

## Part VI - Paradise

### 1

In the deepest part of the lowest level of Cavern District, there is an area where only the vampires of the 14th House of Vlad are allowed to enter.

Sekishu, the subordinates of the Eternal Vanguard, and Theo—who was being used as leverage against Eden—advanced deeper into the cavern path as they were guided by Eden. About an hour had passed. This cavern path was not as well-developed as the rest of Cavern District, so the rocky footing made walking difficult. There was nothing to provide light, and if not for the lanterns held by the subordinates, only darkness would have been there. Along the way, numerous traps designed to eliminate outsiders had been set up, but Eden had deactivated them using a device at the entrance. It was clear that this was a place only those who knew the secret of *Paradise* could reach, which was why it was passed down only to the head of the 14th House of Vlad. Eventually, they arrived at the innermost part of the cavern path. At this place, only a rock wall greeted them.

“...A dead end?” Sekishu asked, sounding suspicious.

“Please untie my ropes.”

Eden faced Sekishu and resolutely demanded her release.

“Do as she says.”

Though the subordinates were confused, they untied the ropes that bound Eden’s hands behind her back with Sekishu’s words.

Eden began searching for something at the dead end. After a while, she began to rub one of the rocks. Upon closer inspection, the crest of the 14th House of Vlad family was engraved there. Eden made a cut on her left thumb with her teeth and rubbed the blood that oozed out onto the crest. The sound of a device activating echoed. With a thunderous sound, the cavern path began to shake, and the rock wall in front of them opened like a door. From between the rock walls, a dazzling white light overflowed. Beyond it was the Forest of Cocoon Trees, with Cocoon Trees growing in clusters inside a large hollow.

“This is... *Paradise*...”

Sekishu, surrounded by the white light, was trembling with joy.

Sekishu and the others led Theo and Eden into the Forest of Cocoon Trees. Inside the hollow, a dazzling light was overflowing, and from deep within the forest, an eerie presence was drifting. Without hesitation, Sekishu moved deeper into the forest, and his subordinates followed him.

Deep within the Forest of Cocoon Trees, there was a spring—a deep crimson spring. It was a spring of blood. In the center there was a protruding rock, and on top of it, something was placed as if it were being enshrined—a heart. Blood continuously oozed from the heart. This flow, accumulating over a long period in the hollow of the rock, formed the spring of blood. Sekishu pushed Eden aside, who had been walking ahead, and stepped forward toward the spring. The subordinate restraining Theo discarded him as if he were no longer needed. In the process of falling, Theo's clouded consciousness began to return.

“This is...”

Still dazed, Theo couldn't understand the situation, but when he spotted Eden nearby, he fully woke up.

“Eden!” Theo called, running towards her to protect her from Sekishu and the others.

However, Sekishu paid no attention to either of them.

“The *Paradise with a Heart*... there's no doubt about it. I've finally reached the *Paradise* I've been searching for.....”

Sekishu knelt down while shedding tears. The subordinates of the Eternal Vanguard were similarly captivated by the scene, shedding tears of emotion.

Without a sound, Banri struck from behind Sekishu. Sekishu spun around and dodged it.

“Ah, Banri. It looks like you've made it here too, haven't you?”

Banri immediately took up his next offensive stance. From the entrance of the Cocoon Tree Forest, Albrecht, Rein, Hugh, the Stray Cats, and Dominicus, whose five dismembered body parts were rejoined, were coming. Isaac, who had suffered near-fatal wounds, was also leaning on Dominicus' shoulder as he came along.

Banri called out to Sekishu in an anguished voice. “Why, Sekishu? Why did you fall into the Primordial Faith!?”

Sekishu began to speak calmly, with a composed demeanor.

“.....It started with just a simple curiosity. As a hunter, I wanted to understand what vampires—the beings I killed—truly were. Nearly a thousand years ago, something happened.

A war broke out between humans and the vampires who revered TRUMP as a god, both sides fighting for the eternal life he possessed. It was the *Blood War*, a pivotal event recorded in vampire history. However, the existence of TRUMP was erased from history and the war only portrayed as a mere religious conflict between the two races. TRUMP shared the power of immortality with his kin and created the immortal army... FALSE OF VAMP. Among them, the high disciples—who were given seven hearts that would never decay as a symbol of their loyalty—later came to be known as the Seven Apostles. The war between the humans and the immortal vampire army reached horrific extremes. But at some point, when the FALSE OF VAMP suddenly disappeared from the world, the *Blood War* came to an end. Whatever happened, I don't know. However, among the vampires, there were those who were not given eternal life by TRUMP. Those who were pitiable."

"That's Nico Vlad and the others, the ones currently known as the Seven Apostles. They betrayed TRUMP, somehow erased the False from this world, and are traitors who falsely claim to be the Seven Apostles. Founded by Nico Vlad and the others, the Blood Alliance Congress spent many years hiding the truth, and eventually TRUMP's existence was forgotten, becoming just legends and fairy tales. These are the conclusions I have drawn from studying ancient texts and forbidden books from around the world."

"One day, while I was on a mission as a hunter to exterminate vampires, an opportunity arose: I met a vampire named Damian Stone who confirmed my theory. He was one of the pitiable ones who lived a thousand years ago and was never granted eternal life by TRUMP. The ideology and knowledge of Damian Stone was passed down, and vampires who have inherited his teachings continue to exist to this day. I met one of the Damian Stones... but I couldn't bring myself to kill him for the mission. To understand vampires more deeply, I falsely reported to GUILT that the vampire subject had escaped. In reality, I was hiding Damian Stone in human territory, seeking teachings about the TRUMP legend. And then, I was able to confirm that my theory was correct."

"It was just a simple curiosity... but that curiosity became fear ever since a certain day. Six years ago, in Nebula Village, Banri was horrifically killed. No-me..... in order to save you, that *Banri* was torn apart and killed right before my eyes. You asked why I fell into the Primordial Faith. Well, from that moment, I feared death... and began to seek eternal life."

"While researching the legends, I heard rumors about the treasure of eternal life passed down in the 14th House of Vlad. It is the blood that flows from TRUMP's heart. Followers of the Primordial Faith are everywhere, and Cavern District is no exception. When I learned that Eden, the daughter of the 14th House of Vlad, had escaped from Cavern District with the secret, I decided to use that opportunity. Comrades of the Primordial Faith in Gray Cat Town confirmed Eden's location and reported it to the 14th House of Vlad. In response, they sent their guard unit to reclaim her."

"And then, the secret was proven in the forest battle near the Classico mansion. The guards killed kept coming back to life, no matter how many times they were killed. It was the same for

Captain Dominicus over there. I heard from my comrades that he hadn't died even after his neck was severed, and I wanted to confirm it for myself. Captain Dominicus, I severed your limbs and decapitated you... yet here you stand, still alive. Eternal life *truly* exists. I don't want to die..... I'm terrified of death. The thought of dying as horribly as Banri did is so terrifying that it almost drove me insane! But now, eternal life is right in front of me...."

Why did Sekishu fall into the Primordial Faith? Even after hearing the entire story regarding that question, Banri showed a disappointed face to Sekishu. Sekishu and the subordinates of the Eternal Vanguard then started heading toward the spring of blood.

Dominicus shouted, "You are mistaken! Eternal life does not exist!"

"What are you talking about? You—the one who doesn't die no matter how many times I kill you?" Sekishu and his subordinates entered the spring, scooping up the blood with their hands. "This is... eternal life..... the gospel we have been seeking."

Sekishu brought the blood to his mouth and drank it in one go. The subordinates did the same. Then, they scooped it up again and again, fervently consuming it.

"What is this...." Dominicus said, face turning pale as he was visibly shaken.

Something seemed wrong. The subordinates who had just drunk the blood clutched their chests and began to suffer.

"Ugh.....!"

"Gah...!"

Sekishu's face was also becoming one of agony. Hugh and the others, watching this, were bewildered, not understanding what was happening.

"What the? What's happening?!" Hugh asked.

"It's the *burden* of eternity!!" Dominicus shouted, his voice a mix of anger and sorrow. "Eternity is far too vast for those who are alive! In order to alleviate that burden, one must drink a small amount of that blood diluted a hundred times. Only then can they remain in a temporary state of immortality for about an hour. Our guard unit is only allowed to drink it just before a combat mission. Living beings absolutely cannot endure the burden of eternity!!"

"Ugaaaaahhh!!"

"Gaaaaaaahhh!!"

As the subordinates' agony reached its peak, the first one exploded as if rupturing from within, and their body tore apart into a spray of blood. Then, a second one ruptured the same way, their body bursting into viscera—spilling like a flower of blood on the ground. Theo and the others, witnessing it firsthand, could only watch in silence. At the same time, they realized the meaning of the burden of eternity that Dominicus had spoken of.

Realizing their own near futures, the subordinates became frantic in a state of agony and fear. But it was already too late. The third, fourth, and fifth subordinates exploded one after another into viscera, blood splattering like flower petals. Seeing this in his suffering, Sekishu despaired.

“No..... no no no no!! I don't want this... I don't want to *die*! Help..... someone help me..... Banri..... please save me!!!”

Sekishu's agony overwhelmed him. His scream of death echoed throughout the *Paradise with the Heart*.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!!!!”

Sekishu collapsed into the spring of blood. Everyone present covered their eyes, imagining the tragic end that would soon unfold. But Sekishu didn't burst apart like the others had. Sekishu embraced himself, as if confirming his own body. He felt his heartbeat and breath. He was still alive. He hadn't died. Sekishu—having turned from a human to a vampire—endured the burden of eternity. While lying face down in the spring of blood, Sekishu laughed.

“Ku...ahaha...hahahahahaha!!”

Sekishu rose unsteadily from the spring of blood.

“.....Eternity has chosen me. Eternal life is now mine!! With this, I can live forever. I can continue living for eternity..... I have become..... TRUMP.....”

“Sekishu.....!!”

Banri immediately slashed directly at Sekishu. Sekishu didn't even try to dodge, and his head was split open from the top of his skull to his lower jaw. But Sekishu didn't die. Even with his head split open like a flower, Sekishu didn't die. Banri was grabbed by the neck and his face was plunged into the spring of blood.

~~“Now, Banri. Let's be freed from the fear of death together. I'll give you eternal life too...”~~

Sekishu was saying something, but his words couldn't be understood because his head was split open.

Albrecht, Rein, and Dominicus immediately launched a fierce attack on Sekishu. Without even trying to avoid it, Sekishu took Albrecht's fists, Rein's slashes, and Dominicus' blows, utterly unconcerned. Dominicus swung his iron club upward from below, and Sekishu's body went flying into the spring of blood with a splash. Rein went to pull Banri out of the spring of blood.

"You haven't drunk any of the blood, have you?" Rein asked.

Banri spat while checking his own body. "Hahh... since my body isn't bursting, it looks like I somehow managed to survive!!"

"It's not over yet!!" Albrecht called, urging everyone to stay alert.

Theo, Eden, and the Stray Cats couldn't approach, paralyzed by fear.

"He's coming again!!" Dominicus shouted, preparing his iron club.

Sekishu, who had sunk into the spring, stood up, his entire body dyed bright red. His split head and slashed body healed while the open cuts bubbled and foamed.

".....Amazing..... how wonderful eternal life is....."

Sekishu, drenched in fresh blood, slowly walked toward Albrecht and the others from the spring of blood. Albrecht, Rein, Dominicus, and Banri all launched a coordinated attack, but Sekishu was, again, unbothered by this.

He grabbed Albrecht by the head and slammed him into the ground.

Next, he delivered a powerful kick to Rein's abdomen.

After that, he seized Dominicus' iron club and struck him in the face.

Lastly, Sekishu went behind Banri and strangled him in a bare-handed hold. The four of them were quickly rendered incapable of fighting.

Sekishu then slowly walked toward the fearful Theo, Eden, and the Stray Cats.

"Ah right..... if you vampires in the Cocoon Period become immortal..... you could stay in the Cocoon Period forever..... an endless and eternal Cocoon Period....."

Theo, upon seeing Sekishu's gaze as he spoke, realized something.

Sekishu was no longer sane.

At that moment, a shadow rushed in and punched Sekishu across the cheek with a fist. The intense blow made Sekishu stagger, and he dropped to his knees on the ground.

“To mock a finite life... you lowly being.”

It was Dino who struck Sekishu.

“Father...” Theo uttered, looking straight at his father who stood before him.

Sekishu unsteadily rose back up and picked up the dagger beside him that had belonged to Banri. Dino raised both fists and assumed a stance, stepping toward Sekishu. Sekishu swung the dagger, aiming for Dino’s neck, heart, and other vital areas. Dino, with agile steps, avoided the dagger while striking Sekishu with his fists. *Jab, jab, straight, hook, body, body, uppercut.* However, Sekishu didn’t fall over. Sekishu countered with a roundhouse kick to Dino’s shoulder, causing him to lose his balance. Taking advantage of the brief opening, Sekishu tried to stab Dino’s heart. At that moment, something shot through the back of Sekishu’s hand. The impact caused Sekishu to drop the dagger. It was an iron ball from Hugh’s slingshot.

“I- I did it!” Hugh said, though his legs were shaking uncontrollably.

“.....Mischief isn’t allowed, is it.....”

The moment Sekishu switched his target to Hugh, Dino stepped in front of Sekishu and delivered a punch right to his face. Without moving an inch, Sekishu grabbed Dino’s neck with both hands, choking him.

“.....gu.....!”

At that moment, Eden had circled behind Sekishu. She jumped onto his back, entwining her legs and clinging to him, using both hands to grip his head tightly.

“Eden!! Why?!”

Theo, at the limit of exhaustion, screamed as he gathered his last ounce of strength. While choking Dino’s neck, Sekishu showed an expression of disappointment.

“.....Children really shouldn’t interfere with adults.”

“What are you doing, Eden!?” Martin shouted. Sandro and Monty were also confused, not understanding Eden’s actions.

“‘I’m going to steal all of his memories!!’” Eden declared.

Theo and the Stray Cats were shocked by her words. Sekishu's face suddenly turned to one of panic. Theo tried to stop it, shouting toward Eden.

"No, Eden! If you do that, you'll..."

Eden laughed. "Yeah. If I do something like that, my head might explode. I might even go insane and die. But I have to do something about this, right?"

Sekishu flung Dino away and tried to get Eden off his back.

"Stop! Stop it!!" Sekishu yelled desperately.

"I won't stop! I'm going to steal all the memories you've had since the day you were born!!"

Eden focused her consciousness on the palm that was touching Sekishu's head. The next moment, Sekishu's body jerked and he began convulsing. Eden let go and slid off of Sekishu's back.

Sekishu—Sekishu became an empty shell of memories, losing his consciousness and collapsing right there.

"Eden! Are you okay!?"

Hugh and the Stray Cats rushed toward Eden. Theo followed after them.

"I'm..." Eden started, "I....."

Suddenly, she began to writhe on the ground, holding her head and screaming in agony.

**"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!"**

"It's too overwhelming for her brain! At this rate, Eden is going to go insane and die!!" Theo shouted.

"What do you expect me to do about that!?" Hugh shot back.

Hugh and the Stray Cats were powerless, unable to do anything. Theo searched for knowledge to resolve the situation from the countless books he had read. During that time, Eden continued to scream in agony.

"What should I do? How should I.... how can I save Eden!? I've read so many books, but I don't have the knowledge to save Eden..... wait.... knowledge?"

Theo came up with something.



“.....!!”

Eden continued to suffer.

“At this rate, Eden is going to die!!” Monty sobbed. Martin and Sandro also started crying.

Theo crouched right next to Eden and gently touched her cheek. “Eden... listen carefully. Give me all the memories you stole from Sekishu.”

The Stray Cats were shocked upon hearing those words.

“If you do that, then the same thing will happen to you!” Hugh said, concerned about Theo’s safety.

“It’s okay. You see, I want to become a novelist in the future. To do that, I need a lot of knowledge. Eden, I will convert all the memories in your head into knowledge, and I will take on that knowledge.”

“How do you even know something like that will work!?” Hugh continued.

Like the other Stray Cats, Hugh started crying.

“I don’t. I just have a dream, a dream to become a novelist. And... I like Eden. That’s all,” Theo said. Once again, Theo spoke to Eden. “Now then, Eden. Trust in me. Give me Sekishu’s memories...”

Eden, while writhing in agony, looked at Theo.

“...Th.....Theo.....”

Eden believed in the boy named Theo.

Eden believed in Theo’s dream.

Eden believed in Theo’s feelings.

Eden.... Eden handed over all of Sekishu’s memories to Theo’s heart.

At that moment, a voice was heard—

*“Wow Theo, you’re incredible.”*

Time stopped in the *Paradise with a Heart*.

No, it might have been just a fleeting moment inside Theo's heart.

In front of Theo, a small stuffed animal came pitter-pattering over. It was a small teddy bear plush toy.

"Yeah, as expected, you're amazing, Theo."

The bunny, the mouse, and the cat stuffed animals also came pitter-pattering over.

"To go that far for the girl you like, huh?"

"As expected of our Theo. I'm proud of you."

"When you grow up, you might become a great novelist."

Theo smiled. "When I become an adult, I won't be able to see you all anymore."

"It's okay. Even if we can't see each other, we'll still be together," said the bear.

"I'm really looking forward to the adult Theo," said the bunny.

"I'll always support you, Theo," said the mouse.

"Well then, looks like it's goodbye for now, Theo," said the cat.

"Goodbye..... my beloved stuffed animals....."

—Theo's consciousness faded there.

How much time had passed?

How deeply had he been asleep?

How much had he made everyone worry?

How much had he made Eden cry?

Theo opened his eyes. His head was terribly heavy, but his heart was light and clear. Suddenly, when he looked around, everyone was looking at him. Eden, Hugh, Martin, Sandro, Monty, Albrecht, Rein, and Banri. Everyone had been waiting for Theo to wake up. Eden, crying, hugged Theo.

“.....Theo..... I..... I...”

Theo gently stroked Eden’s head as she cried uncontrollably.

“Thank you, Eden. For believing in me.”

All of the Stray Cats cried while hugging Theo.

“Theo!!”

Hugh, Martin, Sandro, and Monty all hugged Theo tightly.

“What the hell did you do!?” Hugh said first.

“You could’ve died, you know!” Martin added.

“But I can only say thank you for saving Eden!” Sandro thanked him.

“Theo! We love you!!” Monty cried.

Theo was almost crushed by the hugs of Eden and the Stray Cats.

“Y- yeah, I love all of you too. But it’s getting a little hard to breathe, so I’d be really happy if you could loosen up a bit,” Theo tried.

Albrecht knelt before Theo.

“Young Master Theodore, you were magnificent,” Albrecht praised.

“Thank you, Albrecht. And thank you, too, Rein. If it weren’t for the both of you, we might have been killed somewhere already. I really appreciate you two,” Theo said.

“No, I should be the one thanking you, Master Theodore. It has been an honor to share this adventure with you. However, there is just one thing I ask of you—please allow me to be worried about the future,” Rein said.

“...This is about the Primordial Faith, right?” Theo asked.

“Yes. You may only be twelve years old, but you’re very clever. As you may already know, the thoughts and ideals of the Primordial Faith have been imprinted in your mind. Please be careful. I hope you don’t become deceived like Sekishu, and fall for eternity,” Rein advised.

“Got it... to hell with eternity!” Theo shouted.

Albrecht and Rein made shocked faces.

“I’ll do my best to live my limited life to the fullest. Also, I have a request for both of you,” Theo said.

“A request, you say?” Albrecht repeated, looking puzzled. Rein made a similar expression.

“Albrecht and Rein, could you stop calling me ‘Young Master Theodore’ or ‘Master Theodore’? I’d prefer if you just called me Theo now that we’ve become friends.”

Albrecht and Rein exchanged looks, then turned to Theo and smiled.

“Understood, Theo. But please allow me to continue serving the Classico family as before,” Albrecht requested.

“When we return to the Central City Cluster, I will resume my role as Sir Dali’s assistant. However, I would love to have another thrilling adventure with you someday,” Rein replied.

“Thank you... Albrecht and Rein.”

Isaac, carried by Dominicus, approached Theo and the others.

“Sir Isaac...”

Dominicus knelt in front of Theo, still carrying Isaac. Theo and Isaac’s eyes met. Isaac, wounded by the stab from behind by Sekishu, seemed to be beyond saving.

“.....Theodore Classico..... *I saw it..... your Cocoon Period.....*” Isaac said.

“Did I handle my Cocoon Period well?” Theo asked.

“Ah, *you* did well. It was a truly magnificent Cocoon Period..... it's a shame *I* can't add it to *my* collection..... but *I* must fulfill my promise..... *I'll* return *your* father to *you*..... and entrust Eden to *you*.....”

Theo tightly gripped Isaac's hand. “Sir Isaac, it's a shame I can't become part of your collection.”

“Hahaha..... it's amusing that *you* can joke at a time like this..... Theo..... please take care of *my* daughter.”

“...Yes, I will,” Theo promised.

“.....Eden..... is Eden here?” Isaac called for her.

Eden stepped forward in front of Isaac, along with the Stray Cats.

“I'm here, Father,” Eden said.

Isaac took Eden's hand. “.....*My* daughter Eden, born from the depths of death..... live *your* life freely in this world...”

With those words, Isaac took his last breath.

Dominicus stood up, carrying Isaac's body. “Kid! I also have a request. Please take care of Eden!”

“Dominicus... what will happen to the 14th House of Vlad?” Theo asked.

“Sir Isaac has many children besides the eldest son and Eden. One of them will likely succeed him. While I still live, I will bring an end to Cavern District.”

“Can I come visit Cavern District again sometime?”

Theo said this from the bottom of his heart.

“I don't mind at all! As far as the Blood Alliance Congress is concerned, this will still remain as an insignificant hostile Manor territory! Now, I must prepare for Isaac's cavern funeral. I look forward to the day we meet again, boy! Hahahahaha!!”

And with that boisterous laugh, Dominicus left.

Eden took Dino's hand, concentrating her consciousness into her palm. The time had come to return the memories stolen from him.

Dino suddenly made a startled expression as if waking up. He remembered who he was. He remembered that he was the head of the Classico family. He remembered why he had come here. He remembered where he needed to return to. He remembered everything that must never be forgotten. When he looked around, he saw his capable butler serving him.

And then, he saw his son.

"Theodore..."

Dino stood up and walked over to Theo. Unlike before, Dino didn't avert his gaze away, instead looking at Theo intently. Theo also looked back at Dino without dropping his gaze.

"Well done, Theodore. I am proud of you."

"Father... I was praised by you for the first time," Theo said in surprise.

"Is that so? I'm sorry for that. You've endured well for twelve years," Dino said.

"It's fine, it was just twelve years," Theo forgave.

"I wonder, is it still possible...?"

"What do you mean?" Theo asked quizzically.

"I have decided that we will properly become parent and child."

"I still don't think I understand. You and I have always been father and son, and we will be forever."

"....."

Without saying anything, Dino gently placed his hand on Theo's head.

"Thank you for allowing me to be your father."

Theo was deeply moved by his father's words.

".....Do you remember what you said when your memories were inside Eden?" Theo asked.

“Yes. When the stolen memories were returned, those memories came along as an extra.”

“You said, ‘The Classico family will end with my generation’,” Theo quoted.

“You don’t intend to succeed the head of the Classico family, right? In that case, it will naturally end that way. I heard you want to be a novelist. Sir Isaac taught me something valuable at his end. Theodore, live freely in your own world. I will fulfill the role of the head of the Classico family.”

Hearing that, Theo got lost in his thoughts. No, he was trying to convey to his father the conclusion he had reached after much thought.

“I...”

Dino quietly waited for his son to say what he was about to say.

“...I turned away from the reality of being a vampire of the Classico family and escaped into the world of books. It’s because I didn’t think I could become the head of the family like you, Father. But I’ll stop running away now. Eventually, I’ll succeed the head of the Classico family.”

“Are you saying you’re giving up on your dream of being a novelist?” Dino inquired.

“No. I spoke with you from when you were a child within a shared illusion. You gave up your dream of becoming a mountaineer and became the head of the Classico family. When you said you would end the Classico family with your generation, I thought of the *Nursery*.” Theo reflected on his time from back then. “Five years ago... at the Delico family’s *Nursery*, you aimed to balance your mission with raising children with Sir Dali and the others. I thought it would be impossible,” Theo admitted.

“Yes, it’s hard to say we managed to balance those two responsibilities. In reality, the *Nursery* was a mess,” Dino said.

“I don’t think so. There were many things back then, and I was even kidnapped, but I think all of you managed to balance both your duties and parenting properly. So, I’ll be able to balance it as well. I will grow up, pass through the Cocoon Period, and eventually become the head of the Classico family in the Blood Alliance Congress, as well as a novelist. I won’t give up on balancing both my duties and my dream,” Theo declared.

Albrecht helped Dino come to a hopeful conclusion. “From this incident, I’ve learned a lot from Young Master Theodore and the Stray Cats here. I am now looking forward to the new era of vampires that they will create.”

Dino closed his eyes, deeply moved. “Yes, that’s right,” he said, looking at Theo and the Stray Cats again. “I look forward to your future.”

“....Yes!!” Theo replied with all his strength.

The Stray Cats ran towards Theo. The first to jump on him was Hugh.

“Theo! You’re really something else!!” Hugh was moved to tears.

“I thought you were just some aristocratic kid!” It seemed that Martin was completely enamored with Theo.

“You really are amazing!” Sandro said, with respect in his gaze.

“We’re friends now, right?” Monty said with a smile.

Finally, Eden approached Theo.

“....”

She took Theo’s hand, looking uncomfortable.

“Actually..... I have memories I need to return to you, Theo.”

“Huh? You stole my memories too? When did that happen!?”

“When we first met at the Centennial Ceremony..... right after you asked my name, I touched your hand and stole your memory.”

“....What kind of memories did you steal from me?”

“As for what kind of memories..... I’ll return them to you right now.”

While touching Theo’s hand, Eden returned the memories. Theo began recalling the memories that had been stolen from him at that time, without him knowing.

...

*“I introduced myself. Now it’s your turn.”*

*“Hm... right. My name is Eden.”*

*“....Eden?”*

*Eden was staring intently at Theo.*

*“Huh? What’s wrong? Is there something on my face?”*



*"I've met you before."*

*"Huh? When? Where?"*

*"Five years ago... in Gray Cat Town..."*

*Hearing this, Theo tried to recall what happened five years ago.*

*Sir Dali had been so focused on the infant UI that Raphael had become jealous. Raphael said he would 'get rid of UI,' and tried to leave, so everyone in the Nursery chased after him, trying to bring him back. But they got lost and ended up in Gray Cat Town. When they were about to be attacked by bad people there, Theo, being the oldest, thought he had to protect everyone.*

*So, he said to the adults, "I'll take care of these thugs myself!"*

*Eden told him that she watched the events unfold from a bit further away.*

*"You were about the same age as me, but you were trying to stand up to the adults to protect the younger kids. I haven't been able to forget about you since that time."*

*"Huh? So, you've been thinking about me since five years ago.....?"*

*"I'm not sure. It's really embarrassing... forget it! I don't know you, and you don't know me. So forget what I just said!"*

...

Theo began to recall the forgotten memory. The memory of when he first met Eden at the Centennial Ceremony. The memory had been stolen before he knew it, but as a result, Theo didn't harbor any negative feelings toward Eden. Theo felt an unexpected feeling of exhilaration, as if he had found the last piece of a puzzle he had lost. Theo couldn't help but laugh out loud. Eden saw Theo laughing, and looked embarrassed.

*"So, does that mean Theo was Eden's first love?"*

Martin said that, not reading the room.

*"What's this!? So, it was decided from the start, huh!?"* Hugh immediately deflated.

*"I'm sorry..... I lied about not stealing Theo's memory,"* Eden apologized.

*"No, it's fine. You returned it properly. Even after you return stolen memories, Eden is still Eden. I've said before that I'm like a patch-work monster made of my memories of knowledge."*

“Like a monster from a horror novel in the human world....” Eden murmured.

Theo returned the grip of the hand Eden was holding and looked straight into her eyes.

“Eden, you’re not a monster. Let’s make lots of memories from now on. In our world, memories that are just for us.”

“We Stray Cats are with you too!” Hugh said cheerfully, as he and the Stray Cats stepped in between the two. While playfully putting Theo in a headlock, Hugh quietly added so that only Theo could hear. “I still don’t plan to lose.” After having his headlock undone, Theo looked at Hugh.

“Ah, of course!” Theo replied. Then, he stood in front of Eden and took her hand.

“Eden, I’m glad I met you.”

Theo smiled.

“Yeah! I’m glad I met you too, Theo.”

Eden started smiling too. It was a smile that wasn’t stolen from anyone, but was genuinely her own.

The adults—Dino, Albrecht, and Rein—were watching over her and the boys.

All around them, the Forest of Cocoon Trees radiated a beautiful white light, continuing to shine as though nothing horrific had taken place. From that scene, Banri’s figure had disappeared long before anyone had known.