The sound of bells rang out across Cavern District through speaking pipes.

"What's going on?" Rein stepped outside the inn to check the situation.

Theo and the others also stepped outside. From the inn overlooking the Central Shaft, the situation in Cavern District was clearly visible. The residents were in a state of panic, fleeing toward the lower levels. In contrast, armed guards were heading toward the upper levels. Dominicus and his guards, looking frantic, came rushing over. Dominicus was wielding an iron club larger than himself, ready for battle.

"We're under attack by those black-robed people!! It's such a large-scale attack that at this point we might as well call it a war! From this moment on, Cavern District will be on the defensive. All of you, take shelter in the lower levels!!" Dominicus urged.

"Their target is Eden! We have to protect her!!" Theo shouted, and Dominicus showed a pained expression.

He seemed to be deeply troubled. After pondering for a while, Dominicus shook off his hesitation and looked at Theo.

"Kid, as much as it displeases me, Cavern District needs all of its guards to intercept the attack. There is only so much we can do to protect Eden." Dominicus handed Theo the key that hung from his waist. "Eden is imprisoned deep in the lower levels of the prison. Take her and flee from Cavern District!!"

Theo tightly gripped the key he had received. "Understood… Dominicus, please protect Cavern District!"

"That goes without saying!!"

After that, Dominicus led his guards towards the upper levels. The black-robed forces of the Eternal Vanguard had already invaded the middle levels where the inn was located. Fights had broken out all across Cavern District. The Eternal Vanguard appeared to outnumber them. The guards killed the black-robed attackers, and the black-robed attackers killed the guards. It was a back-and-forth slaughter. Even when the guards of the corps were killed, they were revived almost immediately and returned to battle. It was the same sight Theo had witnessed when Eden and the others were attacked near the Classico mansion. This was the effect of the Anti-Death Medicine Dominicus had spoken about. Seeing that, Theo recalled the words of the black-robed figures from before.

"Those people saw the revived guards back then and called them an immortal army… False. The guards of the 14th House of Vlad don't die even when they're killed!"

Rein assessed the battle situation inside the cavern. "However, we're at an overwhelming disadvantage in numbers. How long can they hold out?"

"Let's go, Young Master Theodore. We must protect Lady Eden," Albrecht said.

"Yeah, let's go!"

Theo and the others took off running toward the lower levels where Eden was. All of the cavern paths were in a state of chaos, filled with panicked residents fleeing and guards heading into battle. Witnessing the chaos firsthand, Theo and the others nearly got swept up in it. They kept bumping into residents and guards, making it nearly impossible to walk properly. Even so, Theo and the others managed to weave their way through the cavern paths, somehow pushing forward.

…

The cavern paths of Cavern District were as complex as a maze. Maybe the residents knew their way around, but visitors like Theo and the others would quickly get lost. However, thanks to Martin's Cocoon Period symptom of eidetic memory, they could take the shortest route to the prison. As they navigated through the chaotic and complex cavern paths of Cavern District, they once again emerged into the Central Shaft. The black-robed army had already extended their reach to the lower levels. As soon as the black-robed figures spotted Theo and the others, they attacked without hesitation.

Albrecht sent an enemy flying with a punch, while Rein swiped his opponent's dagger and instantly cut him down. A black-robed enemy grabbed onto Theo, but Hugh kicked them away, sending them plummeting to an even lower level. Sandro ended up tripping and falling, and a black-robed enemy lunged at him. Then, out of nowhere, a large number of cats appeared and began scratching the black-robed enemy all over. Taking advantage of the opening, Albrecht smashed his fist into the enemy's face, knocking them out.

"Who would've thought that being liked by animals as a Cocoon Period symptom would actually come in handy here...?" Hugh said, deeply moved.

A dozen or so black-robed figures launched another attack, surrounding Theo and the others.

"Mischief is *not* allowed, you know." Cracking his knuckles, Albrecht displayed an expression of anger unlike anything before.

Meanwhile, Rein held an ice-cold expression on his face as he pointed the tip of his dagger at their enemies. Then, the black-robed figures suddenly became frightened of something. But it wasn't Albrecht or Rein.

"What is that...?!"

A great golden serpent was swimming through the air of the Central Shaft. They were witnessing a shared illusion. As the black-robed figures were distracted by the giant serpent, Albrecht and Rein seized the opportunity to wipe them out. Rein flicked the blood off his dagger as he spoke.

"There are believers of the Primordial Faith among both vampires and humans, but I've heard that the majority of the followers are vampires—perhaps because the object of worship, TRUMP, is meant to be a vampire. If most of the Eternal Vanguard here are vampires, then it wouldn't be surprising for some of them to enter the Cocoon Period in Cavern District. Whether that will be an advantage or disadvantage in this battle, I cannot say."

Hugh urged everyone to move. "Oi! If we keep wasting time, those bastards will get to Eden first!" As he started running off, Martin called out to stop him.

"No, Hugh, that's the wrong way!!"

Hugh, who had been stopped, spun around and jabbed Martin. "This place is like a damn maze! How the hell am I supposed to know which way to go?!"

Ignoring Hugh's irrational fury, Theo turned to Martin and made a request. "If Hugh leads, we'll just end up lost. Martin, you take the lead."

"Sure, I got it! But you didn't have to jab me!" Martin directed at Hugh.

"Shut it! We gotta move!!"

Martin took off running, and everyone followed after him.

…

The prison section, located even deeper underground in the Central Shaft, was also structured like a maze. An outsider who knew nothing could easily get lost and might take an entire night to find their way out. However, among their group is a vampire with a unique symptom of the Cocoon Period. Eventually Monty—with his keen sense of smell—took over as the guide, replacing Martin, who had been leading them with his eidetic memory until then.

"The smell of blood is getting stronger and stronger. So many people are dying in Cavern District… it's making Eden's scent harder to track…"

Even as he said that, Monty concentrated on his sense of smell. Amidst the overwhelming mix of scents filling Cavern District—those of residents, plants and animals, the various foods and drinks being sold in stores, and the fresh blood now spilling from the attack—Monty managed to single out one scent.

"This way! I can smell Eden from this cavern path!"

Monty followed the scent along the cavern path, and everyone else followed behind him. After turning right, they turned left. After turning left, they turned right again, proceeding steadily deeper into the labyrinth of a prison. Perhaps because of the urgency, Monty moved with an unexpectedly fast pace that didn't match his huge body. Theo and the others desperately followed, trying to keep him in sight.

"It's here!" Monty announced, stopping in front of an iron door.

Theo and the Stray Cats, who had been following, also gathered around Monty. Albrecht and Rein were on alert, watching the rear for any potential enemy pursuit. Perhaps because they were deep inside the prison, the sounds of battle and the accompanying shouts from Cavern District didn't reach this far. Theo took the key he got from Dominicus and slid it into the door's keyhole, turning it. The lock released with a sharp sound.

"It's unlocked!"

Theo tried to open the door, but it was made of thick steel and had an unusually heavy weight. He put his own weight against the door to try to open it, but for a twelve year old, small-framed Theo, the iron door wouldn't budge.

"Hey, let us help too!" Hugh said, and the Stray Cats joined Theo in trying to open the door. "Come on! Put more strength into it!" Hugh urged, and everyone stuck to the iron door, pouring all their strength into it.

The thick door slowly opened, and finally, a gap large enough for a person to get through appeared. Exhausted, Theo and the Stray Cats collapsed to the ground with a heavy sigh.

"Hahh!!"

Even though he was exhausted, Theo got to his feet and entered the cell where Eden was.

"Eden!"

"Theo!"

Eden ran toward Theo and leapt into his arms, hugging him tightly. Without strength, Theo collapsed into Eden's embrace on the ground, but the joy of their reunion was greater than the momentary fall.

"Did you come to get me?" Eden asked.

"Yeah! Those guys in black robes are after you again. We need to escape from here!"

Hugh poked his face in from the gap in the door. "Oi, is Eden in there?"

"Yeah, she's safe!" Theo confirmed.

"Then hurry up! We need to escape from Cavern District!"

Theo, who had fallen down on his backside, stood up and extended his right hand to Eden.

"Eden, can you run?"

"Yeah!" Eden nodded firmly.

"Alright, let's go!"

Theo took Eden's hand and started running toward the exit of the prison.

Guided by Martin's eidetic memory, they ran back through the cavern path, leaving the prison area and heading toward the Central Shaft. During this time, the attacks from the black-robed enemies showed no sign of stopping. There was no end in sight to the battle. Even Albrecht and Rein, who were fighting while protecting Theo and the Stray Cats, were clearly showing signs of exhaustion. After passing through the cavern path and emerging into the Central Shaft, the battle had already intensified significantly. Those from the guard unit could be seen everywhere, being killed one after another by the black-robed enemies, only to be resurrected and killed again. Death and life were swirling in Cavern District.

The golden serpent was still swimming through the air, which signified the safety of Dino, who was somewhere in Cavern District. Theo felt relief for a moment at this, but new black-robed enemies soon began attacking in droves. Theo also realized that the enemy was radiating an eerie killing intent. Among Theo's group was Eden, the target of the black-robed enemies. Their plan was to kill everyone and kidnap her. Albrecht, Rein, and the Stray Cats fought back against them, protecting Theo and Eden. In the midst of the chaotic battle, Albrecht was tackled into a wall by a large black-robed enemy, coughing up blood from the impact. He had injured his internal organs. Rein was also being overwhelmed by the swift movements of another enemy, his body slashed and bleeding.

"Enough already! You damn bastard!" Hugh shouted as a battle cry.

The Stray Cats leaped at the large black-robed enemy who was trying to deliver the finishing blow to Albrecht. However, the large man easily ripped them off with one hand and threw them aside. The Stray Cats were slammed to the ground, and couldn't immediately get up as they groaned in pain. The large enemy and the other swift black-robed figure then turned their attention to Theo and Eden, chasing after them. The black-robed enemies had their sights set on Eden, their objective being her retrieval. The two adversaries leaped at them. Eden instinctively crouched down, and Theo threw himself over her in an effort to protect her. In the next moment, both the large and the swift black-robed enemy collapsed with a thud. It all happened in the blink of an eye, and both seemed to be dead. Someone had taken them down from behind. The dim light of the Cocoon Trees softly created a backlight, casting a shadow that revealed a figure.

"Hey there. Looks like both of you are safe."

Standing there was the hunter Banri. Theo was surprised to see that he was here in Cavern District.

"Banri! How are you here...?" Theo wondered.

"I have some business to take care of. This doesn't concern you," Banri answered.

Eden stood in front of Banri. "Thanks for helping us. Sadly, we won't be able to repay you right now, though."

"I was just looking for someone and happened to be passing by, that's all. I'll be going now, so the rest is up to you guys. See ya." After saying that, Banri left with a scowl.

However, the attack on Cavern District by the Eternal Vanguard was far from over. Even though they'd just narrowly escaped death, a new group of black-robed enemies appeared and surrounded Theo and Eden. Albrecht and Rein, with their injured bodies, acted as a shield for Theo and Eden as they faced off against their enemies.

"Well then, shall we make one more effort? Can you do it, Sir Rein?" Albrecht turned.

"Yes. A scratch like this causes me no trouble at all. As for you, I can see you've taken quite a bit of damage. Are you alright?" Rein replied.

"This kind of thing is no problem at all!" Albrecht answered.

Albrecht and Rein, working together, counterattacked the charging black-robed enemies. Finally, the Stray Cats, having recovered from their pain, joined in to help Albrecht and Rein, and Hugh strained his voice to shout.

"Theo! Take Eden and run! We'll handle things here!"

"But...!!"

"Theo! We've survived in Gray Cat Town. No one can outlast us! Believe in the Stray Cats!"

Theo took Hugh's words to heart. "Got it! I'll leave this to everyone!!"

When Theo looked around, he saw the minecart station, which was the main means of transportation in Cavern District. Theo took Eden's hand and boarded one.

"Let's go, Eden.

"Yeah!"

Theo moved the hand-bar pump up and down to start the minecart. Moving the heavy pump with a child's strength—especially going uphill, not downhill—was an extremely difficult task. Theo thought that if he kept moving like this his arms might tear off, but even so, he continued moving the pump with all his strength. Desperately pushing the minecart forward, Theo climbed the rails laid out around the Central Shaft's vertical tunnel, heading toward the upper levels. The black-robed enemies were also trying to pursue Eden, riding minecarts from all directions, both from the upper and lower levels. Behind them, a minecart with two black-robed enemies on it

was closing the distance. One was rowing the pump and the other was holding shamshir curved swords in both hands. Due to the difference in strength between a child and an adult, the distance between the two minecarts kept getting shorter.

"Theo! Look at that!" Eden was looking around the Central Shaft.

From the walls of the tunnel, countless glass angels were emerging. It was a beautiful sight, as if pure white, innocent flowers were blooming wildly. Theo recognized the glass angels.

"It's Sir Isaac's shared illusion…"

The army of glass angels simultaneously fired arrows from the bows they were holding. At the same time, the black-robed enemy with the shamshir curved swords leapt toward Theo and Eden's minecart. The arrow from the shared illusion pierced the black-robed enemy, who immediately lost consciousness. After crashing into the side of their minecart, he fell into the lower levels of the tunnel. Other black-robed enemies fighting all over Cavern District were also hit by the arrows of the shared illusion, their psyche harmed, and they fainted one after another. The ones that didn't lose consciousness after being pierced by the arrows were likely human.

When Theo looked down to the lower levels, he spotted Isaac standing at the entrance of the cavern path leading to the audience room. From behind Isaac, a black-robbed enemy approached, stabbing him in the back with a dagger.

"Sir Isaac!" Theo shouted, but he couldn't do anything because the distance between him and Isaac was too great.

At the same time Isaac was stabbed, the shared illusion of the glass angels shattered and faded away. When the black-robbed enemy who had stabbed Isaac removed his mask—it was Sekishu.

On the rails in front of Theo and Eden's mine cart, an even bigger black-robbed enemy was lying in wait than the one from earlier.

"We're going to crash!! Eden, hold on to me!!" Theo called.

"....hm!!" Eden clung to Theo's arm.

The giant black-robed enemy stopped the minecart, which was moving at considerable speed, head-on. Theo and Eden were violently jerked inside the minecart from the impact. It was incredible strength, terrifyingly so. It had to be impossible for a human. This new enemy was probably a vampire that either avoided the arrows of the glass angels or endured the damage to his psyche despite being struck. When the giant black-robed enemy concentrated his power, his arms swelled up, becoming nearly twice as large. The blood vessels in his upper arms stood out, densely packed. The iron minecart that Theo and Eden were sitting in creaked and

groaned, warping in shape. In the next moment, the giant black-robed enemy threw their minecart horizontally with his impossible strength. It crashed into the wall of a cavern path, causing Theo and Eden to be knocked from the cart. Both of them, who had fallen and hit the ground below, were unable to move immediately due to the pain.

The giant black-robed enemy and the others who had been chasing them surrounded Theo and Eden. Albrecht, Rein, the Stray Cats, and anyone else who could help protect them weren't there. For a moment, Theo was overcome by the fear of death, but greater emotions soon surpassed that fear. There was no one else there but him. Therefore, he had to protect Eden. Theo's survival instinct was directly connected to the knowledge he had gained from the countless books he had read. Theo, who was on the verge of death, remembered a passage. The word came from an ancient vampire tradition, passed from generation to generation to signify a pledge to those whom one protects.

"...I am the guardian," Theo murmured quietly, as if to motivate himself.

After that, Theo pulled Eden close and hugged her tightly.

"I have to protect... I have to protect... I have to protect... I *will* protect Eden...!!"

The black-robed enemies leaped at Theo and Eden mercilessly, all at once. At that moment, a voice was heard.

…

"Long time no see, Theo."

…

Time stopped in Cavern District. No, this might have been just a brief moment happening within Theo's heart. In front of Theo, a small stuffed animal came walking. It was the little teddy bear stuffed animal from five years ago, an illusion created from his Premature Cocoon Period Syndrome.

"Long time no see, Theo."

The bunny, mouse, and cat stuffed animals also came walking over.

"You've grown so much, Theo."

"To protect a girl you like, you're really admirable!"

"Yeah, that's really impressive. As expected of our Theo!"

Theo smiled. "You used to say nothing but mean things back then."

"It's because Theo is doing his best, that we should help too," said the bear.

"Hmm... I wonder if there's anything we can do," said the bunny.

"It's a tough problem, but let's try doing as much as we can," said the mouse.

"I wonder what we can do... oh! I just thought of a good idea!" said the cat.

The cat gathered the other stuffed animals and seemed to be discussing something. The other toys seemed to agree with the cat's idea.

"Yeah, that might be a good idea."

"Let's try it for now."

In the next moment, the bodies of the stuffed animals in Theo's illusion began to grow rapidly. The once small toys grew to the height of Theo's waist, then to the same height as Theo, and even surpassed that, growing even larger. And finally, they grew so large that they filled up the Central Shaft's tunnel completely. The vampires in Cavern District were looking up at the giant stuffed animals in shock. The toys of the illusion were not only visible to Theo, but had become their own shared illusion.

The stuffed animals swept away the black-robed enemies throughout Cavern District with their giant arms. The black-robed vampires, who were swept away by the toys, lost consciousness one after another. It was likely the same principle as the arrows of the glass angels. The giant vampire in front of Theo also collapsed on the spot. The black-robed humans were bewildered, not understanding what had happened.

…

Albrecht, Rein, and the Stray Cats, who were fighting on the lower levels, were watching that scene. Hugh, Martin, Sandro, and Monty were looking up at the stuffed animals in surprise.

"…What's that?" Hugh wondered.

"They're huge stuffed animals," Martin observed.

"Why did something like that suddenly appear?" Sandro asked.

"I'm not sure, but it looks like we're safe. Those stuffed animals took care of these guys," Monty said.

The black-robed enemies that Albrecht and the others were fighting were vampires, so they lost consciousness from the attack.
Rein turned to Albrecht. "Albrecht, that might be…"

"Yes… it's Young Master Theodore!"

A single tear was rolling down Albrecht's face.

…

Isaac, who'd been stabbed from behind and was near death, was captivated by the scene.

"…Wonderful… wonderful, Theodore Classico! What a magnificent Cocoon Period!!"

Most of the black-robed vampires in Cavern District had been immobilized by the stuffed animal's illusory attacks. What remained were the black-robed humans. The stuffed animals had somehow returned to their original size and were lightly attacking the legs of the remaining black-robed enemies. However, the same illusion doesn't work on humans.

"Stop panicking! Quickly capture Eden!" One of the black-robed enemies ordered to his remaining comrades.

The black-robed enemies once again began to chase after Theo and Eden. But at that moment, a large iron club, taller than a human's height, came spinning through the air. The enemies were knocked away after taking the full brunt of the weapon. What came next was Dominicus, whose body was pierced all over with countless daggers and longswords.

"Are you alright, kid!?" Dominicus' voice boomed.

No matter how Theo looked at it, Dominicus was clearly not fine, yet he was the most powerful reinforcement they could have asked for. Dominicus picked up the iron club he had thrown and stood in front of the black-robed enemies.

"Fa… False…"

Dominicus showed a furious expression toward the frightened black-robed enemies.

"I am *NOT* False!!"

With that roar, Dominicus began smashing the heads of the black-robed enemies with the iron club. One by one, Dominicus struck their bodies, sending the last one flying across the opposite end of the tunnel.

"That should be all of them," Dominicus declared, and for a moment, he relaxed his guard.

From behind, a blade flashed. In an instant, his neck, arms, legs, and torso were severed, falling apart onto the ground. Only his head remained, and Dominicus looked at the man who had cut him up.

"You... you bastard…"

The one standing over him was Sekishu. The man smiled faintly as he stared intently at Dominicus' scattered body.

"So you really don't die, do you? But even if you're immortal, healing will still take time if you're cut up like this," Sekishu said to him.

Around Sekishu were the vampire subordinates who had avoided the stuffed animal's illusion attack. Sekishu grabbed Theo and lifted him up in a restraining grip, pressing a dagger to his neck. As he held it there, the blade sank in, and blood began to flow. The accumulated fatigue and the shock of thinking his neck had been slashed caused Theo to faint.

"Stop! Don't hurt Theo!!" Eden pleaded.

"Eden, all of this is your fault!" Sekishu harshly declared to her.

"My fault...?" Eden hesitated.

"Yes! Because of you, Cavern District became a massacre! Because of you, a lot of blood was spilled! Because of you, many lives were lost! The secret of *Paradise* you hold gave birth to this tragedy—a secret passed down through generations of the 14th House of Vlad family heads. Now that we've come this far, there's no turning back. Well then, shall you guide me? To the *Paradise with a Heart*..."

"......"

Eden remained silent in response to Sekishu's demand.

"Then, let's try this. Just like the man whose body is scattered there, I'll tear this boy apart right in front of your eyes. First one arm, then the other. Cut off both legs, and finally, cut off the head," Sekishu stated.

"What a despicable act! I'll deal with you!!" The headless Dominicus shouted angrily.

The severed body parts were twitching, but they had not yet been healed back together.

Sekishu continued speaking. "If this boy's neck is severed like the man over there, he won't be able to speak. Is that okay with you?"

Eden didn't attempt to say anything.

"I see. It seems you wish for this boy's body to be torn apart. Very well, I'll grant your wish right now."

Sekishu attempted to sever Theo's right arm and thrust his dagger toward it from the side.

"Wait!!"

At that point, Eden finally broke her silence. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"I get it… I'll take you to the *Paradise with a Heart.* So please, don't kill Theo…"

The tears on Eden's cheeks were not from fear toward Sekishu. It was out of concern for Theo, who had tried desperately to protect her. Sekishu showed a gentle smile that was utterly tainted by madness.

"I've been waiting to hear those words. Well then, shall we go, Eden?"

The black-robed subordinates made Eden stand and tied her hands behind her back. Eden, with a nudge to her back, faced the ground and began walking towards *Paradise* with Sekishu and the others.