

Part III - The Eternal Vanguard

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Vampires are believed to be a subspecies that branched off from humans long ago.

Perhaps that is why there is so little difference in appearance between the two races. Vampires with traits reminiscent of albinism tend to have paler skin. When their bloodlust is triggered, their canines extend. Vampires have, on average, greater physical abilities than humans. Vampires in their Cocoon Period, with heightened senses of smell, can sometimes distinguish the unique scent of individual blood. Due to differences in their digestive systems, vampires absorb very little nutrition from human food and must obtain their nutrients from blood. Since the consumption and trade of both human blood and vampire blood is prohibited by Blood Alliance Law, their primary source of blood is livestock. Despite these differences, it is not easy to distinguish vampires from humans by appearance alone. As the existence of dhampirs proves, the two races are so closely related that they can even produce offspring together. Hunters who deal with vampire cases that violate the Non-Aggression Treaty are said to undergo special training to distinguish between humans and vampires. However, for ordinary humans, identifying a vampire is difficult unless they directly witnessed one drinking blood.

Two weeks had passed since Theo, the Stray Cats, Albrecht, and Rein snuck into a human city. Albrecht somehow managed to arrange lodging. Lacking any form of identification in human territory, they were met with suspicion wherever they went. After considerable difficulty, they were finally accepted at the inn that now serves as their base. While staying at the inn in that city, they had been attempting to gather information, but they had yet to find any leads. The 14th House of Vlad, with whom they had formed a temporary alliance, had dispatched search teams to various human cities, but so far, they'd found no valuable information, and their efforts had ended in vain.

There was a clear reason why Theo and his group had chosen this city as their base among the many human settlements. It was due to Monty's Cocoon Period symptom. Vampires undergoing their Cocoon Period exhibit various symptoms, which differ entirely from individual to individual. The symptom that manifested most strongly in Monty was a heightened sense of smell. It was as if he were more like a *stray dog* than a *stray cat*, boasting that his sense of smell was a million times sharper than that of a typical vampire. He claimed that if a vampire was in a human city, he would know by the scent of blood. And then Monty said, "Eden's scent is still in this city."

Whether she was still in the city or had already passed through to another, they couldn't be sure. For now, they had no choice but to rely on that faint clue. Theo and the Stray Cats spent the entire day wandering the city. This must be one of the largest cities in human territory. Even after two weeks of searching all over the city, they still hadn't fully explored it. Besides, they had no intention of relying solely on Monty's sense of smell. Theo had one last idea to find a lead on Eden's whereabouts. It was a dangerous idea, but the only way to find a lead was to search for it themselves rather than relying passively on a scent trail.

Over the course of two weeks, Theo and the Stray Cats had grown quite close.

Aside from his heightened sense of smell due to his Cocoon Period symptoms, Monty was also the strongest among the Stray Cats. He usually stepped up in handling heavy labor at the inn. He was also a big eater and could easily consume more than twice as much as the other Stray Cats.

Sandro, on the other hand, loved reading, and apparently kept rereading the same book he stole from a bookstore. Since Theo had also read that book before, they had an engaging discussion about its contents. Sandro's Cocoon Period symptom was that animals were drawn to him. It seemed that this was the reason why there were several small birds perched on his shoulder at the Centennial Ceremony.

Martin has known Hugh the longest. He had been with Hugh ever since Hugh's parents, who were blood smugglers, were killed by human hunters. As a pacifist, he often steps in to mediate when the Stray Cats get into fights with other Stray Cat groups. He himself said that his particularly strong pacifist nature is likely one of his Cocoon Period symptoms. He also mentioned that another one of his symptoms is something called "eidetic memory." Anything he sees once is burned into his memory.

Since coming to human territory, Hugh and Theo had stopped clashing as much. Late one night, the two of them had a private conversation.

"You said you like Eden. I like Eden too, but I'm not going to fight you over her. That's for Eden to decide," Hugh said.

Hugh respects Eden's will—the will of a girl whose very identity is made up of patchwork memories. Theo felt as if he himself had been acknowledged. Since that night, Theo and Hugh's relationship had been going surprisingly well. According to Hugh, 'Anyone who loves Eden can't be a bad person.' Theo wasn't quite sure how that logic worked, though.

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It had been nearly a month since Theo and his group entered the human city.

According to the reports from Dali and the others, the Blood Alliance Congress still hadn't granted the border-crossing permit. Apparently, bureaucratic work takes time. Theo and the others continued walking through the city every day, relying solely on Monty's sense of smell.

"Oi! Have you still not figured out where Eden's scent is coming from?"

Having finally lost his patience, Hugh questioned Monty with a hint of intimidation. For someone as short-tempered as him, this was him being quite patient.

“The scent of those black-robed people who kidnapped Eden is getting in the way. And since Eden’s scent is lingering all over the city, it’s actually making it harder to pinpoint.”

Monty looked troubled. Upon hearing this, Theo and Martin realized something at the same time.

“If Eden’s scent is all over the city, doesn’t that mean they’ve been walking her around everywhere?” Martin voiced the same question that Theo was just thinking of. Theo took Martin’s question even further, delving deeper into it.

“No, that’s not it. There’s no reason to keep moving Eden around. This is a diversion. They must have realized that we have a Cocoon Period vampire with an enhanced sense of smell. That’s why they’re carrying something with Eden’s scent, spreading it throughout the city. There might be a spy at the inn we’re using as our base.”

As Theo laid out his deduction, Hugh clenched his fists. “Then if we catch that bastard and rough him up, we might be able to find out where Eden is!” Just as they were about to head back to the inn, a human walking down the street suddenly grabbed Hugh’s shoulder. It was so sudden that Hugh couldn’t immediately comprehend what was happening. “...Who the hell are you?”

The human appeared to be around the same age as Hugh. He was still young enough to be considered a boy. But the glare he directed at Hugh was filled with a hatred far beyond his years.

“Vampires who sneak into human territory usually skulk around in hiding. This is the first time I’ve seen one walking so openly through the city,” the human said.

The boy kept his grip tight on Hugh’s shoulder and hurled him with full force. Hugh’s entire body slammed hard against the nearby building wall before crashing down onto the ground. From behind, Albrecht and Rein—who had been following as protection—rushed forward.

“Young Master Theodore, please leave this to us,” Albrecht assured.

“Albrecht, be careful. This person is likely a hunter,” Theo cautioned.

The human, now identified as a hunter, turned his hateful gaze toward Albrecht and Rein as well.

“Tch, you’d be right. Name’s Banri, a hunter. Imagine that, *vampires* parading around the city like a bunch of sitting ducks. I’ll slaughter you all!”

Neither side was carrying weapons. Walking around the city while armed wasn’t an option, so they’d left everything that could be used as a weapon back at the inn. The same was likely true

for their opponent. However, both Albrecht and Rein possessed enough combat strength even when unarmed. There was no way an unarmed hunter could take them on. Yet, the hunter who called himself Banri seemed intent on fighting every vampire present.

“Come on, bring it! I’ll take you on all at once!!” Banri goaded.

Hugh, who had been thrown and slammed into the ground, stood back up, trembling with rage.

“What the hell are you playing at?! I’ll kill you!!” Hugh shouted.

The situation was about to erupt as Hugh and Banri were on the verge of lunging at each other. Onlookers, curious about the commotion, began gathering to watch. No one thought that a deadly battle between vampires and a hunter was about to begin here.

“Wait—!!” The one who stopped them was Theo. He lowered his voice so that the onlookers wouldn’t hear him. “Given where we are, I can’t speak too loudly. So, just listen without saying anything. We’re vampires, sure. But we don’t have the slightest intention of causing trouble in human territory. We’re here to find our friend who was kidnapped by bad people. We even have a border-crossing permit from the Blood Alliance Congress.”

The part about the permit was made up, but everything else was true. It was a makeshift excuse, but that wasn’t all there was to it. Theo had spent a whole month walking around until his legs were sore, not because of Banri—rather, because of the hunters. It was part of Theo’s other idea for obtaining a lead on Eden. His plan was to let the hunters find him on purpose, ask for their cooperation, and use their information network to find a clue to Eden’s whereabouts. It was a high-risk move, but Theo judged that it was worth trying if it meant getting information in human territory. However, Banri didn’t seem willing to listen.

“Vampires must be eradicated from this world! That’s why I became a hunter!”

Banri’s eyes were wild as he took a battle-ready stance. Theo painfully realized the foolishness of his attempt to use the hunters to find a lead on Eden’s whereabouts. Even under normal circumstances, they had to avoid drawing attention, and yet of all things, they ended up attracting it due to a conflict with a hunter. Needless to say, Theo’s group was violating the Non-Aggression Treaty. To avoid a fight, he had to persuade Banri by any means necessary. As Theo was searching for a way to resolve the situation, a man stepped forward from the crowd of onlookers. He had a slim build and appeared to be around Albrecht’s age. Had he been out shopping? In one hand, he carried a basket filled with groceries—vegetables, meat, and other food items were visible inside.

“Well, well, what’s got you all worked up, Banri? Are these people acquaintances of yours?” The man asked.

Unlike the short-tempered Banri, this man had a gentle demeanor.

“Sekishu, these guys are vampires. This isn’t an official order from GUILT, but it’s an emergency. We’re taking them out—immediately!” Banri said firmly.

The man called Sekishu kept his calm demeanor as he restrained Banri.

“Hold on for just a moment. Indeed, at first glance, these people do seem to be vampires. We hunters are trained to identify vampires by analyzing subtle details—their unique skin tone, differences in their digestive system, the faint resonance in their voices, their center of gravity, the way they move, and other such small details. However, I sense no aggression or hostility from these vampires here. You seem different from the bloodthirsty vampires we usually deal with. Why are you here?”

“We’re searching for a friend. A very dear friend.” Theo spoke as if placing his hopes into his words.

“Monty can smell her scent. There’s a high chance that Eden is in this city.” Hugh, while keeping his battle-ready stance toward Banri, explained the situation to the hunter called Sekishu.

“Are you, by any chance... a vampire from the Classico family?”

Theo was surprised by Sekishu’s sudden words.

“You know who I am?” Theo said.

“The Classico family is one of the most prestigious noble houses within vampire territory. Their name is known even in human lands. Given my profession, I consider myself fairly knowledgeable about vampire territory. Around five years ago, I was once requested to assist in an investigation through the Blood Alliance Congress. During that time, I met your father. You’re Theodore Classico, right?”

“Yes...” Theo answered, but his mind was still struggling to keep up with what Sekishu was saying.

“Earlier, you said you were searching for a friend, correct?”

“Yes, she was taken by a group called the Eternal Vanguard, which follows the Primordial Faith.”

Banri seemed to latch onto those words. “The Eternal Vanguard...? You mean those guys who went against the territory authority leader?”

“It seems so. Coincidentally, we Hunters are also tracking the whereabouts of the Eternal Vanguard. I heard that they violated the Non-Aggression Treaty and caused trouble in vampire territory, but I never expected them to be involved in a vampire kidnapping case as well,” Sekishu said.

Theo hoped that this man, Sekishu, might go along with the plan he had in mind.

“Young Master Theodore, if you have business with these people, I would advise that you wrap it up quickly.” Albrecht was wary of the eyes watching them.

“This is nothing, just a small quarrel,” Rein said, trying to disperse the onlookers with a convenient excuse.

The passersby, looking disappointed, gradually left the scene. Theo moved closer to Sekishu and the others so that he could speak quietly.

“I have a request. I would like to ask for your cooperation in finding Eden.”

“Why the hell should we hunters have to cooperate with vampires?” Banri bristled.

“Banri, be quiet for a moment. Even if you ask for our cooperation, what exactly do you need us to do?” Sekishu asked.

“I want to find out the whereabouts of the Eternal Vanguard, the group that kidnapped my friend. If you hunters have any information, I’d like you to share it with me.”

Sekishu lowered his head slightly, looking apologetic. “Unfortunately, even we don’t know the whereabouts of the Eternal Vanguard. GUILT has sent Hunters to different regions to gather information, but so far, we haven’t found anything useful.”

“Their location is something we’d like to know too,” Banri stated.

“You all came all the way to human territory, even risking danger, for the sake of your friend. And yet, I’m sorry we can’t meet your expectations,” Sekishu conveyed his regret.

“Oi, Sekishu! You don’t need to apologize to these guys!” Banri appeared to be unable to accept the exchange.

“We usually live in a mountain lodge in a mountainous area, but we occasionally come down to the city to procure food supplies. Since we also have orders from GUILT, we’ll be staying at an inn in the city for a while to gather information,” Sekishu said.

“Like hell I’m sharing a room with *you*, Sekishu. Make sure to get me a separate one,” Banri demanded.

“Understood. Then, if either of us finds a lead, let’s cooperate.”

Theo's plan and Sekishu's proposal aligned, and both sides exchanged the locations of their lodgings. Even so, Banri still cast a hateful glare at Theo and his group, but Sekishu somehow managed to pacify him. As they parted ways, Sekishu gave them just one warning.

"I understand that you don't intend to bring harm to human territory. However, that doesn't change the fact that you are violating the Non-Aggression Treaty. If your presence is discovered and GUILT issues an execution order, Banri and I will have no choice but to kill you. Be very careful with your actions so that it doesn't come to that."

With those words, Sekishu took Banri and left. As he watched their backs fade into the distance, Rein seemed to remember something.

"Sekishu... I see, he was the hunter dispatched during the Nebula Village Fire Incident six years ago. Since a few vampires in their Cocoon Period were involved, the case records Sekishu compiled were also shared with the Blood Alliance Congress. If I recall correctly, I heard that he became the guardian of a surviving boy from Nebula Village and took him in as his apprentice. That boy from earlier, could he be the one?"

"In any case, things went just as you planned, Young Master," Albrecht congratulated.

"...Huh?" Theo let out.

It seemed that Albrecht had already thought everything through.

"You intended to use the hunter's information network to track down the Eternal Vanguard, didn't you? That's why you spent this past month walking around the city."

"You really see through everything, huh?" Theo said.

"I have been looking after you for a long time, Young Master. If I couldn't even understand that much, I would be unfit to serve as the Classico family's butler." Albrecht lowered his voice slightly and switched to a different topic. "That being said, just as Sekishu pointed out, they are hunters first and foremost. As long as they remain loyal to GUILT's orders, there is a real possibility that they could turn against us. We must be prepared for the possibility that they may become our enemies."

Hugh, sounding irritated, raised his voice and cut off the conversation. "Oi, this isn't the time for pointless chatter! Theo, aren't you forgetting something?"

Theo suddenly remembered. "Oh right, there might be a spy at the inn where we're staying..."

Martin looked like he was about to run off at any moment. "Let's head back to the inn. If there really is a spy, we might be able to get some information out of them."

Urged on by Martin, Theo and his group quickly moved through the city to return to the inn.

What awaited them there was an utterly unexpected sight.

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The inn was completely desolate, as if it had been abandoned. Neither the innkeeper nor the staff were anywhere to be seen. There should have been other guests staying at the inn, but not a single one was in sight.

“...What the hell?” Hugh looked completely bewildered.

Theo sensed that something far stranger was happening than he’d initially thought, but his mind was too confused to organize his thoughts.

Albrecht’s face seemed to have turned pale. “It seems we’ve been caught in a trap for quite some time now.”

“A trap?” Sandro repeated.

“Ever since we entered this city, we struggled to find an inn that would accept us. Most likely, our enemies had made arrangements ahead of time,” Albrecht observed.

“I see, it’s like a magic trick. Just like how a magician makes a person choose the card they want without them realizing it, we were led into staying at this inn from the very beginning.” Rein also seemed to have realized the true nature of the trap set for them.

Now that the initial shock was over, Theo finally regained his mental clarity.

“The employees and guests at this inn... they were all part of the Eternal Vanguard. They made us stay here and have been watching us the whole time...”

In response to Theo’s statement, Martin tilted his head, still seeming to have doubts about something. “But if the ones here were really from the Eternal Vanguard, then why didn’t Monty’s sense of smell detect them?”

“That’s because the ones who kidnapped Eden and the ones at this inn were different groups. Monty said that the scent of the ones in black robes were interfering with his ability to track Eden’s scent. Most likely, it’s because those black-robed figures, the Eternal Vanguard, are lurking all throughout the city.....” As Theo laid out his reasoning, he was about to arrive at a terrifying conclusion. “Actually, why did the Eternal Vanguard choose this city out of all the cities in the human territory as their hideout? It’s not just because their base is here. What if... most of the people in this city are members of the Eternal Vanguard? This city... it must belong to the believers of the Primordial Faith!”

The Stray Cats were left completely speechless.

Albrecht agreed with the hypothesis that Theo's reasoning had led to. "Your assessment is almost certainly correct, Young Master Theodore. The Eternal Vanguard is far larger than we had imagined—it's an entire religious sect of Primordial Faith believers."

Rein brought up an even more terrifying possibility. "If we make the Eternal Vanguard our enemy, this could escalate into a religious war."

Everyone fell silent. It felt like no matter what they said next, only despair awaited them. Theo had believed that as long as he took action, he could save Eden. But the place they had stepped into was an unimaginably dark part of the world.

In the dead of the night, Banri stood in front of the inn where Theo and his group were staying.

He nimbly climbed up the rain gutter along the inn's outer wall and slipped inside through a window on the second story floor. Since the first floor was a public area, the guest rooms are located on the second floor and above. Through the window, Banri found himself in a hallway. In order to exchange information with Sekishu, the vampires told them which inn and which rooms they would be staying in. Banri looked completely different from how he had dressed during the day—he was fully armed in hunter gear. This was so that if he left the inn late at night to kill the vampires, no one would notice his absence.

Banri stood in front of their room, and silently, he opened the door. He'd planned to strike while they were sleeping, but he found only one vampire sitting on the bed. It was the boy Sekishu had called "Theodore."

"Banri, I was waiting for you."

It was an unexpected statement, enough to make Banri momentarily forget the murderous intent that had been burning within him just moments before.

"You're alone...?" Banri wondered.

"Yeah, I had everyone leave the inn. They probably won't be accepted anywhere, so they'll have to sleep outside tonight. Albrecht and Rein will protect the Stray Cats, so they should be fine... but still..." Theo trailed.

"Why are you the only one who stayed behind?" Banri asked.

"I figured you might come to kill us. You seemed to hate vampires too much to let us go. If Albrecht or Rein were here, you'd be too cautious to listen to me. That's why I made sure to be alone," Theo explained.

"I have *nothing* to say to you." Banri kept his guard up as he faced Theo.

"There's something I need to talk to you about. Banri, are you a believer of the Primordial Faith?"

"What do you mean? The only thing I believe in is myself."

"Most of the people in this city are believers of the Primordial Faith. This place is a gathering point for them. You can think of the entire city as one giant cult," Theo said.

"What the hell are you rambling on about?" Banri demanded.

"The entire time we were here, we were being watched by the city."

"There's no way that's true. We come to this city often to buy supplies, and it's just a normal city. It's no different from any other place," Banri stated.

"The Primordial Faith is outlawed in both vampire and human territories. It's a forbidden, heretical belief, so here's no way they would operate openly. They live their daily lives as ordinary townspeople, but it's all just a facade."

"What's so crazy about this?"

"I need your help."

"Why the hell would a hunter like me cooperate with a vampire?"

"To get Eden back."

"That has nothing to do with me."

"If you're a believer of the Primordial Faith, tell me where she is."

"I told you, I don't know!"

Banri remained hostile, showing no intention of cooperating. Theo continued speaking, unfazed by Banri's attitude.

"If you're not a believer of the Primordial Faith... then I want you to infiltrate the Eternal Vanguard and pose as one."

"Hah? And why the hell would I do that?!"

"We're vampires, and they already know who we are. But since you're human, you might be able to get close to them. Isn't tracking down the Eternal Vanguard part of your mission as a hunter? You and I have the same goal."

"Like I give a damn about GUILT's orders! I'm going to kill you!!" Banri threatened.

"Why do you hate vampires so much?"

"That doesn't matter."

"If I'm going to be killed by you, the least you could do is tell me why."

After thinking for a moment, Banri hesitantly began to speak. "...It's because of vampires appearing in my village that my father and sister died. If those bastards had never come... my village wouldn't have been destroyed. That's why I became a hunter, to kill vampires. I'll kill every last one of them."

"I have no intention of fighting you. Just as there are good and bad people among humans, there are good and bad vampires. I wouldn't be so arrogant as to call myself a good person, but at the very least, I'm not evil. Your hatred is misdirected, Banri. The ones you should hate are the vampires who harm humans. That's where your anger should be."

"You sure talk big for a brat. Say whatever you want while you still can."

Theo and Banri's conversation remained at a standstill from beginning to end, but then it suddenly came to a halt due to an intrusion. Figures emerged from the darkness, completely silent. One assassin inside the room. Ten outside. There was more beyond the inn, too.

"When did so many of them get here?!" Banri exclaimed, drawing the sword at his waist. At the same time, the black-robed figures lunged at Banri. He fought back, but his blade struck only empty air. "They're fast! Are these guys vampires?!"

"No! They're human! They're assassins from the Eternal Vanguard!" Theo called.

"What?!"

The black-robed figures moved fluidly, like entwining snakes, surrounding Theo and Banri and gradually driving them into their encirclement. Banri took a blow to the back of the head and lost consciousness.

"Banri!!" Theo cried out.

In the next moment, Theo's vision also blacked out.

The damp, cold, stone floor was sapping away his body heat.

The moment Theo opened his eyes, he shivered from the extreme cold. His body was so cold that it wouldn't have been surprising if he froze to death at any moment.

"Hey, you awake?"

A voice came from right beside him. It was dim, but he immediately knew who it was—Banri. His arms and legs were bound, making it impossible for him to move. Theo was restrained in the same way. The room was surrounded by stone walls and floors, with iron bars fitted on one side. It looked like they were inside a prison. Both of them must have been captured during the attack. Why weren't they killed? What reason did they have to keep them alive? As he thought about it, Theo arrived at an answer.

"Eden...."

The moment those words were murmured, the iron-barred door swung open, and the masked black-robed figures stepped into the cell.

"We only needed the one called 'Theodore,' but it looks like an extra tagged along," one figure said.

"We couldn't just kill back there, though," another stated.

"Unfortunately, we were seen by them."

"Then should we kill them here?"

"No, we'll wait for the Faith Leader's judgment."

The black-robed figures seemed to ignore Theo and Banri as they discussed something ominous.

"You, come along now," one of them said.

The black-robed figures forced Theo up on his feet and attempted to take him somewhere.

Banri shouted. "Oi! What are you planning to do with him? Let him go! If you don't, I'll kill you!!"

One of the black-robed figures delivered a brutal kick to Banri's face. The force of the blow sent him flying into the wall. Even with his limbs bound, Banri refused to give in and lunged forward again. A black-robed figure's foot-blade countered, stabbing deep into Banri's stomach. From

the impact of the kick, Banri crashed into a pot in the corner of the cell, shattering it into pieces. It seemed to be a pot meant for prisoners to relieve themselves in, but fortunately, it was empty, so Banri avoided being covered in filth.

“Behave yourself. Your fate will be decided later by the Faith Leader.”

There was no response from Banri. It seemed he had lost consciousness. The black-robed figures then dragged Theo out of the cell.

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Theo was being forced to walk through a dimly lit hallway. With not a single window in sight, Theo couldn't tell whether he was above or below ground. He was nudged in the back, silently urged to move faster. After walking for a while, he saw a door ahead. Theo was brought in front of it, where his restraints were removed.

“Go inside,” one of the figures said, opening the door.

When Theo entered the room, he saw that it was simple yet gave off a sense of holiness, furnished only with the bare essentials.

“Faith Leader, we have brought him.”

At the back of the room, a carved holy emblem shaped like the infinity symbol—representing eternity—was displayed. Could this be a prayer room of the Primordial Faith? However, Theo didn't register the details of the room. Eden was standing in the center.

“Theo!”

“Eden!”

The two of them rushed toward each other and embraced tightly, as if confirming each other's presence.

“Why are you here, Theo?” Eden asked.

“I came to take you back,” Theo replied.

“To take me back?” Eden repeated.

“Yeah! Hugh and all the Stray Cats are with me too!”

No further conversation was allowed, and Theo was violently torn away from Eden by the black-robed figures.

“What are you doing?! Let go! Let me go!!” Theo shouted.

Theo was grabbed under both arms, pinned down from above, and forced face-first onto the ground. One of the masked black-robed figures stood beside Eden. This was the one the followers referred to as the “Faith Leader.” A muffled voice came from behind the mask.

“*Paradise*, Eden. That is the sacred land that we, the Eternal Vanguard, strive to reach. It is said that those who reach *Paradise* receive eternal life and continue to exist for all eternity. Using the power brought by your Cocoon Period symptoms, you stole that secret, which was known only to the head of the 14th House of Vlad. The very secret we require. But, you refuse to tell us that secret. I have been thinking about how to open that firmly shut mouth of yours..... Theodore Classico. You two seem to be quite close, don't you? Eden, if you refuse to reveal the secret of *Paradise*, Theodore will die right here and now.”

Pinned to the ground, Theo somehow managed to lift his head. He could see that Eden's face had suddenly turned pale. Even so, Eden resisted their threats with all her might.

“The secret of *Paradise* must never be revealed to anyone. *Paradise* exists alongside TRUMP's heart. If *Paradise* is violated, it will threaten TRUMP's peace of heart,” Eden said.

“I see, then there is no other choice. Theodore will have to die. His death will be your fault, Eden,” the Faith Leader decided.

One of the black-robed figures, carrying a large sword, approached Theo.

“...Eden. Don't worry about me. Hugh and the Stray Cats will surely come to save you. Eden, you have to live. Live the life that's meant for you,” Theo said to her.

Despite standing at the brink of death, Theo's heart was not consumed by fear. In that moment, what mattered more to Theo than his own fate was Eden's future—her chance to live.

“Do you have any last words, Theodore?”

The man known as the Faith Leader granted Theo this final mercy.

Theo's eyes never left Eden.

“You taught me that I wasn't the only one who felt alone. Thank you, Eden. I'm glad I met you. Just being able to tell you that is enough.”

In truth, Theo wanted to say much more, but he chose those as his final words. Even when faced with death, Theo felt no fear. He was surprised at how calm his heart was. At Theo's words, it seemed like Eden couldn't stop crying.

“Do it.”

As the Faith Leader gave the order, one of the black-robed figures carefully aimed at Theo’s neck and raised their large sword.

“Wait!!” Eden cried out.

The heavy sword, just moments away from striking Theo’s neck, stopped precisely before making contact.

“*Paradise*... the *Paradise with a Heart* is deep within Cavern District... in a place called the Forest of Cocoon Trees.” Eden confessed the secret while crying.

Beneath his mask, the Faith Leader could be seen trembling with joy.

“I see... thank you, Eden. With this, the Eternal Vanguard can live for all of eternity...”

“Faith Leader Simon, what should we do with this boy?” A black-robed figure asked.

From beneath his mask, the Faith Leader looked down at Theo. “An outsider who has learned of the Primordial Faith cannot be allowed to live. I regret to say, but you must die here.”

“No! That’s not what we agreed on!!” Eden protested.

“Cavern District is in vampire territory, isn’t it? We will have Eden guide us—to the Forest of Cocoon Trees, where *Paradise* is said to be.”

Once again, the large sword was raised. Theo, having accepted his fate, closed his eyes. A scream echoed. But it wasn’t Theo’s. It was one of the black-robed assassins. When Theo opened his eyes, he saw Banri lunging at the black-robed figures.

“I’ll kill you!!” Banri growled.

What Banri was holding was a shard of something that looked like ceramic. Theo immediately realized. It was a shard from the pot that broke when he was kicked inside the prison cell. That shard was deeply embedded in the throat of one of the black-robed figures. Fresh blood spurted out. Banri, now covered in blood, moved with feline-like speed and slashed another black-robed figure’s neck with the shard. Once again, fresh blood splattered everywhere.

“Restrain him!”

At the Faith Leader’s command, the black-robed figures inside the room all lunged at Banri at once. Banri dodged their attacks and grabbed the Faith Leader’s robe, yanking him down. The Faith Leader quickly got up and wrapped his hands around Banri’s throat, choking him. With his

blood flow cut off, Banri's complexion turned a deep shade of blue. Banri smashed the Faith Leader's face with the shard from the broken pot. The mask shattered into pieces, revealing the face beneath. Banri was shocked upon seeing that face.

...

"Sekishu... how could it be you?"

The true identity of the Faith Leader of the Eternal Vanguard—was none other than Banri's mentor and partner, Sekishu. Sekishu grabbed Banri by the collar and hurled him away. Banri quickly regained his posture and took a combat stance. It was an instinct ingrained into his body through harsh training. The one who had engraved that instinct into Banri's body... was none other than his mentor, Sekishu. If they fought to the death, Banri wouldn't stand a chance against him. But Sekishu didn't want that.

"Let's go."

Taking the black-robed figures with him, Sekishu left the room.

...

"Banri!"

Theo rushed toward him, but Banri, in utter shock, fell to his knees.

"Why... why would Sekishu join the Primordial Faith...?" Banri asked aloud.

Eden walked up to Banri. "That person... who is he to you?"

Banri looked too overwhelmed to answer. Theo answered in his place.

"He was called Faith Leader Simon... he's a hunter, Banri's mentor, and a parental figure to him."

Banri, still in shock, finally managed to speak. "...Sekishu is his hunter codename. His real name is Simon."

"Banri, so you were part of the Primordial Faith too? What is the Eternal Vanguard trying to do?" Eden asked.

"No! I'm not one of them!! Even Sekishu wouldn't... my hometown was wiped out because of Cocoon Period vampires and the Primordial Faith... everything burned... and turned to ash..."

Eden knelt before Banri and took his hand. She was trying to peer into Banri's memories. Could she see the memories of humans as well, not just vampires?

"...This person... he doesn't bear the mark. He's not a Primordial Faith believer. His hometown... and that he trusted Sekishu... and this... what is this? I see something... this is... Sophie?"

Banri instinctively pulled his hand away. "How do you know about that...?"

Seeing Banri grow suspicious, Theo explained.

"Eden can see other people's memories... and even steal them."

"Who's Sophie?" Eden asked with curiosity.

That was probably an important memory for Banri.

"...Sophie... he's my older sister's son. I was the one who named him. Right now, he's living in an orphanage," Banri explained.

"He's an important memory to you, isn't he?"

Eden was crying. She must have empathized with Banri and Sophie's circumstances.

"...Why the hell are you crying?" Banri was bewildered by Eden's reaction.

"Eden, you need to stop stealing memories." Theo didn't scold her, but spoke with kindness instead.

Eden wiped away her tears, then smiled faintly before responding. "I won't steal anyone's memories anymore. Didn't you say it yourself? Not just a patchwork of someone else's memories... but memories that belong to me alone."

Hearing that, Theo also smiled. "Yeah, let's create memories that belong to you alone."

Regaining his composure, Banri finally stood up. "I'm going after Sekishu. That bastard violated the taboo of the Primordial Faith, broke the Non-Aggression Treaty, and kidnapped Eden from vampire territory. He's a criminal. I can't just let this go."

"Yeah. I won't steal anyone's memories anymore, but because the secret of *Paradise* has been exposed, I have to take it back. I'll steal the memory of *Paradise* from Sekishu. That will be the last memory I ever take from someone. Theo... will you forgive me?" Eden asked anxiously.

Theo looked straight at her. "Of course. Let's capture Sekishu and take back the memory of *Paradise!*"

Theo, Eden, and Banri then left the room to pursue the fleeing Sekishu.

At the end of the hallway in the Eternal Vanguard's hideout, a heavy iron door stood open which seemed to be the exit. They must have fled through there, not even bothering to close it behind them. Beyond the door lay an underground waterway. It must connect to various parts of the city. From the exit, they could see the waterway splitting in two, but figures were fleeing to the left. It could only be Sekishu and his men.

"After them!"

With that, Banri sprinted forward, and Theo and Eden followed close behind.

Ahead of them, black-robed figures lay in wait, ready to kill. They were merely sacrificial pawns to buy time for Sekishu's escape. Without slowing his sprint, Banri plunged straight into battle with the masked figures. Banri's only weapon was a shard of pottery, while his enemies wielded lethal blades. The difference in weapon capability between them was obvious. Banri didn't use the shard as a weapon. Instead, he hurled it at his enemy's face to create an opening. As the enemy flinched, Banri drove his elbow into their stomach, causing them to collapse in agony. Banri snatched the figure's blade and immediately made it his own—the decision of a fighter well-versed in battle. The remaining black-robed figures quickly surrounded Banri.

"Their movements are just like those of hunters. So these guys are the Eternal Vanguard's combat unit trained by Sekishu!" Banri realized.

The black-robed figures attacked all at once, and Banri fought back. Even though he was outnumbered, Banri was holding his own—or possibly even better. As a hunter, he must have survived countless brutal battles. For Banri, who had fought for his life countless times against vicious vampires, this situation was nothing special.

"Theodore! You two go ahead!! Catch Sekishu!!" Banri urged.

"Banri, don't you dare die!"

"Who do you think you're talking to?! Once I take care of these guys, I'll be right behind you!!" Banri promised.

Theo and Eden left the fight to Banri and ran ahead. The underground waterway twisted like a labyrinth, and with the black-robed figures delaying them, they lost sight of Sekishu.

"Dammit! Where did he go?!"

Theo searched for clues about the direction Sekishu had fled, but with only the dim moonlight filtering through a latticed window in the ceiling, he couldn't find even the smallest trace.

“No need to search. I’m right here.”

As he spoke, Sekishu appeared—accompanied by the black-robed figures. The branching tunnels of the underground waterway were each guarded by black-robed figures, completely cutting off any escape. Theo and Eden had been ambushed.

“I am Banri’s mentor. If I was actually serious, killing him would be easy. But we lived together for six years. If possible, I’d rather not kill him. That’s why I had him held back by sending some of the others after him. To separate him from you.”

The black-robed figures that Banri was fighting were all part of Sekishu’s plan.

“Eden must come with us. Information alone isn’t enough to reach *Paradise*—we need her to guide us. Theodore, you’ll be coming too so that Eden will listen. You have value to me this way.”

Theo braced himself to fight back, but a black-robed figure grabbed him from behind.

“What are you doing?! Let go of me!!” Theo yelled.

Sekishu reached out to grab Eden, but noticing something, he instinctively pulled his hand back.

“Ah, that’s right. You’re an Irregular of the Cocoon Period—someone who can steal memories by touch.” When Sekishu gave a signal, the black-robed figures seized Eden instead. “Now, let us go to *Paradise*, where we shall live for eternity!”

“Theo!” Eden cried out for help, but restrained, there was nothing Theo could do.

Crushed by his own powerlessness, Theo couldn’t even cry out. And that frustration was unbearable—just the fact that he lacked the power to protect Eden. When Theo looked at Sekishu, his ecstatic smile was illuminated by the moonlight. He was insane. Sekishu was completely mad. Just as Theo thought that, Albrecht suddenly appeared, his spinning kick slamming into Sekishu’s face and sending him flying. Struck by the hit, Sekishu staggered and collapsed to the ground.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, Young Master,” Albrecht stated.

“Albrecht! How did you find this place?!”

Rein and the Stray Cats followed close behind.

“It was Monty’s sense of smell! They spread Eden’s scent all over the city, so instead, we had him track yours!”

Monty rubbed his nose with a smug expression. “You should have still been at the inn, but I caught your scent in the underground waterway, so I figured something had happened and got worried.”

Hugh readied his slingshot, while Rein drew his longsword from his waist and pointed it at the black-robed figures.

“We shall fulfill our duty as protectors. Theodore, please protect Eden,” Rein said.

“Thank you, Rein!”

Pulling back his slingshot, Hugh took aim at the black-robed figures. “Let’s cause some chaos!”

As Sekishu got back up, Albrecht took a Pankration stance. Most likely, the most skilled fighter among their enemies was Sekishu, and Albrecht intended to take him on.

“Alright, let’s do this!” Hugh rallied his allies.

The Stray Cats leaped onto the remaining black-robed figures, and the battle began, with Rein providing support. While everyone was buying time, Theo ran to Eden.

“Eden, recovering Sekishu’s memory is important, but if you get captured, none of it will matter. First, I’m taking you somewhere safe. If there’s even a safe place in this city, that is.”

Theo grabbed Eden’s hand and ran once again.

After running for a while, they emerged from the dim underground waterway into the city under the night sky. As they started running toward the city’s outskirts, almost immediately, countless black-robed pursuers appeared. The sheer scale of their numbers filled Theo with dread.

“So this really is a city-wide gathering of Primordial Faith believers!”

Countless figures in black robes pursued the fleeing Theo and Eden. As time passed, their numbers only continued to grow. Theo and Eden ran until their lungs felt like they were burning. Ahead of where they were running, they saw many silhouettes. Theo panicked, thinking they were reinforcements for the Eternal Vanguard—but it was the 14th House of Vlad’s guard unit. Among them, Captain Dominicus stood firmly with an imposing stance and gave the order.

“Fire!”

The gun artillery unit opened fire all at once. The black-robed pursuers chasing Theo and Eden were shot down one after another. This was clearly a violation of the Non-Aggression Treaty, but their opponents were Primordial Faith believers. The 14th House of Vlad would likely face trial by the Blood Alliance Congress, but Dominicus was prepared to take full responsibility for his

unilateral decision. The gunfire didn't stop, continuing to shoot down the black-robed pursuers one after another, until they were completely wiped out. By the time Theo and Eden reached Dominicus, they were both gasping for breath from sprinting at full speed.

"Thank you, Dominicus. You saved us," Theo forced out between gasps, but Dominicus' face remained as hard and cold as iron.

"Don't get the wrong idea, boy. I didn't save you. We were ordered by our lord, Sir Isaac, to take Eden back to Cavern District. We only cooperated temporarily for the search. I told you already—upon recovering her, she will be handed over to us. I had subordinates watch your movements, and it paid off. Now, take her away."

At Dominicus' command, the guards grabbed Eden by the arm and threw her into a nearby cage. The cage had small wheels for transport. It was likely meant for capturing large animals like bears.

"What are you doing to Eden?!" Theo accused.

"If we touch her carelessly, she could steal our memories. This is the best method. She will be taken to Cavern District as is," Dominicus explained.

Theo grabbed Dominicus. "Eden is finally trying to live life for herself! Not as a patchwork of stolen memories, but a life shaped by her own. To do that to her and put her in a cage... that's insane! Please, let her be free!"

The surrounding gun artillery unit aimed their weapons at Theo.

"I wouldn't mind killing you here, but in recognition of your efforts in retrieving Eden, I will spare your life." As he said that, Dominicus grabbed the back of Theo's head with both hands and delivered a heavy knee strike to his stomach. Theo fell heavily to the ground, overwhelmed by the force of the attack. "Farewell, boy. Shall we never meet again."

From the sheer pain, Theo's consciousness gradually faded. Dominicus and his guard unit left the area, taking with them the cage holding Eden. Feeling the weight of his own powerlessness, Theo's consciousness completely faded, and his vision went black.

How long had he been unconscious? Theo's consciousness was still trapped in darkness. The one who found Theo was Albrecht, who had followed after him after repelling the black-robed figures. When Albrecht found Theo collapsed on the ground, he feared the worst. After confirming that Theo was alive, he felt relieved for the time being. Having also repelled their enemies, Rein and the Stray Cats eventually regrouped with him. With Albrecht carrying Theo on his back, they headed out of the city.

Along the way, Theo woke up while being carried by Albrecht. Still in a dazed state, he told everyone that Eden had been taken by Dominicus. Hugh was still silent at that moment, but Theo could feel that he was holding back overwhelming anger. Since there was no pursuit from the Eternal Vanguard, the group was able to escape the city safely. Rein theorized that the Eternal Vanguard had shifted their actions to tracking down Eden, whom Dominicus had taken. By the time they left the city, the night had already deepened, and stars twinkled in the sky. Having lost Eden, the group remained largely silent, with no choice but to search for a place to hide.

...

Before dawn, Theo and his group, having left the city, hid inside an abandoned livestock shed on a disused farm. Even though the black-robed figures weren't pursuing them, staying in the city was not an option, as Albrecht explained once more. They had no way of knowing where the Primordial Faith believers were hiding in the city. From the previous battle, not only the Stray Cats but also Albrecht and Rein were severely exhausted. In a corner of the livestock shed, Rein was tending to the injured Stray Cats. According to Albrecht's report, Sekishu's combat ability was about equal to his own. As far as Theo knew, the only one who could match Albrecht in hand-to-hand combat was his father, Dino. During the battle, Sekishu took advantage of an opening in Albrecht's defense and fled somewhere. By the time the chaos had settled, Banri had also disappeared. At the place where Banri had been fighting, only the corpses of the black-robed figures remained. Most likely, he survived and went to pursue Sekishu.

Hugh, who had put up the strongest fight against the black-robed figures, had suffered significant injuries, but he didn't seem to care at all. Instead, he let his suppressed anger explode and lashed out at Theo.

"You were with her, so why couldn't you protect Eden?!"

Hugh was furious that Eden had been taken by the 14th House of Vlad. Albrecht spoke in Theo's defense.

"Lady Eden is originally the daughter of the 14th House of Vlad family. The guard unit, acting on the orders of their lord, had justification in retrieving her. Of course, considering Lady Eden's

unique upbringing and the symptoms of her Cocoon Period, I fully understand why you wouldn't want her to return to the 14th House of Vlad."

It seemed that Hugh had already decided what he was going to do.

"I've said this many times, but Eden is one of us, a Stray Cat. She's not some fancy noble lady or anything like that. She's just like us, a Stray Cat. That's why I'm going to take her back from Cavern District."

Rein, standing beside Albrecht, spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. "Cavern District is far north of the Central City Cluster, where the Blood Alliance Congress Headquarters is located. Even by carriage, it takes more than ten days to reach. Additionally, Cavern District lies outside the control of the Blood Alliance Congress and is a Manor territory ruled by the 14th House of Vlad family. It is also a Manor that opposes the Blood Alliance Congress. It establishes its own laws, and Blood Alliance laws do not apply there. Additionally, Cavern District is a massive underground labyrinth built using an abandoned mine. Finding Lady Eden in there will be an extremely difficult task. And ironically, just like the human city where the Eternal Vanguard was, Cavern District is also known for being overrun with Primordial Faith believers. Even the Blood Alliance's Inquisitors cannot intervene there. Infiltrating that place would come with significant risk. In some ways, it may be even more dangerous than trespassing into human territory."

Even after hearing that, Hugh remained completely unfazed. "I was hoping for a little danger anyways. We're going. Theo, what about you?"

Theo had already made up his mind as well. "You don't need to ask me twice. We're comrades, aren't we? You, Eden, Martin, Sandro, and Monty—we're all comrades. I won't let you go alone. I'm coming too."

However, Rein voiced a concern regarding his position. "Whether Sir Dali or Sir Gerhard would approve of me doing this..."

That's right. Setting Albrecht aside, Rein is Sir Dali's assistant, and he was acting under orders to accompany Theo and the others. That very Rein cannot take action or make decisions without Dali's approval. Losing Rein would be a significant loss in combat strength. Even so, Theo believed that, for Eden's sake, he had to go to Cavern District, even if it meant taking great risks.

"This matter will not be reported to Sir Dali or Sir Gerhard. This will be an independent intervention by the Classico Family in Cavern District. Rein, thank you for everything up until now," Theo said.

Rein, who never changes his expression, paused to think for a moment before answering. "You say strange things, Sir Theodore. I was ordered by Sir Dali to babysit you. If Sir Theodore and

the others are going to Cavern District, then I must accompany you as well—whether Sir Dali permits it or not. That’s how it was, wasn’t it, Albrecht?”

Rein had deliberately twisted Dali’s orders.

“Indeed, it’s as Rein says. Sir Theodore once spent time in the Delico family’s *Nursery*, but even after five years, it seems he still requires supervision. There is a proverb that says, ‘Send your beloved child on a journey,’” Albrecht explained.

Rein nodded in agreement with Albrecht’s statement. “There is also a proverb that says, ‘A lion throws its cub into a deep ravine.’ Outdoor learning is highly meaningful, after all. Thus, Albrecht and I will take full responsibility in leading this excursion.”

At their words, Theo could only force a bitter smile. “Outdoor learning, huh... isn’t there another way to say it? Like, for example, *adventure*?”

“An adventure, huh? That sounds wonderful,” Albrecht said, sounding impressed.

Rein joined the conversation as well. “I see. Actually, despite how I may seem, I’ve always admired the idea of adventure since I was a child. I’m very excited about this.”

Since Rein said this with a completely straight face, even Hugh looked exasperated.

“Oi, Theo. Are there any *normal* adults around you?”

“Don’t say that. They’ve helped me many times up to now, and there’s nothing more reassuring than that. Albrecht, Rein, once again, it seems I’ll be in your care,” Theo said.

The long night was coming to an end. Outside the shed where Theo and the others were, the sky was beginning to lighten. Leaving the abandoned livestock shed, the group escaped human territory. Back in their own territory, they entered a vampire city, and then went to procure food, transportation, and other travel supplies.

“Is it really the time for this?” Hugh grumbled. This was because the journey to Cavern District, ruled by the 14th House of Vlad family, would be a long one.

While Martin tried to calm Hugh, the group split up to prepare for the journey. During this time, Theo and Hugh didn’t exchange a single word—remaining tense around each other.