quite tall, but also seems beautiful and kind."

Completely interested, Celica looked at the doll with her brown eyes. Nine stared her in wonder, feeling amazed and also admiration at her.

"What a girl. You know it's different from playing with a doll, right? Besides, I have yet to input her personality. The mouth also doesn't move."

"Is that true? So I can't chat with her... But it's fine, I still like her."

"...I see. Then I'm glad."

Nine's astonishment changed into a wry smile.

Unable to exactly understand why her sister got that amazed, Celica tilted her neck and replied with a smile too. She wondered if Nine wasn't pleased. It was so like her to be so worried.

In order to switch her feelings, Nine took a deep sigh and let go of the strength in her shoulders. Then, she looked at Celica with a bit of seriousness.

Getting roped in as expected, Celica straightened her back.

"Also, regarding the matter with Seven and Eight."

"Ah... okay. It's about the conversation in the courtyard before, isn't it?"

"...Sorry, but I'm not going to tell you what they are trying to do. But I can tell you this. If you cooperate with those lot, you'll lose your life for sure."

From her voice and expression alone, Celica could understand how serious Nine was when she was speaking. But Celica didn't immediately nod. After biting her lips once, she looked straight at her sister.

"But I will do my best if I can be useful. It doesn't mean I'd sacrifice myself, but maybe they just wanted some help with their research. They might find a solution that doesn't require my death."

Celica didn't know exactly what Seven and Eight were making and the significance of Celica being necessary. But whatever it was, if it could help Nine's plan, then Celica thought that her sincerity wouldn't lose to Nine's.

It was nothing about some sort of burning feeling like getting recognized by Nine or wanting to help in the fight herself. But if there was a way for her to do something, then she wanted to give a bit of ease for somebody by doing it.

But looking at her sister's eyes that became grim, Celica understood that she had made a careless remark.

Celica thought that she was going to receive a harsh lecture, but instead Nine turned her face away to hide her detested face before dropping her voice to let the hate out.

"What they're doing isn't that simple."

Celica understood for a bit.

She didn't have complete grasp of it in the end. But from the bottom of her heart, Nine was disgusted with what Seven and Eight were trying to do.

"Celica. I want to protect your life no matter what. ...After all, that man had risked himself to protect you."

That man. When she heard those words, Celica got attacked by a sensation that tightened her chest.

Eight months ago, she met and parted with a man. Ragna. The promise he gave and exchanged with her. Many kind of thoughts rushed to her mind.

Nine, who had been crossing her arms, embraced herself so tight that her fingers sunk into her skin. It seemed the disordered wrinkles on her clothes pictured Nine's emotions.

"To think that I was about to sacrifice you... I absolutely can't forgive myself. Even if someone does, I myself cannot."

"Onee-chan..."

What should she do? Nine endured herself to spoke. For Celica, her voice sounded like she was condemning herself.

Something. She wanted to do something. But since she couldn't let a single word out, Celica slowly reached out her hands to embrace Nine.

When Celica's hand touched her arm, Nine let go of her superfluous strength after a short pause. Her mouth was soft, but a strong will resided in her pupils. Without change, she made a speech at Celica.

"Got it? Even without those meddling losers, I will show you that I can defeat the Black Beast. Believe in your sister. There is nothing impossible for her."

"Okay, got it. I'll trust you."

Celica nodded quite easily. It seemed as simple as when she was requested to buy groceries. But it was definitely not something trivial in her mind. It was just that easy. It was a thousand times easier than not getting lost when going to a bakery in the neighborhood.

Moreover, in Nine's opinion, Celica had to compare it with the difficulty to get her to the bakery using shortest path, or she would get confused. But for now, Celica decided not to think about her own constitution of easily getting lost.

"Hey, Onee-chan. What's her name?"

If she were to trust Nine, she would have to befriend the bodyguard to reduce one of her sister's worries. Celica hopped to the front and picked up the doll's hand.

Its hand was big and cold, but she grew to like even its improper modelling and unnatural feel.

"She's Nirvana."

After she answered, Nine began to chant a spell. A spell so that Nirvana would recognize Celica as the subject to protect.

But for Celica, it sounded simpler than a vow to protect or a contract between master and servant. If she were to speak of it, then it might be a promise of friendship.

"Let's get along, Nirvana."

Smiling, she gripped the hand she had taken to do a handshake. After she opened her eyes, Nirvana awkwardly moved her neck and stared at Celica with her artificial eyes.

After Celica had left to prepare for dinner, Nine remained in the workshop alone as she wanted to do something.

Nirvana returned to the surface following Celica. After using magic to confirm that the workshop's door had been tightly shut, Nine stood between the two bookshelves as if lured by them.

The wall there was wide enough for two people. A number of drawings were pasted there in the place of furniture.



Nine faced the wall and held up her hand. As she did, reacting to its master, a small magic circle emerged from the other side of the drawings.

Short phrases and twisting her hand on the air made the magic circle rotated. Next, the wall in front of her eyes itself started to turn.

Beyond, a staircase leading to even further down was formed.

Nine stepped forward and then breathed life to the staircase that was shut in deep darkness by creating a faint light.

It lasted far, far, longer than getting down to the workshop itself. Nine's heels etched noises as she walked.

The air was cold, full of the characteristic feels of the underground.

What awaited at the end of the eternal journey was a large gate made of old wood.

Nine used both hands to push the gate that was so plain it was unbecoming of its large appearance. An enormous magic circle manifested before it stirred like a cogwheel. Then the gate solemnly and gracefully opened its mouth.

The noise of heels stepped inside.

Appropriate with the descending staircase, beyond the door was a room with ceiling as tall as eyes could see. Different from the upper floor, the wall, ceiling, and floor were covered in metal. The considerable size of the area was enough to cleanly fit Nine's workshop in it.

But the indoor that should have had plenty of space was occupied by something rather gigantic.

The object was an upside down cone barely suspended on the ceiling by using chains.

In accordance to its abnormal, or incomprehensible balance of silver surface, a great number of faintly shining green lines ran on it.

Its structure made it hard to believe so suddenly that it was manufactured by man's hands. The structure was lovely. If someone were to say that it was sculpted by god, a large number of people might firmly believe it.

The object that appeared to be a huge nail of a wedge was encircled by many number of purple rings. They were seals Nine had created. They were so secure that they gave off a sense of tenacity over and over again.

"I've never thought... that I have to borrow your power."

With her back facing the shut gate, Nine hatefully gazed at the suspended silver and green object.

It was a device found at the location where Black Beast first appeared. Now the place was called as *District 1*. It was able to temporarily stop the flow of seithr that originated from the Boundary.

Its manufacturer was Shuuichirou Ayatsuki. Nine and Celica's father.

"...*Kushinada's Lynchpin*."

The gigantic wedge might have heard Nine's muttering as it loudly pulsed a single green light.

Part 3

Ishana was covered with a barrier which had been protecting it from seithr. The barrier was so strong that even the weather of the outside world was unable to affect the island.

Caused by seithr, the climate had been disturbed and lost the concept of season. The usual traits that happened when summer turned into fall were no more. The warmness on the air felt the same as ever.

It was just perfect to wear long sleeved clothes since most of the days in August were in that condition. Speaking of change, Celica wondered if the color of the sunset would be even prettier during other seasons.

The pretty sunset was about to commence in the western sky when Celica was walking toward her home as she had finished with the academy's lessons.

Nirvana was going along with her on the way back.

The truth was, Celica had been thinking to have Nirvana waiting at home when she had to go to the academy. It was because she would attract attention when they were going to the academy.

However, Nine had been making Celica to take Nirvana along thoroughly when she was not in the island. Since it was a request rather than an order, Celica resigned herself and decided to bear the odd looks from her surroundings.

Of course, Celica couldn't bring her to the classroom. Thus, Nine had been using her position as a Ten Sage to borrow an office inside the Mage's Guild for Nirvana to standby there when Celica was taking a class.

It took time and effort travelling from and to Mage's Guild like she did in morning and returning home. However, Celica liked this bizarre commuting for a bit. The reason might be because she had no one to accompany her going home since Nine was gone and that all her close friends were living in the student dormitory.

When she looked up at the tall doll that had been matching her walking pace with Celica, the light of the day that had begun to turn orange got reflected on Nirvana's metallic skin and glass-like clear eyes. It was pretty.

"Come to think of it, I wonder how many days left until Onee-chan back. It's tiring to make just one dish every day."

While kicking a rolling pebble with her tiptoe, Celica dropped her shoulders along with a faint sigh.

Currently, Nine wasn't in Ishana. According to what she had heard when she received Nirvana, her older sister would be more and more busy coming September or something. She would also have to leave the island for a few days.

It wasn't just Nine. It was also true for Trinity, Jubei, Valkenhayn, Hakumen, and Terumi. Even if she was in Mage's Guild, Celica didn't know the specific of what they were doing as she was just a mere student. But it seemed they spent day after day being busy and in a hurry.

Taking a look at the school bag she held in her hand, Celica took another breath.

She wondered if it was okay to leisurely commute to the academy and studying at such time.

Unlike other students, she recognized the true state of affairs although only half of it. Because of that, she had been thinking about it for too much.

As Nine and the academy teachers had said, the students should keep doing practice every day and prepare themselves so they wouldn't get outdone by Mage's Guild's magicians when the crucial time comes... or some kind of important duty like that.

(Well, it's expected. I'm only a burden to Onee-chan now. Have to study hard so I can quickly stop being a burden one day.)

What she was telling herself had also become a routine for the past few days. After all, she wasn't fully satisfied with just saying it. Her real motive was that if there was something she could do, then she wanted to do it as soon as possible.

"For now, I guess it's been while for me to take it easy and clean the house until Onee-chan returns."

"Right?" said Celica to Nirvana. She responded by moving her chin and staring at Celica.

Looking at her expression, Celica laughed a little.

The streets in Ishana were practically stone pavements. When she was going home, she would use the main street heading from the academy to the port. Then after leaving the street halfway and taking a turn, she would take a little detour by walking beside a quiet park.

Since she had to do shopping today, she headed toward the main street. Celica thought about it while trying to go past a junction. Then, it happened.

"Celica A. Mercury. I wonder if I can have a bit of your time."

A familiar refreshing voice of a man could be heard from behind.

Celica stopped her feet and turned her body around. What awaited was a pair of man and woman. A man that looked like some kind of a noble when judged from his graceful manner, and a woman with slender body who wore a dress that was wide open on the chest area. There were large triangular hats on top of their heads.

"Ah, Seven-san, Eight-san. Good day."

She immediately recalled Nine's dangerous mood when she met them on August. But Celica greeted them with a smile.

Nine wouldn't make an amused face if she were here.

Eight stared in wonder like she was being puzzled. Her long eyelashes that had lovely curls went up and down frantically.

"It's surprising that you're a pretty likeable. Are you really Nine's sister?"

"Yes, of course... Hmm? What do you mean by that?"

As she suddenly thought about it, Celica reflexively looked down on her own body. It was the first that came to mind if she was searching for the reason why her blood relations with her sister were being questioned. Certainly, if she was her younger sister, then she would have a louder voice or so as she thought.

Just as she was thinking about it, a noise could be heard. Celica took notice and raised her face.

Still standing with both hands on her hips with lips making a smile, Eight's eyes twitched.

"...But it seems like you have the similar tendency to upset me."

It was a taboo to talk about Eight's proportion.

Celica instinctively put her hands on her mouth.

With a considerably amazed tone of voice, Seven interrupted with a cough.

"...Will it be all right to begin our talk?"

Beyond the thin metal framed glasses, his calm ice blue eyes stared at Celica and Eight who were facing each other. As his manner was like a teacher from the academy, Celica retracted her chin, straightened her back, and brushed it off with a laugh.

"Ah, y-yes. Go on."

After she urged him, Celica let out an 'ah' as she suddenly realized.

"But Onee-chan's not here today though...?"

"It's alright if she's not here. We only have a business with you."

Completely pulled herself together, Eight teasingly winked at her while entangling a wisp of hair that had spilled from the hat to her shoulder.

It was Seven who took after that and asked the main issue. Putting a real serious face, he adjusted his glasses with his index finger.

"I will ask bluntly. Cooperate with our research."

"Research..."

Muttering, Celica took a glance at Nirvana.

Nirvana was standing by behind Celica.

She remembered what Nine had said during the day she met Nirvana.

"That's what Onee-chan has been opposing, right? ...She said I'll lose my life if I cooperate."

But she wondered if such dangerous research was really performed in a place like Ishana. Moreover, by the hands of Nine's fellow Ten Sages.

Noticing the surrounding as Celica dropped her voice, Seven put a baffled face and greatly shook his head.

"Perish the thought that you will die. Nine has quite a misunderstanding. Our research only requires a bit of magical power and the unique healing ability you have. Generally, an unusual disposition of magical power is needed."

"Is... that so? Then..."

"Perhaps Nine doesn't want you to be involved with this research so much that she made an exaggerated lie. She really is a difficult woman."

"Good grief", said Seven as he put his white finger on his brow.

To brush it aside, Eight leaned her body forward.

"What we're making is a powerful weapon to defeat the Black Beast that will revive one day. If it exists, then surely... no, we definitely can win against it. We can fight without things like Armagus."

Her thick lips, which were painted in bright red lipstick, delivered a passionate speech so fast to point it was dizzying. Her large eyes were burning with passion. It was unthinkable that she was the same as the lighthearted person who had raised an eye over talk about proportion before.

The same passion dwelled even in Seven's calm glance that was looking at her.

"Understood? If it's realized, we won't have to recruit a large number of people to create Armagus force for the war. Hence, your cooperation is necessary."

Just what was the 'research' Seven and Eight had spoken of? Celica could only have a faint guess.

A weapon to defeat the Black Beast. It must be amazing. If it existed, large number of people wouldn't have to participate in the war. If it would truly become like that, then it was no great wonder.

The speech was something she would quickly agree with. But something still stuck in her.

"If it's that amazing... then why does Onee-chan oppose it?"

Celica spoke of the question that came to her mind.

Immediately, Eight frowned and made a troubled look while answering.

"Your magical power is required to control it. Maybe she doesn't want you to get involved with a weapon that will become a tool for war."

Putting her gloved hand to her cheek, Eight had an anxious look as she took a breath.

Celica looked downward. She didn't have self-confidence in quick thinking. But still, she pondered as hard as she could.

Certainly, Nine wouldn't allow Celica to get involved with war and weapons. Even if they were doing their share of cooking now, Nine was so prone to

worry that she had been making an uproar about kitchen being dangerous and doing everything alone for two years.

However.

"...I'm sorry. I can't cooperate after all."

At the end of her pondering, Celica frantically shook her ponytail from side to side.

With the high heels that were so tall that Celica would fall down in three steps if she were to wear it, Eight approached her.

Still, she was interrupted as Nirvana put her arms between them.

Eight's face turned into frustration.

"Why!? It can be realized if you participate!"

"Eight, settle down."

From behind, Seven reprimanded Eight who was shouting in rage. But it was hard to say that Seven's face looked calm.

"Please tell us, Celica-san. Do you have any discontent toward our explanation?"

The vigor in his gentle voice felt much heavier than the roaring angry voice.

But without hesitation, Celica looked straight at Seven and Eight whose eye positions were tall.

"It's not that I have a discontent. It's just because I've promised that I'll believe in Onee-chan."

Nine had promised that she would show Celica that she could defeat the Black Beast. Then in order for the promise to be realized, Celica couldn't afford to doubt Nine. Celica believed it not with logic, but with her intuition.

"Besides, sure, Onee-chan's worrying about me too much. However, she's real smart. If the research were something amazing that could defeat Black Beast without any sacrifice like Seven-san and Eight-san said, then I think Onee-chan would take the initiative to use it instead."

If her magical power was needed, then Celica would put her effort so she could be a little less of a burden. And since this was about Nine, then Celica would definitely make it true if possible.

Above all, the matter of cooperating in Seven and Eight's research had reminded her of something. Before, there was a time when Celica was about to throw her life in order to entrap the Black Beast.

Now, Celica couldn't do the same as she did before. After all, her life had been saved by a person who was precious to her back then.

"That's why, I can't cooperate. I'm sorry!"

After carefully straightened her back again, Celica bowed deeply.

Then with the same strength when she bowed, Celica raised her head and started to run. Nirvana followed her immediately.

"Hey, wait!"

Shaking free from Eight's voice that pursued her, Celica went toward Ishana's main street.

While running, Celica looked up at Nirvana who was dyed by the setting sun.

Nine was amazing. She made such a delicate bodyguard alone. She was even trying to get to the front row to fight the Black Beast.

Perhaps Celica herself had missed the chance to have the same strength as her sister. If she had cooperated with Seven and Eight, she might be able reduce Nine's hardships.

But Celica believed that Nine surely had given Nirvana to her in case a situation like this happened. Celica's decision surely wasn't a mistake. Probably.

Nirvana turned her face at Celica's presence. When her gaze met the beautiful glass eyes, Celica laughed in embarrassment. It was like Nirvana was her other sister.

"Ahaha, it's nothing. What should we have for tonight's dinner?"

For the time being, let's go to the bakery. We should buy breads for tonight and tomorrow morning.

The western sky began to swallow the sinking sun. Before anyone realized, the sky that had been painted in orange changed into blazing flame.

Soon, the ominous sunset would burn shadows onto the pitch black stone pavements. The lined buildings, roadside trees, and the Ten Sages who were seeing off the escaping girl were counted equally amongst the sinister shadows.

"Aaah~, and there she goes..."

Rocking the large earring with her finger, Eight intentionally made a discouraged face.

Looking at her with a side glance, Seven took a step back and changed his body orientation. What he looked beyond the thin lens of his glasses was a thin alley. From the dense shadow that was born from the evening sun, several figures indicated their presences without exposing their faces.

As the figures checked the surroundings, they asked something to Seven.

The tip of Seven's lips slightly moved as he answered.

"Yes, that's the girl in question. Her name is Celica A. Mercury."

"You're aware, right? She's mentioned in Professor Ayatsuki's reports."

While putting the finger that had been messing with the earring to her mouth, Eight made a charming smile. Her eyes didn't seem like they had looked when the blunt proposal was refused; they were shining in curiosity.

A single figure dropped its voice as if in doubt. It sounded like the figure was finding fault in the two people.

Catching on it, Seven sharply narrowed the excellent eyes that a man could have.

"Be at ease. We will handle her accordingly whether she refuses or accepts. Of course, you will somehow collaborate with us, won't you?"

Being fearlessly pressed by Seven, some kind of opening was born between the human figures.

Beside, Eight put both hands on her hips and threw a glance to where Celica had gone.

"We have one chance. In that moment, the required control system and data will all gather. When that happens, it will completely be ours."

Eight's passionate words fully fuelled the expectations of those who lurked in the shadow. The words that served as encouragement and reminder got several replies.

Seven adjusted his glasses using his finger.

"The both of us will prepare the required arrangement. All of you should do no mistake without fail."

"Take care... the people of *Orbis Librarius Norma*."

After receiving the heated gazes from both Seven and Eight respectively, the people who were called by the name of their organization left two, three words of salute before quickly vanishing into the shadow.

The sun sank even more to the west. As the twilight sky burned even redder, the shadows gradually got denser and longer as they were etched on the ground.

As if putting on the shadow, Eight waved her long mantle and turned her back from the alley where several figure people had vanished. As her folded her arms lifted up her chest, she brought her cheek near the flashy fur.

"I thought about what to be done for a moment, but looks like everything works out in the end. It's fortunate that we have personal connection to Orbis Librarius Norma."

"Fortunate, huh."

As if pouring cold water to Eight's good mood, Seven simply dropped a sigh.

His voice was small, but Eight could hear his nervousness. She strongly churned up the eyebrows that had been carefully groomed.

"What's wrong? I know that you want to say it was all thanks to that man. It's good that we listened to his story."

"I wonder. I have no faith for that man. Once a traitor will always be a traitor. You need to pay attention, too."

"Is that so? Thanks for the warning."

Because Seven's scolding didn't seem that amusing at all, Eight waved her hand over her shoulder. As the high heels that supported her slender legs hit the stone pavements, her thighs, freely exposed from the dress' slit, left the place.

"Hmph, what a detestable man."

After the distance was far enough, Eight spat out those words. As if trampling those words as it fell to her feet, her heels made loud noises.

Similarly, while gazing at the retreating figure of his extravagant associate as she headed toward the Mage's Guild, Seven slightly opened his mouth.

"...What a loud-mouthed woman."

The sun sank into the western sky.

The color of the sky that looked burning also ran after its master and rushed to the west. As the city of Ishana gradually began to insinuate the presence of the night, Seven also began to walk to the Mage's Guild.

Chapter 4 - Indigo Heart, the Conception

Part 1

Where might the proof that one is oneself be?

Where might the significance that one is oneself be?

This is the memory of a man who bears the name *Hakumen*.

The memory when he began the life as himself.

And the memory when he chose the fate to fight——.

——An old castle nestled in eternal night. The residence of an old vampire who had lived a thousand years.

Jin was there, deep in underground.

Although there was nothing but night recurring there, the place had a basement in addition. No light was supposed to flow in; only flame inside the lamps which were furnishing the wall. The light from the lamps flickered, warmly shining on the place eerily.

Between the wavering lights, an old-fashioned wooden door stood still, giving dignified feels. It looked so heavy like it couldn't be moved with the strength of one man. If this weren't the underground, it would be easy to imagine that the castle's scenery awaited beyond the door. Being indoor, it had a rather inappropriate look to it.

While sitting on a wheelchair, Jin looked up at the door.

Back then... he woke up at the presence of the castle's master, Clavis, before fainting again. Apparently a few days had passed since then. Most of the paralyzing injuries on his body had healed poorly. But it was enough to enable him getting up on the bed.

Nonetheless, it was impossible to stand on his own. Wearing an easily removable sleep-wear, his appearance looked unsightly as he was covered

in bandages. He was forced to move around in wheelchair still in that appearance.

Valkenhayn had been pushing Jin's wheelchair up to here.

The master of the castle whom Valkenhayn usually accompanied, Clavis, was in front of Jin. The uninjured but old vampire was unable to walk. He moved his own wheelchair with magic.

Standing close next to Clavis was Rachel. When the light from the lamps flickered, its color was reflected on the young profile of the girl. It highlighted her unusual charm.

"All right... We have arrived."

Stopping before the door, Clavis smiled in a way like he had gone weary from the long journey up to here.

The shut door had been subjected to strict seals.

Although it had weathering feels to it, it rather looked like a rock. Clavis held out his worn out hand at the surface of the standing still door.

In response, bluish-white magic circle rose to surface. With a few words, Clavis incited the magic circle to recognize its visitors. After that, a bleak light slowly went around the hand he held out to examine it. Before long, it dissolved and vanished.

After a short pause, the door opened itself without borrowing anyone's hand.

"Ugh..."

For a moment, Jin felt a numbness as if a lightning was running on his skin. It was caused by the door's seal.

The seal wasn't necessarily broken as it was no more than a key faithful to its master.

Despite that, he understood how uncommon the engraved seal when his skin felt the after-effect.

There is something I want to show you.

Having said that, Clavis led Jin here.

What could possibly need a seal as strict as this? The question and remnant of discomfort made Jin frowned completely.

When Clavis moved his wheelchair forward, Rachel followed behind with a step.

Following them, Valkenhayn pushed Jin's wheelchair and started to walk.

There was a layer of darkness inside the door.

Rachel's tiny hand was holding something similar to the lamps that illuminated the castle. But the flickering magical light inside the glass had intensity that didn't match its size as it shone on the surroundings. Other than darkness, it proceeded to shine continuously on the emerging pathway which stretched straight inside.

They slipped into a strange and mysterious space as though they weren't in a castle. Other than the pathway, everything was completely drowned in black.

As Clavis advanced, the door behind him closed by itself.

When the place was shut, every noise vanished as if absorbed.

Not just the noise. It was also true for the flow of air and time. All kinds of flow were halted as if absorbed.

Obviously, there was an unusual realm here.

Clavis proceeded without hesitation. So did Rachel and Valkenhayn. They must have known where this place was, its purpose, and what was inside.

Being the only clueless one, Jin, not raising any question and could only follow along, felt the situation was somewhat unpleasant.

"By the way, Sir Jin."

Clavis spoke gently as he went ahead.

Looking from Jin's side, the visible old face was mellowed by an affection that didn't suit the dark, shut place.

"How is your memory since then? It seems you have calmed a little."

No sound came from the wheelchair's movement. Despite that, the unhesitant voice sounded strange.

Jin gave a glance at his soundless means of moving before opening his mouth.

"...Your information regarding this world contradicts my memories."

"How come?"

The withered and grunting voice urged him to continue.

Jin spoke as he got pulled along.

"In my memories... the Black Beast had been killed in distant past. It was none other than a fact of history. The ones who defeated Black Beast were the Six Heroes... As for who they were..."

Jin frowned again. The memories after this were dim. He should have known more about the existence of Six Heroes itself.

But he couldn't remember.

"Is there anything else you can remember?"

Perhaps Clavis' voice didn't reach directly inside Jin's skull. While having a dull headache, Jin picked up words from his memory like tearing pieces of cloth.

"...Ragna. My... brother..."

Clavis slightly turned his face.

But for Jin, who dropped his sight while prying his memories, the small gesture never entered his eyes.

"And then..."

Inside the hazy memories, there was a face that emerged vividly in Jin's mind. It was awfully nostalgic, and truly warm... but somehow weighted his heart.

"...Tsubaki."

The moment that name was spoken, an intense headache attacked. The pain was like a hot steel had pierced inside his head. Jin grimaced without letting his voice out.

Simultaneously, bursting emotions began to overflow. Most of them were dark thoughts. A drowning sorrow that contained burning hatred.

His powerless hands creaked, making tight fists on their own.

Why. How. Rejection. Helpless feeling. Wrath and fury. The fragments of emotions and words came one by one and burned his brain.

"Please, calm down."

Then, he heard a voice that went straight to his sense of hearing. A soft and modest voice. The voice pulled the hot iron from Jin's skull. It suppressed and eliminated the headache that could make his body trembling.

Jin raised his blank eyes. The pain had withdrawn, but a dizziness had been born from the headache and made his head staggered.

Exhausted, Jin sank his back to the wheelchair. Clavis squinted as if sympathizing with him.

"More time is required to regain all of your memories. ...It is alright, you certainly will remember. Therefore, you should not drain your consciousness searching for memory."

Jin returned the friendly tone of voice with sharp glare. Sweet words were obnoxious to him. The spoken words that somewhat took light of his feeling were also unpleasant.

Realizing he had stopped moving, Clavis slowly moved his wheelchair again.

In the long pathway that were illuminated with the light Rachel had, there were many more of seals applied. The magic circles weren't on doors, but rather floating in air to stand in the way.

While quietly unsealing them one by one, Clavis spoke again.

"You certainly came from the future and has been washed away into this age. ...The *manipulated future*."

"Manipulated future...?"

While frowning because of the persistently remaining dizziness, Jin asked.

Clavis' thin shoulders dropped along with a sigh.

"It is a pretty old story. Long before the repeating, barren history of the world... Further than when Black Beast materialized. Humanity had come into contact with the Boundary."

Again, Clavis' hand undid a seal.

Coupled with his narrative tone, it looked like the old vampire was also unraveling humanity's history which he had been watching.

When Clavis' wheelchair started to move like it was gliding, Rachel followed after. Valkenhayn advanced, taking along Jin.

"The world gained will due to the hands of man. In accordance to its will, the world has determined the future where humanity should tread. There are some disparities, but with the same procedure, humanity will pursue the same process to be led to the same fate."

"The future... has been determined...?"

"Perhaps it is easier to comprehend when being said that way."

Gently and slowly, Clavis spoke as if seeing a distant scenery. Even if the crimson pair of eyes had deep foresight, they were brimming with swaying emotions rather than simply a serenity.

"...Let me give you an example, young man. You, coming from some future, and arrived into this era was also one of the procedure which has been determined by the world."

"Tsk, DON'T MESS WITH ME!!"

Yelling, Jin hit the wheelchair's handrail with his fist.

"To hell with the world's will! Screw determined procedure! Then Nii-san... Tsubaki... ARE YOU TELLING ME THEY WILL FALL TO *THAT* FATE!?"

Filled with vigor, Jin flared up at Clavis and strongly raised the upper part of his body. But the weak and injured body wouldn't let him stand.

Still, Jin violently squirmed his body to shake off something. Valkenhayn's arms forcibly held him to pull him back to his wheelchair.

"Be quiet! Surely you realize that you cannot move! Be aware of your own situation, kid."

"Ugh..."

Once strength left his body, pain and dizziness suddenly came rushing. He was unable to move again, but Jin's shoulders went up and down because of the rapid and disordered breathing while laying his glare on Clavis.

Not minding it, the wheelchair continued forward.

Rachel gave a cold stare at Jin. In contrast, Clavis gave a warm gaze.

"...It seems you have a sorrow."

"I don't know... I can't recall it! But... but..."

Ragna and Tsubaki. A while ago, those names didn't even appear as they had been sinking inside the mist of his memory. When his sub-consciousness raised to surface for a moment, a whirl of emotions would follow.

He couldn't remember even a fragment of the specific and what he had gone through with them. Despite that, he felt an awful sorrow, frustration, and agony. The inner corner of his eyes which sight had grown weak were burning hot.

After Clavis returned his head forward, he slowly closed his eyelids before raising them again. As if his age and magnificent articles added the looks, deep consideration could be sensed from the gesture only.

"This world is like a dream seen by god. God has been seeing the same dream many times over. Its story is a repeating cycle of life and death...
The dream of fate."

While listening to Clavis' voice, Rachel held the lamp up high. The last stop inside the passage could be seen.

What had been waiting was a wooden door.

The entrance didn't seem majestic as it was actually a simple door, but the strength of the applied seal was even stricter.

"I do not know if you are able to put an end to that dream. Unfortunately, I cannot see through that future..."

Clavis' wheelchair drew closer near the door. His skinny hand fluctuated the invoked magic circle like a ripple. After a few patterns had been drawn on the surface, it gently vanished.

Within the dark room that hadn't been accepting any noise except voices, the creaking and heavy sound from the wooden door resounded eerily.

As if stepping aside, the door opened. Another darkness awaited on the other side. But this time, it was quick to discover that it was a small room.

Valkenhayn brought Jin until the entrance of the room.

In the center of the room, something stood alone as it had been left behind. Something white. A silhouette.

"What is this...?"

Facing the front side of the white frame, Jin inquired.

Clavis didn't come inside, but he stopped his own wheelchair beside the door. As his red eyes gazed inside the room, he sluggishly opened his mouth.

"...It is something humanity had attained by chance when they discovered the Boundary in the past. Do you know of the objects called as Original Unit?"

"Original Unit..."

With a voice that was practically a sigh, Jin murmured.

It was very likely that this wasn't the first time he spoke of those words. He realized that a corner of his memory was trembling. But it was only that far. He couldn't remember.

"To put it as a better explanation for human, perhaps... they are the gods who have been creating the world."

Even without hearing his words, Clavis could guess Jin's thought by his face. Clavis looked troubled as he groaned while talking. Leaning his whole body to the wheelchair, He linked his thin fingers on top of his stomach.

"There are three Original Unit. Master Unit Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi Unit. And this one here is Susano'o Unit. ...Though, it has nothing inside. Just simply a vessel."

Although he said 'simply', even Jin could easily understand how that thing was far from common sense. Clavis' speech was erratic, and yet his

extraordinary old voice was appropriate. Rather, importance and truth could be sensed from it.

Even without a word or presence, the standing still object was clad in odd sense of intimidation. It was simply powerful.

"It has made its way through different hands since its discovery. However, I am the one in control now. ...Young man. If you believe it would be necessary, then I will hand it over to you."

Even if it seemed he was telling a fairy-tale with the gentle way of speaking, Jin was bewildered. He looked back to the old vampire.

Clavis calmly looked at Jin. As if picking up the thought in Jin's heart; looking at it while carrying affection.

"...Your body is no longer functioning as it should be. If it still does not matter to you, you are welcome to remain in this castle until the day your life meet its end. But if you need a leg to stand and an arm to wield sword... I believe that vessel is appropriate for you."

Jin stared at Clavis again as he spoke. He was looking for the real motive hidden inside those pair of deep crimson eyes. Still, no matter how doubtful he was, there was nothing but honest warmth.

Clavis took a single deep breath. There was a hint in his sigh that he got a bit weary.

"...There is still time. Do consider about it. You must decide for your own future."

"Even if it follows the plot of god's dream you're talking about...?"

Jin put a small sarcasm in his words.

Clavis was pleasantly smiling. The wrinkles on his face became clearer.

"What a high spirited young man. However, you are right indeed. You have to choose. No matter how much of it is part of the world's wish, the limits to keep on choosing is none other than your own decision."

While speaking, Clavis moved his wheelchair. He made his way beside Jin and then turned his back on him. Valkenhayn who was nearby immediately moved aside.

"Well... It seems I have got a bit weary. Rachel, is it alright to leave the rest to you?"

"Yes. Please take a good rest, dear Father."

As her eyes that had been cold were now bright with faint warmth, Rachel drew her chin for a little.

After leaving a thanks, Clavis gave a gaze at Valkenhayn who was nearby. Receiving that gaze, Valkenhayn went around behind Clavis and gently pushed the wheelchair.

Before he left, Clavis stopped his wheelchair for a moment and spoke to Jin. "Young man. Please, live true to your own heart."

The old voice thoroughly held deep affection. It was like he wouldn't be here if not for it.

Clavis looked back at Jin and made a worried, strained smile.

"...Once, I have said something similar to someone who was very much like you, but... Oh dear, it seems I am not able to remember who the person was. It appears I am being reduced to a part of the repeating dream, too. It has to be my age."

After he spoke, he leaned against the wheelchair as if sleeping. Clavis borrowed Valkenhayn's strength and left from the seal within deep underground.

Left behind, Rachel turned the lamp on her hand toward Jin.

Left behind, Jin turned his jarring body toward Susano'o Unit.

Rather than worry, the young man's face looked more to being determined. Rachel caused a small stir by letting her bell-like voice out.

"...By accepting and uniting with the Original Unit, you will cease to be human. There won't be a second chance to return."

"What will I be if it isn't human?"

Jin muttered like he was asking himself.

Rachel's charming and lovely eyes slowly winked.

"Who knows. Perhaps you won't become anything. At the very least, you won't be like you are presently."

His current self.

Jin looked at himself who was sitting on a wheelchair.

His powerless self. He was no doubt alive, but his body was impaired that he couldn't do anything by himself. It didn't amount to anything as it couldn't wield a sword to fight.

Where might the proof that one is oneself be?

Where might the significance that one is oneself be?

Jin questioned himself. Those were vague questions, but he arrived at the necessary answer quite easily.

It was natural. It was because Jin already had his resolve long ago.

"I am me. I don't need anything beyond that."

These were no more than two simple options.

Live unable to fight, or live to fight.

Only few choices came to his mind. But either of them were piercing sharp and deep into his heart like a blade of ice. Cold pain was running through his mind.



The black silhouette he saw inside flames. The Black Beast. Both were something that had to be killed.

The man he called as brother. The young girl with the name of a flower. Both were people he had lost repeatedly within the repeating dream.

He must fight.

If the Black Beast was here, then he would follow the wish of his instinct to kill it.

If he wanted to sever the repeating tragedy, then he would follow the protest of his sentimentality to decapitate it.

He could hear a voice from the standing white silhouette.

—Be the white void. Be the cold steel. Be the just sword. Wield the blade in your hand to reap the sins of this world and cleanse it in the fires of destruction.

The immovable arm moved. Jin ended the life of the name *Jin*, and chose to tread a new stage.

Part 2

Time passed exactly like an arrow. Only a little time left from the remaining four months of delay.

A large scale of encampment took place about half a month away from the last day of 2107 AD. They were carrying a plan to ambush the Black Beast which would be awake from its one year sleep.

For that reason, a meeting was presently held in the council room in the Mage's Guild of Ishana.

The participants were the war potentials who would play the central part of the strategy. Jubei, Valkenhayn, Trinity, Terumi, Hakumen, and Nine.

They were surrounding a floating orb in the center of the room. The orb had unfolded a map they were staring at with grave look.

"As revealed by the previous data, it was certain that the Black Beast made its appearance from the vicinity of Cauldrons. Before that happened, those Cauldron had been discharging intensive seithr. In short, there's high

possibility that Black Beast will appear near the Cauldron which is leaking massive amount of seithr."

Nine, acting as the commander, nimbly waved her finger. Then, a great number of tiny lights appeared on the map functioning as markers.

"We have the specific approximation regarding the location of Cauldrons around the world from Terumi. We've been observing whether there's a change in the influx of seithr among these data. And here they are."

Several green markers were now glowing red. Their numbers roughly amounted close to twenty.

She had already received and understood the information, but Trinity's face grew dark.

"It's everywhere... We have to start deploying the armies quickly. Besides, even if they'd arrived before its appearance, I'm not sure if they can make it stay in one place..."

"There's another nature in Black Beast's appearance. The thing's drawn to life force. It'll sniff out the most abundant and splendid life force and chase it."

Although he looked unmotivated, Terumi spoke while wiping the map with his hand. Around half of the red markers turned blue. The blue lights were concentrated in Eastern Europe.

"Taking that in mind, the monster will appear from the Cauldrons around here. ...Though, they're not locations that can be easily visited anyway."

Having said that, Terumi chuckled like how a human would.

Valkenhayn knitted his brows. Jubei shifted his attention as if to calm Valkenhayn. Like usual, Hakumen didn't move nor talk.

When such scene happened... Celica was watching it intently while sitting on a chair placed alongside the wall of the council room.

She just sat there with nothing to do. Next to her was Nirvana with her long arms dangling.

Celica didn't have any relation to the plan. She was here because Nine kept pressing her demand not to leave her alone at all.

She wasn't being overprotective. Nine was being cautious for Seven and Eight.

Around a month ago, Nine who were being absent from the island had been receiving contacts. Let alone being not involved with Celica, Seven and Eight had even shown their faces to her.

Celica thought they probably had given up, but it seemed Nine was still being suspicious of their action. Nine's excuse must be that because it would be problematic if they make a pass at Celica in this tight time behind her.

Although there was Nirvana, Seven and Eight were Ten Sages. Since she couldn't afford to be negligent, Nine tried to have Celica with her while she was in the island one way or another.

Celica felt grateful that her older sister's was being protective to her. The feeling alone was very valuable.

But in the end, she had been made to attend this meeting where she just aimlessly sitting around unable to do anything. Unnecessary things popped up in her head as the result.

For example, there was overwhelming difference between her and the six people near her. She was usually together with them, but she was being self-conscious that they weren't on the same ground with her.

It didn't come out of boredom nor from doing something useless.

But a bit. Just for a bit.

"....."

Celica raised her face as she felt the silence.

It seemed she had unwarily been leaning to Nirvana's arm. Nirvana, who was standing at her side, looked down at Celica.

"Ah, sorry."

With voice as little as possible so as not to disturb the meeting, Celica straightened her back.

Nirvana's large hand lightly hit her head. Receiving the gesture that was closer to caressing than hitting made Celica's chest warm for a moment.

(Come to think of it, I usually get this feeling before...)

From that person. From Ragna.

Soon, it would be one year since their parting. Thinking about it made her suddenly surprised. It made her missed him so much.

If Ragna were here, she should be able to speak of her current feeling. And then he would say something. No matter what he spoke of, he would say 'idiot' and then laugh.

"...It's okay. Thank you, Nirvana."

Both human and doll surely had the same kind of kindness. While thinking about it, Celica gripped the hand of the affectionate guardian. The hand was cold. The hand was big. Currently, the hand felt reliable.

After once again telling that she was fine, Celica turned to the meeting. Then she straightened herself. She had to listen diligently.

It was because her sister and the others were about to begin the discussion for their important fight.

After she previously looked over to Celica, Nine once again manipulated the blue markers and changed five of them to white. They were the spot where the Cauldron's locations were comparatively concentrated.

Immediately, Trinity told the detailed information regarding the spots that had been turned white.

"We could probably get more definitive specification if the proximity were closer. But considering the required time, we can no longer postpone to notify many countries in deploying their armies. Our discussion this time will be to estimate which is the place where Black Beast will appear."

"Are ya gonna deploy the armies in all these points? Even if they gather elsewhere, there's practically a lot of distance between them."

A wrinkle was made on top of Jubei's nose.

"I know," nodded Nine.

"That's why as soon as we confirmed its appearance, we're going to be forced to move large number of units. It's preferable to teleport each of them, but I can't use teleportation magic strong enough to transport troops. Therefore... can I ask of you, Valkenhayn?"

With a sigh, Nine folded her arms below her chest and shifted her focus to the grimacing wolf man.

Valkenhayn deeply frowned.

"Are you requesting for Rachel-sama's assistance?"

"Her teleportation is able to transfer a squad of army. If the scattered parties can be teleported to the place where Black Beast appear..."

"I refuse."

Interrupting Nine's words, a clear bell-like voice shook the place. At the same time, a faint scent of rose bloomed and a small figure appeared near Celica.

It was so sudden that Celica jumped above her chair and grabbed Nirvana's arms. Nirvana quickly put herself on guard.

Her black dress was decorated with frills. Her beautiful golden hair was tied into two parts by the big ribbons. Her eyes were deep crimson and her skin was pale. The vampire who was looking after a castle in endless night, Rachel Alucard.

From the start, her appearance here made Celica's eyes opened wide. Rachel used the teleportation magic that had been brought up as the topic just now.

But Ishana was concealed in secure barrier. Furthermore, the Mage's Guild's council room had also been applied with barrier. Originally, it shouldn't be possible to directly teleport into such place.

"A-Amazing..."

As one would expect from the teleportation that was capable of moving a squad of army like Nine had asserted. A respectful voice unintentionally escaped from Celica's mouth.

Rachel turned her sight at her and pointed her gaze as if sneering.

"Good day. You're so skilled, dislocating your back on top of chair like that."

"Ahaha... It was too surprising. Hello, Rachel-san."

Celica replied while giving a wry smile. Rachel snorted as if in discontent.

"Rachel-sama! Why are you here...!?"

Leaving the circle of people, Valkenhayn came over in panic.

From raising her eyes to the butler who was worried if anything happened, Rachel shifted her gaze and looked at Nine.

"Why, to give advice since all of you were so serious about the amusing joke of borrowing my power in the start of humanity's battle. Discard the absurd idea of involving me, Nine of the Ten Sages."

Rachel spoke with mockery mixed with the kind of astonishment from a child's imprudence.

Trying not to get provoked but still seemingly wanted to say something, Nine scowled in discomfort. Turning to face the childish vampire, Nine pulled her chin and looked down on the girl from tall position.

"This year is about to end, and the Black Beast will come alive at the same time. You should be aware of this, Rachel Alucard. If the damage from that monster spread further, humanity will likely lose the willpower for the

following battle. At the very least, this strategy gives us the strength to fight. Considering about it, the first battle would have to bear fruits."

"That's why you're asking for my help? And where is your manner? I'd prefer if you ask of your request while rubbing your head on the ground."

"Hey... I told you to understand the situation, didn't I? Or are you telling me that humanity's life and death are just some game for the daughter of Alucard Family? You have a lot of screws loose."

If the blood red eyes were sneering and looking down on her, then she would give down contempt from the shade of her purple hat. If their mutual incompatibility were to be drawn in a picture, it would become intertwining force of opposition.

But Rachel, who was raising her eyes at Nine, immediately dropped her gaze powerlessly.

Celica noticed something when looking at her face from the side. Rachel usually put up a cold look. But for moment, she saw her making a sorrowful face.

"...Even if you're asking it while standing on your hands, I will not lend my hand in this battle. No, perhaps you won't understand unless I tell you directly that I cannot help."

"Rachel-sama..."

Other than Valkenhayn who let out a worried voice, perhaps no one in this place could guess the reason why Rachel made a cloudy expression.

Celica, who was standing straight after leaving from her chair, couldn't understand why she had that look. Bewildered, she could only blink.

To press her further, Nine instantly frowned hard. When she did that, Rachel continued in scornful voice.

"I am not able to intervene with humanity's decision. So please win this fight all by yourselves."

The manner of speaking made Rachel seemed to have been continuously watching over a hundred of years of history... Yes, it was like the vampire who had spent no less than a thousand years, Clavis Alucard, was talking to them with his transcendental presence.

In addition to that, Celica had briefly seen sorrow and gloom on her face.

When a heavy footstep could be heard, everybody turned their faces to the noise.

Hakumen, who had been silent like he had no concern with everything, turned toward Rachel.

"...I did not expect any assistance from the likes of you since the beginning."

"Sir Hakumen. I will not forgive any mockery toward Rachel-sama. Even if it comes from you."

Nine's previous words had already made Valkenhayn's face looked grim. It was now full of resentment like smoldering flames.

Jubei stepped forward in front of him, trying to keep the quarrel from developing further.

Rachel wearily took a breath. Then with the manner of walking that resembled waltz, she turned to Celica.

"I cannot give my support. However, I can give you advice. The Black Beast will certainly appear before her. Perhaps it is not an advice... but a prediction."

Her red eyes seized Celica as they winked frantically.

Nine snapped and looked at Celica.

Even Trinity, Jubei, and Valkenhayn. Terumi and Hakumen were the only exception.

While blankly looking back at the staring deep crimson eyes, Celica pointed at herself being unable to comprehend why.

"W-Why me?"

Again, a sad look passed over in Rachel's red eyes. Her tiny lips gently told her.

Those words blew through Celica's chest with the force of sudden gust.

"...*His* soul is sleeping within Black Beast."

Who did she mean by 'his'?

Celica was probably reminded of someone's face in that moment.

With their own circumstances, everyone understood who he was.

Part 3

That night.

Celica took a shower after finishing the dinner with her sister at home. Like she usually did when the day was over, Celica changed into sleepwear and went upstairs into her room.

She was sitting on top of the bed which was positioned beside the window. Instead of cushion, she held a pillow with knees. The hair that was usually tied was now unraveled.

Nirvana was sitting on top of a sofa beside the bed. The sofa was something Celica prepared to become Nirvana's fixed position when she was in the room. Nowadays, she was completely attached to it.

No light was put on in the room as she was going to sleep. However, she didn't feel like sleeping at all. It had been going on since a while ago.

She knew well the reason. It never left her mind. The words she heard from today's noon within the council room of Mage's Guild.

—*His soul is sleeping within Black Beast.*

Rachel was the head of the Alucard Family who had been watching over everything in the world. Celica somehow knew that her words held some truth in it. When she had the chance to meet the previous head Clavis Alucard, she could see a faint sadness in his eyes when he was speaking gently. She thought that Rachel had a really similar look back in the meeting.

If that's true. In the case that it was true.

Rachel's words gradually expanded the remains of fire within Celica. The remains immediately flickered bright red, releasing heat, and burned her chest.

As if she couldn't bear the growing heat, Celica tossed the pillow and got off the bed.

She ran up barefoot to a closet placed on a corner of the room.

Opening it, what appeared were the outer coat and dress of the academy's uniform and several of Celica's clothes which were hanging up.

Within the deepest part of the closet, there was a clearly different outfit hanging.

A bright red long coat.

The coat was too long for Celica to wear. As evident from the design and shoulder width, it was a men's wear.

And hidden in a more invisible place, there was a single sword that had thick and bulky blade as its trait. It was leaning on the closet's partition.

When Celica stretched her arms and dragged out the sword from the closet, she fell sitting on the spot. The sword was heavy.

Unable to wield it at all, Celica raised her knees to hold it up in her arms and placed the broad body of the sword on her palms.

The sword was cleanly polished without any stain on it. It was the same for the red coat. Before, it was dirty and torn in some parts. But every day, she mended it bit by bit until it was completely restored.

The sword and coat were left in charge to Celica by her important friend.

"Ragna..."

Unconsciously, her lips moved and uttered *his* name.

If Rachel was telling the truth. If *his* soul was indeed sleeping within the Black Beast.

She might be able to meet him again.

She could meet him again, and then... have a conversation if possible.

She couldn't stop once she thought about it. Celica had that nature since she was little. The recklessness had made her did things without thinking of the consequences. It must have given her sister Nine troubles.

She surely would give her more problems this time.

She knew. In truth, she didn't want to give Nine anymore trouble nor worry. However.

"Ragna."

Calling the name again with her voice made her chest slightly warm and grew with expectations.

Embracing the bulky sword, Celica's soft lips began to open. She might be able to meet him. Just thinking about it gave her feeling like she could do anything.

If the owner of the sword heard Celica's current feeling, he would be frowning. She definitely would get scolded and told not to do anything dangerous.

After all, Nine was like that. Putting Celica's safety first, she had even prepared Nirvana for her.

But it was no good. Her chest was throbbing. She could only feel the hasty feeling of happiness.

Because none of the options that were born from the possibility Rachel showed were inconvenient for Celica. Rather, it was like a magic which granted hope like she could do anything.

"...I've decided."

After she let out her voice, Celica looked over to the sofa while still hugging the sword.

Nirvana was sitting on the sofa with straight posture. Her unblinking eyes were staring at Celica.

Celica faced Nirvana and spoke. And when she spoke of the words, the determination within her took a shape.

"Tomorrow, I'll spoke to Onee-chan. When Black Beast revived, I might be able to lure it."

She might get angry. At worst, she might cry. But Celica didn't think she should give up.

"If I can lure the Black Beast, I think Onee-chan's strategy will get a lot smoother. If there's anything I can do, and if it can save someone, then I will do anything. I'll give it my all."

She wanted to be her sister's, everyone's strength.

Above all, she might be able to meet Ragna.

As her chest gently throbbed, Celica tightly hugged Ragna's sword once again.

She remembered the time when she had the same kind of feeling. The warmth from his kindness.

——That night, Celica saw a dream.

A dream where she was standing alone in a white room.

There was nothing when she looked around. Not even someone's shadow.

Where might this place be?

She was letting her voice out as she thought so, but even her breathing noise was inaudible like it was absorbed by the white surface.

She took a step forward.

The room was so white it rendered her unable to grasp whether the concept of ground existed or not. However, her feet unexpectedly felt the certain sensation when she took a step.

Then, a mirror appeared before her unnoticed.

Celica's whole body was completely reflected. Furthermore, it was not reflecting anything unnecessary. As if the rectangle, full-length mirror was prepared exclusively for her.

How could there be a mirror here? She held a curiosity even though it was rather suspicious.

As she had seen the same kind of dream before, she vaguely felt a *déjà vu*.

She wondered if the mirror really existed here.

Wanting to touch it, Celica stretched out her hand.

In the other side of the rectangular mirror, Celica's image also stretched her hand.

When the fingers of the real and false image were about to touch each other, Celica was driven out of the bright white room like a fish diving into the sea.

The dream ended there.

When she awakened, Celica couldn't even remember a fragment of the dream.

Chapter 5 - Black Beast, Reappears

Part 1

December 31th, 2107 AD.

A night that felt unpleasant; with a strangely warm wind blowing.

Although the sky was mostly deprived of clouds, the supposedly visible stars grown hazy as they were covered by thick seithr.

But the moon that had none of silver nor gold was oddly close. It shone its stagnant light upon the ground that was about to be ruined as if giving a sympathy.

The vicinity was a plain wasteland. No grass or water existed.

If today would be the day of apocalypse for humanity, it would truly be the appropriate place.

...Nine thought about it while taking a deep breath, having confirmed the situation with all the main units of Mage's Guild.

The day and the year would end very soon. When a whole year had passed since that time, something might get revived. Just thinking about it would give anyone shivers.

Of course, the preparation had been sufficiently arranged. As anything that could be done had been dealt with, there was no anxiety or fear regarding that part.

What had been concerning Nine was Celica.

"Nine. The deployment of the foreign armies has been completed without problems."

Trinity jogged to Nine. She was among the same main units as Nine and had the role to support all of the armies.

Every functioning countries were participating in this strategy.

They mobilized the acknowledged armies in the last moment. The armies included the countries that had been previously refusing to cooperate with

Mage's Guild and also the circles of the Ten Sages other than Nine that had been made to act.

Presently, several hundreds of thousands of units had been positioned around various cauldrons that had a high rate of seithr discharge. The units also included volunteers who were ordinary people.

It was still unclear which cauldron the Black Beast would emerge from. But once its arrival had been confirmed, the attack and mobilization would commence immediately.

Among the armies that had been stationed at the cauldrons... there was Celica. She was on the central point of the cauldrons' vicinity. Her position made her easy to move from anywhere.

"...Are you worried about Celica-san?"

Trinity asked her in a whisper as she detected a deep sorrow from Nine's expression that was dressed in calmness.

Finally noticing that her mind was completely filled with Celica, Nine lightly bit her lips to reprimand herself. The light pain that didn't get to be wounded felt like she was chewing a gum.

"...Of course I'm worried."

She could have dodged the question, but Nine chose to speak out her mind obediently. Her company was Trinity. She could immediately see through Nine's pressure no matter how many words she used to coat it.

Plus she couldn't keep making a calm face like there was nothing when it came to that matter.

"Don't make a joke like that! Do you even understand what you're saying!?"

The first moment Celica said that she wanted to be a decoy, Nine reflexively yelled.

Nine's shout would make her classmates from the academy trembling. But it wasn't a big deal for Celica. Instead she talked back with a louder voice.

"I said I do. I can't say something like this jokingly."

"That makes it even worse! Celica, didn't you hear about my thoughts in anticipating for this battle!?"

"Of course I remember. But this is different from our talk about Seven-san and Eight-san. I won't be dying. And if I can lure the Black Beast, won't it be good for the strategy?"

The more Nine resisted, the more stubborn Celica stood her ground.

Even if they kept repeating it, Celica wouldn't back down once she had decided on something. Nine knew about it as the experience kept piling up in her.

At such a time, she might already know who would yield in the end.

"Please! I want to do it no matter what! I'll run away when it gets dangerous. I'll obey your instruction. So please...!"

The sisters continued throwing their demands and made the argument lasted close to thirty minutes.

But then Celica joined her hands and then deeply bowed in her begging. The excessively direct request made Nine spontaneously at a loss for words.

She understood about it. About what kind of a sister Celica was and how earnest her heart was.

Nine gave a big sigh and scratched her hair in annoyance.

"...Aaah, okay! You have a comeback for everything I said!"

"...Then... you get it!?"

"I get it, I get it! You're such a stubborn kid. You must have thought tons of excuses to persuade me."

Actually, even if the theories she lined up against Nine might seem all over the place, they needed a little more accuracy in pin pointing Black Beast's arrival in order to intercept it.

There weren't many alternatives that would go smoothly even when the certainty wasn't in 100% percent, or even if they had to rely on the vampire girl's prophecy. In fact, there were only a few of them.

If the Black Beast would get drawn to Celica, then it would greatly helped the proceeding of the plan.

Nine wouldn't have any complain if Celica didn't do it.

"...But remember, your duty is just to lure out that monster. You absolutely cannot participate in the battle. Get to a safe place after that. You hear?"

"Yes! Thanks, Onee-chan!"

With her confidence to not lose to Nine went away, Celica put her usual bright, carefree smile. Then she gripped her sister's hands.

Nine didn't have the slightest idea about what she should feel when looking at her smile.

...The day of the decisive battle approached. Although the arrangement had been finished at this point, Nine was in violent remorse. She couldn't resist to think that it might be better if she had dismissed Celica's opinion using whatever means necessary.

Nine crushed the deployment scheme of the foreign armies in her hand. She immediately switched her long gaze to the direction where Celica was supposed to be.

"Truth to be told, I want to send her to Ishana immediately. Having Celica to be a bait to lure the Black Beast is ludicrous... If I could, I wanted to at least be right beside and protect her now."

"You have to take command of the Armagus unit, you know. No one but you are able to do it."

The Armagus unit was organized from the candidates around the world that had been tested for their aptitude. Today would be their first combat.

Even with their skill, the armies had insufficient combat experience. Commanding them required someone who grasped the understanding of Armagus better than anyone. In other word, Nine.

"I know about that."

Trinity was to give support and direct the supportive magic unit from headquarters. Jubei, Terumi, and Valkenhayn were participating in the units which are located near their respective cauldrons. Even with someone else's assistance, there was no other choice for Nine.

But it was because she precisely knew about it that the absurd irritation within the helpless situation struck her nerves.

The cause of annoyance didn't just come from the Black Beast. Seven and Eight's movement was still in her mind.

Nine thrust her disarranged long hair with her hand. Trinity put her hand to Nine's shoulder and gently smiled.

"Didn't you create Nirvana and have her beside Celica-san? And that gentleman is also there."

"...Ugh. Oh, well. I guess I don't have a problem with him being her guard at the very least, considering his war potential."

Combing the tangled hair in her hand, Nine took a deep breath to shake off the ill feeling in her chest. Though the burden in her chest hadn't disappeared, she had to forcibly convince herself for now.

"Anyway, let's beat up the monster before it reach Celica."

"Fufu, that's the spirit~. ...But please don't do anything reckless."

"I know. You too, Trinity. I can't do anything without you after all."

"Oh my. You're making me embarrassed."

Trinity covered her girlish mouth with the fingertips that came out from the sleeve of her robe. Nine replied with a daring smile.

But time was ticking. No matter how many words she spoke of, the pressuring anxiety hadn't yet to disappear from Nine's chest.

Part 2

The midwinter wind blew, making her cheeks lukewarm. There was smell of cloud dust around.

The night somehow had gotten stagnant. The stars and moon became so much farther away. The air which was filled with seithr appeared like a pretty thin silk curtain. It gave the impression of vague feelings.

It had been a while since she felt the air outside the island. Celica sat down on top of a rugged hill within the everlasting wasteland while inhaling the dusty air of the night deep into her lungs.

Nirvana stood just next to her. The smooth and brilliant glass spheres that were her eyes appeared as if they were gazing at the distant scenery.

Following her gaze, Celica also looked at the distance.

The scenery she was staring at seemed desolate.

Once, this region had suffered damage from Black Beast. The demon appeared suddenly as usual, transformed the buildings and road into wasteland, and disappeared abruptly as before.

But a small town barely survived thanks to that whim. It was located on the other side of the rocky mountain west from here. If the Black Beast appeared on this territory tonight, the town would surely disappear and turned into a wasteland like here.

It was truly a dreadful thing.

Thinking about it made Celica couldn't help but think that she was a complete fool for being here.

It was like being in a dream. Sure, she was fully conscious, but some part of her mind couldn't believe the situation that was about to approach before her eyes.

Although the wind wasn't chilly, it was mysteriously cold. Sitting on top of a rock, Celica hugged her knees and placed her chin on top of them.

The dusty wind fluttered her tied hair like a sash.

Suddenly, she heard heavy footsteps behind.

Snapped, Nirvana put her guard on. Celica turned around in panic, but seeing the person there slackened her cheeks.

"Hakumen-san."

There, a tall man wearing white clothing and white mask with long sword on his back stood silently.

There was no unit near Celica. During the strategy meeting, she had emphasized the possibility that the Black Beast might not be able to find her if she was included in a unit.

Of course, Nine opposed to it. But she was eventually outmatched by Celica's unyielding spirit once she had decided on something. Then she arranged for Celica to be stationed in the middle of the wasteland. Yet she would allow it only if Nirvana and Hakumen were near her. It all led to now.

After Celica calmly called out to her, Nirvana ceased her cautious attitude.

Hakumen stood beside Celica. His white mask turned toward the air as if gazing at the wasteland.

"...Are you scared?"

A low, muffled voice questioned.

Celica looked up and stared at Hakumen's face. His words were unexpected. Shrugging her shoulders, she broke down her expression with a bashful smile.

"Aha... A little."

While giving a reply, Celica got surprised by something other than Hakumen's remark. For the first time, she noticed that she was trembling a bit when she heard her own answer.

She had never expected to be so terrified. But now that she had realized it, she found out that there was a fear laying deep inside. Comparing it like a small pebble sinking to the bottom of a lake was accurate.

Celica drew her knees close and hugged herself tightly. She felt a bit relief from getting enveloped by her own body heat.

"But I'm not so sure what could be so terrifying. Because I feel safe as much as I feel scared. This one year, Onee-chan and the others has really done their best. It should be fine when the Black Beast come."

It weren't just Nine and Hakumen. Everyone around the world had done what they could.

There were some quarrels among fellow countries, a reorganization that had to be done to the collapsing economy, and insufficient goods. The world had to go forward while burdened by loads of problem, but plenty of people had worked hard from each of their place. And it finally came to today.

Celica believed that there wasn't any pointless part within there.

While staying in small posture, Celica straightened her back and raised her face up straight. Her big eyes reflected a distant scene.

"Onee-chan with everyone will surely win the battle. A world where everybody lives in peace without conflict is coming. And I'm glad I can lend my hand to achieve it. That's why right now I don't have any regret nor a single thought to stop. But you know, it's just... "

As she thought, being in the middle of an empty wasteland alone was frightening. A terribly simple reason that made her shivering.

"...A world where everybody lives in peace. Without conflict..."

Hakumen muttered in deep voice and slightly made the parched sky vibrated. It was like he was thinking of a distant wish that was vanishing. Faint and weak, swept away by the rough wind.

Hearing his voice which seemed like he was pondering of fleeting thoughts, Celica pulled her head and made a wry smile. When she heard Hakumen repeating her words, she became embarrassed. Because it felt like her naivety and inexperience were exposed.

"A-Ahaha. It's weird, isn't it? I got scared despite thinking about all that. It seems I'm more confused than I thought."

"...There is nothing to fear."

Hakumen looked straight forward and spoke, looking like he didn't even have a slight hesitation. Clenching the dangling hands beside his body, his

feet which were previously spread shoulder-wide stepped firmly on the hard ground without a hint of retreating.

"I will slay the Dark One. Your only task is to see it with your eyes from here."

Hakumen's voice was like a single swing of sword. Unwarped, unclouded. His standing figure reminded her of a dear feeling... Celica slowly caught her breath.

"Ragna..."

Hearing the name she unintentionally spoke, Hakumen turned his head toward her.

When he did, Celica finally noticed that she had been muttering. She quickly waved both hands in front of her face.

"Ah, no, excuse me. I just thought that you look like someone right now."

While speaking, Celica wondered in her mind about what made her do that. She shouldn't be recalling Ragna when she looked at Hakumen somehow. It was okay if it only happened once or twice, but continuing to remember somebody else's image like this was really impolite. Even if Celica was a dull in etiquette, she could sympathize in that.

She had to be careful. While staring at Celica as she was controlling herself, Hakumen leisurely asked a question a moment later.

"...Do I have any resemblance to him?"

This time, Celica gasped in surprise.

She had never considered that she was getting questioned for it. He usually would have averted his face without speaking a word. She thought he would stay silent while looking at a distance with his white face.

Celica nodded twice afterward.

"I'm sure I told you about this before. That time, I was searching for his resemblance with you... but now I found various clear similarities."

"Hm."

His groan urged her to continue. She might have misunderstood it, but Celica went along with her intuition.

"He's blunt and has bad manner. He also tends to get in a fight with Oneechan. But somehow, he's good at taking care of people. And... I didn't know where he was coming from or anything about himself at all."

With good mood, Celica spoke about him one by one while counting on her fingers. But her hands immediately opened up and she smiled while squinting her eyes in happiness.

She pressed her chest with both hands as if a warm light had been lit inside.

"But I guess it's your air that's similar to his. When I look at you, I recall Ragna."

In no way that was a painful feeling. Her feeling toward Ragna was more like the same feeling when she was basked with sunlight filtering through trees, back in the academy's courtyard.

"...Do you wish to meet him?"

It was a miracle for a day to come when Celica was given a question filled with such emotion from Hakumen. Still spontaneously smiling looking for answer, Celica lifted her eyelids and looked at Hakumen.

She didn't know where was the location of his eyes and mouth on that white and flat face. He might not have one in the first place. It was unclear whether Hakumen was living while relying on five senses like a human would.

However, Celica followed the feelings from Hakumen's gaze and stared back at him.

"Yup, I want to."

Her pupils and voice struck directly through and through. She never doubted her wish to meet him.

"The talk about me luring the Black Beast is also because I thought I might be able to meet Ragna. Ah, of course I'm doing to help Onee-chan, too. But... when I thought about meeting him, I just couldn't hold myself."

"The Dark One is still the Dark One. It appears with oblivion as its purpose. ...The *Ragna* you spoke of who is being inside of it might not necessarily be the *Ragna* you are wishing for."

The flowing low tone of voice struck the reality without reservation.

However, his words instead made Celica glad.

"Aha. I'd been told the same thing by Ragna in the past."

She was talking about when she found her missing father. She had been told that she might regret it if she found him.

Celica's feeling was close to that time.

"But I still wish to meet him."

Releasing the knees she had been hugging, Celica leaped and stood up. She stretched her body, puffed out her chest, and took a deep breath.

"I want to meet him. Talk to him. It'd be great if we can do things like in the past, but... it's fine even if we couldn't. I mean, there's a lot of specific things I want to do it makes my head spin. I want to meet Ragna. And if I do, it's enough to make me really happy."

It was strange. She should have been trembling enough to make her tripped. But now, that feeling was completely fading.

It must have been Hakumen, Celica thought. When Hakumen was there, she felt that she would get her harmony back whenever she had unsettling thought.

She wanted to meet Ragna. That feeling had made her push herself to stand here. She was made to remember it.

"...I see."

Hakumen sighed. It was no longer a hint. His voice obviously had sensitivity in it.

Astonished, Celica stared hard at Hakumen. She couldn't help but have a hunch that there was a gentle yet sad face of a man under the white mask.

Between his breaths, Hakumen continued to talk as if speaking to himself.

"I, too, recalled a person whenever I looked at you. Someone in the distant side who I have grown to forget."

"I look like someone?"

Celica asked a question to draw him in. Hakumen's past. It was like a glasswork that shouldn't be carelessly handled. It made her heart throbbed a little.

But betraying the faint feeling of expectation Celica held, Hakumen flatly shook his head.

"There is no similarity."

"Hey. Just now, I get a feeling like you're making fun of me."

"I wonder."

Even his counter of feigning ignorance was as sharp as ever.

...But Hakumen soon spoke gently.

"...It is simply because she had the same boldness as you do. A girl who would charge ahead once she saw her goal."

Hakumen was staring ahead. It was a mystery whether the white mask was looking at the dull wasteland or a dearest face of someone. Looking at his face from the side, Celica guessed the latter.

"Is that girl someone you love?"

The question was mixed with the wind.

Hakumen didn't answer. But the warmth feeling that had lasted until his silence was probably not just her imagination. Pushing her hair that was blown by the wind, Celica smiled while scratching her ear.

"I have a feeling that you'll definitely meet her again... I just know it."

She didn't know when, where, and what kind of situation that reunion will occur. But the encounter would surely bring happiness. Celica hoped from the bottom of her heart that such reunion would truly happen to Hakumen.

A long sigh that was clearly different than a simple one was heard coming from Hakumen.

"It is an odd conversation. You see the image of Ragna the Bloodedge in me. And I see the image of someone unforgettable in you."

Perhaps he was smiling right now. Perhaps his lack of smile was his way to smile.

The white mask might not only have snatched his expression. When she suddenly thought about that, Celica let a small voice out as she chuckled. Hakumen couldn't speak it out smoothly, but he had intended to smile at each other along with his words.

Led by the sound of Celica's laugh, Hakumen took a step forward.

His long, silver hair swayed.

"Celica A. Mercury. If it is true that you see the image of that man in me, then I will bear the image itself as many times as it takes. He has protected you. Then I shall protect you at once."

"Protect me? I'm happy but... It's somehow strange hearing Hakumen-san saying it formally. What's wrong?"

Searching for the hidden thoughts inside those words, Celica tilted her head to the side. She tried to take a peek to his face, but she was hindered by the silver hair which was blown by the wind.

Though, there was no expression that could be seen even if she saw his face.

"...I am someone who is seeing an image within you, too. I wield my sword for that foolish purpose. I shall not repeat the same mistake. Hence, I must protect you for that very reason."

It was like the voice that went across her back was hardened by a firm determination. After taking a short pause, Hakumen slightly looked over his shoulder to his back.

"Cease your curiosity. This is of no concern with you."

It was not a manner to push her aside. But what was being grasped tightly by Hakumen's hands must be something precious to him.

Because of that hunch, Celica stopped giving a deep thought like she had been told to.

It was enough for her since it was true that the words Hakumen spoke of had made her happy, whatever his circumstances might be.

"Hakumen-san, you're a kind person. Just as I thought."

"Alrighty," said Celica as she hopped to Hakumen's side. She gazed at the borderline of the sky in the wasteland while smiling.

Hakumen kept quiet as if his previous talkativeness was a lie. He lifted his chin and looked at a distance.

The gesture made it look like he was getting emotional or possibly just turning his face away. When she looked at him, Celica made a mischievous face.

"Hmm? Perhaps you're getting embarrassed?"

Every single part of her upper body peeked at Hakumen, but his white mask still kept silence without a slight movement.

It was hard to imagine, but he might be getting embarrassed for real, Celica thought. The childish emotion within Celica's mind was getting ticklish. She was thinking to push him a little more. But that thought only lasted for a moment.

Somehow, Celica realized that Hakumen's appearance gave her uncomfortable feelings. This time, a circumstance was glanced from his straight face.

"Hakumen-san? What's wrong?"

He didn't move even when he got addressed. Hakumen kept focusing at his front while holding his breath.

As she thought, the situation was strange. It happened when she thought about it.

As if enshrouded with thick heat, the air around Hakumen changed.

Killing intent.

The dangerous sensation even made Celica, who was still far inexperienced, instantly frozen and stopped breathing.

At the same time, Celica had a thought. What kind of opponent could make Hakumen take out so much killing intent?

A strong breeze blew from the front. Celica turned around to brush off the wind. She only did that, yet it felt sluggish and really hard to move.

Immediately, a thick fog sprouted out like a geyser in front of Celica's eyes. Celica screamed a little and sprung to a jump. From her side, Nirvana used her arms to hold Celica and stepped back while carrying her.

In the meantime, the gushing mist from the ground distinctly multiplied to two, three bursts. As if aiming at a spot, the eruption drew a dotted line on its own.

It was the direction where Celica and Hakumen were staring at. The location of a barren and uncovered wasteland.

After the small openings of the bursts gathered from around there, it was followed by a vast amount of black mist that began to overflow from the ground. A tremor violently shook the ground as if something was pushing up.

Conspicuously, the large opening of the burst eventually made a crooked neck and created cracks everywhere. It ripped the dry wasteland as it pleased.

"MOVE!"

Hakumen shouted an order.

But Celica couldn't separate her eyes from the scene. Rather than the scenery, all of her senses couldn't run from the sensation she felt on her skin.

It was the same as that time. The atmosphere she had felt just before she parted with Ragna one year ago.

The wind that was polluted with seithr advanced and surrounded Celica's whole body. The earthquake was so violent it pushed her feet off the ground.

Nirvana supported Celica as she was staggering.

Celica raised her face up toward while trying to oppose the devastating wind.

Toward something enormous which tore the cracked earth and raised the ground level.

It was as black as a solidified darkness, had many red veins running on its figure, and had the shape of serpent head. The number of simple ways to speak of its size and potential limit were unimaginable.

But Celica immediately realized.

The number of the creeping head was just one.

Instantly, another head of the same scale crawled out one by one.

With a total of eight necks dragged out, a large torso which far surpassed the heads appeared on the desolated ground.

Meanwhile with the Armagus unit near the headquarters, Nine's chest was gasping for breath as her breath had gone ragged unconsciously. She stared at it with hostility floating in her eyes.

"This is... the real deal..."

What made her breathing went unnoticed was not because of the seithr that went thick all of a sudden.

She held down her body with her judgment. That sensation made her stayed obediently while still trembling a little.

At the main unit, Trinity fell to her knees. Strength was sapped from the waist to her legs. Soon, she wasn't able to stand anymore.

Her brain couldn't accept what her eyes were seeing. It felt like the insides of her skull were firing off warnings as they couldn't comprehend anything. ...She could only stay in blank with eyes opened wide.

At the assault unit leading various demi-human that was pioneered by the beastkins, Jubei tormented his body and desperately resisted the rejection

in his mind. It has begun, he thought. At the same time, he felt it was also strangely the end of things.

Once, there was a time when he was near to it. That moment was also dreadful. He was unable to move as his feet had frozen.

But it was even bigger now that its shadow couldn't grow anymore.

Meanwhile at the massive assault unit, Valkenhayn spontaneously averted his eyes from the figure that appeared from the ground. It was like he had witnessed the world's demise itself.

He had the courage to bear it within his field of vision again. While speaking the name of the person he gave his loyalty to, he encouraged himself up.

However, his body was already frozen in fright.

At Ishana's magician unit, Terumi looked up at the soaring silhouette high in the sky. His throat vibrated as he laughed. It was not because of joy nor composure. It was a laugh that happened because he couldn't hold it.

He softly muttered under the hood.

"This guy's nasty... He's even bigger than the last time..."

The Black Beast.

It was simply an overwhelming fear.

Who could have imagined it?

The dark red nightmare was squirming right there.

Part 3

The Black Beast loudly roared. Its paralyzing howls combined into one and would give terror to animal instinct.

The destructive voice struck and was enough to shake the ground. It was giving the vibes of despair to the world.

The black mass which trampled the common sense within people and couldn't just be treated as phenomenon. The shadow monster. The Black Beast.

Its eight heads were raised and the ominous red eyes were lit up. It moved around like it was searching for something.

Several red lines of its veins were running on its large body. It looked like the wiring of an artificial device and also the blood vessels that were spread out in the whole body of living things. It was pulsing lights as if it was beating. It went beyond fear as to being repulsive.

The eight heads roamed about until they made a discovery all at once. A young girl standing alone in the wasteland... Celica.

Its red eyes were glaring as if some kind of emotion passed by.

However, the color was nothing but sinister. The sensation was far from the emotion a human could have.

Her eyes met the Black Beast's. She realized about that, but Celica wasn't able to take off her gaze nor stared back.

Her body was frozen in place from the beginning of her head to the end of her feet. With even her gaze solidified, Celica was at her wit's end as she trembled in fear.

(This is... the Black Beast...)

Her throat was stuck. Voice wouldn't come out.

She was afraid. It was different from the vague fear she had a while ago as it made Celica withered in pain.

The eight crooked necks bent like a whip and moved. Fitting its large size, the black giant moved ahead in grandiose manner.

Several steps more, the eight snakes would reach Celica. She might get eaten. Or else, she might get crushed. Either way, that moment would be the end for her.

Although that thought constantly came to her mind, there was nothing that would tell her what to do. She could only tremble and stood petrified unable to do anything, like a baby...

(...But Ragna...)

For an instant, the precious color of an eye went past her terrified, shivering mind.

It was clear green. A warm and gentle color of green, like a summer that was full of leaf. But probably because of his wound, only the left side of his eyes was fine. He was always astonished, angry, and laughing with only one part of his eyes.

A transparent wind blew through Celica's chest. Her panic disappeared like it was a lie.

(Ragna... faced this alone.)

Thanks to it, Celica didn't lose her life.

Humanity obtained one year of time that was both short and long.

And Ragna had not yet to come back.

—*—mise.*

The words she heard exactly one year ago were echoing in her ears.

"...na."

As if the feeling pushed her back, Celica took a step forward.

—*—Yeah, I promise.*

Yes, he promised.

Ragna had promised to return. To take back the red coat he had entrusted to Celica.

Celica held onto it, awaiting for Ragna to return... She promised.

Then if Ragna was somewhere inside the black mass in front of her eyes...

(I want to meet him—!)

The previously stepping foot immediately sent out the next foot. Celica ran off toward the Black Beast. While running, she let all of her voice out.

"RAGNA—————!"

The next moment.

A swift, silver light flew and tore the sky. It cut apart the head of the approaching black snake in a flash.



"...!?"

Celica halted her feet in her surprise.

It threw its whole body to the black giant without a slight hesitation.

For an instant, that figure was overlapped with a nostalgic silhouette.

(No, that's wrong. It's not Ragna.)

It was Hakumen.

After he landed on top of the cleaved snakehead, Hakumen flipped his sword without unnecessary movement and ruthlessly pierced the head, making a vertical line.

The head took almost all of the long blade, and then it violently struggled. But before it did, Hakumen pulled the sword and leaped to a dodge. Next, he gave a slash to the neck part.

The sharp noise of the slash was vividly audible. It sliced the part under the jaw in a straight line.

Nonetheless, there was a drastic mass difference between Black Beast and Hakumen.

Even the eye-snatching white gleam of the long sword was unable to completely chop off the demon's neck. Perhaps the wounds of the squirming neck had finally healed since it calmly began to brush Hakumen away.

But still not minding it, Hakumen jumped high and didn't even stop his hands from moving the sword.

The strokes of the sword were many and the blows were deep.

While keeping the jaw that had received blows in check with his brute strength, he slashed it from bottom up.

Altering the recoil with a jump, he kept going around just below the jaw and stabbed the sword to the monster's throat. Then he sliced it by falling down, leaving it to gravity.

The beast shrieked dreadfully in rage.

Hakumen's body was knocked and struck the ground. The shock hollowed the earth. But before the soaring cloud of dust even settled, the white warrior was already standing up.

In response to the gallant figure of Hakumen, white lightning was casted from one part of the battlefield like a rain.

It was the Armagus unit led by Nine.

There was numerous lightning bolt as it was casted repeatedly. It made explosions while at the time resounded thunderous roar that wasn't inferior to the Black Beast's howl.

Subsequently, Jubei's unit approached with great speed from behind the Black Beast. They were aiming for the its feet. The alchemistical weapons that Trinity had prepared disturbed its movement occasionally by repelling the giant's feet from the ground.

Various offensive magic were fired off from the dotted magician unit. The military forces from many nations also commenced their attack simultaneously.

Celica was watching on how the battlefield had become intensive in a blink of an eye from the hill of the mountain side.

It was a ghastly spectacle.

It couldn't be more obvious that it was a struggle which humanity had concentrated the power they had at.

The one which had superior accomplishment among them was Armagus.

The number of users that had been assembled spanned several times of Ishana's inhabitants. The average offensive ability from the Armagus couldn't be compared with the magician unit.

Because Nine was giving the command, the raining impact of the Armagus didn't get jumbled. It clinched the legs which were the means for the Black Beast to advance. It even reacted like it was taken aback.

It was effective. That conviction felt like humanity was drawing a victory for the first time.

...But when the hands that were used to attack repeatedly stopped for a moment, the Black Beast cried its ferocious voice and swung its eight necks.

When the long necks brushed off the sky, the thick fog roared and gouged the earth like a whip. Along with a howl, the descending mass of seithr crushed the earth and living beings like a lump of iron.

Then after stopping one moment, it resumed its advance. This time it slid on the ground, imposingly moving forward.

It was aiming for Celica.

"It's coming to my location...?"

The distance was no longer mattered. The seithr would blow around violently whenever the Black Beast was near. The following rampage of wind toyed with her hair and mantle annoyingly.

Even while squinting her eyes from the head wind, Celica couldn't take off her eyes from the approaching black mass that caused the quake.

It wasn't because she was terrified. She was searching for a presence inside this dreadful and grotesque of a giant.

Celica had a thought. The monster kept walking to Celica's direction even while withstanding the fierce attack. There might be a part within it that remembered the promise to 'return'.

A foolishly optimistic thought that might get laughed at by anyone else if they had heard about it. But once she gave it a thought, Celica couldn't stop her feeling.

"I must go!"

With this much distance, Celica's legs could run until she got close. Taking a resolve, Celica dashed off of the other soil. ...However, someone suddenly caught her arm.

"Wha... Nirvana?"

When she turned around, Nirvana, who had been standing motionlessly beside Celica, used her large, weaponized hand to grab Celica's wrist.

The beautiful artificial eyes were staring at Celica silently.

She had judged that it would be dangerous for Celica to go any further. Celica struggled, shaking her arm to loosen Nirvana's hand, but she was undaunted as if she was a tough restraint.

"Let me go, Nirvana! I want to go there. I might be able to meet Ragna. So please..."

Her desperate objection was cut midway.

Under Celica's feet, veins of light were appearing.

As if in the middle of drawing a pattern, it crawled on the ground with constant speed and adding complexity to the line.

She didn't know its purpose, but Celica soon realized what the light was drawing.

It spread wide with Celica on its center. Furthermore, it pulled along small magic circles as if they were connected somewhere, making a strange shape.

"Trinity, what is that magic circle!?"

After she entrusted the Armagus unit to another person, Nine teleported to the headquarters. While yelling, she walked at quick pace to her friend who was wearing yellow robe.

The location of the headquarters was a little higher than other places. Trinity who had been watching over the battlefield got in a panic from Nine's voice. After she lifted her face, she shook her head with complicated face.

"I don't know. I was just looking at the user now."

"Where?"

"Somewhere around the dispatched magicians who are on Celica-san's left and right sides. There's a chant of unusual spell... Found it! There!"

Trinity probed for the stream of magic power while manipulating her hearing. She pointed at the magician unit gathered within the shade of a few rock within the wasteland. Simultaneously, Nine amplified her vision.

With her telescopic eyes, Nine saw a pair of magicians she recognized well.

"Seven, Eight...!"

Crushing her anger, Nine groaned.

Beside her, Trinity's voice screamed.

"NINE, PLEASE LOOK AT THAT!"

At the same time of the shrieking voice, Nine turned her sight back to normal.

What had burst in to her regular sight was a drawing of huge magic circle like a geoglyph that appeared behind Celica.

A magic circle unknown to Nine. But it was easy to decipher by looking at the magic circles that had been used as foundation, the objects that were added, and its gigantic size.

But it was something that gave Nine a tremendously bad feeling.

"Summoning magic? ...It can't be!"

Faster than the transformation of her surprise to anger, the expanded magic circle on the ground began to emit a sinister light.

The large magic circle that appeared all of a sudden began to shine. After realizing it, Celica was shaking in confusion while looking behind.

"Huh? W-What's this!?"

Even the magic circle below her feet began to glow after a bit of delay.

She couldn't understand what was happening. Celica tried to get away from that place.

But for some reason, she wasn't able to go outside the magic circle. It was like she got imprisoned within a cylinder glass bottle.

She hit the invisible wall with both hands. There was no sound, but the sensation blocked Celica from getting out.

(What should I do... I somehow got a very bad feeling...)

As if confirming that ominous hunch, a lukewarm chill brushed against Celica's spine.

To shake it off, Nirvana stretched her arms and hugged Celica tightly. Both of the hard, inhuman arms covered Celica to protect her from everything.

At the same time outside of Celica's sight, Nirvana's back opened.

Something like a rod was pushing up and went toward the empty sky. The object that looked like an antenna and lighting rod engraved a violet crest. It wore light as if acting in agreement with something.

"Nirvana..."

Question and relief. With a voice mixed with both, Celica whispered to Nirvana.

Before her sigh ended, an unusual phenomenon happened.

The light from the magic circle suspiciously started to flicker strongly. After the noise and shock diminished like they were sinking furiously, it tried to drag Celica from everything else and knock her down.

"Wh... what's going on... Why's this happening..."

Still getting taken to the bottom of the ground by the force, Celica desperately clung to Nirvana and endured it.

But soon, the circulating chill stroke her spine and went inside her skin. The cold touch of ice snatched strength from Celica's whole body.

Body heat, sensation, emotion. Everything that dwelled within her warmth was seized, frozen, and unfolded.

(No...)

She put strength into the arm that was clinging to Nirvana. But all of that strength were turning to liquid, making it meaningless.

Celica's knees crumbled, light enough to make the illusion of noise.

Her consciousness became distant like it was absorbed.

(No... if I faint... I can't meet... Ragna...)

The hand that was supposed to grab Nirvana slipped and dangled beside her body. While she was relying on the neck that couldn't support her head, her sight went around and couldn't see anything but the night sky.

(Ragna...)

She wondered if this was what dying felt like. With her back still could only feel the stiff hands of Nirvana who was supporting her... Celica lost her consciousness as if she went sleeping.

——Celica didn't know what happened afterward.

Delivering what had been extracted from Celica, the extended magic circle connected its light to the main part of the magic circle which was lying in wait behind.

The gigantic magic square that appeared on the sloppy ruin of hill received it. It was gushing out a light that had the color of flame. The light was spreading to the jet black figure within the circle.

The figure immediately grew large and began to crawl out from the circle.

Its huge arms were stretched before placing both hands on the wasteland. Then it pulled its body like it was crawling out of a swamp.

It had a really vague depiction of a man's features. It had one head, two arms, one torso, and two feet.

Its whole body was black like it was built by molding solidified darkness. Like it was split by cracks, the skin had some kind of blood vessels that were like red veins circulating as they pleased.

Its appearance... resembled the Black Beast.

The titan that appeared from the magic circle made deep noises and waved its long arms. It moved its clenched fists forward to grasp the Black Beast, which had been confined by the Armagus attack, from the side. With unbelievable strength, it knocked off the beast's large build.

Making a violent roar that shook the earth, the Black Beast forcefully gained a distance.

Everyone was watching over that scene in blank.

It was no longer a battle of humanity. It was the clash between absurdity with absurdity, monster with monster.

When the black titan's stance changed to crawling on all fours on the ground, it widely opened its mouth with compulsory movement like a machine.

A white magic circle was unfolded within the mouth cavity that had transformed into a black cave. The magic circle rotated like the gears of a watch that had gone awry. It made the red veins that covered the titan's body to swell slowly.

The next moment.

A straight, white flash was fired from the black titan toward the Black Beast.

The ear-piercing roar and shriek robbed the owners of their sense of hearing to hear all noises for several seconds. The powerfully strong light burnt every shadow, fading their sense of sight.

But everyone heard and saw it.

The sound when the beam fired by the titan penetrated the Black Beast's abdomen, and its condition.

As the spear of light vanished, the world regained its colors and sounds. Then the black titan once again submerged into the swamp of magic circle as if it had accomplished its duty.

What remained afterward was the Black Beast. But the gaping hole in its body didn't get healed.

The light which the titan had fired even burnt and wiped the seithr around the Black Beast. The Black Beast would cease to exist if there were no seithr.

The snake demon that was the embodiment of nightmare roared to the distant moon with a shriek. Then its large build trembled once.

And like a bag stuffed with sand that was released at once, its form crumbled. While still crumbling, it ran away to underground.

The rasping noise was getting absorbed by the earth.

The vast amount of black was getting swallowed.

Then without taking a long time, the Black Beast vanished from that place.

...After its gigantic body was gone, the remaining scenery could be seen clearly.

Toward the location where the Black Beast was, the ground was greatly demolished in a straight line. The beam which the titan had fired had burnt it.

The tall cliff that existed above the titan and beast lost its contour as if scooped by spoon like ice cream. A part had transformed into a gentle plain.

It was a tremendous power.

That abnormal strength had repelled an abnormal apparition.

It was the very first moment for humanity to succeed in repelling the Black Beast.

No one knew where it had originated from, but the desolated battlefield was engulfed in cheers.

It seemed like the cheers within the wasteland was done to celebrate posterity and the act of god as it went across the deep traces of the attack. The soldiers who shouted their joy were competing to assemble at the disfigured terrain.

It was like they had witnessed the act of god. At any rate, it repelled the Black Beast with a blow. Toward the monster that couldn't be stopped for an instant even if they had concentrated their own energy.

But that wasn't the case for Nine.

"CELICA!!"

Making a sorrowful voice that split her throat, Nine ran at the top of the hill that had bad footing.

Nine usually didn't think of them as obstructing, but she had thrown away the high heels and Ten Sages hat somewhere. Getting covered with cloud of dust, she stumbled and came into a stop.

Nirvana was standing there. She was holding Celica on her arms.

Her tawny hair was completely disarrayed. Her head was supported by the chest of the feeble Nirvana while her limbs were stretched out like a puppet that was snapped of its thread and broke its joints.

Even the fingertip that she would take out to immediately meddle in everything, the cheeks that usually dyed in slight pink, the lips that fit her lovely smile. All was so pale it would make anyone shudder.

Nine's hands tucked in her sister's cheeks. Then as if to support them, she pressed her own forehead to Celica's forehead. The forehead she touched was cold.

"Nine, how's Celica-sa... n...!?"

Trinity who was running late pinned her bursting chest and asked a question while still breathing roughly. Before she finished her question, Jubei who had arrived just before muttered with a sharp voice.

"She's okay, ain't she?"

Nine's shoulders slightly trembled. But there was no tear flowing. When Nine raised her face, she brushed off bits of dirt on Celica's cheeks with her fingers while replying with the kind of voice like she had crushed her emotions.

"She just fainted. It was thanks to Nirvana who was beside her. ...But her magic power got sucked out, so she won't wake up for a while."

"The Black Beast's... dead yet?"

"No. It was only running away. It seems the strength of the finishing blow was lacking."

While calmly answering another question from Jubei, Nine untangled Celica's bangs with her fingers.

Hakumen walked with undisturbed pace and stopped at a separated place. His emotionless face stared at Celica and Nirvana.

Valkenhayn, who was among the largest army of the allied countries, joined them with the appearance of wolf that he wouldn't normally expose. Still in that appearance, he bared his fangs and groaned a question.

"Nine. Tell us if you know about it. What on earth was that?"

"...Artificial Causality Weapon."

Nine spoke quietly. After letting go of her hands from Celica who looked more like a doll than Nirvana, she used the hand to tightly grip the chest part of her own clothes.

Looking over Nirvana's shoulder, Nine glared at the location where the titan had appeared. Her pupils were shaking in fury. Directing her burning gaze to the wasteland that was presently empty, Nine squeezed her stomach and continued to speak.



"That was Nox Nyctores... Gigant: Takemikazuchi. ...Something I created."

Exactly at that time, he stood alone at a separated location.

The excited crowd were cheering while swarming the scar from the overwhelming destruction that had carved the earth. Looking over from the position where he could see them, his long coat was fluttered by the dry wind. Putting both hands to the pockets, a glint in his eyes was shining dully under the hood he wore low over his eyes.

"Khukuku... Nice, real nice. You're really some extraordinary geniuses..."

He laughed, shaking his thin shoulders.

"Thanks to you, looks like I might get what I want faster than expected... Guess I have to give a gratitude, HYAHHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The joyful voice that didn't reach anyone's voice silently thickened the color of darkness.

Afterword

(placeholder)

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