

Part II – At the House of Classico

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The Classico estate was placed under fortified security by the Blood Alliance Guard, in preparation for potential attackers. As they were led to the guest room, Eden and the Stray Cats curiously looked around the interior of the mansion. In the rigidly structured society of the vampire domain, high-ranking nobles hold the highest status. For Theo, a son of the Classico family, this was an ordinary sight, but to the Stray Cats from Gray Cat Town, everything must have seemed new and unfamiliar. In the guest room, Dali and Gerhard, who had recently joined them, were also present.

“So, you’re the vampire in the Cocoon Period who stole our memories?” As Gerhard pressed Eden for answers, Hugh and the Stray Cats glared at him menacingly. Gerhard paid no mind to their intimidation and continued speaking as if unaffected. “I’d like you to return the memories you stole from us.”

Eden shook her head and retorted, acting as if she were Gerhard himself. “Angelico is my precious son. The memories of him belong to me now, too. I refuse to give them back. For all the times I couldn’t be kind before, I want to make it up by being as kind as I can now. But, you know, Angelico is... you know how he is. But when I actually face him, it’s awkward, and I just can’t bring myself to be kind to him properly...”

The memories Eden spoke of were Gerhard’s.

“Stop blurting out my memories so openly!” Having his private memories put into words without hesitation, Gerhard’s face turned red. “The me that has had his memories stolen... doesn’t even know who this *Angelico* is. I was never supposed to have a son. But I understand that I only think that way because you stole my memories. That’s why I need you to return them to me. My memories, Dali’s... Henrique’s and Dino’s as well.”

“Ah actually, I don’t think any of my memories were stolen.” Henrique said this with slight hesitation, though outwardly, it was just an act.

Of course, Eden seemed to see right through that as well.

“Because you didn’t have any precious memories to steal in the first place,” Eden stated.

“Yeah, that’s actually true. But, you know, I still manage to get by,” Henrique shrugged.

Seeing Henrique respond in such a carefree manner, Gerhard gave him a resentful look. Dali interrupted from the side.

“I need my memories back too. Without them, I’m lost. I’m told I have two sons, Raphael and Ul, and that I had a wife, Frida. Without my memories, I don’t know how much they meant to me.

But..." Dali chose his words carefully, as if searching his own heart, "... it feels like there's a gaping hole in my chest. That's why I'd be really grateful if you gave back the memories you stole."

Eden refused him with silence. It was Hugh who spoke in her place.

"We won't give back the memories. Eden isn't like us or like you. She has no memories of her own to define who she is."

Martin, Sandro, and Monty also stepped in to defend Eden.

"That's right. If she gives the memories back, we don't know what will happen to Eden," Martin said.

"Maybe she'll go back to being as good as dead, just like before she entered the Cocoon Period," Sandro thought aloud.

"Eden is one of us Stray Cats! We won't let anyone make her suffer!" Monty exclaimed.

Tension spread between Dali, Gerhard, and the Stray Cats. Henrique tried to defuse the situation.

"Now, now. After everything that's happened, we're all on edge. Let's just sit down and have some tea. The Blood Alliance Guard is watching over the place, so we're safe here."

Hugh ignored Henrique and glared at Theo, who was sitting on the sofa, listening to the conversation.

"We Stray Cats are different from you. All of us have lived completely alone in this world. Even Eden is the same. Ever since she was born, she's been sleeping as if she were already dead. And when she finally woke up, both her father and mother hated her. You have it good, don't you? From the moment you were born, you've lived in a mansion like this. You've never once struggled to find food, have you?" Hugh then turned his hostility toward Dali, Gerhard, and Henrique. "You nobles are just the same. Up until now, you've been able to get anything you ever wanted, haven't you? We don't need protection from people like you. We Stray Cats will protect Eden ourselves."

Hugh had the tone of something close to a declaration of war.

"This is quite a troublesome situation," Dali let out a sigh.

The adults, since their opponent is a child, were unable to act forcefully.

“Young Master Theodore, what shall we do?” Albrecht asked him. Suddenly, having the conversation directed his way, Theo panicked. “This is the Classico family’s estate. And with the Master currently absent, you must make the decisions as the acting head.”

“*I’m* the head of the Classico family,” Eden immediately objected.

“That is nothing more than a memory you stole from the Master,” Albrecht denied. After the commotion of the Centennial Ceremony, Dali and the others informed Theo that Dino was missing. Having had his memories stolen by Eden, Dino forgot that he was the head of the Classico family, and Theo had no idea where he’d disappeared to. Up until now, the only way he had ever seen his father was as the head of the Classico family. “Young Master Theodore, please issue me any command as you see fit. I will obey it.”

“And I’m telling you, I *am* the head of the Classico family!” Eden said, clearly dissatisfied.

Albrecht was demanding a decision from Theo as the acting head of the family. He’d intended to abandon the position of family head, which he would eventually inherit from his father. He’d intended to destroy the Classico family ever since the moment he embraced the dream of becoming a novelist. And yet, here and now, having to fulfill his role as the family head—it was such an irony. Theo could only give a wry smile.

“What’s so funny?!”

Hugh, seeing Theo’s expression, snapped at him.

“Ah... there’s nothing funny at all. You Stray Cats will be protected by the Classico family. I won’t allow anyone to leave this mansion. Albrecht, inform the Blood Alliance Guard on duty. No one is allowed to enter from outside or leave from inside the mansion, no matter who they are.”

“Why should you be the one to decide that?!” Hugh immediately protests.

The other Stray Cats followed, shouting, “That’s right!” and “Why you?!”

“Understood completely, Young Master.”

When Albrecht placed his left hand forward and bowed, the room fell completely silent for a moment. His movements, as sharp as a finely honed knife, carried an undeniable intensity that left the Stray Cats speechless.

Theo was in the library. Ever since leaving the mansion to attend the Centennial Ceremony, too many things had happened. His feet had naturally led him to the place where he felt most at ease. He randomly took a book from the shelf and flipped through it, but the contents didn't sink in. Only the letters, as mere symbols, registered in his vision. The library was filled with an air of stillness and quiet. Within that silence, a voice calling Theodore echoed. Before he knew it, Eden had entered the library.

"Is it okay for you not to be with the other Stray Cats?" Theo asked.

"Yeah. It's just that they're sulking, so it's boring to be around them. We're not allowed to go outside either, right? So, I thought I'd take a walk around the mansion. Ah, but don't worry. I already let that butler know."

The sense of unease from when he first met Eden was still there. It was the unease brought about by the patchwork of memories inside her.

"There are so many books here, huh. I've never read a book before," Eden said.

Eden's speech mixes masculine and feminine language. It was probably the countless memories she had stolen that made her speak that way.

"Hey, Theodore, have you ever read a book?" Eden asked.

"Of course. In fact, I've read pretty much all the books here," Theo replied.

"You've read all these books, even though there are so many?" Eden said in wonder.

"I've loved reading books ever since I was little."

"So that's why you want to become a novelist, Theodore."

Eden spoke aloud the feelings in Theo's heart that he had never shared with anyone. When he tried to escape from the black-robed figures and took her hand, that must have been the moment when she peered into his memories.

"You didn't steal my memories?" Theo asked her.

"No, because there was no time for that, right? Besides..." Eden hesitated to continue speaking.

"Besides... what?"

"Besides... you're like me."

"I'm like you? What do you mean by that?"

"I was dead the whole time. My world only truly began when I entered the Cocoon Period. Because of the symptoms of being an Irregular, I stole many memories, and as a result, I ended up with a patchwork of them. I'm a monster, aren't I?"

"And how does that make me like you?" Theo questioned.

"I understood after peeking into your heart. You're also patchwork. Looking at all the books here, it finally made sense to me. You're made up of knowledge gained from books. If I'm a monster, then you're a monster too."

Eden didn't mean any bad intent behind her words, and Theo didn't feel upset hearing them either. Rather, he now understood what the discomfort he felt toward her when they first met was. Eden really was like himself.

...

Eden, who shapes her existence with borrowed memories.

Theodore, who shapes his existence with borrowed knowledge.

In reality, Theodore had been made painfully aware during the attack by the black-robed figures that the knowledge he'd gained from books hadn't saved them. But, he had no intention of denying knowledge itself. There are probably times when knowledge can be useful. However, for someone like Theo, who has been immersed in the world of books since childhood, his real world experiences were sorely lacking. Up until now, he had never made anyone he could call a friend. Theo had just now realized that reading books had been a form of escapism.

A patchwork collection of knowledge—that was the vampire known as Theodore Classico.

"Hey, Theodore."

"Just Theo is fine."

"Then, Theo, I can't steal your memories. Because if I steal them, it feels like everything would come crashing down, and then you wouldn't be you anymore, right?"

He was being shown how fragile his sense of self was. The same could be said for Eden. The pleasant yet unsettling feeling he had when he first met her was also a premonition that she might come to understand him. To Theo, Eden was like a mirror reflecting himself.

"Hey, Eden."

“Yes, Theo?”

“What we lack is knowledge and memories that belong only to us. That’s why I think it’s important to see things with our own eyes, hear sounds we’ve never heard with our own ears, and come up with ideas only we could think of.”

Eden shrank back and looked awkward. “But... I have nothing. The only thing I ever relied on was the memories I had stolen from others. If I lost that, I wouldn’t be me anymore.”

“Then, let’s start creating them from now on,” Theo suggested.

“Creating what?” Eden wondered.

“Your own memories. Your own experiences. Let’s create them.”

Hearing that, Eden looked extremely surprised. “Is something like that even possible? Theo, aren’t you also just patchwork?!”

“I’ll try too. I won’t run away into the world of books anymore. Even if I become a novelist like this, it would be nothing more than an imitation of someone else. That’s why, in order for me to be myself, I need the world outside of books.”

“Then, what should I do?”

“What you need is the world outside of the Cocoon Period.”

“If I stop being in the Cocoon Period, all the memories I’ve stolen until now might disappear...”

Eden seemed to be afraid of that.

“That’s why, before then, let’s experience as many things as we can. So that even if the memories you stole disappear, you can still be yourself.”

“So that I can remain myself... Theo, will you help me too?” Her voice sounded as if it were trembling with anxiety.

“Yeah, of course. It’s a promise. Even all the Stray Cats will surely help too. Wait, no, that’s not it. The Stray Cats are already part of your own memories, aren’t they? They are proving it. Even without other people’s memories, Eden, you can still be yourself.”

Eden’s cheeks turned red, because she felt as if everything she had given up on until now had suddenly appeared before her eyes.

“So, let’s try giving back Sir Dali’s and Sir Gerhard’s memories. I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Theo assured.

The moment she heard that, Eden’s face, which had been faintly filled with hope just moments ago, rapidly darkened with despair. Theo was shaken, realizing that he had said the wrong thing to her. Theo found it frustrating that he couldn’t understand the emotions of someone who had been born in a state of suspended animation and lost seven years of their life. Eden feared losing her stolen memories far more than Theo had thought.

“Oh my! Theodore, you’re having a date in a place like this?”

“Theodore, you’re quite grown, aren’t you?”

Along with those voices, the ones who entered the library were Lucia and Elena. Ul, Raphael, and Angelico were with them too.

“Eden,” Raphael stepped forward. “Don’t take Mother’s memories away from Father.” It was closer to a plea than a demand. “I don’t want the memories of us to be taken, but I hate it even more that memories of Mother were taken. So, give back Mother’s memories to Father.”

Angelico seemed like he wanted to say something else. He probably wanted to have his own memories of himself returned to Gerhard. He was gazing intently at Eden with teary eyes. In contrast, Lucia and Elena were strong-willed.

“Raphael and Angelico are still better off. I mean, what was stolen were all of our Fathers’ precious memories, right?” Lucia said.

“Our Papa remembers us and Mama properly. So, that means we weren’t important to him, right?” Elena added.

“Well, our Papa isn’t normal, so I figured that’s just how it is,” Lucia continued.

“That’s why Lucia and I are going to fix Papa someday. With the power of love!” Elena declared.

Where does their unwavering belief come from? If there was one thing he could say for sure, it was that the two of them had undoubtedly inherited Henrique’s blood, Theo thought.

“Ah, you guys. Were you playing around in a place like this?”

Theo had already noticed that Dali, Gerhard, and Henrique had been there for a while. They had been watching the children and waited for the right moment to speak up. The Classico family’s library—normally a place where Theo was always alone, a place meant for solitude—had become something different.

“My daughters are impressive, huh? I guess this is what they call the fruits of education.”

Henrique boasted proudly, but it seemed that Gerhard had a different opinion.

“Lord Henrique, you’d better make sure to properly love your daughters.”

“Oh? Gerhard is the one saying that? You must really love Angelico, huh?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t remember him. Are you really my son?” Gerhard questioned Angelico.

Angelico still had teary eyes. “....Yes, I’m your son. One day, I’m going to become a noble as dignified as you, Father. So... please don’t forget me...”

Lucia and Elena narrowed their eyes and stared intently at Angelico, who looked as if he was about to burst into tears at any moment. It was as if, through their gaze alone, they were trying to stop Angelico from crying.

Dali looked at Raphael, who was holding hands with UI. “And you two are my sons?”

“....Yes,” Raphael responded sadly. UI looked up at his older brother’s face and tightly gripped the hand he was holding.

“What kind of person was your mother?” As Dali said that, he, too, seemed somewhat lonely.

“Mother... I was still small, so I don’t remember all that much, but she was a very kind mother,” Raphael said.

Dali thought that something might trigger him to remember the stolen memories. However, even after hearing Raphael’s words, he didn’t feel like he would remember anything. But...

“....Father... you’re crying.” It was UI who spoke, looking at Dali.

Tears were overflowing from Dali’s eyes. Dali himself was surprised by that.

“What is this? I can’t even remember my sons or my wife, so why am I crying?”

Unable to hold back, Raphael and UI embraced Dali, their sobs filling the quiet library. As if a dam had burst, Angelico also started crying loudly. The library, which normally prides itself on being a place of silence, would surely not complain about the children now.

Dali, unable to remember anything, could do nothing but embrace the sons lost from his memory.

In the guest room, the Stray Cats were idly passing the time. Hugh lay sprawled on a sofa, while Martin continuously gazed out a window. Sandro wandered restlessly around the room, while Monty just sat in a chair, staring blankly.

The Stray Cats had attempted to escape several times, but they were thwarted by the Blood Alliance Guard's tight security and eventually gave up. The adults had stepped out to discuss something with the Blood Alliance Guard. It was to give instructions to a search team to find Dino, who was missing. Ul, Raphael, and Angelico, exhausted from crying, were sleeping in a guest bedroom. Lucia and Elena had gone out for a walk in the garden of the Classico estate. In the guest room, only Eden, the Stray Cats, and Theo remained. Theo, unsure of what to talk about with the Stray Cats, pretended to read a book he had brought from the library.

"Even so," Martin was the one who broke the silence, "setting aside the 14th House of Vlad family, why did those black-robed guys try to kidnap Eden?"

(That's true. Why did they target Eden?)

Back when they were running, Theo had been too frantic to even think about it. Since Eden was originally a vampire of the Fourteenth Vlad family, it made sense that someone would try to take her back. But what was the black-robed group's goal in trying to kidnap Eden? The black-robed figures seemed to be acting in a way that wouldn't harm her. That meant their goal was not to kill Eden. Theo and the Stray Cats looked at Eden, because they wanted to find out exactly what she was getting caught up in. Sensing everyone's gaze, Eden opened her mouth to speak.

"The 14th House of Vlad family and those black-robed people probably have the same goal. The memory I have. The memory I stole a long time ago. What everyone wants is the memory of *Paradise*."

The memory of *Paradise*—Theo had a habit of searching for answers within the knowledge he gained from books. But in all the books he had read so far, there was nothing about the *Paradise* Eden spoke of. The Stray Cats were the same. None of them seemed to understand what Eden was trying to say.

"That must be why. It's the *Paradise with a Heart*," Eden added, but the mystery only deepened further.

"So, what exactly is this *Paradise*?" Hugh asked bluntly.

"That's something no one is supposed to know. Only the head of the 14th House of Vlad family knows about it. I stole this memory from my father. That's why the 14th House of Vlad family wants to take me back," Eden replied.

“Then, what about those black-robed people?”

At Sandro’s question, Eden paused in thought for a moment.

“I don’t know... but they’re probably believers of the Primordial Faith.”

“Believers of the Primordial Faith?” Theo involuntarily spoke aloud.

The Primordial Faith—a belief system with a different ideology from the Faith of the Seven Gods, the state religion of the vampire territories. Those who worship TRUMP, believed to be the origin of all vampires, are called Primordial Faith believers. The Blood Alliance Congress has strictly banned the ideology under Blood Alliance Law, and those who devote themselves to the Primordial Faith are judged by the Inquisition. Dali, Gerhard, and the others were also Inquisitors who judged the Primordial Faith believers before they joined the Vlad Institution. Those believers of the Primordial Faith are targeting Eden. Was *Paradise* something related to the Primordial Faith? Theo tried once again to look for clues in his knowledge from books, but he quickly stopped himself. The world outside the Cocoon Period. Since he had asked Eden to seek it, he had to do the same.

“Let’s drop this topic. There’s nothing good for us if we dig too deep.” Martin waved his hand as he cut off the conversation. The other Stray Cats looked at him as if to say, ‘You were the one who brought it up, weren’t you?’

Eden lay down on the sofa, turning her back to Theo. The moment she lay down, her breathing became slow and even. The chaos at the Centennial Ceremony, the escape from the 14th House of Vlad family, and the attack by the black-robed group in Gray Cat Town—it had all happened in rapid succession. So many unbelievable things had happened in a single day. It was no wonder she was exhausted.

“There are still some guest bedrooms available. If you get sleepy, you can use one of them.” Theo said that to the Stray Cats, and then left the guest room.

The veil of night had completely fallen. Because of the clouds covering the sky, the darkness was even deeper. Stepping out onto the mansion's terrace, Theo could see the Blood Alliance Guard lighting lanterns and keeping watch. With this level of security, even if attackers came, they shouldn't be able to infiltrate easily. However, Theo felt an inexplicable sense of anxiety. He had a feeling that he was overlooking something. He just didn't know what it was.

A short distance away, Rein was standing by. Within the Classico estate, security was primarily handled by the Blood Alliance Guard, but Dali had assigned Rein, his aide, to act as Theo's personal protector. With the family head missing, if something were to happen to Theo, it would endanger the very survival of the Classico family. Blending into the night's darkness as if he were one with it, Rein had erased his presence.

"It's cold outside. Why don't you come inside?"

Noticing Theo standing on the terrace, Albrecht approached. He was the Classico family's butler, who had served Theo's father, Dino, for many years. Theo also knew that Dino trusted Albrecht completely, without needing to put up a front.

"Where could Father have gone...?" Theo, who rarely speaks his true feelings, openly expressed his unease.

"I don't know, but I will find him—without fail."

When Albrecht said that, it felt as if it would undoubtedly come true, and Theo's unease loosened. *'I am like a mother to you, Young Master,'* he had once said, though that was quite a ridiculous thing to say.

"Eden's Irregular Cocoon Period symptoms cause her to steal important memories. Sir Dali had his memories of his wife and children stolen, while Sir Gerhard lost his memories of Angelico. The memories stolen from Father weren't of me, so I guess I wasn't important to Father after all."

Perhaps trying to comfort him, Albrecht pulled Theo into a gentle embrace.

"No. Master Dino treasures you, Young Master Theodore. That's exactly why he was willing to accept that you would not inherit the family estate or become the head of the Classico family."

Theo was shocked. Once again, something he had never told anyone was already known. It was one thing for Eden, who could peer into memories, but for even Dino and Albrecht to see through him... that was something he had never even imagined. However, what did it mean that Dino had accepted this?

“Me not becoming the head of the Classico family? There’s no way that would happen. Since birth, I’ve been expected to become a noble of great dignity. One day, I will become the head of the Classico family.”

Perhaps because he was shaken, only a shallow lie came out. It was decided from birth that he would become the next head of the family. That is the fate of those born into a noble bloodline. Since the moment he was born... Theo had never lived his own life. Just like Eden.

Moonlight streamed through a gap in the clouds covering the sky, illuminating someone else standing on the terrace. With her back pressed against the window leading inside, Eden stood in quiet contemplation. Perhaps due to the moonlight, her pale skin appeared even more translucent and ethereal. Theo couldn’t help but be captivated.

“Those born into nobility have duties they must fulfill. You’re quoting the concept of *Noblesse Oblige*, huh. But what Albrecht said earlier is right.” Eden’s hair fluttered in the night breeze.

“How can you say something like that?” Theo said.

“I already told you, I’m the head of the Classico family. I know what Dino was thinking, because I am *Dino*.”

“You’re not Father. You’re Eden,” Theo stated.

“No, I’m Dino, I’m Dali, and I’m Gerhard. I’m also all those whose memories I have stolen. You were the one who called me a patchwork monster, weren’t you?”

“If you are Dino Classico, then do you know where my father disappeared to?”

“I don’t know that. Dino disappeared the moment he ceased to be the head of the Classico family. That’s why, as the current head, I can’t even begin to imagine what Dino’s current thoughts are. But, I do understand what the perspective of the head of the family is, had he still held that position.”

Eden stared intently into the depths of Theo’s eyes. It seemed like there was something she wanted to tell Theo.

“Hey, Theo. From now on, I’ll speak as your father. You are important to me. That’s why, if you don’t want it, I won’t force you to become the family head.” Theo was bewildered by the unexpected words. “Theo, you have a dream, don’t you? I don’t want to take that dream away from you for the sake of the family name. I don’t want to see you as a mere tool for inheritance, but as an individual vampire worthy of respect. That’s why I intend to end the Classico family with my generation. At the very least, while I am the head of the Classico family, I thought I should treasure it..... the reason I stole the memory of being the head of the Classico family

from Dino was for Theo's future, because Dino was resolved to see his duty as family head through to the end. This is my..... no, Dino Classico's *Noblesse Oblige*."

Were the things Eden said truly Dino's memories? Theo had never, not even once in his life, had an honest conversation with his father. But if the memories Eden stole were truly Dino's pure, unrestrained feelings, free from any burdens, then Theo wanted to believe that.

"But now, Father is no longer the head of the Classico family. Maybe, just like me, Father also has a version of himself he truly wanted to become. Maybe that's why he disappeared somewhere."

If that was the case, then Theo wasn't sure he should even look for his missing father. Somewhere out there, Dino might be living a free life. Not as a noble, not as a Blood Alliance Congress member, not as the head of the Classico family, but as the person he truly wanted to be.

"Young Master Theodore, even so, we must find Master Dino. As for what Master Dino truly wants, the only way to know is to ask him directly," Albrecht said.

"Please allow me to help as well." The one who said that was Rein, who had been standing by as a guard. "I was ordered by Sir Dali to support the Classico family until this incident is resolved."

Albrecht knelt before Theo. "I do not know what you will become in the future, Young Master Theodore. I sincerely apologize for forcing the role of acting family head upon you, even though you never wished to become the head. However, I have one request. While Master Dino is absent, I humbly ask that you continue to serve as acting head of the Classico family. I, as your butler Albrecht, swear my loyalty to you Young Master."

Albrecht dropped to one knee, pressing both palms together in front of his chest, demonstrating the deepest bow in accordance with vampire tradition. Rein followed suit, offering the same deep bow.

"As the head of the Classico family, I am proud of you, Theo." Using the memories she stole from Dino as the head of the Classico family, Eden praised Theo.

"Father..... I will find you, no matter what. When that time comes, I will speak with you properly—about what I think and what I want to do. I won't run away into the world of books anymore."

Hearing Theo's resolve, Eden found herself momentarily caught off guard.

"If Theo is stepping beyond the world of books, then I guess I have to leave the Cocoon Period's world behind too...?"

Theo met Eden's gaze with unwavering determination. "That's right. Eden, I'm in the world beyond the Cocoon Period. So let's go on an adventure together."

"What's an 'adventure'?" Eden asked.

"An adventure for us would mean facing reality. It means not turning away from the world we live in and the things we must confront," Theo explained.

Eden tilted her head, puzzled. "Huh?"

For Eden, who had awakened through the Cocoon Period, it was her entire world. Theo knew that her worldview couldn't be changed so easily. Theo recalled a passage from a book he once read, one that had left a strong impression on him.

"Anything people can imagine, they can surely make real¹," Theo quoted.

Conversely, one could say that 'What people can imagine is also what they can never realize.'

For Eden, who couldn't even imagine a self beyond the Cocoon Period, the world of reality might be far too cruel. Is it truly right to force that upon her?

"Look Theo!"

Eden was suddenly looking up. The clouds that had covered the entire night sky had, at some point, cleared away, revealing a sky full of shining stars.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" Rein murmured, as if deeply moved.

Theo slowly stretched both of his hands toward the stars above.

"Is something the matter, Young Master?" Albrecht asked, confused.

"I was just wondering... if I could reach those stars," Theo said.

Albrecht and Rein watched Theo with puzzled expressions, but in contrast, Eden smiled as she watched him. But no matter how far he stretched his hands, they would never reach the stars.

"What people cannot even imagine is what they can never realize."

...

¹ (T/N: Theo seems to be referencing science-fiction author Jules Verne: "Whatever one man can imagine, another man can make real," from the book *Around the World in Eighty Days*)

By the time the night clouds had cleared and the stars emerged in the sky, Theo and the others were still unaware that figures in black robes were gradually gathering around the Classico estate. Then, a few hours later, deep into the night, Eden and the stray cats had vanished from the Classico estate.

The first to notice was the Blood Alliance Guard, who had been patrolling the mansion as part of their security duty. The Stray Cats, who were supposed to be sleeping in the guest room, were nowhere to be found.

"I can't believe they actually escaped through the hidden passage that leads outside," Henrique remarked. Despite the situation, he seemed impressed.

Theo had once heard about it from Dino that there was a secret passage in the mansion known only to the family head. And that when Theo eventually became the head, it would be his duty to pass it down. In the mansions of high-ranking nobles, hidden passages and secret rooms are not uncommon. In fact, the mansions of Dali, Gerhard, and Henrique also have similar hidden passages. For high-ranking nobles, there was always the risk of being targeted for assassination, robbery, or kidnapping. To avoid such dangers, estates have precautions set up throughout the property. However, the fact that only the family head is supposed to know about them meant that those areas were neglected. Did the Stray Cats stumble upon the hidden passage behind Dino's study bookshelf by chance? No, that wasn't it. Theo immediately realized that this was Eden's doing. Eden possesses the memories of the Classico family head, so it wouldn't be surprising if those memories included knowledge of the hidden passage.

"If I go now, I might be able to catch up. I'll bring Eden and the others back. Sir Dali, you and the others should stay with the children." Theo showed no hesitation in his decision.

Since he doesn't know where the hidden passage leads, the only option is to follow from the entrance. If too many adults go after them, the Stray Cats will be on guard.

"Understood. You shouldn't go by yourself, though, so have Albrecht and Rein go with you," Dali suggested.

Theo accepted the conditions set by Dali and entered the hidden passage. For a while after the entrance, the ground was paved with bricks, but gradually, bare rock was exposed, and the passage split off in multiple directions.

Rein examined the ground. "There are traces of several people having passed through. They likely went this way."

Following Rein's lead, they traced what appeared to be the Stray Cat's footprints. As they walked on, Theo felt a breeze coming from somewhere. The exit must be near. Mixed with the sound of the wind, they could hear voices shouting. Theo and the others hurried toward the exit. Outside, they found themselves in a forest a short distance from the Classico estate. This was outside the Blood Alliance Guard's patrol zone. The passage's exit was hidden inside the hollow of a giant tree, and it seemed to be camouflaged with a bark-covered door when not in use. Just

as they exited, they spotted someone collapsed on the ground. It was one of the Stray Cats—Monty. Theo rushed to his side and lifted him up.

“What happened!? What’s going on!?”

“The black-robed figures ambushed us, captured Eden, and ran off! Hugh is chasing after them!!”

Looking more closely, Sandro and Martin were also collapsed beside Monty. Albrecht rushed over to check their condition, then looked at Theo and gave a small nod. That nod signified that while they were injured, their lives were not in danger. From deep within the forest, the sounds of a struggle could be heard. It didn’t seem too far away.

“We’ll be fine! Go after Eden and Hugh!” Martin spoke as if entrusting everything to Theo.

“Rein! Albrecht! Let’s go!” Theo commanded.

“Yes, of course,” said Rein.

“If that is the Young Master’s order,” Albrecht replied.

Theo, Albrecht, and Rein dashed into the depths of the forest. In the midnight forest, moonlight was their only source of light. Hugh’s voice could be heard.

“You bastards! Give Eden back!!”

Hugh was lunging at one of the black-robed figures.

However, the black-robed figures weren’t the only ones there. The 14th House of Vlad’s guard unit was also engaged in battle with the black-robed figures. Captain Dominicus was battling several black-robed figures, swinging around a hexagonal iron club as tall as himself. With his iron club, which could best be described as a solid mass of metal, Dominicus smashed through the black-robed figures as if he were demolishing an old building.

“Do not waver! Reclaim Eden and deliver her safely to Lord Isaac!!” Dominicus ordered.

The black-robed figures quickly turned their attacks on Theo and the others, who had just arrived. Albrecht and Rein swiftly evaded the black-robed figures’ relentless, undisguised killing intent. Albrecht fought using Pankration, while Rein cut them down one by one with his exceptional swordsmanship. Hugh also fought back, firing small iron balls from his slingshot. However, due to the darkness of the night, it was impossible to tell how many black-robed figures there were. In terms of combat ability, they even surpassed the 14th House of Vlad’s guard unit. From all around the forest, cries of agony echoed. Fresh blood splattered under the moonlit sky. The guard unit was being slaughtered one after another.

“What in the world is this...?”

Captain Dominicus’ face was one of despair. Suddenly, a black-robed figure severed Dominicus’ head in a single flash of a blade. For the first time, Theo witnessed a gruesome sight, leaving him speechless. Albrecht and Rein immediately took their stances to protect him.

“Theo!”

In the direction of the voice was Eden, captured by the black-robed figures, her movements completely restrained.

“The girl is ours now.” Saying this, the black-robed figures attempted to flee the scene with Eden.

It was at that moment that an unbelievable phenomenon occurred.

“What is this...?”

Theo couldn’t believe his eyes—what was happening seemed to defy reality.

“What’s happening...?”

Even Rein, who was usually calm and collected, was shaken, and Albrecht was at a loss for words.

...

It was a sight of pure horror.

...

The 14th House of Vlad’s guard unit, who should have been killed by the black-robed figures, were now rising to their feet, drenched in blood. Each of them should have received fatal injuries. When Captain Dominicus stood up, that terror deepened. He stood up despite having no head. Even the black-robed figures, who had slaughtered them, couldn’t hide their shock.

No, it wasn’t shock.

It was more like a trembling of joy.

“The undying army... so this is False...”

Someone in black attire muttered as if groaning. Dominicus’ body searched for its own head.

“Over here, a little more to the left! No, that’s the right!!”

The severed head of Dominicus gave commands to its own body. The headless body eventually grabbed Dominicus’ head with both arms and returned it to where it belonged. As if boiling, the blood from the severed surface foamed, and Dominicus’ neck and torso reconnected as if nothing had happened.

Led by Captain Dominicus, the guards once again took up a battle stance, raising their weapons as they charged toward the black-robed figures. The black-robed figures fought back in kind. The darkness of the night allied with those clad in black. The guards were cut down one after another, but each time, they revived and returned to battle. That sight reminded Theo of a novel he’d once read, where a horde of the dead swarmed the living. The battle turned into a scene where blood bloomed like flowers all around. Theo was helpless, while Rein and Albrecht were fully occupied protecting him. Just as casualties among the black-robed figures began to increase, a whistle rang out. It was the same retreat signal Theo had heard in the bustling city during the Centennial Ceremony. The surviving black-robed figures vanished into the darkness as if being swallowed by it.

“Eden? Where did Eden go!?” Dominicus looked around, but Eden was nowhere to be seen.

Martin and the others, who arrived later, saw Dominicus’ disappointed face and grasped the situation.

“Did they kidnap Eden?”

“Yeah...” Theo could only reply weakly.

“Damn it!!” Hugh, overcome with rage, slammed his fist into the ground.

“What a blunder! To let those bastards take Eden... Lord Isaac will be absolutely furious...”

As Dominicus lowered his shoulders in defeat, Theo stepped forward with a firm stance.

“Can you explain just what exactly is going on here?”

By then, the Blood Alliance Guard had finally noticed the commotion and had surrounded the 14th House of Vlad’s guard unit.

Theo and the others, having returned to the Classico manor, were listening to Dominicus explain the situation in the guest room. Hugh and the Stray Cats, along with Dali, Gerhard, Albrecht, and Rein, were also present. Henrique was absent, as he was in another room putting the children to bed.

“Those bastards are the Eternal Vanguard—a gathering of Primordial Faith believers!” Dominicus’ deep, heavy voice resounded throughout the room.

“The Eternal Vanguard...?”

It was Theo’s first time hearing of them, but Dali and the others seemed to know of their existence.

“They are one of the groups of Primordial Faith believers that the Vlad Institution considers a security threat. Why are you fighting with them over Eden?”

At Dali’s question, Dominicus shut his mouth. From his resolute silence, it was clear that he was hiding something significant. As Theo watched Dominicus closely, a certain thought came to his mind.

“You mean the memory of *Paradise* that Eden possesses, right?”

Theo brought up the topic of *Paradise* partly as a bluff to gauge his reaction. Since Dominicus showed a surprised expression, it seemed that Theo’s intuition was correct.

“How do you know about that?”

“Eden told me about it. But she didn’t explain it in detail.” Theo spoke honestly, without any attempt at bargaining. This is because he figured that Dominicus’ strength would be necessary to reclaim Eden. As if he had run out of patience, Hugh grabbed Dominicus by the collar.

“Hey, old man! Where did you take Eden!?”

In response to Hugh’s furious outburst, Dominicus displayed an expression of anger.

“That’s what I want to ask you! Our mission is to take Eden back from the Eternal Vanguard and return her to Sir Isaac!”

Despite Dominicus’ intimidating words, Hugh retorted without hesitation.

“I don’t care if it’s the Eternal whatever or Isaac—Eden belongs to no one! Eden is a Stray Cat! We’re the ones who will save her and bring her back!”

Theo pulled Hugh back, restraining him. The guest room was filled with anger, frustration, and doubt from all sides. Though Theo was not calm inside, he made an effort to remain composed.

“Dominicus, there is still something I need to ask you. You were certainly killed by those people in the forest. And yet, you kept reviving over and over and continued fighting against them. It sounds like something out of a nightmare. Something completely unbelievable, but... now that I’ve seen it with my own eyes, I have no choice but to accept that this is not a nightmare but reality. Why are you able to come back to life?”

“That’s...” Dominicus trailed off, his words becoming vague. It was probably a secret that couldn’t be revealed so easily.

“It’s connected to *Paradise*, isn’t it?”

Like cornering a king in chess, Theo maneuvered the conversation forward.

“The Eternal Vanguard called you False. They also referred to you as the “Undying Army.” A long time ago, I read about it in a fairy tale. Beings who were granted ageless immortality by TRUMP, the god of eternal vampires... that’s what False is. But, that’s nothing more than a fairy tale. I never imagined it could actually exist, and even now, I still find it hard to believe.”

That’s right. Both TRUMP and False are nothing more than fictional beings from fairy tales. They’re like Santa Claus, the bizarre old man in red who delivers presents to children in the human world. In reality, Theo doesn’t believe for even a second that TRUMP actually exists. There must be some trick behind that phenomenon of death—something like a magic trick. That was Theo’s conclusion.

“We are not False! That was... the effect of the anti-death medicine.”

“Anti-death medicine...?”

Hearing those words, Dali immediately interrupted the conversation. “That’s enough. Anything beyond this is taboo.”

Gerhard followed up with an official declaration. “If this topic is discussed any further, then under the Blood Alliance Law, we will have no choice but to administer the appropriate punishment to everyone here.”

Gerhard’s declaration was directed not only at Dominicus but also at Theo. Theo felt a chill run down his spine. Dali and Gerhard intended to judge mercilessly, no matter who their opponent was. That’s how much this situation is violating the vampires’ taboos. Dominicus shot an irritated glare at Gerhard. Gerhard paid it no mind.

Dali turned to face Theo. "Theodore, no matter how talented you are, you are still a child. This matter is no longer something a child can meddle in. Do not involve yourself any further."

It was a cold, dismissive way of speaking. If he were his usual exemplary student self, Theodore would not have defied the adults here. However, thoughts of Eden kept running through his mind.

"Indeed, I am still a twelve year old child, and I'm well aware of the dangers. However, with my father's whereabouts unknown, I am also the acting head of the Classico family. A guest that the Classico family was sheltering has been abducted. That is the responsibility of the Classico family, and regardless of being a substitute, it is the duty of the head of the family to fulfill that responsibility."

Theo knew that his argument was unreasonable, but he couldn't back down here.

Dali tried to persuade Theo. "The Eternal Vanguard is an organization primarily made up of humans. Their hideout is in human territory. I had an informant investigate, and it seems Eden was taken there. If we vampires enter human territory, it will be a violation of the Non-Aggression Treaty."

Even so, Theo refused to back down. "However, the fact that the Eternal Vanguard took Eden from vampire territory is already a violation of the Non-Aggression Treaty."

"That doesn't mean we have the right to break the treaty in return," Dali said.

Growing frustrated, Hugh stepped in between the two as they argued back and forth.

"All this yapping, shut up! I'm going to save Eden, and I don't care if it's a violation or whatever. The Stray Cats are free. If you want to punish me, do whatever you want. But only after I've saved her."

Hugh glared at the adults like a wild predator, keeping them in check. Theo realized that now was his chance, as the conversation had shifted to his advantage. To capitalize on this, he needed to press forward.

"Hugh, I'm going with you."

"Hah!? What can a noble brat like you even do?"

"I have the knowledge I've gained from all the books I've read."

"That kind of thing is useless," Hugh spat, as if mocking Theo.

"You won't know whether it's useless or not until you try. The knowledge I've gained from books is my greatest weapon right now."

"I'm not interested in bringing a burden with me!"

"If I end up in danger, then you can abandon me."

Those words weren't a lie. And from Theo's gaze, Hugh could feel it too. Theo was not just some spoiled noble brat, as Hugh had suggested. The heated atmosphere seemed to cool down just a little. Dali stepped between Theo and Hugh.

"Do you like Eden?"

Dali was probably asking both Theo and Hugh. Theo was the one who answered immediately.

"Yes, I like Eden."

Dali's tone remained probing as he continued. "You've only just met Eden. How can you be so sure?"

"I don't know. But I felt that Eden and I were the same. We are both made of patchwork. I'm patched together with knowledge. Eden is patched together with memories. Perhaps this feeling is just sympathy, but even so, I still want to save her."

Caught off guard, Hugh was stunned by Theo's fearless and unwavering words. Dali gazed at Theo as if impressed.

"To think it was only five years since the *Nursery*. No, perhaps five years is more than enough. Theodore, five years ago you were shut away inside your shell—so fragile that you seemed like you'd shatter if touched. You've become quite strong."

"Oi, Dali!"

Gerhard had a bad feeling and tried to intervene, but Dali ignored him and continued speaking.

"The Primordial Faith is a serious matter that concerns the survival of our race. We've already submitted a request to the Blood Alliance Congress for special interterritorial crossing regarding this matter, but the Non-Aggression Treaty is quite rigid, and it will take time. We've also requested investigative cooperation from GUILT, the human hunter organization, and currently, they're tracking down the location of the Eternal Vanguard's hideout. You guys do whatever you want. I won't look after you anymore. However, I'm assigning Rein and Albrecht as your babysitters. Rein, Albrecht, you will be violating the Non-Aggression Treaty. If this comes to light, you will face punishment."

"I am Sir Dali's aide. My only duty is to carry out what I am ordered," Rein stated.

"For Young Master Theodore, I will accept any punishment," said Albrecht.

Having put the children to bed, Henrique entered the guest room and quickly grasped the situation from the atmosphere.

"Ah, looks like Dali-chan has said something outrageous again. Well, that's what makes him interesting, though," Henrique commented.

"Dali! Are you really going to expose a child to danger!?" Gerhard was making a reasonable point.

"Theo is not a child, he is the acting head of the Classico family. I consider him our equal. Even if his life is in danger, that is his own responsibility... but until the border-crossing permit is approved and we can join you, don't do anything too reckless."

"Do you really think such an excuse will hold up?"

"Hey, Gerhard. I don't remember it myself because my memories were stolen, but our head maid told me that I let someone important die because I couldn't protect them."

The moment he heard that, Gerhard fell silent.

"*Sir Theodore* is trying to protect someone precious to him. I cannot stop him from doing that. Besides, Eden must return the memories she took from us. We must take her back. Sir Theodore, I said it was your own responsibility, but if anything happens, I will take full responsibility. I'm counting on you." Dali looked at Theo with eyes full of trust.

"Yes. Thank you, Sir Dali." Theo then turned to Hugh and took his hand. "Hugh, I want you and the Stray Cats to help us. We're going to save Eden together."

There was not a trace of hesitation in the boys' gazes.

"You don't have to tell me that. Stray Cats never abandon their own," Hugh said.

The other Stray Cats also looked at Theo, sharing the same resolve. Before anyone noticed, Raphael and the others, whom Henrique was supposed to have put to bed, had entered the room.

"Theodore, are you going somewhere?"

Theo, behaving in a more mature manner, faced Raphael. "Yeah, I'm going somewhere that's going to be a bit far away."

“Eh?! We want to go too!!”

“Hey, take us with you!”

As Lucia and Elena started whining, Angelico and UI jumped in too.

“Hey, where are you going!? Is it somewhere fun?”

“I wanna go tooooo!”

“No, you can’t. This isn’t for fun. You all have to stay here,” Theo said.

“Theodore gets to go out by himself!?”

“Ehh, that’s unfair!”

Lucia and Elena complained, but going forward, Theo and the others would be heading to human territory. In the past, they were once all kidnapped by bad people together, but that was something beyond their control. Theo couldn’t take the other children to a place that he knew was going to be dangerous.

“Sir Dali, please take care of everyone.”

“Sure, I’ll have our excellent head maid look after them,” Dali assured him.

Dominicus, the captain of the 14th House of Vlad’s guard, stood up. “Our objective is the same. Our unit will also assist in reclaiming Eden from the Eternal Vanguard. However, once she is recovered, you *will* hand Eden over to us.”

Martin, Sandro, and Monty spoke up, challenging Dominicus.

“We don’t need your help!”

“That’s right! Eden is one of us Stray Cats!”

“We’ll take Eden back ourselves. Right, Hugh?”

Hugh seemed to be deep in thought. “Theodore Classico... no actually, Theo. Let’s save Eden.”

It seemed that Hugh had come to see Theo as a true ally, sharing a common goal. Between the noble’s heir and the Stray Cats—people who were never meant to cross paths—a strange sense of unity was beginning to form. Theo’s heart was pounding with anticipation.

“Yeah. We’re going to take Eden back from the Eternal Vanguard.”

Dominicus was about to leave, but he paused at the doorway, possibly to say something important. “My unit will head to human territory first. Brave young men, let us meet on the other side.”

With those words, Dominicus left the room. After seeing Dominicus off, Theo felt his tension finally loosen, and exhaustion suddenly weighed heavily on his body. A carriage chase from the Centennial Ceremony, a desperate escape from the Eternal Vanguard in Gray Cat Town, a fierce battle in the forest near the mansion, and negotiations with Dominicus—considering that he had experienced all these things in just a single day, his exhaustion was only natural. Though quick-witted, Theo was still only a twelve year old boy.

“It’s been a long day, we should rest for now. At dawn, we’ll depart for human territory,” Theo told the Stray Cats.

“Yeah, got it.”

Theo thought Hugh might say something like, ‘We’re leaving immediately,’ but surprisingly, he accepted his proposal without resistance. Hugh and the other Stray Cats are vampires currently in their Cocoon Period. Perhaps it’s because of their heightened senses that they were able to perceive that the journey to rescue Eden would be a harsh one.