



Sunset

Chronicle of the
Saint Town Tragedy

THE 1ST NIGHT

Wallachia

Story & Illustration
Cenma496



THE BLOODSUCKING SLEUTH

"My father told me that he was saved by a guy named Vincent Valakia. Said he owed him far more than he could ever pay, and moreover that the guy refused to be paid. I never got to meet him, but I sure would've liked to. Vio? Never heard that name before."

"Vincent Valakia? Yeah, of course I know him! Our store was named after him. Apparently he made a deep impression on my grandmother. I heard so many stories that I'm not sure what to really believe, but the guy seemed amazing. I don't know about any Vio, but I think I heard he had a son named... something like Victor?"

"I was so young when I met that old man Vincent. Now I'm an old man myself, but when I think back to him I feel young again. No, maybe I just don't want to lose to him. He was far more lively as a geezer than I ever was as a young man."

"Vio? Yeah, come to think of it, he did have a grandson named that. I don't remember him very well though."

"Vincent? I knew him. Met him only twice, but twice was enough. Maybe too much. I can barely remember anything at this age, but him I can't forget. Went to his funeral too. His poor son couldn't be there. Victor died young. But his grandson was there. Looked so much like his father. What was his name again? ...Oh! That's right. Vio."

- Testimonials about Vincent Valakia, collected by G. M. Ziggurat



THE BLOODCURDLING HUNTERS

"You're asking about Iscario T. Rosenkranz, huh? It's a name I haven't heard in a long, long time.

Years ago, he used to work directly under me.

The 6th Division—we were neither full of the most promising young recruits, nor did we have a track record of taking down particularly powerful vampires.

Nonetheless, people respected our work, and they respected us.

That's because what we didn't have in terms of quality, we made up for with sheer volume.

Out of every division in the Thirteenth Chamber, it was the 6th that took down the most vampires.

And it was that man—Rosenkranz, that personally saw to it to inflate that number as much as he could.

He lived like a monk.

He didn't have any hobbies or passions outside of work that I knew of.

I probably ought to commend a man so devoted to his faith, but honestly, I found him to be a creepy bastard. I could never read him.

(Takes drag from cigarette)

Oh, this? Sorry.

I guess it doesn't exactly gel with the scripture.

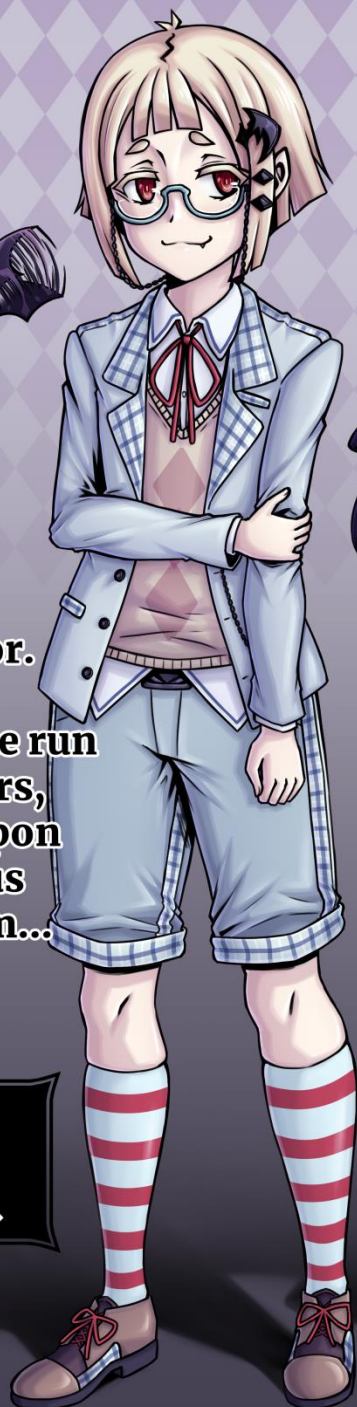
Though I've lived my life for the sake of faith, I don't consider myself a saint for it.

If anything, I'd say I racked up a far bigger share of sins than most.

It takes dirty hands to keep the world clean."

- Excerpt from an interview with Morrigan Z. Gyldenstern,
Cardinal of the Thirteenth Chamber of the Phaethon

Cast of Characters



The narrator.
A vampire.
While on the run
from hunters,
stumbles upon
a mysterious
locked room...

Vio
Valakia




The victim.
A taciturn girl.
Found near death
in a locked room.
She was saved by
being turned into
a vampire.

Rafflesia
Valpurga

Number 1
Thirteenth
Vampire
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Isco
Rosen



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Vio
kranz

Number IX of the
Thirteenth Chamber.
Vampire hunter.
Dispatched to
exterminate Vio.
Just what is it that
fuels her intense
hatred of vampires?

Rosalia
X.
Dornenkron



THE BLOODSOAKED LOCKED ROOM

St. Purgatorio village—a small settlement on the western periphery of the Dukedom of Grimgrave. Its location was not recorded on any well-circulated maps, and even the locals living around the area would have only tilted their heads in confusion were they to hear the name. The existence of the village was known only to a few traders working in the nearest town that happened to have conducted business with its inhabitants.

Given the lack of any solid records, it is impossible to say how long the village has existed, but there are historical traces which suggest that it had been founded as far back as three hundred years ago. For a settlement near a border which had constantly shifted over time, its territory likely switching hands between multiple nations, that is a staggeringly long lifespan. And in all those centuries, St. Purgatorio stood by quietly, isolated, away from prying eyes, neither expanding nor dying out, simply existing.

Who was it that first set foot in the idle meadow between a forest and a mountain and decided to remain there for the rest of their days?

As none of its inhabitants saw fit to record that fact, it is something that no chronicler can ever set down upon the page now.

It is a truth that only an immortal being could possibly remember.

- Notes on St. Purgatorio village, written by G. M. Ziggurat



Sunset
Vallochia

**Chronicle of the
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Sapria Valpurga ——— Rafflesia's Mother

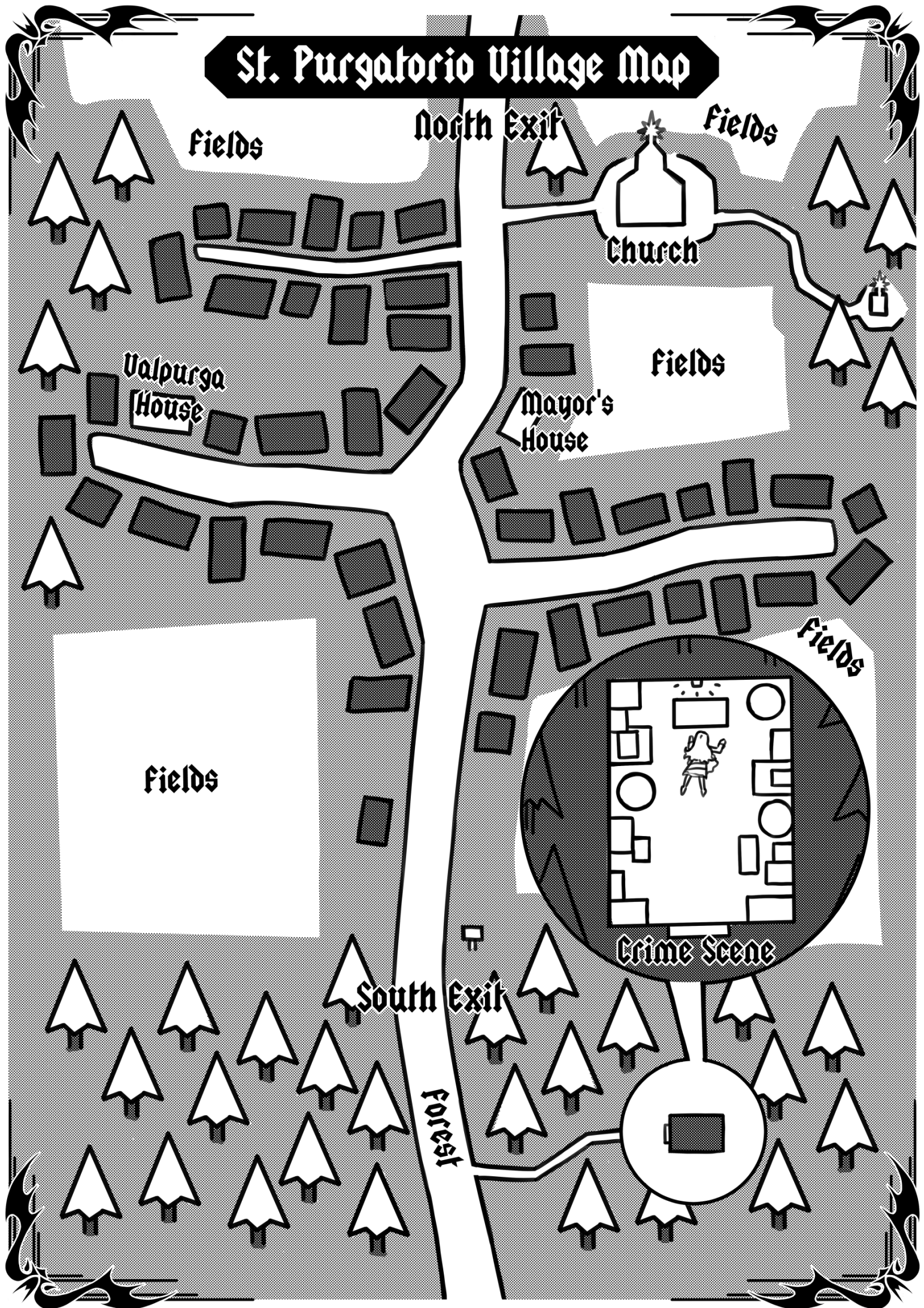
Rhizanthus Valpurga ——— Rafflesia's Father

Klimat Hordendorf ——— Village Mayor

Bolo Bolobo ——— Village Farmer

Olga Eulogia ——— Village Girl

St. Purgatorio Village Map



Preface to the Chronicle

What exactly comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘vampire’? Is it a monstrous fiend, a beautiful immortal, or a shameful wraith? These beings lurk in the darkness, yet they often vividly persist at the forefront of our minds through their innumerable myths.

What I write down is a chronicle, a record of unvarnished truth, and yet it will inevitably be dyed in the vibrant shades of legend and remembered as a story, as fantastical as the tales of the old world of Magic. I hope then that you will take with you a grain of truth of your own from this story, however commonplace it might be, and carry it forth.

And perhaps then, when you happen to hear of these bloodsucking demons again, your mind might flash to the tale henceforth—The tale of a saintly human’s death and a devilish vampire’s birth.

◆ Record 1 ◆

Heretical Handshake

「Vamp's Dusk Vamp's Dawn」



I was running blindly, wildly. Without any thought to something like a destination, I dedicated all of my focus on simply putting one foot in front of the other.

It had been like this for hours at this point. I'd gone well beyond my limits; the muscle tissue in my legs was being torn far faster than it could regenerate. I knew I couldn't go on like this for much longer, but simply stopping wasn't an option either.

"Huff, huff!" I was panting fiercely. Through the corners of my eyes, with the smallest bit of awareness I could muster towards my environment, I could see a dark forest stretching out around me. Moonlight illuminated the unpaved road I'd put my all into traversing. And then suddenly, that road stretched to fill my entire field of view.

"Gah!" I'd slipped on something, falling forward onto the dirt. However, my tumble turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as moments later the hiss of a projectile piercing through the air rang out, followed by a powerful impact.

"Hiiiie—!" I didn't dare turn around, yet I could still sense it nonetheless. In the exact spot I'd just been seconds earlier, a bright, gleaming spear stuck out of the ground. I had no time to dwell on the terror of the situation. Rolling forward on the dirt road and somehow recovering my stance, I resumed my full-speed sprint through the woods.

Good grief, I thought, my mind surprisingly calm and detached, perhaps yet to catch up to my current reality. How the heck did I get into this mess?



—A few hours earlier, in the evening.

I had just been gloomily lounging about the house when I heard a knock at the front door. *What is it, this late? Another family friend come to console me or something?* I really didn't feel like talking to anyone, and inwardly debated for a few moments whether to just ignore it entirely. But when a second set of knocks resounded, I heaved a sigh and dragged my body over to the hallway to answer it.

"Coming~!" And when I finally turned the knob, I didn't see some apologetic-looking elderly person, but instead two unfamiliar faces. "Huh?" The one in front was a tall, lanky bespectacled man in a cassock. He had long hair, and wore the composed, soothing expression characteristic of clergymen—his gentle visage, however, was marred by the many silver piercings in his ear and lower lip, which clashed to form a very eccentric impression. My eyes then turned to the one standing a few feet behind him—a scowling nun with her arms crossed, wearing a black habit. Noticing my gaze, she directed a mean glare at me.

Seeing members of the clergy definitely didn't put me at ease, but after a few moments of shared silence, I addressed the smiling man towering above me. "Umm, can I help you?"

"Pardon me, but you are Vio Valakia, correct?" His voice was deep and pleasing to the ears, making me imagine for a moment that I'd enjoy listening to him reciting scripture.

"That's right, but..."

"Ah, wonderful." He put his hands together. "The Heliocentric Church extends its greetings to you."

"Umm, I'm sorry, if you want to get me to convert or something, could you leave it for another day?" My shoulders drooping, I wound up being a lot more frank than I'd usually be. Trying to smooth things over, I added, "I just came back from a funeral, so I'm a little tired, sorry."

"Tch! As if we'd want someone like *you* among our believers?" the young nun in the back exclaimed with a husky voice.

"Eh?"

"Yes, we'd like to extend our condolences," the priest continued, not acknowledging his companion's outburst at all. "Losing someone can be a very painful thing."

"Right..." Unsure what to make of the man nodding to himself in front of me, I tried to find some way out of this conversation. "So anyway, uhh—"

"A very painful thing, indeed." Well, I tried, but he cut me off before I could say anything, speaking on in a solemn tone. It can feel like a part of you has passed along with them. Sometimes it's hard to go on living at all, after such a grievous loss. "So then, Vio Valakia—what about you?"

"Huh?"

"Can you go on living?" he asked, gazing into my eyes pointedly, like he was searching for something. A strong sense of unease built up within me. "Are you not yet tired of this life?"

I took a step back. A cold sweat formed on the back of my neck. The man kept on watching me with a thin smile, his dark frame blocking the twilight. With a quivering voice, I replied to his question with one of my own. "...Who are you?"

"Ah, yes. My apologies, I forgot the most basic of manners. Allow me to introduce myself." And then, his smile widening, he pronounced his name like a death sentence.

"Of the 6th Division of the Thirteenth Chamber of the Phaethon, number IV, priest of the Heliocentric Church, Iscario T. Rosenkranz."

And then, behind him, a clang of metal against concrete rang out—the nun held in her hand a massive silver spear, retrieved seemingly out of nowhere. With a mocking lilt, she too introduced herself.

"Of the 6th Division of the Thirteenth Chamber of the Phaethon, number IX, sister of the Heliocentric Church, Rosalia X. Dornenkrone."

Here it was. A scene out of a nightmare that I'd long since rationalized away, unfolding right before me. I'd gotten too comfortable. Too careless. My self-inflicted reprimands would be of no use now. There was no way out of this. Stumbling backwards, I fell with my rear to the ground. The man took a step forward, intruding into my home, the sister following along behind him.

"Vio Valakia, demon slithering among humans, you cannot hide any longer. Your time of judgment has come. In the name of our Sun's divine light—" And then, the sister, shoving the point of her spear right to the tip of my nose, joined in on the sentencing.

"—" —we're here to exterminate you, vampire!" —"

The frantic fleeing that followed left my mind in a blur. Even hours later, I was still on my feet, dashing desperately.



It was summer of the year 496 according to the New Order calendar.

Nearly five hundred years had passed since Magic disappeared from this world, yet things were as hectic as ever. Luckily, the constant wars were starting to die down. The first few centuries were full of ancient kingdoms being toppled and replaced by new dynasties, only to be ravaged by other countries who were, in turn, absorbed into burgeoning empires. Not that I was around for any of that, mind you. It's all just material for the history books. And yet, even though regular law-abiding citizens like me just wanted to lead peaceful, quiet lives, remnants of the Era of Magic were still running, galloping, swimming, flying or floating about and causing all sorts of trouble, be it dragons, shapeshifters, giant sea monsters, sentient floating islands, werewolves or—among many others—vampires.

Vampires, bloodsuckers, demons—call them whatever you will. Immortal monsters who feast upon the blood of humans to satisfy their forbidden desires. I won't sugarcoat it, there were plenty of troublesome guys among them. Like Jackal V. V. Brooks, the eighth richest man in the world, who cashed in on century-old debts with plenty of interest and used his wealth to escape extermination, or Palatina Permafrost, who'd built an empire meant exclusively for vampires, and was currently at war with pretty much every other nation in the world, or Hematolegion, the Nightless Night, an unpredictable disaster melting into the land and absorbing the blood of everything that walks upon it, not to mention Sanguina or the Glib Brothers. And then there was also that guy who'd made a cult called the Ecliptic Church that did a lot of terrible stuff, and add to that the countless serial killers and mass murderers like Monomania the Ripper—it's fair to say that vampires could be kind of a pain. But, you know, I'd say it's just like how newspapers always report on the most terrible things, to the point that you wind up thinking only bad stuff is happening in the world. My point being: vampires weren't *all* bad. Consider, for instance, me!

My name, at least at the time, was Vio Valakia. On paper, 18 years old. I was the grandson of Vincent and Valentina Valakia, an elderly couple living in

a quiet little town within the Dukedom of Grimgrave. My parents had passed away, so it was just me and my grandparents, but we were living our lives to the fullest! At least, that was how I'd introduce myself to most people for the past couple of years. In truth, I was a vampire, but I didn't go around decapitating people and using them as drinking fountains or anything. I didn't even drink anyone's blood without their consent! I was a perfectly average law-abiding citizen that happened to have an unusual diet, that's all.

I'd known ol' Vince and Tina for many decades. In truth, I'd started out as Tina's adoptive older brother, though she'd quickly outgrown me, and Vince was our childhood friend. After they got married, they took me in to live with them, and ever since then I'd stuck around as the third wheel who couldn't read the room. I constantly had to change identities, going from Tina's now younger brother to her son and eventually her grandson. I won't say it was an effortless life, but we'd had our fun. And then, just as I'd been thinking we ought to relocate soon before people got suspicious of my agelessness, Vince went and kicked the bucket.

That was about a year ago at this point. Tina still kept smiling while I was looking, but it felt like her eyes had become affixed to the past. They no longer had that glint in them, that vigor and love of life that she'd always shown. And as if following her husband, her health got worse, and soon enough she was on her deathbed. And then, I...

Well, we all make mistakes, right? Sometimes you go ahead and try to do something terrible, even though you know you really shouldn't. Can't avoid that, it's just a part of life. In such situations, you just have to live and learn. A single mistake won't kill you, right?

That's what human logic dictates, but apparently vampires don't get the same treatment. Because of my little error in judgment, the Heliocentric Church went and sent some nasty hunters to exterminate me. Well, I say 'exterminate,' but that's not really accurate. After all, there was currently no way to really, permanently kill a vampire, and no vampire deaths had ever been reported. I'm sure given the advancement of science they'd find one eventually, but so far the only thing the Church had at their disposal were some leftover magical seals which, while piercing the heart of a vampire, could prevent their healing as well as eliminate their consciousness. It was close enough to death, even if it was temporary. Supposedly even a little prick was enough to paralyze a vampire, and just touching the things would burn us.

I'd heard that apparently the Church's big plan was to gather the hearts of every vampire like that, seal them, then launch them above the sky and into the Sun. Honestly, that seemed like a very frivolous and unfounded plan

to me, and I'd much rather they spent their donors' funds on something that'd do some actual good in the world, but who was I to talk, really?

Either way, I was being chased around by incomprehensibly monstrous humans and was bound for a nap from which I'd realistically never awaken. I wanted to cry. I guess fate didn't want me living any longer, now that Vince and Tina were gone. I thought that, and then I wanted to cry even more. Maybe I had already been crying.



And, with all those thoughts swirling inside my head, I gave it my all and kept on running. I couldn't hear my pursuers, but I was sure they'd catch up to me before long. I couldn't keep this up. I had to lose them somehow. And right as that fact crossed my mind, I noticed a small wooden shed out of the corner of my eye, peeking out from between the trees. I quickly changed course straight for it, diving through the overgrown bushes in the wilderness and scratching my legs, the cuts not even healing instantly due to how little blood I had left.

If I'd had a clear head, I might've realized that I'd be a sitting duck inside that shed, but in my panic I just rammed into the door of my one potential hiding spot. The creaky wooden door, however, didn't budge. *No good!* It seemed to be locked from the inside. I went around the small building, looking for any openings. Finally, near the edge of the right wall, there was a small hole, just big enough for a rat to cross through, at the bottom of the vertically arranged planks. *Perfect!*

"Morry, please, help me!" Desperate, I called out the name of the only friend I had left in this world. And then, from the center of my heart, through my veins, through the membrane of my skin, shuffling out from beneath my shirt and popping his head out from the collar of my shirt, Maurice appeared, flapping his wings, his tiny black body barely visible in the night's darkness.

Wasting no time, the little bat flew straight through the hole and into the shed. Circling around to the door, I waited for him to do his work. I couldn't see what he saw, but I could feel his presence drawing near the other side of the door, and he understood my will perfectly. A few moments later, the bolt locking the door in place was lifted, and thanking Morry with all I had, I entered the dark room.

I've gotta lock the door shut! I was about to do just that, but then, after the split second it took for my eyes to visually process the room's interior, I was shown a scene which obliterated any concern I'd had for my hiding place, for the hunters chasing me, and for my life altogether.

Directly opposite to the door, at the back of that shed, was—

Looking at her, my mind flashed to a memory I'd been trying to forget. It was a recent one, just a few days old.

It was a twilit room.

In a dimly lit room.

Her hair was now stringy and white.

She had luscious black hair.

Her flesh was old and withered.

The fair skin of a young girl.

She was lying still on the bed.

Collapsed in a heap on the floor.

On the verge of death.

On the verge of death.

I had committed a grave sin. I understood it was just my own selfish fixation. I understood that I'd be going against her wishes. And I did so anyway. I tried to exert my demonic will upon her life. And I failed.

Yet again, I was faced with death.

My hopelessly overworked legs forgot about their fatigue and broke into a run, as if moving by themselves. I ran towards the girl sprawled out on the floor in front of me, her blood pooling beneath her.

The rational realization that I was about to make the same mistake made no dent in my desperate advance. At that moment, I finally understood just what a hopeless bastard I was.

And then, aiming at the girl's white nape, slightly visible through her locks of black hair, with one solitary prayer desperately ringing out in my mind—

Please, live! Please!

—I sank my teeth in.



The priest who'd named himself Iscario burst through the doorframe of the shed, alongside his companion. The door was wide open, after all—it was as conspicuous as it gets. Though I doubt they'd have overlooked it either way. In truth, they would have sensed me regardless, thanks to my reckless act.

Noticing what I was doing, the nun called Rosalia yelled out “Hey, you bastard!” and tightened her grip on her weapon, but the man raised his arm to block her.

“He’s not feeding. He’s performing a far graver sacrilege. And there’s no stopping it at this point. So observe.”

Honestly, I wasn’t paying much attention to them. I was much more concerned with the girl in my arms. My left hand was enveloped by her silky hair while holding her head in place, while my right was keeping her limp body up. And right below my eyes was her soft neck, which my fangs had easily torn into. Her blood was flowing into me. My blood was flowing into her. This wasn’t an act of consumption—this was me welcoming a new immortal monster into this world.

Please, live! This one simple prayer was the only foundation through which I’d inscribed her name upon a bloody list of heretics. Her name... *Rafflesia. Rafi.*

Her soul flowed into me. Unknown information, memories that didn’t belong to me, they all filled me.

I felt hunger, a powerful hunger, more than I’d ever experienced.

I felt pain—a powerful force, slamming into me.

I felt blood spray on my face. An unfamiliar girl killed right in front of me, her head rolling on the ground—her face peaceful, tranquil, almost blissful.

A collection of foreign scenes overwhelmed me. Far from a memory playing back in my mind, the phenomenon took over all of my senses for the express purpose of delivering onto me a past that was not my own.

My eyes became hers. My ears became hers. My skin became hers.

What must have been less than a second stretched out to minutes on end as I was draped in the very fabric of her being, her most important moments.

“Phah!”

And then, when it was finally over, I took my fangs out of her flesh. I stabilized my senses. I remembered my identity. I became *myself* again. I was Vio Valakia.

After taking a few moments to become used to my self again, I hurriedly looked down at Rafi. "Please! Please live!" I couldn't help saying it out loud this time.

And, after a few moments that felt like eons, I saw it. The bitemarks in her neck slowly closed up. Even though I couldn't see it, I was sure the wound in her back, was also steadily closing. I moved my face closer to her own, staring intently at it. I could feel her stirring. Her organism, previously prepared to face its own cessation, was now full of life again, full of more life than it had ever contained before. I could feel her breath. And then, slowly, gingerly, her eyes opened—bright blue eyes, like the morning sky.



"—H...uh?" Clearly dazed, Rafi looked at me blankly. Overcome by relief, I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her into a hug.

"Thank goodness! Thank goodness you're alive!"

"..." Probably confused by the situation, she didn't say anything else.

"You... You bastard!" As I let go of the girl, the nun who'd been silently watching interjected once more, pointing her spear at my face. "What have you done!?"

"Isn't it obvious? I saved this girl." There was no way I could weasel out of the situation at this point, so I decided to just be frank with them.

"Saved?"

"If I hadn't turned her into a vampire, she would've bled to death here, alone."

"So you claim to be a good samaritan? Isn't the more likely explanation that you just attacked this girl yourself in order to drink her blood and recover your strength?" The priest asked with an appraising gaze.

"What kind of psycho do you think I am!? ...Actually, don't answer that." I probably wouldn't get anything out of appealing to their empathy. "Rather, if that was the case, why would I have turned her? Just so you know, me turning her doesn't make her my slave or something."

"We're well aware. Those are nothing more than idle rumors," he agreed.

That was the kind of idle gossip people spread about us. Turning someone into a vampire meant just that. It didn't give us any kind of authority over the person who got turned or anything. *I sure wouldn't refuse some mind control powers right now though.*

"I don't think a person I randomly bit out of nowhere would be all that happy to help me, you know?"

"Even so, it's not enough to prove your innocence. You're the most likely suspect in this situation, as I'm sure you're aware."

"Figures. Not like I thought it'd be that easy to get you to believe me," I said, shrugging. "Luckily for me, I think I have a more persuasive claim to my innocence," I said, showing the two the palm of my right hand.

"Hmm?" The priest narrowed his eyes. Reflected in his spectacles was my pale hand—marred by a reddish wound, like a burn mark, especially slow to heal, even for a weak vampire like me. It really hurt, too.

"That thing over there left it," I said, pointing to the ground next to me. There, sitting in a pool of blood, was the silver stake.

At that, Rafi, who'd been silently listening to the conversation from behind me, let out a sound of recognition and unconsciously reached for it. "Wait!" I yelled, and grabbed her hand. "You shouldn't touch that. Unlike before, it'll really hurt you now... Well, I guess it already really hurt you, but I mean, it'll *really really* hurt you now," I said, sounding like an idiot. Evidently, I didn't know how to talk to a murder victim properly.

"Okay." Not reacting to my awkwardness in the least, she nodded and pulled her hand back.

"Wait, is that...?" Mumbling in surprise, the priest walked over and picked up the stake, studying it intently.

"You tell me."

After a few silent moments, the man responded. "...No doubt about it. This is a Sealing Sacrament."

"What!?" The nun raised her voice in surprise.

"I don't think I need to clarify this, but I'll say it just in case," I added with a smile. "Rafi here was stabbed in the back with that thing. I just barely managed to pull it out. You won't suggest that I walk around carrying something that dangerous to me, will you?"

"...Rafi?" The quiet voice behind me questioned.

"Oh, sorry," I turned around to her, flustered. "Your name is Rafflesia, right? Hence, Rafi. Umm, I ended up seeing some of your memories, so that's how I know your name. I also feel a little closer to you because of that, but I'm sure it must be weird, getting called by a nickname by some guy you don't know, right? I can stop if you want. No, really, I should stop!"

"No, it's fine." As I desperately flailed my hands around, Rafi just shook her head. "I don't mind."

Meanwhile, the bespectacled man's eyes bore into me for a few more seconds, before he finally exhaled, closing them. "Very well. I acknowledge that you're unlikely to have perpetrated that particular sin."

"Phew. Glad you're so reasonable," I said, nodding to myself.

"Now then, let us exterminate both of these vampires at once, shall we, Sister Rosalia?" *Right, that's on me for putting my foot in my mouth.*

"..." The nun, however, didn't respond, looking down, her expression hidden behind her bangs. And then, right as the priest was about to call out again, the woman raised her head, glaring at me with gritted teeth. "Why!? Why couldn't you have just left this world by yourself? Why did you have to drag that girl into this too!?"

I was speechless for a few moments, before blankly replying, "If I hadn't, she would have died."

"Even then," she forcefully added, powerfully stepping forward with her steel-toe boot. "She would have at least died a human death! But you had to rob her of even that, you *monster!*"

My eyes opened wide in shock. And as my brain registered the desperation and contempt in her voice and the tears in the corners of her eyes, I looked down.

Her words brought to mind an image. The image of myself, forever young and unblemished, desperately, greedily drinking the blood of my only family, old and wrinkled.

"...Yeah," I finally said. "If you see me as a monster, I won't try to convince you otherwise. Heck, you might even be right."

"Then—"

"But!" I stood up, glaring at the nun with all my might. "Say what you will about me, but how the hell is this a human death!? What's human about this?! Dying alone in this shed full of junk without anyone knowing, without any resolutions or goodbyes, not even having reached adulthood! If that's what being a proper human means, then I'd rather be a monster!"

"Ghh..." She let out a growl of frustration as she backed away, unable to meet my gaze and failing to find a retort. Suddenly, I realized the sensation in my hand. Looking down, I saw a wide-eyed Rafi staring at me. My wounded right hand was tightly gripping her own, so tightly that it must have hurt, but she said nothing.

"...Sorry." Saying that, I let go of her hand, turning back to the exterminators and heaving a sigh. Then, my voice having calmed again, I continued. "If you seal me here tonight, I'll just accept that as my fate. But if

getting rid of us is all you care about, and if you'll just overlook this crime and go on your merry way, then monster or not, you're more inhuman than I ever could be."

And with that, I'd said my piece. The ball was in their court now. The chances were high that they'd just disregard my words entirely, but even so, I couldn't leave them unsaid.

And after a voiceless exchange of stares that seemed to go on for minutes, the priest broke the silence at last. "...So, then, what are you suggesting?"

With a cheery smile, I stated my terms. "As you can see, I'm a total weakling. My regeneration isn't all that fast, and I don't have much in the way of special abilities, aside from a single measly bat. You could probably defeat me anytime.

"So let me help you. We can bring justice to whoever did this to Rafi. And then once that's done, you can do whatever you want to me. How does that sound?"

"Father Rosenkranz, what if he's just screwing with us and hiding his powers? He did manage to turn a human into a vampire, after all!" the overly-aggressive nun argued, her spear at the ready.

"If he was actually a powerful vampire, he wouldn't have ended up cornered like this to begin with. I don't sense any danger from him—he has the aura of a small fry." *It's not like he's wrong, but would it kill him to put it a little more kindly?*

Still wearing a conflicted look, he asked me another question. "Why should I spare you until then? I could simply resolve this case after you've already been dealt with."

I guess that's the unavoidable question. While we spoke, Rafi got to her feet. I met her wide, blue gaze. She didn't show any signs of it on her blank expression, but she must have been anxious too. I gave her a cheerful smile, my best attempt at reassuring her. And then, looking the inscrutable man in the eye, without trying to conjure up any excuses or fabrications, I just gave voice to the honest feelings in my heart.

"I don't know how helpful I'll be, but I want to see this through with my own eyes, now that I've gotten involved. Will you indulge this final request of mine, Father Iscario?"

The priest's eyes opened wide, showing a glimpse of vulnerability beneath his sagely veneer. Then, a wry smile graced his lips, and he shrugged his shoulders lightly, as if mocking his own decision.

"Good grief. To think I've become this generous. It's you I'll blame if my subordinates end up thinking I'm a pushover, Vio Valakia," he said,

extending his gloved right hand forward. The nun called Rosalia watched him wide-eyed, though she didn't interject.

As I looked at his hand, I too could barely believe it myself. Even as I made the request, I was sure it would be in vain.

I didn't know whether it was truly mercy or a pure whim that made him accept, but I wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Heh, I'll take it. What's one more grudge at this point?" Raising my own arm forward, I wrapped my small hand around his. Next to me, Rafi watched on, saying nothing. I'd have to reach an understanding with her as well, as the one who'd invited her to the world of the night. But more than anything, I wished for her to find some meaning in the fate that had befallen her. Helping her with that was the only thing I could do for her.



And so, for perhaps the first time in history, the bloodsucker and the demon hunter, the fiercest of mortal enemies, shook hands, marking their fleeting contract. For three days and three nights, they would together seek the truth behind this cruel tragedy. Man and monster both agreed that this mystery ought to be elucidated—even though the answer might be one they'd come to regret learning.

On this hopeless, hopeful note, on the cusp of sunrise, the legend, and the chronicle, began—of the vampire who'd be remembered for a thousand years to come.



◆ Record II ◆

Saint Town Sinners

「 Visitors to a Demon's Hometown 」



As the early morning sunlight peeked over the horizon, gracing the lands around us, we looked at the old, worn out sign guarding the village's entrance from the direction of the forest. The chipped wood and faded paint clearly indicated that this path was not often frequented, at least not by any newcomers.

By us, I of course mean a sacrilegious band of strangers held together by a rickety, fragile truce. As I glanced at the profile of the priest, as tranquil as a meditating monk, I couldn't help but be amazed that my suggestion had been accepted. And then as I caught sight of the incensed nun behind him, I remembered that our foundation of trust could at any time be shattered by a well-timed spear to the face. *I wanna go home.*

"So this is your hometown," Father Iscario addressed Rafi, heedless of my inner anguish. "Does a hamlet this small even have an inn for us to stay at?"

"Mm," Rafi denied, shaking her head. "You can stay at my house."

"Are you sure that's all right?" I asked, to which she just nodded. I couldn't imagine her parents happily welcoming a bunch of suspicious weirdos like us into their home, but beggars can't be choosers.

"How can you *really* be sure of that, though?" Sister Rosalia asked indignantly. "Aren't your memories confused, after all?"

It was a mean question, but while I aimlessly blubbered between them trying to figure out a way to smooth things over, Rafi just closed her eyes, as if thinking it over. And then a few moments later, she continued, her tone of voice as lacking in emotion as ever.

"It's fine. They wouldn't turn away people like you."

"Hmph, really?" And so the exchange ended with a snort from Rosalia.

After silently watching over the proceedings, Father Iscario motioned for us to follow him, heading for the village. Nervously trailing behind them, I wondered just what truth might have been hiding in this unfamiliar place.



Earlier, in the abandoned shed.

“So? How do we proceed?” Father Iscario asked, looking at me for some reason. *Wonder what’s up with that.*

“—Eh? Wait, you’re asking me?”

“Who else? You’re the one who came up with the idea, so it’s only right that you lead us, no?” His serene mask showed no hint of sarcasm.

“No, wait, how am I supposed to know what to do in this situation? I’ve never solved a murder before!”

“Come now, you say that like I have any more experience in this than you do,” the priest said, troubled.

“I—it’s not that out of place for a priest to moonlight as an amateur detective, is it? At least you go out and do fieldwork and such! I’ve just been collecting stamps and building ships in bottles, I’m not suited to this kind of—*Wah!*”

“Get your head in the game already, damn it!” A rough voice called out from behind, and I simultaneously felt my head being enveloped by a crushing pressure.

“Aaah! Unhand me, please! At least don’t be so rough! I’m made of soft tissue!” In a show of unexpected strength given her figure, Sister Rosalia was squeezing my head with her hand.

“*Tch*, even if I popped your head, it’d just grow right back. So there’s no problem for you, is there,” she spat as she swung my head around.

“It’s not fine! It is most definitely not fine!”

“Come now, Sister Rosalia, don’t bully our new companion too much—temporary though he may be.” *You didn’t have to add that last part.*

“Hmph,” she snorted in displeasure, though abiding by the command. “Anyway, what I wanted to say was this: instead of panicking, how about you consider the most obvious first step you should take?” And as she said that, she forcibly turned my head to the side.

"Ah." What entered my sight was the girl that this entire incident revolved around: Rafi, who was currently crouching on the ground and intently watching the bugs crawling towards her blood.

That's right! Shaking off Rosalia's grip (which she'd probably loosened on purpose), I hurried over to the girl and crouched down next to her as she turned to me. Peering into her eyes, I addressed her as gently as I could.

"Um, if you wouldn't mind, could... Could you tell me everything you remember from before you saw me? Everything that led up to this?"

No trace of distress on her face, she nodded lightly.

"I came here because my parents asked me to bring back some vegetables. We have some stored there," she said, pointing to a crate at the back of the shed, near the pool of blood I'd found her in. Looking closer, I could also see a basket on the floor with some now-bloodied onions and potatoes scattered around it.

"Does your family own this shed?" Father Iscario asked.

Rafi shook her head. "It was built by Olga's dad. We all use it." She mentioned an unfamiliar name, probably that of another villager.

"I unlocked the door, I came in, and then... Then I locked the door, and then went to light the torch." The room's sole light source was a wooden torch, held right above the aforementioned crate of vegetables. If that thing fell to the ground somehow, it might light the entire shed on fire, though I guess whoever had set it up there held no such concerns.

"Do you still have the key to this shed on you?" I asked.

She briefly searched her dress pockets, and then took out a rusty old key attached to a string, showing it to me. I nodded.

"So you locked this room yourself? And right after entering? Why is that?" The priest asked suspiciously.

"..." She returned his gaze, but was seemingly unable to produce an adequate reply.

"M-maybe she's just a particularly careful person," I mumbled out in her defense.

"..." The priest looked unsatisfied, but for the moment said no more.

"After that, I just went to take the vegetables out, and then..."

"...Then?"

Rafi kept quiet. Though her face didn't betray it, perhaps it was hard for her to say what came next. I didn't try to rush her. We all watched her expectantly.

“...Then,” Rafi tilted her head, putting a finger to her cheek as if confused. “Then I saw you, Vio.”

“...Uh?” I couldn’t process her words for a second. The train of events failed to make any sense. “—Wait, what? You don’t remember anything else from before you blacked out? It could be anything, however small!”

“Hmm...” She crossed her arms and closed her eyes, as if straining to remember. “I think I heard some kind of clacking sound? That’s the last thing I can remember.”

“Could that be the sound of the door being opened, perhaps?” Father Iscario opined.

“So what, she got stabbed before she could even turn around?” Sister Rosalia asked.

“That sounds hard to believe. I mean, it’s just human instinct to turn around when you hear a sound behind you, right? How fast would someone have to be to stab her before she even managed that?”

“Well then what the hell happened here?” Sister Rosalia yelled in frustration, perhaps displeased at being rebutted by me.

“Hrmm.” Father Iscario put his fingers to his chin. “I’ve heard that there are cases of people losing their memories upon experiencing traumatic events. I’ve never seen a case like this myself, but I would presume being killed is quite the shock.”

So that’s what’s happening. Well, I could understand how an experience like this might mess anyone up. Still, I guess that meant we weren’t gonna solve this the easy way.

“Seriously!? What the hell *do* you remember then, girl?” Rosalia asked.

“Hmm? About what?”

“I dunno, anything in general?”

“Mm.” Rafi briefly considered the question. “Well, I remember that my name is Rafflesia Valpurga. I know I’ve lived in this village my whole life. I know Mom and Dad and Olga and everyone else. I remember how to read and write, and that we have to pray before bed every night, and that the mushrooms in the forest are poisonous, and—”

“Okay, fine, got it!” The nun sighed. “You’re a real odd one, you know that?”

“So it seems that her recollection of her identity and past is undamaged. That’s a relief, at least,” said Iscario.

Oh, that’s right. Speaking of her past... I didn’t have time to really think about it with everything that was going on, but I figured I should probably ask about *that*.

"Hey, Rafi. I... mentioned this earlier, but, well, when I drank your blood earlier, I saw some of your memories."

"Hm?" She tilted her head.

"I didn't mean to peek, really, it's just an innate property of vampires! It's not something I can prevent, so sorry about that. But..." I stopped. I didn't understand the context of any of it, but given what I saw, I figured I had to be pretty delicate about how to approach this. "...You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to. But... I saw some pretty horrible stuff. It seems like you've really been through a lot."

"..." She stared at me in silence, and then, after a few moments, "...Mn?" She tilted her head again, this time in the other direction.

It really didn't seem like she was trying to hide anything. I couldn't see a speck of recognition on her face in regards to what I was saying. "I didn't see much of what led up to it, but you were in a lot of pain, and starving... Honestly, it felt like being tortured. And then... you saw a horrific crime." A human life trampled upon and disposed of. A hellish scene of brutality. I felt like a coward for not properly conveying the full atrocity of that memory, but I just couldn't bring myself to give voice to it. As if properly describing it would be affirming that desecration of human life in some way.

Rafi didn't immediately respond, putting her hands on her head as if trying to wring out any knowledge of what I was talking about, but she ultimately gave up, giving me an apologetic look. "...I'm sorry. I don't remember any of what you said."

"No," I said. "You don't have to apologize for that. If anything, I'm kind of glad you don't have any horrible memories like this." Then, I turned to the priest behind me and asked, "Hey, Father, I'm sure you've been taught all there is to know about vampires. Is there any possibility that these memories I saw were mistaken in some way?"

"Impossible," he swiftly answered. "Viewing your prey's memories like that is possible because of a temporary linkage of souls. It's a magical process inscribed in every cell of your being. In this world without magic, nothing can ever defend against it anymore."

"Don't call her 'prey'," I grumbled. "But I see. So that's how it is..." Then that means whatever I saw must have really happened to her. I thought the trauma of her almost dying would have only affected her most recent memories, but did it actually jumble up even more of her mind than expected? Or had she already forgotten those events long before as a form of coping with whatever ordeals she'd gone through? If so, I could at least be glad that my brash questions hadn't provoked some kind of panic attack.

I honestly was glad that she didn't have to remember something painful like that. But at the same time, I wanted to bring her closure, to find the person responsible for her suffering an inhuman fate like this and make them pay for it. Only then would she be brought to justice.

But would it even do her any good, when she'd been completely freed from it all? Wouldn't it have been best for her to simply lead a peaceful life, since she'd miraculously gotten a second chance?

...No, regardless of whichever choice was best, there was no longer any chance of her living a normal life. I'd taken it away from her. I didn't regret saving her, and I doubted I ever would, yet part of me couldn't help but lament that fact.

Her remembering everything would have probably helped with our investigation immensely, but I didn't have it in me to try probing her with more questions at this point. And it probably wouldn't have borne any fruit anyway. Rather than stressing her out even more, it was probably best to let her mind rest and heal for a while.

Thump. "Ow!"

"Don't go contemplating shit on your own! You sitting there isn't gonna help anything! What do you think you are, an armchair detective?" Sister Rosalia loudly complained, her iron fist raised in the air.

"Could you communicate your complaints without punching me in the head, please?"

"But it's the perfect height for it!"

"That hardly seems relevant!"

Rafi gave us a sidelong glance as she idly sat by, while the priest looked on in exasperation.

"Ahem." Father Iscario audibly cleared his throat, calling our attention. "This memory issue is troubling enough on its own, but it obfuscates the real issue, which I'm sure both of you have noticed by now."

"..." I shared a brief look at the nun, before we both sent our gazes back to the priest. He sighed, continuing his smooth explanation.

"Miss Rafflesia locked the door herself, right after entering. It's not exactly a course of action I understand, but I can put that aside for now. However, it spawns a very clear contradiction, don't you think? Until you broke into this shed with your bat, the door was locked. And the only one present here was the victim. So *how exactly could the killer have entered?*"

Both mine and Sister Rosalia's eyes widened in realization. A murder and a locked door. In other words—

“—This case is what they call a locked room murder.” The priest declared it so with a faint smile, before turning to Rafi. “Is that key the only one for this shed?”

She quietly shook her head. “We aren’t the only family using it.”

“Therefore, if Miss Rafflesia’s testimony is to be believed, and this shed truly was locked before she arrived, then the culprit could only have been someone who had a spare key themselves. Either that, or—”

“Or there’s some other method of getting inside of this place without opening the door,” continued Sister Rosalia. “If that’s the case, then we ought to search this room, right?”

“That seems like a wise course of action,” Father Iscario said.

“...All right.”

Even though nothing about this felt right, going along with the flow was the best I could manage. My eyes wandered over to Rafi for a moment, who looked as placid as ever. I wanted to know what emotions laid behind that tranquil expression, but I couldn’t see inside her heart. For a vampire who’d just looked inside her mind, it was a truly selfish grievance.



We searched the grimy shed for a while, but found nothing of note. For how small of a space it was, it felt awfully empty. There were a few crates and barrels in the corners and along the walls, including the one holding the Valpurga family’s vegetables, but the room was clearly not filled to capacity. And even the containers that were there were either close to empty or just filled with random junk that looked like it hadn’t been touched in years. The walls were plain, without any shelves of any kind, the only fixture being the metallic torch holder.

“Hey, these walls aren’t exactly sturdy, are they? Plenty of gaps between the planks too,” Sister Rosalia brought up.

“That’s true...” The wood seemed weathered and not especially resistant to the elements. There were a few gaps, like the one Morry had snuck in from, that looked like they could fit the murder weapon, and a few could even fit a fist holding onto it.

“Certainly none in any beneficial position, though. Did you get close to any of the walls, Miss Rafflesia?”

“No... I just walked straight towards the crate in the back.”

“Not like the bastard could have thrown it in.”

While knocking on one of the wall planks, I idly mumbled out “Could they have... removed one of these from the outside?”

“Go in through the wall, huh? I can’t see them being able to nail it back in place very easily. It’d probably be half an hour’s work at least,” the priest said.

“Why bother doing something as stupid as that anyway?” asked Rosalia. “If they have the key then entering the shed shouldn’t be much of a challenge.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” It had been a ridiculous idea to begin with.

I focused my attention on the floor. It was also pretty dirty, full of dust and blackish grime, enough that I’d have to wipe my shoes after leaving this place. That wasn’t even counting the puddle of blood atop the wood. But we found nothing that looked like it’d been left by the culprit, aside from the stake itself.

“Is there any space beneath the floorboards? Could the culprit have hidden there?” suddenly asked the priest.

“What, you think he’s still here!? We’d have heard him breathe or something,” said Rosalia, slightly worked up. Perhaps the idea freaked her out.

“No, that doesn’t work,” I said, kneeling down with my eye to one of the gaps beneath the floorboards. “The ground is pretty much directly under this thing.”

“Meaning,” Iscario said, putting his hand to his chin, “that this crime really could only have been committed by someone who held the key. They would have had to unlock the door behind Rafi, stab her, and then lock the door again on their way out.”

“But why the hell lock it again? No one would have known that she’d locked it to begin with if she’d really died. So locking the door on the way out is just narrowing the pool of suspects to those who have the key.”

He had no answer for the nun’s very reasonable question. I certainly couldn’t come up with any myself. I just powerlessly looked around the room once more, my desire to uncover some clue dwarfed by my instinctual want to leave this musty, iron-smelling prison.

By the time we concluded our inspection, the light of dawn was already peeking through the tall trees of the forest. Incidentally, it seemed that Rafi and her family were quite the early birds, as they’d woken up long before sunrise, which is why she’d come to the shed not too long before I arrived.

The more I thought about it the more of a miracle it seemed that I'd managed to find her still alive.

Regardless, we decided to finally hit the town. Before we left, though, the priest stepped back into the storehouse and left behind a small jewel, hiding it within one of the wooden crates.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"A ward," he explained. "A simple precaution. If anyone enters this place, I will know."

The church sure had a lot of handy knick-knacks. You'd think they'd be a bit more sparing in using them, considering new artifacts could never be made again now that Magic could no longer be used. They were probably worth a whole lot too.

With that done, the plan was to rest for a while at Rafi's house and then continue the investigation by looking into all the villagers. It didn't seem like too tall of a task, given that St. Purgatorio village apparently only had a population of about seventy people—really, it was more of a hamlet, and I couldn't remember ever seeing it on a map before.

We continued past the sign welcoming us into the village, leaving the forest behind. The entrance to the village was surrounded by farmland, though we could see houses clustered together in the distance. The sun was getting brighter by the second.

"I presume you're unharmed by sunlight," Iscario asked.

"It gives me a nasty rash, but I can deal with it." The sun is generally harmful to vampires, though the extent of the damage really depends on the individual. I heard that stronger vampires are affected more by it, but while I couldn't exactly enjoy a day out on the beach, I was more or less fine with it.

"I see. What about her though?"

"Ah." He was pointing to Rafi, who was walking behind us, covered by the priest's tall shadow. "Crap, I forgot about that!"

I hurriedly took my jacket off and covered her head with it, prompting a startled "Hweh?" from her.

"Sorry, I don't know how much this is gonna help, but you should probably avoid the sunlight. I don't know how you'll react to it, but I don't want you bursting into flames or something."

"Hey, why not try it out? She'd be fine anyway. Can't hurt to test her new body's limits, right?" Sister Rosalia said that offhandedly.

"I'm sure after all that's happened the last thing she wants is to be a guinea pig right now. Right, Rafi?" I said, crossing my arms at the nun.

But Rafi just tilted her head beneath the jacket and then answered with a muffled voice, "Hmm... If you really want to, I can..."

“What!? Don’t just agree to that!” I yelled.

“Oh, okay...”

Looking back at the two of us, Rosalia shrugged her shoulders and sighed, “With a personality like that, I’m surprised you didn’t fall for a conman way before a murderer.”

As I thought about how to dissuade that gullibility of Rafi’s, I noticed Iscario stopping in his tracks. “Huh? What’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer, instead seemingly looking somewhere off to the side. And then, I noticed a sound coming from somewhere nearby, like something hitting the ground. Following the priest’s line of sight, I saw a human figure out on the farmland, using a hoe to till the soil.

“Hmm?” It was the first person we’d come across since entering the town, but for some reason, even squinting my eyes, I couldn’t make out what they looked like at all.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Oh. That must be old man Bolo,” Rafi said, not elaborating any further. Even though we were all looking directly at him, ‘old man Bolo’ just continued working the earth, seemingly not noticing us at all.

“S-should we approach him? We’re gonna have to talk to everyone anyway, right?”

“I don’t see why not,” Iscario approved.

We all got off the main road to approach him, careful not to step on any of the crops. The man still didn’t pay us any mind. As we got closer, I finally realized why I hadn’t been able to make out any details about him—The man was wrapped from head to toe in black bandages, atop which he wore dark tattered clothes. Looked upon from a distance, his strange appearance gave the impression of a charred corpse.

When we finally got close enough, I looked at everyone around. However, Rosalia faced away from me, while Iscario held his eyes shut in contemplation. And Rafi stared back blankly, clearly not picking up on my intent. *Of course... None of them are any help!*

Gulping, I mustered up the courage to call out to the old man. “Um, h-hello there!”

“Ahn?” Finally aware of our presence, he turned his face towards us, sunken eyes peeking through the bandages on his face. “Whuh? Who’re ye’all? Outsiders?” His somewhat slurred speech was hard to understand.

“O-oh, yes, but Raf—Rafflesia is here with us!”

“Mm? Ah, young Rafflesia? Didn’t notice ya there, kee-hee-hee!” Rafi lightly bowed her head at the cackling old man. “Good, good. Makin’ new friends, ‘s a good thing, I tell ya. Yer always by yerself, was makin’ me worry,

kee-hee-hee! Oh, m'name's Bolo, Bolo Bolobo. Good ta make yer acquaintance, kee-hee-hee-hee!"

"R-Right," I stammered, trying to interrupt his dissonant laughter. "Uhh, I'm..."

"Rupert, m'son, lookit that young'un behind you, see how tall he is? Ye should eat more meat, ye should, get as tall as'im! Kee-hee-hee!"

"W-what?"

"Mr. Bolobo, Mr. Rupert died five years ago..." Rafi interjected with that quiet yet worrying statement, though I'm not sure if the old man had ever heard it through his own cackling.

"...Um, anyway, if you wouldn't mind, could I ask you some quest—" I tried my best to get the conversation back on some kind of track, but Bolo Bolobo suddenly cut his laughter short, fixating on something. It didn't seem like he was any more inclined to listen to me though, as he stared somewhere behind me. Confused, I looked back, but all that greeted me was the priest standing there in silence, the nun a few feet further away. The rays of sunlight made the Luminary hanging from his neck, the symbol of the Heliocentric Church, glint powerfully...

Thud. Turning around at the sudden noise, I saw the old man down on his knees, heedless of the dirt staining his pants, clasping his palms together, tears spewing from his dull eyes. "Aah, *aaah*, a guide!" His hoarse voice was trembling with emotion. "I thought ye'd forsaken us! Ta think ye'd grace such unforgivable sinners with your presence again!" The old man wailed.

I couldn't understand it. There was no transition, no sign in our conversation that would have hinted at this. It was like his demeanor had flipped without notice.

Wordlessly, Father Iscario walked forward towards the crying elder, bumping into me in the process, causing me to stagger backward for a second. And then, stopping just a few centimeters in front of him, the priest slowly knelt down, dirtying his cassock in the process. He gently put his hand on the man's shoulder, and, with a kind smile on his face, softly declared, "Please, dry your tears. Stand up.

"I am neither a guide nor a messenger, but a mere servant. I'm no different than you. Whether a saint or a sinner, the Sun's light shines just as brightly on us all."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" With Father Iscario by his side, Old man Bolo... Bolo Bolobo kept on weeping under the morning sun, his shadow stretching along the farmland. I could do nothing but watch on in stunned silence.

Continuing on unpaved the main road towards Rafi's house, I couldn't push down the desire to ask.

"Say, Rafi, that old man... Is he okay?"

She tilted her head at my vague question. "...Well, he can't see very well."

"...Right." I swallowed the rest of my words.

I couldn't help looking at Father Iscario, walking quietly yet resolutely in front of me.



Once we reached the cluster of houses that was the village proper, we relied on Rafi to lead the way. And before long, we reached the front of her home, a two-story wooden house with a small perimeter. Aside from the old man from earlier, we never ended up seeing anyone else out and about, though I could feel eyes on us from the many houses around, which didn't feel very reassuring.

"It's here," Rafi said, casually walking up to the entrance.

"Ah, wait!" I said, stopping her from opening the door. "Don't just go in, we need to think of how to explain this to your parents first!"

"Mm? Explain?"

"You know, the fact that you're bringing home a bunch of strangers and that both of us are covered in blood!"

"...?" Rafi put a finger to her cheek and thought for a moment. "'I got stabbed and this boy bit my neck and now these church people want to know who stabbed me so that they can then stab us themselves.' Does that work?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Sounds clear and concise to me," Rosalia said.

"Please be quiet!" I yelled that to her, then turned back to Rafi, "We absolutely can't tell your parents what really happened, okay? Don't let them know you're a vampire either! For now, we just have to think of some other justification."

"Mm." Rafi closed her eyes, nodding to herself. "Okay. I have an idea." After saying that, she turned around to open the door.

"Wait, wait, are you *really* sure you've got this?"

Looking back at me, her face as blank as usual, she gave me a wordless thumbs up. *Oh boy, I'm gonna regret this, aren't I?* Giving me no room to voice

my misgivings, she finally opened the door and, stepping inside, called out, "Mom, I'm back!"

After sharing a look amongst one another, the rest of us also got closer to the entrance, looking into the hallway beyond Rafi but not stepping in just yet.

And a few moments later, a skinny middle aged woman popped her head out from behind the corner, her hair in a bun. "Ah, Raff, you're finally back—" she began, before noticing her daughter's appearance. "Oh, dear, is that blood on your clothes? Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I just tripped," Rafi said with a straight face. *That was your 'idea'!? There's no way she'll buy that!*

"I see, I see. Is the young man back there fine, though? He's also covered in blood," Rafi's mom said, sending me a look of concern. *Wait, did she actually believe it!?*

"Don't worry, that's just my blood," Rafi clarified. *How is she supposed to not worry hearing that!?*

"..." Rafi's mom continued staring at us with narrowed eyes for a few moments. I gave her my best attempt at a smile, beads of sweat rolling down my face. A few moments later, however, her expression turned into a sunny smile of her own. "Well, come on in, don't just stand out there!"

"...Right, thank you," I said, bowing my head and stepping inside. *Mother and daughter are both pretty off-kilter, I guess...* And as I crouched down to take my shoes off, I heard a gasp leak out from the woman's mouth. Raising my head towards her, I saw her staring wide-eyed, her hand to her mouth. And then, feeling a sense of deja-vu, I turned back to see the priest and nun standing in full view behind me.

"My, I didn't realize you brought a holy man with you, Raff! I'm terribly sorry for not greeting you properly! Oh, and look at me, making you stand out there, please come in! My, my, I have to whip up a feast!"

Facing the anxiously rambling woman with a gentle smile, Iscario said, "Please, don't feel like you must treat us any differently than you would anyone else. We are most grateful for your hospitality."

"Oh, you're far too kind, Father..."

"Iscario. Iscario T. Rosenkranz. At your service." The man introduced himself, still towering over the woman even as he bowed. "And you are?"

"Oh geez, I forgot to introduce myself! I really am scattered today," Rafi's mom said, pressing her hand to her temple in consternation, before correcting her posture and facing us with a smile. "I'm Sapria Valpurga. Go ahead and make yourselves at home."

Rosalia and I also introduced ourselves (the former being a lot more polite to Sapria than I'd ever seen her up to that point). As we walked further into the entrance hall, Sapria called out to Rafi.

"By the way, dear, did you bring over the vegetables from the storehouse?"

"Ah." The daughter froze, though it was difficult to tell the difference between that and her usual expression. *Amid all that chaos, it's inevitable she'd have forgotten about something like that.*

"Oh Raff, do you get that forgetfulness from me, I wonder? I hope you at least remembered to lock the door like I told you. Thieves might show up again otherwise."

"Yes, it's locked," Rafi replied.

"Thieves?" I asked. "People from the village?"

"Ah, no, that shed is outside the village, and it used to not have a lock, so one time some outsiders broke in. There wasn't much to take, but after they left the door open some wild animals ransacked the place." Hmm, so that was why it was so empty now? I guess most people wouldn't have found it safe enough to use it after that. "But it was *he* who instructed us to put a lock on the door after that. We can't disobey his guidance, you know—"

Sapria's words suddenly cutting off there, she turned to look into her daughter's eyes. Rafi was staring back at her mother, her face no different than usual. After a few moments of silence, Sapria spoke again.

"...Nevermind. But what are we gonna do about lunch? The pantry's empty, you know," she said, eyes downcast.

"No need to worry about that, dear!" Suddenly, a booming voice echoed from behind us. Turning around, we saw an unfamiliar man carrying a large cloth bag in his hands. He was tall, though not as tall as Iscario, his slim yet toned arms visible beneath his short sleeved vest. A bulky crossbow was slung across his back, alongside a backpack. His bright blue eyes were like replicas of Rafi's.

"Dad."

"Hi there, my daughter. Seems like you frolicked around a bit too much, huh? Gahahahaha!" *Their personalities sure are polar opposites, for being father and daughter*, I thought. He certainly seemed unfazed to see his child covered in blood. But then again, I suppose he could intuit that she hadn't been seriously injured. "More to the point, here ya go!"

The man presented the bag he was carrying, opening it up to reveal numerous fresh vegetables and even cuts of meat. "Oh, how delightful!" Her eyes glittering, Sapria snatched the bag and ran off with it to the kitchen, dragging it across the floor with her thin arms with surprising ferocity.

“Gahaha, forgive my wife, will you? She sometimes gets overly excited like that,” Rafi’s dad said, turning to Iscario and offering a handshake. “Name’s Rhizanthès. Nice to meet you, Father.”

“You’ve nothing to apologize for. It’s wonderful to see such lively people,” the priest said, returning the handshake and giving his name. Rosalia also introduced herself with a bow, her face awfully solemn.

And just as I was starting to feel left out, the man—Rhizanthès thrust out his right hand towards me with a smile.

“Ah, nice to meet you! My name is Vio Vaaaaaaagh—” After I timidly grasped his hand and started introducing myself, the man began shaking his arm—and me along with it—vigorously.

“Gahahaha, what’s with that soft handshake? You’re a man, aren’t you? Be more firm!”

“R-right, I’ll do my best!” I said, still being shaken about and desperately trying to keep my glasses on.

After a few seconds of that, Rhizanthès walked further into his home, still laughing boisterously and inviting us to come along with him. As I tried to get my bearings, the man turned his face to us once more, adding, “Hope you enjoy your time here in St. Purgatorio—and may the Sun’s light bless you.”

And with that, he left the corridor and disappeared around the corner. As Iscario and Rosalia followed him, I stayed behind for a moment, letting his words ring out in my mind. *What a merciless blessing it is.*



After being led into the tiny parlor, I apologetically asked Rafi’s parents for a temporary change of clothes—I couldn’t exactly afford to walk around covered in blood forever, and while other vampires could apparently manipulate their own clothes freely, I had no such convenient ability.

The exceedingly welcoming Sapria not only readily agreed, but also offered to wash my clothes herself. I tried dissuading her at first, but eventually gave in to her kindness—things were supposed to be going smoothly.

No, I mean, I really was grateful for her help and all, but—

“U-um, excuse me, don’t you have anything else I can wear?” I asked, doing my best to control my quivering voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I don’t think we have any other clothes that would fit you. My husband’s certainly wouldn’t,” Sapria said in a troubled tone of voice.

“Riiight... I guess that’s to be expected...” I said, my head hung low in despair. As for the reason: while my clothes were to be washed, I was stuck wearing a silky white nightgown—one belonging to Rafi, to be exact.

I suppose it couldn’t be helped. I was about the same height as her, and really, my physique was such that most adolescent boys towered over me, so I didn’t exactly have much choice, but it didn’t make the situation any less embarrassing. I was rarely jealous of more powerful vampires, but this was certainly one such case.

Father Iscario was standing with his back to the wall next to Rhizanthès, cup of tea in his hand, watching me amusedly.

“Grr.” Something about his ever-content smile peeved me. “Having fun watching me suffer, Father?”

“Perish the thought,” he quickly denied, not perturbed in the least. “I would never rejoice at another’s suffering. For what is life if not a series of trials we must overcome?”

“I don’t really see you struggling all that much though.”

“Being prepared for the tough roads ahead is just another virtue,” he said, tapping the surface of a bag he’d apparently been carrying with him the whole time.

And just whose fault is it that I didn’t have the time to leisurely pack my stuff before leaving!?

Seeing my overt shame, Sapria offered to go ask one of the other townspeople for something else I could wear. I belatedly realized I shouldn’t be making the woman feel bad after she’d gone out of her way to help me, so I declined the offer with a smile. I was the older one here anyway, I couldn’t act immature—well, not that she knew about that.

With that settled, I approached Rafi, who was kneeling in front of a wooden tub of water in a corner of the room, and called out to her. “Sorry for whining like that. I’m sure it’s not pleasant for you either, having a guy like me wear your clothes.”

“I don’t mind,” she said plainly, not facing my way.

“Is that so?”

“I think you look good in it.”

“Err, thanks, but that doesn’t really make me feel better.”

“Really? But I think you look better in it than me, Vio.”



“No, really, you really don’t have to say that...”

Letting the conversation trail off, I turned my attention to the container beneath her. She was washing the bloodstains from the dress she’d been stabbed in. She’d have to sew the portion that was torn open, too. I didn’t have much experience cleaning blood stains, but it didn’t look easy.

“Hmm.” Looking at the much more plain outfit that she’d changed into, I realized that she’d been dressed surprisingly fancily for a village girl, especially compared to her parents. “That’s quite the pretty dress,” I said. “Looks like something you’d see out in the city.”

“Mm,” she muttered. “It’s a special gift. I have to take care of it.”

“I see.” I smiled, not prying any further. *Gifts, huh?* I thought I’d been taking care of all the things I’d received over the years, but looking at her diligently scrubbing that dress, I realized I might not have really paid them that much mind after all. I figured there’d always be another chance to say my thanks directly. All the way until there wasn’t.

I turned away from her, looking for a place to sit down and eventually settling for a wooden chair next to the dinner table, though the hard surface wasn’t what I’d call comfortable. A few feet away, the Valpurga couple watched the priest with glowing eyes as they listened to him talk, much like a pack of churchgoers enraptured by a sermon.

Sighing, I averted my eyes, and inadvertently noticed Sister Rosalia silently standing in a corner. Come to think of it, she’d barely said a word since we entered Rafi’s home. Maybe she wasn’t good at dealing with this kind of atmosphere. *But when she’s not yelling or scowling, I guess even she can look like a regular nun.* Idle thoughts like that crossing my mind, I relaxed my body and soul in the Valpurga family’s home.

After that, we all shared a modest breakfast—or maybe closer to a brunch. Sapria’s cooking was unsophisticated and somewhat lacking in flavor, but I enjoyed it nonetheless—truth be told, I’d have probably found any edible dish delicious by that point.

I tried sprinkling in some light questioning when I could, while trying not to give anything away—though in that regard, the couple’s laidback attitude was helpful, as they didn’t seem at all interested in asking about any specifics.

“This morning, when you sent Rafi to the storehouse, would anyone else aside from you two have known about her going there?”

"Hmm? I suppose not? Though anyone could have seen her going to the town's exit."

The Valpurga residence was located around the middle of the village, so she had to have passed quite a few other homes before making it to the path leading out to the forest.

"Does this village happen to have any hunters?" Iscario asked.

"Course. You're talking to one," Rhizanthès said with a grin, pointing at his own face with his thumb.

"Ah, is that so? Then that means you should have access to this village's stockpile of armaments."

"Well, yeah, but that's a funny way of puttin' it. The storehouse ain't locked or anythin'. It's just a few blocks down, in the direction of the village's southern entrance. We all just leave our stuff there for convenience."

That was the way we'd come from, so we must have unknowingly passed it on our way here.

"Isn't it a problem if just anyone can take your weapons," I asked.

"Hmm? Why? Hasn't been any problem so far."

I guess with a village this small there's not much need to worry about security or anything. The town I lived in wasn't particularly bustling or anything, but even we took some precautions against criminals. But in a community as small as this one that probably wasn't on anyone's mind.

"Then," Iscario continued, "Do you happen to have anything like this in your stockpile?" As he said that, he took out a small silver stake from within his bag and showed it to Rhizanthès. I believe he'd called it a Sealing Sacrament before? It was the same kind of weapon that had been used to stab Rafi. I was a bit worried about how this kind of question would come across, but nonetheless I looked on in anticipation of an answer.

Rhizanthès craned his neck to look closer at the stake. As I viewed his face in profile, I felt like an expression of grief crossed his features for just a brief instant, though it disappeared quickly enough that I couldn't be sure I wasn't just seeing things. And then he said, "This is a church implement of some kind, ain't it? I'm sorry, but this isn't really my area of expertise, y'see, Father. At the very least, I'm pretty sure I haven't seen it before."

"That's all right, thank you," Iscario said, putting the stake away.

We didn't manage to get much else of note out of the two. Sister Rosalia never broke her silence for the entire meal.



After we ate, Sapria showed us to the rooms we could use to sleep. Well, as it turns out, their home didn't really come prepared with guestrooms, so I would have to sleep in Rafi's room while the nun and the priest would sleep in the couple's room for the time being. Rafi said she didn't feel tired at all, so it was good enough for a temporary arrangement.

I was somewhat reluctant to sleep in a teenage girl's bed, but my exhaustion overwhelmed any such apprehensions. Sleep wasn't physically necessary for vampires, but it was still a psychological need without which we'd lose our minds. Perhaps no sentient creature could remain conscious forever without going crazy. In practice, the older a vampire got, the longer they slept, usually.

But before I could conk out, Rafi asked me to wait for her to clean up her room a bit. I told her she didn't have to, but she insisted. I probably wouldn't have wanted someone to go into my room without me getting the chance to tidy up either, so I obliged. So I was currently waiting in the hallway outside, absentmindedly playing with Morry. Rafi's parents had gone downstairs, so there was probably no need to worry about them seeing him, though truth be told my tired brain just couldn't keep up the precautions anymore.

"So that's the only power you have? Talk about pathetic!" That rude tone could only belong to one person. And sure enough, when I turned to look at the voice, I saw Sister Rosalia, still wearing her habit but having taken off her headpiece.

Giving her scowling face a faint smile, I said, "Shouldn't that be a good thing in your eyes? The closer I am to a human the better, right?"

"Hah! Whether you're a monstrous freak or a loser freak, it doesn't change that you're a freak," the nun said, smirking.

"Hmm. Well, you're not wrong there," I acquiesced, shrugging. "You seem spirited enough though. I'm glad about that. You were awfully quiet during the meal, so I was worried."

"Huh? The hell are you on about? I don't need *your* worry!"

"Maybe not, but I have the freedom to worry about it anyway," I said, shrugging lightly.

"Tch—!" The vein pulsating on her forehead seemingly close to popping, she gritted her teeth and took a step forward towards me. And then—

"W-woah!"

—Suddenly, she pulled out her spear from God-knows-where and pointed it straight at my forehead, stopping it just a few centimeters from me. The surprise caused me to stagger backwards, almost toppling me over, though I managed to regain my balance before that could happen.

"Let me set things straight. The only reason why you haven't been chopped into a hundred pieces and stuffed into a coffin is because Father Iscario ordained it to be so. But I have no intentions of palling around with you or joining in on your comedy routine. Once this case is over, you're dead." Rosalia delivered this declaration in an icy tone, her viciously glinting eyes boring into me.

"..." I was momentarily left speechless, but as a bitter smile crossed my lips I couldn't help but ask. "...Say, why exactly do you hate me—hate vampires, so much?"

"Hah! Now there's a fun question!" Her face once again twisting into a derisive smirk, Sister Rosalia answered readily. "It's because you're filthy cowards, that's why."

"..." The silver blade still glinting in front of my eyes, I gave her a questioning look.

"Not catching my drift, huh?" Her anger seemed to have entirely given way to sadistic glee as she continued. "Y'know, before we attacked you, we looked into you a bit. So I know the gist of your situation.

"You just lost the last of the people you spent your entire life with. You were so desperate not to be left alone that you even tried turning 'em into a vampire, which is what led us to you." Having said this much, she once again fixed me with an intense glare. "Say, what the hell are you still alive for? Wasn't that your cue to die? But even though the people who loved you are no more, even though you have nothing left, you still hang onto life, you damn cockroach! The gall! Is there anything else to call that but cowardice? You're all wimps who can't bring themselves to go when their time's come." Rosalia pulled her weapon back from me and deftly spun it around before hiding it away somewhere. Then, turning her back to me, she craned her head towards me and added, "*That* is why I hate you."

I hung my head. As much as I wanted to condemn her as an irrational killer, to pity myself as the victim of a cruel fate, her words just squirmed their way through my mind, through the deepest crevices of doubt.

It was true. By any ordinary human standards, I had led a full life. I couldn't claim I'd have no regrets if I died, but then, who could? But I'd seen the world, I'd had my fun, I spent as much time as I could with my closest ones—it was the kind of life no one could complain about. Yet, having found myself at the end of that life, having lost the people whom I'd loved and who had loved me, I still wasn't satisfied. I still felt like I wanted to live, like there was more for me to see and do in this world. Was that the fear of death at work, which Rosalia had accused me of? Or was I boundlessly greedy, unhappy with the share every other person got? Either way, having considered myself human in all but name for my entire life, I couldn't deny my shame at these feelings of mine.

Perhaps it was because she'd managed to get at something in me that I felt the need to take some sort of revenge on her. I called out to Rosalia's retreating back.

"Hey, let me make a guess, would you? Your hatred feels awfully personal. So how about this hypothesis: You lost one of your loved ones to a vampire. Maybe it was a parent or a sibling, I've no way of knowing. But isn't that actually why you despise us so much? Just pushing all of your resentment onto our kind isn't exactly mature, you know."

She stopped in her tracks, keeping silent for a moment. Just as I began to regret my outburst, Rosalia turned her head to me once more, flashing me a wicked grin. "Is that your attempt at provocation? Good, that suits us way better than your bullshit sympathy earlier, keep it that way." She shrugged her shoulders casually. "My sister was killed by a vampire, it's true. But I hold no grudges over it. She died in the line of duty—for people like us, there's nothing better to hope for. And you know, hating all vampires for a reason like that would be stupid. I wouldn't have turned into a mass murderer if a human had offed her, I'll tell you that much." Resting her right palm on the back of her head, she stifled a yawn with her left. Turning away from me, she left me with one last frank declaration. "I just find your existence disgusting. That's all there is to it. See ya." And with that, Sister Rosalia left me behind, going to her own room.

"Sigh. There's just no getting along with some people, is there, Morry?"

Morry just squeaked delightedly as I rubbed his dark body with my finger, ignorant of our petty human struggles. *Then again*, I thought. Perhaps this ignorance, too, was one I'd projected onto him.

"You've given it a name, have you? How peculiar, indeed."

Snapped out of my reverie, I quickly turned to the source of the voice: as if swapping places with Rosalia, Father Iscario appeared, his usual priest's garb removed in favor of a comfortable black sweater.

"Sorry to startle you. Seems like Rosalia has given you quite the hard time as well," the priest said with a gentle smile.

"...Not at all." I couldn't let my guard down around either of them, but as far as their usual intensity went, it seemed clear that he was preferable to the nun.

"But returning to my previous question, a vampire naming their familiars is certainly an odd sight."

"I can see why. Other vampires can transform into a giant flock of bats, can't they? Seems tough to keep track of all of them. I don't have to worry about that though, haha."

"More than that, they are not individual living creatures at all." Iscario directed his gaze at Morry, who was currently flying haphazardly in front of me, as if trying to protect me. "That bat is no less a part of you than your fingers or toes. It doesn't have any sentience beyond that which you impose upon it."

"Heh, you're the expert, so you must be right about that," I said, rubbing the back of Morry's neck with my finger. "But even if it's just for my own self-satisfaction, I can't help but think of this guy as a friend. We've been through a lot together, after all."

"Hmm." Iscario seemed to contemplate my statement. "Well, however you choose to think of it is up to you. Though I believe that cognition itself may be part of the reason why you cannot manifest many of the abilities other vampires can."

"Guess I have a pretty troublesome personality for a vampire," I said, chuckling. "Probably too late to change it by now though."

"...Have you ever asked yourself why so many vampires can turn into or manifest bats?" the priest suddenly asked.

"Hm?" Putting my finger to my cheek, I considered the question. "Huh. I've never really thought about it. I always just chalked it up to one of our many inexplicable abilities."

"There is an abundance of vampires whose powers are in some way related to bats. But there are also other types. Some can turn into crows, for instance, or cormorants. Some can even turn into creatures that don't exist in our biological order at all. And," adding with an amused note, "I've encountered at least one vampire that could turn into a swarm of kittens."

Now that was one heck of a mental image. It must have really wrecked the tension of whatever confrontation they were having.

"So then, the question is," continues Iscario, "is this preponderance of bats due to some kind of quirk in your biology which makes you closer to them in some way? That's one of the principal theories, but there is also

another which I happen to subscribe to.” Spreading his arms, the priest delivers his explanation in the ceremonial tone of a preacher. “It’s because that is the popular perception of vampires. When people think of vampires, the image of bats is one that naturally floats into the mind. That association is one so widespread that it affects even vampires themselves. Because they subconsciously believe that vampires and bats are related, their powers manifest in the form of bats. In other words, the rumors and stories that circulate about your kind have shaped you just as much as you have shaped them, if not more. Of course, that extends not just to the prevalence of bats, but also other common traits. The weakness to sunlight that most vampires share seems to be a physical reaction of some sort, but other features, such as that of some vampires not appearing in mirrors, appear to be of an entirely psychological origin. A fascinating phenomenon, isn’t it?”

“S-sure is.” I found it hard to follow up on his impassioned speech, despite it being indirectly about me. “But I didn’t know our subconscious mind affected our powers that much. I thought it was mostly just up to luck.”

“Well now, that’s no wonder, is it?” The priest said, amused. “After all, you’ve never even met another vampire before, have you?”

“E-eh?” I stammered at his abrupt non-sequitur of a question.

“Am I wrong?”

“W-well, I just like to avoid troublemakers, you see?” I said, laughing bashfully. I didn’t know why I was trying to make excuses for myself, but it felt like I’d somehow been exposed as a fraud or something.

“I don’t know your past beyond what we’ve been able to piece together from circumstantial evidence surrounding you and your family, but I’d wager that you were raised entirely by humans. In other words, you’re in a pretty unique position, as far as vampires go. Your only knowledge of your kind comes from rumors and urban legends, no different than the average human citizen.”

“I suppose so, yeah,” I said, scratching my cheek.

“Hm. And it’s precisely because of that ignorance that you fail to understand exactly what an extraordinary feat you’ve accomplished, you see.”

“Huh?” I didn’t understand what he was getting at. Me, performing an extraordinary feat? Now that was something that was hard to imagine.

Watching me with amusement in his eyes, Father Iscario spoke. “Very few traits are common among all vampires, so much so that it is often difficult to believe that they all belong to the same race. But one thing is true, above all else—the ability to turn a human into a vampire *is one that close to none have.*”

“—Huh?”

"Regardless of how powerful or old they are, very few vampires are capable of turning humans. And even among those who do, it is often the case that they only ever manage to turn one human over the course of their entire lifespan."

"W-what?" That couldn't be right. Vampires were always spoken about as demons that would feast on human blood and turn their prey into slaves. Of course, I knew that rumor was off-base, but I figured it couldn't have been *that* wrong if it was such a widespread image.

"Heh. Very few humans will ever encounter a vampire in their life, you know? Despite that, these monsters are an ever-popular topic of discussion. Under such circumstances, it's no wonder that fiction would wind up overtaking fact."

If I'd been calmer, I might have shot back that the church could correct those wrongful impressions if they just made their knowledge publicly available, but in the moment I was struck by something entirely different. *What? Me? I'm one of the special few? No way! I'm just a small fry who can only survive by hiding! There's no way I have some kind of special ability like that!*

"B-but," I stammered, desperately trying to keep my racing mind under control, "if that's true, if I really am that special, then... then why did you agree to my deal? You only agreed because I'm weak, didn't you? Because you could take me out at any time! If I have an ability this rare, how could you trust that fact?"

"Because," the priest said calmly, evenly, in contrast to my quivering voice, "beyond anything related to your abilities, there's something I understand about you beyond a shadow of a doubt, Vio Valakia—

"—You're normal. A perfectly ordinary citizen, governed by perfectly ordinary common sense. And that is all I need to know." His thin smile never wavered, and through the narrow opening beneath his eyelids I could see his controlling, appraising gaze.

"You..." I mumbled hesitatingly, trying to get out the question which had been plaguing me. "You don't look at me like a monster. You can tell that I'm no different from a human.

"—So why? Why are you so intent on exterminating me?"

"I have no interest in pretending you are something that you're not," the priest replied bluntly. "I won't deny that you can think and feel like humans do. Especially young vampires such as you."

"Then why—"

"However, what you *are*, I—we cannot allow to exist in this world. I won't let an immortal creature defile this earth, whatever it may be. That's all there is to it."

That's all there was to it.

Leaving me without words, the priest wished me a restful sleep before vanishing into his own room. Alone again in the hallway, I felt like I'd just been punched in the face.

"Vio. I'm done." And a short while later, Rafi came out of her room, letting me come in. I thanked her for her hard work, though more than ever before that day, I felt so out of it that I just wanted to immediately collapse into bed. Projected upon the back of my eyelids, I could see Sister Rosalia and Father Iscario's eyes still firmly upon me.



As I laid upon the bed, before my world faded into darkness, I took note of one thing.

"This room... It's so empty..."

◆ Record III ◆

Nightseekers

「The Strange Search Story ~Part One~」



As I slept, a certain scene played out in my mind once more, just one part of what Rafi had given me. It felt as deeply familiar as it did alien.

‘My’ body was shorter than I was used to. It felt as if every door, every window, every roof’s colossal size held divine meaning. Every sight would burn itself into ‘my’ mind and become the fabric of ‘my’ soul.

‘I’ was walking alongside someone, ‘my’ small hand wrapped in theirs. Their—her presence felt like the most massive thing of all, like it towered above the clouds, face obscured by twilight.

She was saying something, but I couldn’t really register most of it. Just watching her speak and listening to her voice was enough for ‘me’.

Suddenly, she let go of ‘my’ hand, and, with a spring in her step, wound around to face ‘me’. She got down on her knees to match ‘my’ level, running her hands through ‘my’ hair.

“A beautiful girl like you should shine brighter.”

Her smile was many times more radiant than the sun behind her.

“Once you grow up, I promise I’ll get you a beautiful dress, like the girls wear outside the village. Would you like that?”

‘I’ didn’t understand the question, but ‘I’ nodded nonetheless. Sharing a promise, a bond with her felt like a gift in its own right.

“I hope you’ll give me a smile then, Rafi. That’ll be my reward.”

The smell of the grass. The sound of the birds. The palm running through my hair. A knowing smile and a wink. A name with a familiar ring to it. And the setting Sun. That snapshot must have been her life’s front cover. And to have a sight any less glorious than that be what adorns the back—I wouldn’t allow it.



Sleeping on an unfamiliar bed, for the first time in quite a while, made me think of Vince.

Vincent Valakia. I’d slept in many unfamiliar beds thanks to him. He was a man who could never be satisfied settling down. Even in his older age, though he’d slowed down, his nomadic nature never left him.

From childhood to old age, he never once stopped running forward, searching for a fresh new destination to lay his eyes upon.

I should have felt nothing but confidence and security gazing upon that wide back, but strangely enough, I never really did. I wonder why that was... a strange sense of anxiety always filled my mind.

Even just thinking this felt like a betrayal. He had always been there for me. For decades on end, he’d never left me behind. He would have gladly given his life for me—he’d proven that on many occasions, and I wouldn’t dare doubt his conviction.

And yet—For my whole life, I’d never been able to shake a certain notion.

That, if provided with the choice between adhering to his principles, reaching for the ideals that he swore by, and remaining by my side—he would pick the former, without a second thought. He would cast aside anything, if it meant staying true to himself.

If I could just remain by his side for one more day, I'd throw away all my cheap convictions, faiths and morals. Though I knew he'd never ask this of me, I could have become a demon for him.

I was always just barely holding onto that back, grasping whatever I could, hanging on by a thread, all so I could remain there, in that place. In that picture-perfect frame, with them by my side.

Tina was different. She followed him with her head held high, made his mission her life's own—I could never be the same. Even now, I still can't wrap my head around it—why he was the way he was, what really drove him. What the world looked like in his eyes.

But I cherished him all the same.

Ah. I knew there was no point in praying—in praying for him to watch over me. Wherever he was right now, I was sure that his gaze, and hers too, were fixed pointedly at the beyond.



About three hours later, I was woken up by Rafi, who came in at Father Iscario's behest. Groggily checking my pocket watch, which I'd left on the dresser next to the bed, one of the room's few pieces of furniture, I took note of the time—ten minutes before six o'clock, just in time for the sun to lower its intensity. It wasn't enough time to get me fully rested, but it was certainly better than nothing. If nothing else, I was thankful I could wake up to Rafi's gentle nudging—picturing the alternative of waking up to the wrong end of that caustic sister's spear was enough to terrify me into fully alert consciousness.

"What have you been up to while I was out, Rafi?" I asked with a smile.

"...Olga stopped by. She stuck around with me for a while."

"I see." *Must be a friend*, I figured. "Did you have fun?"

"..." She just tilted her head at me, staring blankly.

"...R-right. I shouldn't get too ahead of myself." I could not for the life of me get a read on that girl.

Thankfully, my clothes had also finished drying in the meantime, so I was able to shed my undesired new look. Soon after I left Rafi's room, though, I found myself right back, sitting on her creaky bed yet again. Sapria was busying herself around the house, so our best bet for a place where we could hold a strategy meeting seemed to be here.

“We will conduct our investigations on each day starting in the late afternoon, after the Sun’s rays have lessened, continuing well into the night. We’ve gotten used to a nocturnal schedule, as I’m sure is also true of you, Vio Valakia. Miss Rafflesia, I’m afraid you’ll have to bear with it.” Rafi nodded. Despite prompting me to lead earlier, it seemed that Father Iscario had naturally slid into the role of our coordinator. I wasn’t about to complain—he was far better suited to the job. “I suggest we all stick together for now. As a local, Miss Rafflesia’s insight will be invaluable.”

No one had any objections to his propositions. Soon enough, it was time to decide the first target of our investigation, one which we were all on the same page about:

“First of all, we should talk to the owner of the storehouse.”

No one ought to know better about who had access to the place than the owner himself. However, we seemed to have hit a roadblock right off the bat.

“The owner... Well, Olga’s dad built it.” Rafi said. “But if you’re looking for him, I’m sorry, but he’s out of town.” Her curt statement dashed our plans. The owner, ‘Olga’s dad’—his name was apparently Elegio Eulogia—was out of town to see a doctor in order to get a chronic disease treated.

“Hrm. This will somewhat complicate things—but no matter. We mustn’t get stuck on every impediment,” the priest said. “Let us check in with our second most important information source.”

“The second most important? Who might that be?” I asked.

“This case is full of unknowns, and for us outsiders the biggest of them all is the very village we’re in. Thus, we ought to speak with the representative of this place.”

And right as he said so with his proper and composed look, the door swung open behind him.

“Heya, did you all sleep well?” It was Sapria Valpurga, entering her daughter’s room full of cheer and having seemingly never even entertained the option of knocking. “Sorry to bother you, but it seems the mayor invited you to his house. Whenever you’ve got a moment, feel free to pop by!”

And so our next destination was decided—the mayor’s residence, at the center of the village.



It seems that he'd been informed of our arrival into the village sometime prior. After being pointed in its direction, we soon arrived at the mayor's home. The man himself waited for us outside his door with a nervous smile.

Despite it being the residence of the village's highest official, the house was no different in size or grandeur than any of the others around it. Well, to be fair, though we'd called him a mayor, in a village this tiny I doubt he even held any kind of actual governmental position—he seemed like more of a village chief than anything.

“W-welcome, welcome. My name is Klimnt Horheldorfel, and I serve as this village's mayor. Please come in. Hold on for just a moment, I'll serve you all some tea!” And that village chief was none other than the stammering lanky man before us, rubbing his hands nervously. His face was decorated by a brown bushy moustache which stood out against his yellowing skin.

“No need for pleasantries, sir. We have our questions for you, and I'm sure you're also itching to know why we've intruded on your village like this,” Iscario said.

“Oh, nonsense!” he quickly yelled, his voice hitting numerous high notes uncomfortable to the ear. “Whatever your reasons, you are welcome here! I just wanted to offer you better accommodation during your stay. But that can wait, please, come in.”

The twitchy mayor led us into a parlor of sorts on the first floor, with two opposing sofas waiting for us, old and battered, a small table sandwiched between. It seemed this was the closest thing to a town hall that St. Purgatorio had.

“Please, go ahead and help yourselves.” Still smiling awkwardly, mayor Klimnt, seated opposite to us, pushed a plate of stale saltines that looked like they'd been left out as decoration for as long as the building had stood.

“Thank you.” *But I'll pass.* The others seemed to share my view, all except for Rafi, who took one of the crackers and was currently struggling to bite through it.

“I've been told that you've been resting at the Valpurgas',” Klimnt began. “If staying in the same house as such a rambunctious family is proving too troublesome, I invite you to sleep in my home instead. You ought to have more space here, besides.”

"Oh, is that really alright?"

"Yes, certainly," the mayor reassured. "My house has been empty for quite some time, ever since my wife and child passed away. I'm sure the rooms will be happy to see some use," he added with a weak smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." I wasn't sure how to react to his admission, but I felt a pang of shame at only being able to regurgitate stock phrases of sympathy.

"May their souls be graced by the Light," solemnly uttered the priest.

"Thank you, Father," Klimnt said, hanging his head.

I guess he can pull off stock phrases just fine though... Ignoring my supremely petty inner comments, Iscario resumed the conversation.

"In any case, we're grateful for your hospitality. Now then," the priest continued, smoothly switching tacks, "if you wouldn't mind, we have a few things to ask you."

Tensing up once again, the mayor straightened his posture and fixed his shifty gaze on us, as if prepared to bear whatever we hit him with.

"Tell me," Iscario began, "how often do the people here have dealings with the outside world?"

"Oh, almost never. The nearest settlement is about three hours away to the south, but there's no proper path through the forest to get there. And past the northern entrance you'll find your path cut off by a stretch of cliffs a half hour's distance away. Nature has isolated us."

That means until I got here I'd been running blindly through the woods for at least three whole hours, huh. Humans sure can muster up a surprising level of energy when they're desperate. Not that I'm human.

"That means you have no established trade routes with the outside at all?" Iscario's eyes widened slightly. "I confess I find that slightly hard to believe."

"This village has stood here for centuries now. We've grown to be self-sufficient, Father." The faintest trace of pride shone through the mayor's smile. "Village folks like us have to take care of one another to survive. But we've also been able to live our days in peace because of that."

True enough, a settlement like this was likely to have gone more or less unnoticed throughout all the clashes that had taken place around here throughout the ages.

"What about people leaving this place, then?" asked Sister Rosalia. "How often does that happen?"

"Because there's no trade with the outside, those of us here don't have much of anything in the way of money. To leave, we have to carry crops with us in order to sell in the nearby settlement. A select number of villagers,

including myself, have left in the past in order to get an education, but most end up returning here soon enough.”

“I’ve been told that one man by the name of Elegio Eulogia is currently outside the village receiving medical attention,” Iscario cut back in. “Is that true?”

“Ah, yes, old Elegio, he was sent to see a doctor in the closest city. He’s been gone for a few months now.”

“Do you not have any kind of healer within this village?”

“Oh, no,” laughed Mayor Klimnt in a small voice. “This isn’t the sort of village a medicine man would ever live in.”

“What do you mean by that,” the priest asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Oh, well, the path of medicine requires years of study. We simply don’t have the wealth to send anyone to follow that path, and surely no outside doctor would choose to live here instead of moving to a bigger city where their services would be better appreciated.”

“Hm,” losing himself in thought for a few moments, Father Iscario then approached the mayor from a different angle. “Speaking of, do you get many outsiders visiting this village?”

“We’ve had years go by without a single outsider stepping foot here. And if you only want to look at those who dwell here for more than a day at most, then we’ve had periods even longer than that go by without anyone.”

“Is that right?” The priest interlocked his fingers, resting his chin on top of conjoined hands. He then fixed Mayor Klimnt with a stare that went on just long enough for the gaunt man to start fidgeting, before giving him release with another of his gentle smiles. And then, he resumed, “if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could you introduce me to this village’s priest?”

“Ah, well, see,” the mayor stammered, “actually, our priest sadly passed away two years ago, leaving no descendants to take his place. Of course, we’re currently looking into finding another young villager to inherit the role, but the preparations take time, yes.” He hung his head as he made the admission, staring at the floor in shame.

“Oh, is that so?” Iscario spoke in feigned surprise. “Know that you need only send word at the nearest church and we will gladly dispatch someone over to this village. The Heliocentric Church strives to reach out to all those that need it.”

“Yes, err, well, indeed,” Mayor Klimnt’s voice devolved into indistinct mumbling for a second, before finally mustering another complete sentence. “...It’s just been the village’s custom for our priest to be one of us. We’d hate to start imposing now, you understand.”

“Of course, that’s a perfectly reasonable thought process. Just know that you’re always welcome to appeal to us.” The priest nodded to himself, the same gentle smile on his face. And then smoothly, without missing a beat, he slid in a completely unrelated question. “Say, has a traveling priest visited your village sometime recently?”

“Huh!?” The non sequitur got a strong reaction from the mayor, who quickly tried to play it off, looking off to the side and wiping the sweat from his forehead with his palm. “W-what makes you think that, Father?”

The smile still seeped into his features, Iscario put his hand into his habit and pulled a certain object out—the Sealing Sacrament.

“We happened to find one of these in your humble little village. You might not be aware, but these are items that only those approved by the Phaethon may carry. So then, I can only imagine that’s how it found its way here.”

The perturbed mayor looked back and forth between the silver stake and the priest’s face, though soon enough his panic gave way to resignation. His head hung even lower, he answered, “—It is as you say, Father. It was a few months ago when he arrived into our village.”

“Well, that much I figured. But what I’d like to know is why everyone is so apprehensive when the topic comes up. And why this sacred object was just lying around here. Care to elucidate me?”

Still unable to meet his inquisitor’s eyes, the mayor wordlessly opened and closed his mouth like a fish struggling for oxygen. With priestly patience, Iscario simply continued observing him, and just as it seemed the mayor might be crushed by the pressure, he suddenly released it all from within him with a great sigh. Then, raising his head with a pained expression, Mayor Klimnt confessed.

“...We have so much to thank that traveling priest for. Even for such undeserving fools, he spent every effort to guide us. He instructed on how to craft a lock for the storehouse in the forest after it was ransacked. Elegio’s disease which we talked about earlier, he was also the one who urged him to go treat it, and even told him of a doctor who would help him free of charge. Even if the entire village worked their entire lives to repay him, I’m sure it wouldn’t be enough. But... But—!” the mayor’s voice trembled with emotion. “—It was an unfortunate accident. He—he passed away, here in the village.”

“...What happened after that?” Iscario asked, the smile wiped off of his face.

“We entrusted his body to nature, as is customary here in the village. As for his belongings, we decided that we must treasure them. I’ve been keeping them in my residence.”

“Then how did this Sacrament make its way to me, if that’s the case?”

“I-I’m sorry, I genuinely don’t know.” Placing his palms on the small table before us, the mayor bowed deeply.

“Tch.” I’d been hearing the grinding of teeth next to me for a while. Finally, it seemed she’d had enough, for the sister spoke up. “So you people are too cowardly to take responsibility for his death, huh?”

“T-that’s—”

“He died in your village, so whaddya do? You throw him away, steal his crap and make sure to never speak of him again. You didn’t tell the Church about him, did ya? Assumed he had no one but you who’d care if he croaked?”

“No, of course not—”

“All I’m hearing are the excuses of those left behind. You’re not the one who died, yet here you are acting like you’ve been hurt the most—Tch!”

Sister Rosalia’s tirade was interrupted as Father Iscario raised a hand to block her, not even turning to look at her. With a click of the tongue, she stood up and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Then, as if it never happened, the priest’s expression once again turned into a warm smile. He placed his hands on the bowing man’s shoulder.

“Thank you for telling us,” he uttered. “In this fleeting life of ours, that pain and regret which you hold onto is the proof of your humanity. Under the light of the Sun, it too shines brilliantly. You should treasure it.”

Though I couldn’t see the mayor’s expression, I could see the tears falling from his eyes and pooling on the table beneath gleam as the day’s final rays of twilight struck them, his faint sobs echoing all the while.

Though my attention had been stolen by the spectacle, at that moment something urged me to look at Rafi. When I looked to my side, I found her wearing the same blank expression she always did. She stared intently, unflinchingly, at the mayor’s tears, no trace of emotion on her features. Though I wanted nothing more than to know what hid under that visage, I just sat there quietly, unable to move an inch.



The mayor gathered himself, then showed us to the rooms we would be using. Rosalia returned to the house at some point, not opening her mouth again,

though she continued regarding the whimpering man with clear contempt, which made him easily earn my sympathy.

After that, as per Father Iscario's request, we momentarily headed back to Rafi's house to decide our next course of action.

As we approached the front door—*Fwoshhh!*

"Woah!" With a sharp sound cutting through the air, a dark something flew towards us from the air, its shockwave making me squint. Upon opening my eyes again, I was met by an unexpected sight.

"Well done, messenger."

A large black bird sat perched atop Iscario's outstretched arm, its wings still extended. In its long beak was a scroll, which the priest took out with his other arm. Rafi and I both looked at it wide-eyed.

"What the heck is this thing, your carrier pigeon? Doesn't much look like a pigeon to me, though," I said. I could see Sister Rosalia forming a rare happy smile while watching the creature. *I guess even she has certain things she has a soft spot for.*

"It's a cormorant," he explained. "We use these birds to send messages between us members of the Thirteenth Chamber."

"Hoh." It certainly did fit their image, somehow. "What's this guy's name, then?"

"Its designation is Carrier Nr. 72."

"Huh? Now that's not much of a name. That kind of ID only makes it sound like cattle." I crossed my arms sternly. "I'd say it deserves better than that for working so hard to deliver your messages all the time." I could see Rosalia standing behind the priest with her arms similarly crossed, nodding vehemently at my words.

"Why don't you name it then?"

"Eh?" That simple suggestion threw the wind out of my sails entirely. "Me?"

"Sure, why not?" The priest truly didn't seem to mind one way or the other. Meanwhile, I could see Sister Rosalia behind him, now glaring at me with a murderous glint in her eyes, her spear suddenly at the ready.

"Err, um, well, that's..." Frantically searching for a way to avoid doom, my eyes caught sight of Rafi, ignoring our exchange and staring curiously into the cormorant's eyes. "I know! Rafi! Why don't you think of a name?"

"Hm?" She turned to me, her head slightly tilted. "Is that okay?"

"I don't mind one way or the other," the priest clarified, a disappointed nun hanging her head behind him.

"...Is it a girl?"

"It is a female, yes," he replied.

“Then...” Looking at the bird’s eyes in contemplation for a while, Rafi eventually said, “...how about Helga?”

It was an odd name for an animal. Its syllables tugged painfully at me.

“Helga, huh?” The priest allowed the name to ring out. “If that’s what you’ve decided on, that’s what it shall be.”

The cormorant lowered its eyes from Rafi’s face, bowing like she’d just been knighted by her queen.

“So you’re Helga now, huh, buddy?” Rosalia looked a bit conflicted, though she ultimately smiled as she gently petted the bird’s back.

After dismissing the newly christened Helga, whose soaring figure was slowly absorbed into the evening sky like a blotch of ink dropped into a lake, Iscario opened the message and read through it, an inscrutable smile on his face.

“What was that message about anyway, if I may ask?”

“Finding that Sealing Sacrament was a dead giveaway that one of our own had visited this village before. So I wanted to check if there were any records of such. And sure enough, it seems like our good mayor was more or less telling the truth.”

My interest well and truly piqued, I waited for him to elaborate.

“‘Of the 4th Division of the Thirteenth Chamber of the Phaethon, number X—Ixio N. Kreuzigung.’ A so-called wanderer—one who tours the nation’s many towns and villages and surveys them for any vampiric activity. And it seems that this particular individual’s last known contact was around this region, about a year ago—he’s been missing ever since.” Stuffing the scroll into his habit, he turned to Rafi. “Does that name perchance ring any bells?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, not meeting his gaze. “That was his name.”

“Did you get to know him well?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t speak to him much.”

“Hmm... Do you happen to know how he—”

“Ah! There you are!”

Before the priest could finish his sentence, a nearby voice cut him off. From behind Rafi’s house, Sapria was fast approaching.

“Oh, mom.”

“Don’t give me that, where did you run off to all this time, dear?”

“I was—*Wah!*” Giving her no chance to explain herself, Sapria grabbed her daughter’s wrist with both hands and unceremoniously dragged her along.

“Stop wasting Father Rosenkranz and his helpers’ time with your games and come give me a hand with the housework, Rafflesia.”

“But I—*Wawah!*” Once again cutting her off, Sapria began spinning Rafi around by her arm at dizzying speed.

“I don’t want to hear any excuses, young lady!” She sure had a lot of energy, despite being a middle aged housewife. *No, maybe it’s actually because she’s a middle aged housewife?*

Idly watching the scene, I inadvertently mumbled out, “Your helper? Is that really what I look like?”

“It’s just your scrub energy at work,” the scowling nun beside me idly replied. “If I was you I’d be grateful she remembered me at all.”

“Riiight.”

Meanwhile, the smiling priest just kept on idly watching. And then, the smile vanishing from his face, just quietly enough that the mother and daughter pair wouldn’t hear, Iscario declared, “There’s something strange about this village.”

“...What do you mean?” Caught off guard, I followed suit and lowered my own voice.

“Not counting the brief period while number X was here, the village has been without a clergyman for over two years.”

“Is that so unnatural?” I asked.

“Tch. Damn ignorant city folks,” spat Sister Rosalia. *What, now the entire urban population is on your bad side too?*

Iscario explained, “In small rural communities like this one, the one with the most power isn’t the mayor; most of the time he’s just a figurehead. The real leader of the community is usually the priest. I suppose you could say that people closer to nature like this are typically more attuned to spirituality.”

That made sense, though I was much more inclined to chalk it up to people compensating for their lack of infrastructure by relying on faith. But I wasn’t about to give the nun another reason to yell at me by bringing it up. “But what do you make of this anomaly then?”

“Hard to say. It could be that this town has an unusual social structure. Or maybe there’s someone else who’s taken the leadership position. Or—”

“—They could be hiding something,” the sister added.

“...”

“...Well, it’s only a possibility,” Iscario clarified. “It’s something to keep in mind, but there’s no indication that it has anything to do with our matter. And to move on to more pertinent things—” saying that, he called out to the still-spinning mother. “Excuse me, m’am, could I bother you for a moment?”

“Oh, of course!” At his call, Sapria immediately stopped, catching her now thoroughly dizzy daughter in her arms. “What is it, Father?”

Putting his hand to his chest, he bowed. “I deeply apologize for the presumptuousness of my request, but could you allow your daughter to accompany us for just a while longer? I’m afraid there is something we need her help for.”

“Oh, is that so? By all means then, there’s no problem at all! Come on, Rafflesia, go help out.” Sapria removed her daughter from her embrace and mercilessly pushed her over towards us. Still woozy from the spinning, Rafi almost fell over, but surprisingly enough, Sister Rosalia jumped out and caught her.

“Awa—Augh!” She then gave her a chop to the head, saying, “Pull yourself together wouldja?” with a scowl.

“You’d prefer to accompany us in the investigation, right?” Iscario addressed Rafi.

“T-thank you,” she weakly replied.

The priest’s earlier comments still bothered me, but seeing no way to resolve that particular worry, I decided to stuff it into the back of my mind as we moved on.



Having confirmed Rafi’s assistance, for the time being we walked around the village to get a better lay of the land. That said, it wasn’t a particularly large settlement, and around twenty minutes of walking could probably get you across its entire diameter.

The summer sun had finally begun to set, so while the light hadn’t entirely faded, I still felt like I could breathe a little easier. Light tends to ease people’s anxieties, but it never had that effect on me. It wasn’t just the psychological aversion to a source of pain—rather, whenever I was surrounded by powerful light sources, I felt like a specimen under a microscope, like someone was scrutinizing me somehow.

The thought of that core difference would have normally made me sigh, but this village dampened the discomfort.

“It’s all so much dimmer... compared to the city.” I murmured under my breath. There were no streetlights, and the stars shone far brighter than I’d seen them in a very long time.

That being said, it wasn’t as though it felt bereft of human activity. On our short walk, a few villagers had crossed our paths, all busying themselves

with various tasks yet never forgetting to greet us cheerfully—or rather, to greet the priest cheerfully. Though they at least acknowledged me, and it wasn't like I particularly desired their attention.

"Hey, Vio Valakia." Suddenly, that ever-popular priest addressed me.

"Hm? What is it?"

"You just seem oddly relaxed. I assumed you'd be far more tense, traveling with us."

"Well..." *Now that you bring attention to it, I can't help but stiffen up a bit. Especially given that scary nun next to you.* Not voicing those thoughts, I smiled awkwardly. "I guess it's been a while since I took a walk outside like this. To be honest, before this I hadn't gone outside my house in a while."

After Vince's death, we lacked the motivation to move somewhere else, even though my cover identity had begun to outgrow my physical appearance. So I thought I'd try limiting how much people saw me on a regular basis. *Not that I was ever much of an outdoorsy type...* Tina's funeral might have been the first time I'd seen most of those acquaintances since Vince's, come to think of it.

"So you're a shut-in too, huh? How pathetic."

"What choice do I have when there are a bunch of scary people outside? How about you try reflecting on that!" I yelled back at Sister Rosalia's crass remark, though her glare was enough to make me back down.

I sighed. "To be honest, I always felt uncomfortable openly walking around. Not enough to forgo it entirely, but..." The anxiety that somehow, somewhere, I'd be found out had never really gone away, even if I'd never really given it much serious thought. "But well, I've been caught already, so what's the point in worrying about it now? I may as well just enjoy the freedom while it lasts!" I said lightheartedly, stretching my back.

"I'm not entirely sure how comfortable I should be with this sight, but well, a deal is a deal," the priest said with a sigh of his own.

"Stop thinking about violent things and just enjoy this nice walk, would you?" I said, trying to divert the conversation.

"Don't try to sell me on your old man hobbies," spat the nun.

"What a horrible thing to say! Don't call me an old man. I'm in the prime of my life, I'll have you know."

"Yeah? How old are you, then?" she asked disinterestedly.

"Hmph, this year I hit the ripe young age of sixty-seven," I said pridefully.

Everyone looked at me silently. Even Rafi, who'd been walking along with her eyes down, turned in my direction.

"I'm nineteen," said Rosalia. *That's younger than expected.*

"I'm sixteen..." said Rafi. *That's older than expected.*

"I'm twenty-nine," said Iscario. *I'm not sure what I expected there.*

I hung my head in defeat. "Fine, I guess I *am* a withered, dying old man after all..."

"I wouldn't quite say that," the priest said, chuckling. "You may have lived for a long time, but I get the feeling you lack true life experience."

For some reason, that got me even more peeved. "Hmph, I guess I'll have to solve this case and display my elderly wisdom!"

"Young or old, pick the one you wanna be already," added a groaning nun, her head directed to the side and away from our meaningless exchange.

Continuing our idle walk, we hit upon the windmill at the edge of the village. A middle aged man working inside saw us through the opened doorway and waved. The priest waved back. Despite our cheery talk, he had been focused on taking in all he could of this landscape. Both he and the nun had been passively surveying the state of this settlement, the mindset and behavior of its citizens. They had no doubt grown sensitive to detecting growing unrest within otherwise ordinary places. My mind, however, was focused on something else entirely.

As I gazed emptily at the windmill, I put to words what had been occupying my thinking.

"I know thinking about it gets me nowhere, but I keep asking myself—just how unlikely it was, stumbling onto this whole affair."

Arriving in this unknown village in itself is a wonder, but then finding the scene of the crime, and also getting there in time to save Rafi's life?

"It's practically a miracle," I muttered, putting my astonishment into words.

"It would be wrong to call that a miracle, Vio Valakia."

"Huh?" The priest's solemn rebuttal grabbed my attention.

"A miracle is a divine gift bestowed upon the worthy. What you've encountered might have been worth describing as miraculous, but by the very nature of your being you've robbed it of such value—it's nothing but cheating."

"What do you mean?"

"As your life stretches on for eternity, you might encounter many more such coincidences. Time itself guarantees it. In a human's life, it might make for a miracle, but for an immortal it's no more than one of many, a rare but ultimately commonplace event. This world will become much too small for you. But that reach it will give you, that feeling of omnipotence, will not be the work of a miracle. It will be a boon that you've snatched for yourself, having refused to let your life end when it should've."

Father Iscario's words of rebuke didn't strike me all that deeply. His faith would probably never allow him to acknowledge my existence as a fair one. Yet still...

"...Just one of many, huh?" If I lived on for centuries beyond this point, how would I look back upon that moment? Would I see it as the instant I'd used my entire life's supply of luck? Or would it degrade into mundanity, become one of many others like it?



Our wandering around the village eventually led us in front of the church. Sequestered off to the eastern edge of the settlement, the old chapel building looked to be in solitude, its cracked stone walls and crooked spire giving me none of the inner calm and tranquility that such spiritual places are supposed to impart upon their visitors.

"Good. Even without a sanctioned priest, we still ought to check here as a matter of course," Iscario muttered in satisfaction as he looked up at the rusted Luminary on the church roof.

"Well, good luck on the inspection, I hope you find something interesting in there," I cheerfully declared, before turning around and attempting to smoothly walk away.

"Wait, Valakia. I think you should accompany us. There's a chance you might notice something we wouldn't, after all. More heads are always better for an investigation of this sort." Iscario's calm, analytical tone brought me to a screeching halt.

Turning only my head around, I replied, still very cheerfully, "My, you don't need to sell yourselves short like that. I'm sure your trained senses and experience far surpass the abilities of a layman like me. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"No, really, I think you'll be super useful, you should really tag along," Rosalia said, a sadistic smile crossing her lips. *Is my suffering the only thing that brings you joy, lady!?*

"...Well, let's go in," Rafi said, approaching the church door and reaching her hand out toward it.

"—Aaaah! Stop, don't go in!" I ran over to her and pulled her back.

"Mm? What is it...?"

“Look,” I said, trying to catch my breath. “Now that you’re a vampire, you’ll have to get used—or rather, unused—to certain things.”

As a rule, vampires aren’t to be seen anywhere near churches. This is not for any ideological reason, though I’m sure most aren’t the pious type anyway, but rather a very practical one—simple self-preservation. I’m not just talking about how they don’t want to be near their enemies’ strongholds either—the churches of Heliocentrism are all outfitted with artifacts similar to those stakes they hold, only on a much larger scale. To put it simply, a vampire simply touching the walls or floor of a church is enough for them to start burning. That’s why, though for a regular human the sight of a church might be a perfectly innocuous one, for someone like me it’s quite the source of fear.

“So make sure not to go near them from now on, okay?”

“I see... I’ll be careful.” Rafi nodded from above me as if deeply moved by my warning.

Still, despite this limitation, we had to investigate the place somehow, even though the two of us couldn’t even touch the ground. It really was a pickle.

Thankfully, Father Iscario had come up with the perfect solution.

“See? Comfortable, isn’t it?” He wore a radiant smile.

The sister, however, wore quite the opposite expression, a vein bulging on her forehead. “Not so fuckin’ comfortable for me though...”

The sister’s words were quite unsaintly, but I had to admit that I saw where she was coming from—that being the fact that she was currently holding me in her arms, in what is typically referred to as the ‘princess carry’. Rafi, who was being carried on Rosalia’s back, poked her head out from behind the nun’s shoulder, her widened eyes projecting the slightest hint that she was enjoying the situation. When pictured next to Rosalia’s snarling grimace, the two faces together made for quite the study in contrast.

“I guess you could consider this karma for your earlier taunting, huh? Haha.” I said from atop her arms.

“...”

“Though really, I have to question why I had to be the one in this position. Really, wouldn’t it be more fitting if Rafi and I switched places?”

“I think a more fitting position for you would be if I grabbed you by the ankles and mowed these lawns with your face.”

“...I’ll be quiet now.”

“Hey, why the hell do I have to carry both of ‘em anyway? Grab one too, Father!” Rosalia snapped.

“In this life there are trials whose weight you alone must carry. No one else can lighten that burden for you.” Iscario closed his eyes and nodded solemnly.

“Gkhhhhh! There’s no place in paradise for a priest like you!” Rosalia’s frustrated shriek did nothing to disturb the man. *I guess religious orders aren’t exempt from superiors hazing their subordinates either, huh.*

No justice in this world to be served for Rosalia’s mistreatment, we finally entered the church. Though I was spared from direct harm, it didn’t do anything to calm my nerves. I didn’t have any direct bad experiences with churches, but there was no way I could be cool, not after a lifetime of steering clear of them. Being princess carried by a girl didn’t provide much comfort either (especially when the girl in question was liable to drop me to the ground at any time).

However, my anxieties were soon assuaged—Iscario suddenly stopped in his tracks a few steps into the building.

“Hn? What’s the matter?” Rosalia asked.

“...It appears the world doesn’t intend on giving you any such trials today after all, Sister Rosalia.”

“Huh...?”

The priest mysteriously pointed up towards the ceiling.

“This church... It doesn’t have any kind of protection against heresy.”

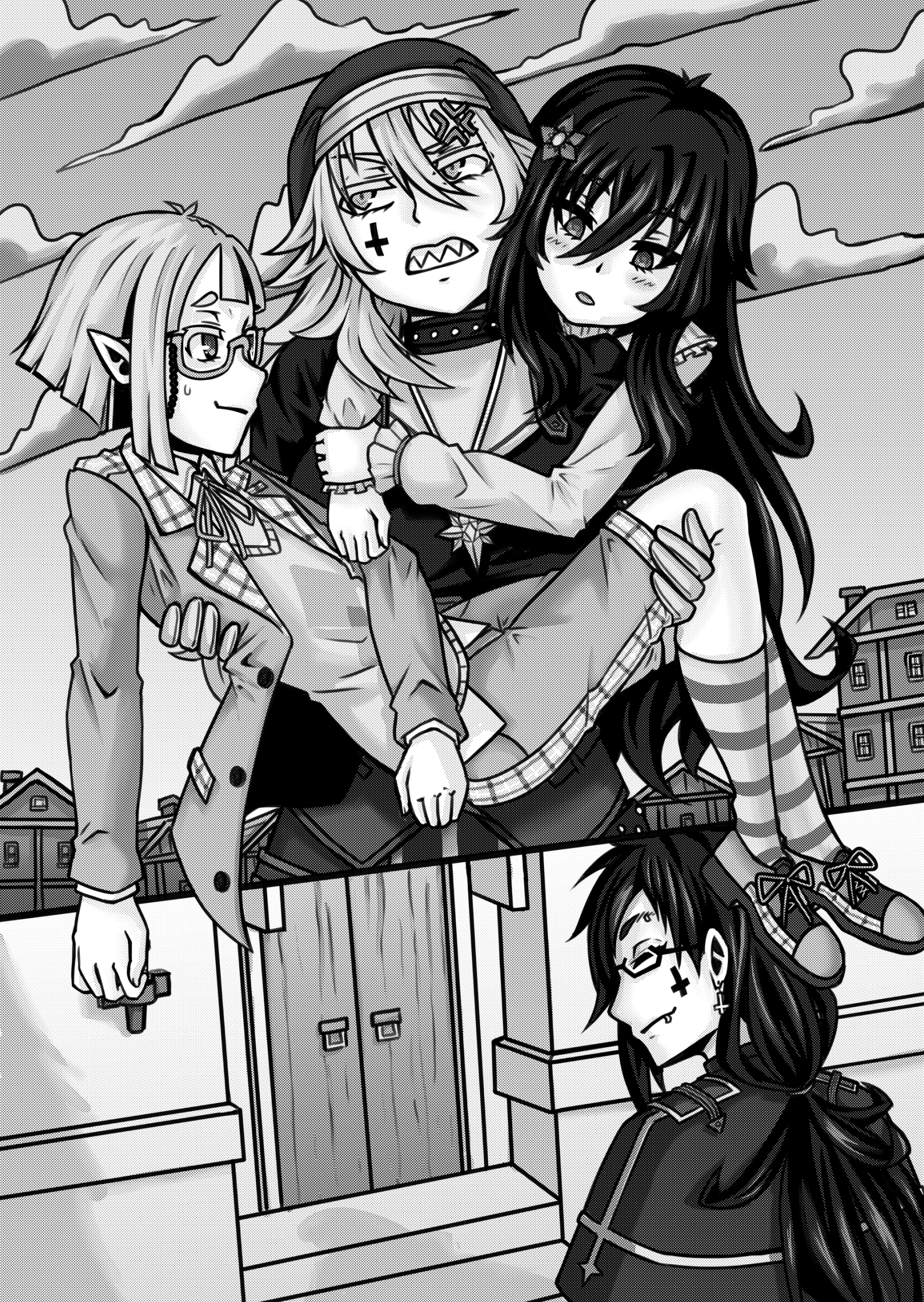
As I processed his statement, a bad premonition formed in the pit of my stomach. Seconds later, that premonition came to fruition, as Rosalia unceremoniously dumped me on the floor.

“Owww! A warning wouldn’t hurt, you know!?” I complained as I rubbed my behind.

“That’s exactly why I didn’t give you one,” she quipped, kneeling so that Rafi could safely get down. *I’m sensing some slight preferential treatment here.* Sure enough, however, I wasn’t burning alive, so Iscario must have been right.

“Settle down, you two,” the priest warned. “This is a sacred place. Don’t disturb it—especially not while there’s a soul here seeking peace and tranquility.”

“Huh?”



It was then that, upon lifting my head and scanning my surroundings, I noticed a woman sitting at the farthest point away from us, in the very front row pew. She had her back to us, so all I could see was her long, straight black hair.

“Olga...” I heard Rafi mutter under her breath while looking at that person.

“Do you know her?” I whispered what now strikes me as quite the silly question, considering everyone in the village probably knew one another.

“She’s always at the church at this time...”

Come to think of it... Olga was a name I’d heard a couple of times already. She was the daughter of the forest storehouse’s owner. The way she spoke of her gave me the impression that they were close.

She must have heard us entering, but she hadn’t once turned around or acknowledged us. Perhaps she was too absorbed in prayer, facing the altar which held upon it an effigy of the prophet Heliosol, the founder of the Heliocentric faith, kneeling below the rays of the Sun.

So as not to disturb the chapel’s sanctity any further, we quietly walked forward towards that effigy, making sure to deafen our footsteps as much as possible. Gradually, as we got closer, more and more features of the praying woman’s face revealed themselves—white ears poking out from between locks of black hair, then white cheeks which ever so faintly protruded outward, and then as a hint of her black eyelashes became visible I felt a knot form in my stomach, the inherent contradiction born of an impossible recognition making my head spin. The closer and closer I got, the more of her visage was revealed to me, the more my feeble attempts at denial were broken down. The only option left to me was to stop my feet from moving any further, and yet as if to take away even that option from me, the woman at last turned her face to us, her thin eyes and thin smile robbing me of all ways out.

“It seems you’ve made some lively new friends, Rafflesia. I’m glad.” Her eyes drew everything in, absorbed it all, and yet her disarming smile forgave everything, accepting it all as it was. That was the impression Olga Eulogia gave me.

Sitting up from the pew, Olga turned to us and bowed deeply. She was dressed plainly, the way any ordinary village girl might be, but her long, silky dark hair alone gave her the luxurious air of a noblewoman. “It’s an honor to finally meet you, Father Iscario, Sister Rosalia. And you, of course, Vio Valakia.”

I gave a stunted bow in return, while Iscario put his palm to his chest, uttering, “Likewise.”

Raising her head, Olga continued, “Welcome to St. Purgatorio’s church. I know that I am unfit to be the one to greet you here, but unfortunately at the moment our village has no priest.”

“Please,” Iscario said, “do not call yourself unworthy. Clearly, the fact that you stand here now, and that you’ve made a habit of standing here even when no one else would, is proof enough of your piety.”

“Your kind words are wasted on me, Father,” Olga said, closing her eyes momentarily, before turning to the effigy behind her and gently caressing it. “I’m not here because of piety. It’s just—This church must be lonely, with no one to tend to it. I just like keeping it company.”

“Then I’ll be the one to thank you on its behalf,” Iscario nodded. “And speaking of this church, I’d like to ask you—what sect does it belong to?”

As with most large religions, the Heliocentric Church was divided into many different branches and sects, though all those I knew of were antagonistic towards vampires. Still, there might have been some sect out there whose churches weren’t furnished with anti-vampiric artifacts—it’s due to that logic that Iscario asked his question.

“Sect?” Olga appeared confused for a moment. “Ah... Yes, I believe he told me about them before...” After thinking to herself for a bit, she replied, “I’m sorry, I’m not really sure. I don’t think anyone else in the village could answer you either.”

“Hmm?”

“Those sects which you speak of, they only exist to differentiate the ways in which different groups of people manifest their faith. But our village has been isolated for the longest time—we don’t interact with any other faith than our own. We don’t know how our ways differ from those of the main branch.”

“I see,” Iscario muttered, his hand to his chin. “It must have evolved into a separate branch in its own right by now.”

“Father, please,” Olga said, her head downturned, “don’t begrudge us for our ignorance. Our prayers might be mistaken, but I want you to believe that our belief, at least, is truthful.”

“Raise your head, Miss Eulogia. I will never belittle the way in which one expresses their faith. As long as your love is real, your prayers, in their mistaken form, will always be worth far more than empty recitals, however canonical they might be.”

“...He said something similar, too.” Olga gave a bitter smile. “He was the one who told me all I know about the outside world—Father Ixio.”

The familiar name of an unfamiliar man—I'd only been half-paying mind to their conversation, but hearing that name made me snap to full attention.

"You knew him?" asked Iscario.

"I tried to. I really wanted to. Who knows whether I ever managed to, though," she said, looking away. "He certainly didn't let himself be easily understood—and then before I could ever get a straight answer, he was gone, just like that." Her smile wavered ever so slightly as she muttered out that last part.

"...Would you tell me about how he passed?"

"It was an accident. He had bad luck—there's no other way I can put it."

"So we've been told. However, we've yet to hear the details."

"..." Olga stood there in silence for a moment—before briefly glancing at Rafi. Then, she finally began speaking, her head down. "...It was a storm. A horrific storm, stronger than I'd ever experienced. I managed to find shelter at the time, but even then I felt like I was about to be swept away. And unfortunately, Father Ixio had it even worse—he was outside at the time. And..." she paused for a moment to collect herself, somehow managing to speak in a perfectly even tone. "...Our homes weren't built to withstand that level of force. One particularly old house was almost uprooted entirely, its top half eventually being torn off. And that debris—it landed directly onto him."

None of us could speak. The image it brought to mind was just too powerful, too striking. I couldn't look her in the eye.

Come to think of it, this region of the Dukedom of Grimgrave was very close to a territory cursed by terrible storms every year. Perhaps that calamity had been caused by a stray storm spawned there. Such matter of fact thoughts ran through my head, trying to distract from the stark reality she'd presented.

"...Thank you," Iscario eventually replied, "and I apologize for making you relive such a horrible event. However, I am sure there is meaning in hearing it from you, someone that cared for him."

"Cared for him, huh?" She smiled, her eyes still down. "Excuse me, may I say something insolent and sinful?"

"...Go ahead."

"Father Ixio was always the type to do things for others that no one would ever ask of him. And he'd do it quietly, out of the way, so as never to hear a word of gratitude for it. That must be what it means to be a holy man, and yet I'd always thought him foolish for it." She finally looked up at us, her eyes moist and red. "But he never once asked me to look out for this church either. I must be quite the fool in my own way, huh?"

Olga saw us off with a smile. Even despite her tearful face, that smile alone looked much fuller than the one she'd first shown us.



"It's gotten late," Iscario said, looking up at the dark sky. "We should leave things off here for tonight. Tomorrow, we ought to speak to all of the villagers and gather alibis."

None of us protested. I was still fatigued, and the others were probably in the same boat. The four of us quietly walked towards the mayor's house, breathing in the fresh air. Despite the late hour, many of the houses still had light streaming out through the windows, and we could occasionally hear the muffled sound of boisterous laughter from groups of men and women out drinking late. It was a much more relaxed scene, a far cry from the silent village we'd seen just hours prior.

Mayor Horheldorfel's house soon came into view. When we reached the front porch, I turned my head back in the direction of the church we'd come from. Only the very top of the Luminary could be seen peeking above the tiled roofs.

That woman... She must be... That thin, empty smile flashed in my mind once more, overlaid upon another, far wider, far more tragic one.

When I turned around once more, I caught Rosalia doorknob in hand, about to enter the house, Iscario trailing closely behind her. Meanwhile, Rafi had wordlessly continued walking off towards her own house.

Without even thinking, I started trotting in Rafi's direction and, quickly catching up, called out to her.

"Hey, have a good night!"

She stopped and hesitantly turned to me. "...Good night."

"Are you ready for another day of investigation? Sure is tough, huh? I mean, we've got barely anything to go off, and we have a whole village to sift through." She looked down. Panicking, I added, "O-oh, but of course, I'll still do my best to look. We're sure to find something, alright? You don't have to worry about a thing!"

"Can I..." she quietly said, still not looking at me, "ask you something?"

"Sure... I-I mean, yeah, of course, ask me anything!" My painful attempt at reassurance clearly wasn't doing much for her, but my pride as an adult wouldn't let me be a downer pessimist to a teenage girl.

“Why... why did you save me?”

“Huh?” Her question, however, shook my mind clean of any superficial concerns.

“Those two were after you, right? If you hadn’t saved me, you might have gotten away.”

“Heh. That’s an optimistic thought. I think I’ve been on the chopping block from the moment they caught sight of me,” I said, chuckling bitterly. “But that aside... I think it’s just normal to save someone who’s hurt, who’s about to die.”

“...”

“It’s just normal... It’s normal, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” she bluntly answered.

I chuckled bitterly. “You and me both. I have no idea what’s normal anymore. Up until just a while ago, I thought I was the most ordinary guy there is, but... I don’t think I can claim that anymore.”

“...” She just gazed silently into my eyes. I took it as a prompt to continue.

“You know... Not too long ago, a good friend of mine died. I’d known her for my entire life... Almost seven whole decades of being with someone. Can you imagine having someone like that? I can’t imagine not.

“But then she died. She got ill, and, well...”

“...” Rafi didn’t interrupt.

“She was married to another friend of mine. I’ve known him too, for pretty much the same amount of time. It was always the three of us, and then about a year ago, he passed away. And suddenly it was just Tina and I. And I...

“I think she didn’t really feel like living on, anymore. It makes sense, doesn’t it? Of course she’d rather be with the one man she really loved.”

“...” She continued listening.

“But I tried to save her anyway. No... I mean, I tried to keep her from dying. I tried to do the same thing to her that I did to you. But I failed.

“I failed, and I... I don’t know whether I should be glad or not. I know she wouldn’t have wanted it. I know I betrayed her. But... aren’t people supposed to keep living?” I looked down, my voice getting louder and louder. “When someone close to you dies, you’re supposed to move on, aren’t you? To heal, and to live on? I’ve both heard and uttered that platitude many times in my life from and to many different people, so at what point exactly did that stop being the case? Why is it so monstrous to still want her here?”

“I... don’t know,” Rafi plainly muttered, her subdued statement snapping me out of my selfish rant. And as I recalled the memory she’d given me, I began to regret ever foolishly opening my mouth.

“...I’m sorry. Of course, it’s not up to you to judge my stupid decisions. I don’t know what got into me. I must just be tired.” I adopted that friendly, saccharine tone again as I desperately tried to steer away the conversation. But ignoring my efforts, Rafi continued.

“I don’t know... I don’t know, but... The fact that I woke up... it probably means that I wanted to live.

“So thank you. Thank you for indulging that wish.”

Her large, clear blue eyes stared right into mine.

“...” It was my turn to be stunned into silence.

That obvious—that painfully obvious statement, she uttered almost as if it was an admission of guilt. A genuine smile of appreciation overtook the crooked imitation I’d plastered over my face.

“No, thank you. I’m just glad I got to be useful for once.”

And on that strange, uncertain note, with nothing settled and yet uncharacteristically satisfied, we said our goodbyes for the night.



“Haaah.” Once I finally got to lay down on the bed, all the exhaustion I’d suppressed spilled out of me.

The mayor’s house was narrow in terms of space, mostly extending vertically. My room was in the basement, and to reach it you had to descend a winding staircase with a harsh angle, its steps barely wide enough to plant half your foot on.

I was so stuck worrying about my footing that when I got down I almost went into the wrong room. It’s tough to orient oneself when there isn’t any kind of decoration to speak of.

I looked around at the dreary room. The lack of natural light wasn’t something you’d catch me complaining about, but it was so lacking in anything outside of the strictly functional that it felt more like a prison cell than a guest room.

It wasn’t just the basement. Everything I’d seen of the house was like this. There certainly weren’t any potted plants or ships in bottles around. I couldn’t imagine living in a house like this.

I sighed to myself. *Why am I complaining about this?* Here I was on furlough from a death sentence and the lacking decor was the foremost thing on my mind. What a joke.

“Ah.” As I lay there lost in meaningless self-deprecation, I suddenly heard a voice coming from the doorway. Instinctively sitting up to locate its source, I caught a glimpse of a truly unexpected sight.

Rosalia, dressed not in her usual sister outfit but instead a white camisole, her hair flowing freely and unobstructed by her headpiece, sat there frozen at the door, a change of clothes hanging atop her arm.

I guess I wasn't the only one getting confused in that hallway. As I thought that, no doubt an awkward smile creeping onto my face, the nun scowled and turned around with heavy steps.

“W-wait!” Before I knew it, I'd called out to her, stopping her before she could slam the door shut. She yelled back an impatient “What!”

“Um, err...” Even I didn't know what I wanted to say. “Have a good night?” Failing to produce anything more meaningful than that, I replied with pointless courtesy that for some reason got her to freeze in place. A moment later, she turned around and entered the room, her steps still heavy.

“Tell me,” she said, standing a few centimeters away from the bed and looking down on me fiercely, “why do you insist on performing these inane acts of goodwill?”

“Huh?”

“Are you a crazy bastard, the kind who doesn't mind acting casually around his enemies? Or do you perhaps think that by acting all buddy-buddy, you can somehow get us to spare you? Or maybe, you're just such a worthless coward that you can't even muster up the guts to show aggression, even to those out to kill you? I'm leaning towards the last option, but just *kindly* clear it up for me. Just so I know what to say to you when I finally put you under.”

“...Hm. I see.” It finally dawned on me as I looked at her furrowed eyebrows and gritted teeth. “It must be pretty tough on you, too. Having to treat someone like an enemy without them viewing you as such. Having to hate someone without being hated yourself. I'm sorry for putting you through that.”

“H-hah!?” She let out a high-pitched grunt, like she couldn't believe her ears.

“I'm sorry,” I smiled bitterly, “but I won't be doing anything about that. You'll just have to live with it. Call it my one act of defiance.

“Now, if I must answer your earlier question, I guess I'd put it like this: I'm a human being.”

“—What?” She growled.

Amused by her dubious glare, I explained. “I'm aware you might not view it as such, but I've lived my entire life thinking of myself as nothing more or less than a human being. And human beings, I find, hate others for

stuff like petty personal grudges. I've none of those against you. They might also fear others as monsters, when they think that it's impossible to communicate with them. But I don't feel that way about you either. In other words, there's no particular reason for me to hate you, and there's no particular reason for you to hate me." I yawned. "Well, you might disagree with that last one though."

"..." She glared at me in silence.

"Does that idea make you uncomfortable? Having to kill someone whom you don't hate?" I asked.

"...Kah!" At last, she scoffed. "You fuckin' wish. I'll kill you regardless, that much is certain. And I got no problems hating you, no matter what you do or don't."

"Then it seems we have no issues after all," I said, grinning.

She turned her back to me again, preparing to leave. The smile fading from my face, I called out to her once more. "I... I have something to ask you, after all."

She said nothing, but didn't step any further either.

"...Please, tell me more about your sister." I finally mustered up the courage to ask about that which had compelled me to stop her to begin with.

"Huh?" She turned her head back abruptly, glaring wide-eyed at me. "And why the hell should I have to do that?"

"You certainly don't have to," I said, lifting my gaze to look her in the eye. "But I want to know more about the person who will kill me. Would you grant me that selfish favor?"

"..." For a time, she stood silent and unmoving. She looked straight into my eyes. I looked back, not wavering.

After what seemed like forever, she quietly began walking—she stepped over to a corner of the room, and dragged a creaky, uncomfortable-looking wooden chair over.

Unceremoniously plopping herself on it with a sigh, she began speaking hesitantly.

"—I'm not telling you a thing about her life. That's not for you to hear. But I guess I can tell you about her death. Keep your ears open.

"Azalia Y. Dornenkrone—she too had a number and a division and a chamber, but to me that's all of who she was—my big sister Azalia," she began, speaking in a level tone. "—No, that's not right. I shouldn't speak falsehoods.

“Part of me did look at her as Azalia the holy guardswoman. The noble, respected woman who protected the holy land of the Phaethon with all of her body and soul. But I knew just as well that she was a softhearted person deep down, someone that had compassion for everyone.

“—That’s why I thought she really wasn’t suited for the job. She wasn’t a bitch like me. But it wasn’t my place to say anythin’ about it.”

“...What happened?”

“She got put in charge of watching a vampire. They captured the *bastard*, but they didn’t silence him immediately.” As she spoke of ‘him’, I could feel a malignant note creep into her voice, though it was gone not a moment later. “They were using him as an experiment. To ‘test the vampiric metabolism’, apparently. Let’s not mince words—It was torture, plain and simple.”

“.....” A shiver ran down my back.

“What, feeling sorry for the poor sap?”

“No, I—”

“Well you’d be right to. So did my sister. I could tell the job was painful for her. She thought that nobody would realize it, but I noticed when she eventually began talking to the guy, trying to communicate—not that he was in any shape to respond.”

I felt a knot of anxiety build up somewhere inside my chest. I knew I didn’t want to hear what she’d tell me next, but I knew even more than that that I would be the world’s worst coward if I dared to stop listening now.

“Well, from here it’s mostly speculation, but she must have eventually felt so guilty that she tried letting him escape. Maybe she thought all her one-sided chatter actually meant something. What a dumbass.

“Well, what’s definite is that the following day we found an unlocked prison cell—and my sister’s corpse in it, her head stuffed inside her ribcage and her heart stuffed inside her mouth.”

“.....”

“So I may have nothing personal against you, but when it comes to that man—when it comes to Black-Eyed Nevermore, it’s an entirely different story.”

“...Wait, that’s—” It was the name of an infamous vampire who’d terrorized a town with a horrific killing spree. They say that by the time he was finally caught he’d razed the place to the ground.

She chuckled to herself. “My sister’s taste in men really was horrible, wasn’t it? Come to think of it, she never did go out in the field for real.”

Her callous laugh rang out. The attention-grabbing smile on her face desperately tried to lead my eyes away from her trembling fists, clenched tightly enough to draw blood.

"...I see," I managed to squeeze out, looking down at the floor. "So that's your reason for hating me."

"Huh?" She let out an incredulous grunt as she turned to me.

"You can't forgive me for still wanting to live on, can you? Even though the people most important to me have already passed on." I hesitated for a moment. "—Even though it must feel like you died along with her that day."

Crash!

Splinters flew from the floorboards below. Gleaming silver stabbed through the ground, the candlelight reflecting off of it, alongside my own twisted image. The nun holding her spear looked down, her eyes hidden from view though her fury was plain to see.

"I can't stand you because you're a demon! I want you dead because you're an abomination who ought to disappear from this world!" Spittle flew as the seething nun professed her hatred to me. "There's nothing else to it! A monster like you deserves to die!"

"I won't deny that," I said, thinking back to that bloody scene I'd found myself witness to in that dusty old storehouse and somehow managing to look her in the eye again, "But can you say the same about *her*?"

"—" She gaped, her anger wavering. She must have taken this hesitation itself as a sign of weakness, because in the next moment she forcefully pulled the spear out of the floor and swung it around to correct her one-handed grip, almost grazing me in the process, before turning around and wordlessly exiting the room. She finally got to slam the door behind her, too, for good measure.

I sighed as I looked at the gaping hole she'd left in the mayor's floorboards. *I sure blew it.* I leaned backwards and fell into the bed. It wasn't even close to the softness of my mattress back home, but it felt more comforting than I'd ever thought a bed to be.

Maybe I shouldn't have asked. Maybe I shouldn't have tried to understand her. Maybe it was impossible for us to reach an understanding in the first place. But I didn't want to believe so.

I didn't want to be hated. I didn't want to hate anyone. That was how I'd lived my entire life. I didn't have any mission worth standing up and fighting for, no ideal worth drowning for. If I ever noticed the signs of conflict brewing, I'd just pack my bags and leave. Running away may not be a respectable decision, but it's the one I'd choose regardless if it meant avoiding that kind of pain.

But people can only run so far, right? That's why you hate me the way you do, isn't it, Sister Rosalia?

Still, those eyes... My mind flashed to her twitching eyes as she thought about Rafi, as she considered head on what it would mean to look at her as an enemy.

I clenched my fists. I want to see the truth of this case... isn't that right? Even though it would spell the end of everything?

With thoughts like those crawling around in my tired brain, my first day in St. Purgatorio came to an end.

◆ Record IV ◆

Nightstalkers

「The Strange Search Story ~Part Two~」



“I hope you'll give me a smile then, Rafi. That'll be my reward.”

That memory floated in my mind yet again. As her smile faded from view, another took its place.

'I' came upon a great door. In reality it must not have been any larger than usual, but from the perspective of 'my' diminutive body it seemed overwhelming.

'I' waddled forward, getting closer and closer. No matter how much I wanted to stop, 'I' kept going.

'My' head barely reached the doorknob. 'I' didn't need to take hold of it, however, for the door was already ajar.

Through the gap I could see various weapons mounted to the walls. Those details quickly disappeared from 'my' mind, though, as 'I' noticed the people standing inside.

Men stood inside, holding a woman's body down. They held axes, hatches and saws, their inscrutable gazes firmly directed at the woman.

As 'I' poked my head further inside, the woman's face came into view.

It was her.

She saw 'me'. She smiled at 'me' warmly, blissfully, as if entirely at peace.

Even as her death sentence came down upon her, that smile never faded. Not once, until her head fell from her body.

Not even as it rolled on the ground, the blood splatter reaching ‘me’, the warm liquid slowly flowing down ‘my’ face.



The second day of our search had arrived.

I woke up in the afternoon. After taking some time to prepare myself, I met up with the pious duo in the parlor. The mayor seemingly wasn't around. Despite living in the same home, given our schedules it seemed unlikely that we would run across one another very often. He didn't spend much time at home either; his main role seemed to have been coordinating tasks and helping the other working villagers with miscellaneous errands.

After sharing a light meal, we set off towards the Valpurga residence. While we walked, I stole a glance at Sister Rosalia. She was following along steadily, gazing at the other side of the road. She'd been clearly avoiding my eyesight for a while now. I sighed to myself.

Getting there couldn't have taken more than five minutes. When it came to getting around, small villages like this sure were convenient. Everyone you'd ever want to meet is just right there in your grasp—makes the whole chaos of urban life feel unnecessary in retrospect.

Clack.

As we got near the house, we could hear a distinctive metallic sound. It seemed to be coming from their backyard. Taking it as our guide, we circled the building, finding the father-daughter pair of the Valpurga family together.

“Oh, if it isn't Father Rosenkranz! Good mornin', my good man!” Rhizantes, seated on a tree stump with his rifle in his lap, gave that enthusiastic greeting. A few feet away, Rafi, leaning against the back of the house, turned in our direction and lightly bowed, her face covered in the shade.

“This village is really calm at this time of day, is it not?” After we exchanged greetings, Iscario made that comment to Rhizantes with a smile.

“Mm? Yeah, I s'ppose so.” He said, combing through the hairs on his chin with his finger. “Everyone's pretty focused on their work during the day. A hunter like me'd ordinarily be out in the forest at a time like this.”

“My apologies for keeping you from your work,” Iscario bowed sincerely.

“Eh? Nah, don’t get me wrong, Father, it’s an honor to assist you!” He waved his hands around and chuckled awkwardly. Stealing a glance at Rafi again, I found it difficult to believe that she could be related to a man this effervescent.

“Well, let’s go, shall we?” With that suggestion, led by Rhizanthès, the four of us walked out of the Valpurgas’ property and onto the village’s main road, heading south. Our destination: the weapons storehouse.

Iscario had requested Rhizanthès to assist us in examining the village’s sole weapons storehouse. This was not only as an act of courtesy towards the village and their property, but also because he might provide some insight as someone in charge of the place.

“By the by, where were you yesterday morning? When we arrived at your house, you weren’t there.” While on the way, Iscario casually started questioning the hunter.

“Oh, that was an eventful morning, I’ll tell you. At about five I went out to the forest to check on the traps we set.”

T-traps? I hadn’t taken that into account. You mean if I was unlucky, I could’ve run into one of those while fleeing!?

“Five in the morning, huh?” Iscario muttered. That must have been before Rafi got there. “Did you see anyone else heading into the forest at the time?”

“No? Don’t see why anyone else would,” Rhizanthès replied incredulously.

“Why were you going there at night anyway?” I asked. “Seems pretty dangerous.”

“We usually set the traps away from the trail we use during our regular hunting trips. If too many people stomp around those parts the animals’ll get too scared, and then the traps might not work anymore. That’s why one just person gets sent to collect, usually.”

“I see... Still seems like a risk, though. Couldn’t you just send one person away from the hunting party during the day?”

“Splitting up, huh?” He chuckled to himself. “Seems like you’re underestimating the dwellers of that forest.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know how you folks view it, but to us, that place is one you can’t hold back against. We might have weapons, but a wolf can easily dodge a crossbow bolt, a boar will take a couple and still charge at ya, and a bear can wipe out you and your weapon in a matter of seconds.” He looked down at me and smiled. “Approaching that place is a risk no matter what. It’s just one we gotta take.”

His frank statement left me speechless. Despite my immortality, I was no stranger to fearing a wild animal, especially considering all the strange situations I'd been dragged into by Vince. But that was always as a single individual relative to the wilderness. On some level I had completely forgotten the possibility of humans as a group ever being unable to dominate the rest of the natural world.

I really had yet to understand just what life in a tiny, secluded settlement like this really meant.

"So anyhow, we got a real bounty yesterday." Unconcerned by my poignant silence, Rhizanthos got right back into his cheerful retelling. "A couple of critters like squirrels and whatnot, but the real lucky catch was a fox. Hadn't gotten one of those in a *looong* time. So after I collected the edible parts, I ran back to town to leave the meat off to the butcher, and who d'you think I ran into? Old man Bolo! He handed some fresh veggies to me, and I gave him a cut of that fox meat in return. Hah, of course, gramps mistook me for his son Rupert as usual, but you can only clear it up so many times before you just hafta start blowin' with the wind, you know?"

It seems he'd taken the question less as a request for testimony and more as an invitation for some lively chatter. Then again, that guileless nature made things easier for us, so I couldn't complain.

"That mayor mentioned it before, but," Rosalia spoke up warily, clearly choosing her words, "you really don't use any currency, huh?"

"I suppose you must deal by bartering instead," Iscario added.

Small communities not being integrated into the nation's economic system wasn't unheard of, but it had certainly become much rarer in the last few decades. It wasn't surprising that someone as young as Rosalia would find it strange.

"I dunno about all that. We just help each other out when we need it. I'm not too bright, so you don't gotta take me seriously, but I just don't see why outside folk have to be so transactional. If you give someone something they need, it just makes sense they'd pay ya back when they can."

It was a refreshingly optimistic perspective, even if it would never work in any group larger than this.

"Have you ever been outside of this village?" Iscario asked.

"Nope. Closest I got was when we strayed a bit too far into the forest and ran into some travelers crossing through. Happened a couple a' times, actually. They always seemed a bit too cold and wary by my estimation, though," he said, and then grunting in realization, added, "Not like you, though, y'all are some fine folks."

I couldn't help but smile. The man had a humble and preternaturally positive attitude that was hard to dislike. Even if I still couldn't for the life of me understand how he could be related to Rafi. *If only she was at least half as easy to read.*

"Oh, and here we are." We'd arrived at our destination. The storehouse was a little larger than the one in the forest, additionally serving as an outpost for the returning hunters to drop off their spoils and rest.

Rhizanthos and the clergy members went ahead and entered the storehouse, but as I approached the door I was hit by a wave of vertigo.

"...!" It was an instinctual reaction. My feet wobbled, refusing to take another step. It was like trying to intentionally touch a burning pot or something—even if the mind wanted to do it, the body refused to obey the instructions.

"A-ah!" Sensing a presence next to me, my head immediately shot to my left—Rafi was standing there, nonchalantly staring at the half-open door with an expressionless face. She'd been quietly following along the whole time, never joining in with her dad's chatter. Noticing my staring at her, she turned to me inquisitively.

"...Sorry, it's nothing." Releasing the air from my chest, I waited for a few moments until my heartbeat slowed down. For whatever reason, seeing Rafi's unwavering expression had helped me calm down as well. "Thank you, Rafi."

"...?" She just tilted her head in ignorance, before walking on ahead into the storehouse. I tried to follow behind, but before being able to move on, I hesitated one last time, gazing at the door uneasily. *I remember it looking a lot bigger than this.*

The storehouse looked every bit the part inside. While the right wall had a table and a few chairs laid out next to it, the left wall was entirely covered in all manner of bladed weapons, like hunting knives, axes and even swords with curved blades, as well as other useful tools like ropes, bandages and backpacks. I could also see one corner where a number of crossbows were laid out, alongside a barrel full of arrows. However, notably, there were no other rifles displayed at all.

Back in the Age of Magic, people had apparently used ranged weapons capable of amplifying one's magical power and shooting it out, but as they held no power in and of themselves, they'd lost all function once magic disappeared, becoming nothing more than museum pieces. Accordingly,

people had rushed to invent new kinds of weapons that could fill their place, leading to the firearms of today.

All that to say, rifles and the like weren't a particularly rare find these days, and they certainly seemed like a must-have for a hunter.

"Are the other rifles perchance being used by the hunters out on duty right now?" Apparently thinking the same thing as me, Iscario directed that question to Rhizanthos.

"Mm? No, look—" The man went to point out the rifle in his hand, but then widened his eyes like a light bulb had turned on in his head, and then started laughing. "Hahaha, I get it, where y'all come from you probably have a bunch of these lying around, eh? But our humble little town only has one, see."

"Eh?" I exclaimed. "There's only one rifle?"

"Yup," he casually said. "I was doin' some maintenance on it, so the other boys're probably stuck usin' the crossbows today." A crossbow might have been a functional weapon, but no matter how I thought about it, it didn't seem as efficient to use while hunting.

"Right," the priest murmured as if a piece had fallen into place. Seeing me still befuddled, he added, "According to the mayor, there's very little trade going on between this village and the outside, remember? They probably can't afford more than one rifle. Even if they could, then they'd also have the additional expense of purchasing more gunpowder."

"Father Iscario's totally right," Rhizanthos affirmed, unbothered. "That's why we tend to stick with stuff that our own blacksmith can make."

"Um, how many hunters are there in this village anyway?" I cautiously asked.

"Ten, includin' me."

"And are you their leader or something?"

"Huh? What makes ya think that?"

"Oh, it's just that, I figured you must have some authority if they let you hold onto the only rifle."

"Ahh, haha, I see." Rhizanthos gave a knowing chuckle. "That's not really how we do things here, y'see. There's no real chief or leader, we all just work together. I just happened to have it this time, but we all share it when needed."

Nodding in understanding, I turned my attention back to the storehouse. We sifted through it for a while longer, but didn't find anything else that seemed relevant to the case.



Well that went nowhere, huh?

As we walked away from the weapons storehouse, I thought about offering that milquetoast icebreaker, but the words got caught in my throat. The awkward tension between us and a lingering sense of anxiety stopped me in my tracks.

After we finished our business at the weapons storehouse, Rhizantes stayed behind, intending to return to his regular duties. The four of us turned back towards the city.

Huh? Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a writhing shadow among the field's greenery. As I squinted at it, its shape slowly became more distinct, until I finally realized its identity: it was the old man from the previous day, Bolo Bolobo.

"Isn't that old man Bolo over there?" I pointed out. "He's still working the fields, huh?" As he swung around his hoe, the bandaged man looked like a wilted reed blowing in the wind. No matter how you looked at it, he seemed way too old and weak to still be doing this kind of work.

But when I pointed that out, Rafi slowly shook her head and said, "...There's no way to convince him not to work."

Putting a hand to his chin, Father Iscario remarked, "I suppose that's how it is for some people. Your true calling is one you can never retire from, so long as you live," he explained. "I know my role in this world is to abide by and spread our teachings, and I know I'll never truly part with it."

"So working hard on a job you're passionate about is a joyous thing then, huh?" I mumbled. The words certainly rang true. But as I watched that ancient shadow writhe, a smile almost certainly plastered across the face I couldn't see, I wondered if that joy was really something to admire.

I let out a sigh, shaking my head and turning away from the old man. "Well, what do I know? It's not like I've ever really worked a job."

All of a sudden, the nun and the priest simultaneously stopped in their tracks. Unable to react in time, I bumped into Iscario, who'd been ahead of me. "Ow! Don't just stop all of a sudden. What is it?"

"You, uh," the priest made a most unusual display of hesitation. "You said you've never had a job? Not once?"

Ah. At that moment it had just dawned on me that I'd made quite the embarrassing proclamation.

For the first time that day, Rosalia was looking at me, and it was a look of total disgust. *Come on, don't give me those eyes!*

"Listen, don't you see what I look like!? How am I supposed to get a proper job?"

"Betcha could've figured something out if you really wanted to, you leech," the nun spat.

"Believe me, I tried, but given the age I look like, the only stuff available were apprenticeships and the like, you know. And I've already had to go through about five different schools in my life. I don't wanna go through an apprenticeship on top of that, you know? People constantly talking about a future you know will never come to pass really gets on a guy's nerves!" I didn't know if the evident desperation in my voice made my argument more or less convincing.

"Oh really," Rosalia said dismissively, her gaze cold.

"And hey, on the other hand, I've gotten pretty great at housework, you know? I don't mean to boast, but I'd say I got at least twice as much hands-on experience as your mom, Rafi. Impressive, eh?"

"...Very impressive," she said, giving no sign of actually being impressed. *Wait, that wasn't sarcasm, was it? No, it can't be.*

"...Whatever," I sighed, sulking. "Let's just drop this, okay?"

Iscario chuckled as he watched me with one eye, head turned halfway toward me. "Not very priestly behavior, to laugh at someone else's troubles."

"You know, Valakia, us priests will never laugh at someone that is troubled. However, laughing together with them at those troubles is the least we could do," he said with a wink. *Your self-serving sophistry doesn't impress me, preacher.*

"Forget it. More importantly, what's the plan now?"

"We've checked out all of the leads that stand out, so now the time has come to engage in some classic grunt work."

"You mean...?"

"Be happy." Rosalia interjected. "You can finally learn what it feels like to do some actual work for once."

And so it was decided: we would be visiting every house in the village to gather testimony.



The exact time at which the crime was committed was actually somewhat difficult to pin down. In order to ask for alibis, it was first necessary to reason out a timeframe within which the culprit had to have acted.

The first issue came down to the fact that, within the village, exact time measurements weren't given much importance. The people there certainly didn't own pocket watches. Clocks weren't entirely absent; there was the clock displayed near the mayor's house, which he'd gotten his hands on from the outside. However, it wasn't something that all villagers felt a need to constantly check, and considering there hadn't been any other clock to cross reference against, there was no telling whether the time it gave was accurate (in fact, upon checking against my own pocket watch, we discovered that it was a few minutes off).

Therefore, there was no way of knowing at what time exactly Rafi had arrived at the shed and when she had been stabbed. However, we did know that it must have been after five in the morning, the usual time she woke up. And we knew that I'd discovered her before the sun had come up. Considering that it was one of the late summer months, that would put sunrise at around six in the morning.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed while she was unconscious and on the verge of death. We had no way of checking the wound anymore, and my memories of it were fuzzy at best considering the shocking situation, but it was unlikely that more than fifteen minutes had passed between her stabbing and my arrival.

Taking all of that into account, and the fact that it takes about ten minutes to walk from Rafi's house to the shed, the crime must have occurred sometime between 5:30 and 5:40 or so.

Given the village was full of early risers, that was around when people would have been getting to work. In other words, there shouldn't have been too many people unaccounted for, so ideally we could narrow down the suspects' list with this investigation.

Unfortunately, that step was a whole lot easier said than done.

There was an abundant amount of people to go through, of course, but that wasn't something I could complain about—the fact that it was even

feasible to interview everyone in the first place was a lucky circumstance for us. No, rather, the issue was of an entirely different nature.

“Ah! Father! Please, don’t just stand out there, come on in. I’ll treat you to something!” A middle aged woman with gaunt cheeks and hair in a bun emphatically said that to us.

“No, you really needn’t, all we have to ask are a few—” Iscario tried to politely decline the invitation with a strained smile, but...

“Nonsense, I’d be embarrassed to even step outside at all if I didn’t properly welcome you! Come now, come!”

I couldn’t help but grin. It seemed there was an area where even that suave priest couldn’t smooth-talk his way to victory.

Not that I didn’t sympathize with his frustration. I might have thought it quaint the first or second time, but by the fifth time around I was really starting to dread having to pick at stale food while listening to housewives talk about their day.

I slouched over and sighed as we finally left this particular woman’s residence, and without much useful information to speak of at that.

“This is impossible. We won’t even get through half of these houses today at this rate,” I said, before receiving a slap to the back that straightened me right up. “Ow!”

“Don’t go complaining all the time, you mosquito! You’re the reason we’re out here anyway!” Rosalia, the culprit behind my violent assault, rudely yelled as I tried to rub my stinging back.

“No...” the priest said, soberly. “He might be right. This is inefficient.” Coming to a decision, he turned to us. “We should split up. We’ll cover more ground that way.”

“Split up?” I asked, now having my back rubbed by Rafi. “How exactly?”

“Well, we seem to be the biggest reason why this is taking so long. Therefore, Sister Rosalia and I can go question the farmers out on the fields, the carpenters and fishermen down the mountain path. I can’t imagine they will drop their tasks to accommodate us, so it might be quicker that way. For now, you and Miss Rafflesia can go visit all of the houses on the east of the village. With our remaining time, we’ll endeavor to go through the west side.”

“Well, that works for me, but...”

“Hold on a minute,” the nun intervened with a strong tone. “I can’t agree to this, Father Rosenkranz.”

“What’s the matter, sister?” The priest asked incredulously.

“Obviously, I’m opposed to letting these two vampires go off by themselves! We can’t trust any information they uncover without verifying it.”

“Hey, what’s that about?” I asked, frowning at her. “What reason would we have to lie?”

“What reason? The longer this case goes unresolved, the more time you freaks have to stay kicking. That’s a clear enough reason to deceive us, if you ask me,” she said, her arms crossed.

“Oh...” Well, I couldn’t argue with that. At least not without resorting to emotional arguments, which she’d never buy from me anyway.

“I suppose you have a point there,” the priest said, looking at me idly. And then, as his gaze glided over to Rafi, he suddenly smiled, and said decidedly, “Very well then, we shall do this:

“Sister, you go with Valakia. I shall go with Miss Rafflesia.”

I froze. “Err...” The sister seemed taken aback for a moment as well.

“What,” he said, looking at us, “is there another problem?”

“N-no,” she answered. “That... should work.”

As I did my best to look away, the nun’s reluctant answer told the entire story.



“...” As we briskly traversed the small distance between houses, I stole a glance at the silent companion walking slightly in front of me. *Should I try to say something?* Sister Rosalia’s opinion on the matter would probably be that there was never any rapport nor any relationship in need of mending between us, and yet the awkward silence that would fall whenever we found ourselves alone kept prodding at me nonetheless.

I sighed. *I wonder how it feels to not care what anyone else thinks of you.* As I tried to simulate in my mind how that liberation would feel, we promptly arrived at our next destination. Not much room to breathe when going door-to-door. *I’m starting to empathize with those salesmen I’d always shoo away.*

Focusing on the investigation was, however, a good way to take my mind off things, so I welcomed the distraction, though perhaps not as warmly as the slender thirty-ish looking woman currently welcoming us in. Iscario’s gambit had proven somewhat effective, though—perhaps it was just Sister Rosalia’s intimidating aura, but we managed to keep things moving faster.

That efficiency unfortunately didn’t translate to better results. It might seem somewhat ridiculous for every person we came across to have a

convincing alibi for our crime, but no matter who we asked, one specific term kept coming up.

“What’s the deal with this ‘exchange’ anyway?” I asked Sapria Valpurga, who just happened to bump into us as we exited the house while running an errand. We’d already figured out the gist as everyone we interviewed brought it up, but I asked her for further clarification.

“Hm? The deal?” She tilted her head in a manner reminiscent of her daughter. “It’s not much of a deal. We just exchange items between each other. Daily necessities or old clothes and all that.”

“So it’s like a flea market?” I asked, adjusting my glasses.

“Hmm, I’ve never been to a market before, but I feel like the nuance is different?” She looked up to the sky with a frown on her face. “We just go through all our possessions to see if there’s anything we don’t need and can afford to give away to someone else.”

“So it’s more like charity,” Rosalia muttered.

Sapria tilted her head again. “Well, either way, almost everyone was gathered in the square. I think everyone’s going to say the same, no matter who you ask.”

“Is there any possibility of someone sneaking out during the commotion for about half an hour?” I asked.

“Huh? I mean, anyone could walk away at any time, but at least one person would have noticed. We try to be swift so we can finish up before the early morning ends, so it would be strange for someone to just wander away.”

“Hmm.” Rosalia crossed her arms in consternation. I sympathized with her.

It wasn’t anything like a rock solid alibi—if anything, a large gathering made it more likely that someone could have been overlooked in the busy atmosphere. But proving something like that was impossible, when all we had to work with was testimony.

In other words, we were still as lost as ever. All we could do was question everyone in the hopes of uncovering some contradiction. *What a mess.* Did the culprit aim for this when committing the crime at that very moment?

Isn’t an exciting investigation supposed to be full of new revelations around every corner? I feel like a hamster on a wheel here. As that aimless complaint crossed my mind, something suddenly clicked. I spontaneously asked Sapria about the doubt that had just sprouted within me.

“Hey, Miss Sapria, could I ask you something—how come you don’t raise any animals here?”

“Huh?” She stared blankly at me.

Something about this village had been bugging me—it was hardly the only strange thing about this place, but it felt like there was something missing. Hunters, farmers, butchers, carpenters—but no breeders. No domesticated animals of any kind. It was a stark contrast from any rural village I'd ever been to before, where you couldn't take a step out into someone's yard without running into some chicken.

"W-well, from what I can tell, you get all your food either from farming or hunting." I explained nervously. "We spoke to your husband earlier today. From the sounds of it, hunting is pretty dangerous. So I was just thinking, it would be a lot safer to domesticate animals."

"Idiot, they said they're self-sufficient, remember?" spat Rosalia. "If that includes buying cattle, then where are they gonna get any farm animals from? You aren't gonna see any chickens in that forest, that's for sure. And if they're gonna spend half their crops on raising farm animals, they might as well eat the crops directly. It's a lot more efficient that way."

"I guess you're right," I said, scratching the back of my head. "But you know, I just thought there must be something in the forest they could try to domesticate. Even if it's less efficient, it beats putting yourself in danger."

"Hmph, you're a coward and a glutton, huh?" she scoffed, looking away. "Not everyone is so desperate to gorge themselves on an animal that they'd waste their crops on it."

What is she, a vegetarian? And you can't attack me with that when they're literally risking their lives to eat animals! Even though I'd addressed the question to Sapria, we'd ended up bickering about it on our own without letting her get a word in. It was quite the rude act, looking back on it, but the woman just looked at us with a cheerful, if slightly confused smile.

"Umm..." Finally getting her turn as Rosalia and I looked away from each other in a huff, she said, "I'm not sure about all that, but I remember hearing about this from the father—from Father Ixio. I still can't quite imagine it."

"Hm?" I said, turning to her. "Can't imagine what?"

"Well, it'd be like if we put our neighbor in a cage and fed him as we pleased. Wouldn't that be strange?" The middle-aged housewife said this earnestly, without any hint of trying to make some kind of moralizing argument.

"What? I mean—you'd be doing it to animals, not people," I said, baffled.

She tilted her head at me, and then continued in an equally earnest tone. "But they're the same as us, aren't they?"

"W-What do you mean?"

“Well, we were all put under the same sky and are just trying to survive in whatever way we can, right?” She smiled like the morning sun.

“I... guess so.” There were a hundred arguments I could have brought up for the ‘superiority of man’, but they all seemed pointless in the moment. It’s not like she couldn’t have thought of them herself—and yet even knowing all that, she still asserted that without hesitation, as if it were a fact known plainly to all.

“Oh well, you’re people of the church, so you must see things differently from us unenlightened commoners. No need to get your head mixed up thinking about my nonsense.”

“No, uh, I’m—”

I tried to correct her misconception, but right as I began her eyes suddenly widened and, interrupting me, she exclaimed, “Ah, shoot. I can’t be chatting out here, I need to deliver this over to Gertie’s. Sorry, it was an honor to speak to you, got to go!”

And the next moment she was off.

Rosalia and I impulsively shared a befuddled gaze before, as if remembering our positions, turned away from one another again.

As we set off, I muttered to myself, “I don’t get that lady.”

“People have all kinds of beliefs,” Rosalia replied offhandedly. “I find hers admirable.”

“Is that so...?” And with that little exchange out of the way, it was time to visit another house.



As we made our way across the east side of the village, any optimism we might have had was slowly whittled down.

Even when we found a ray of hope, someone claiming that they ‘might actually not have seen so-and-so neighbor around’, that light was unceremoniously snuffed out as someone else confirmed their presence. And with no other leads outside that pattern, we’d gotten to the end of the village with net zero clues.

Well, I could at least take solace in the fact that we were almost done. The only house left to visit was a tiny dilapidated shack that looked more like a storeroom for farming implements than a home. Beyond it, we could only

see the lonely church some distance away, its spire quietly overlooking the town.

Without much fanfare and just wanting to get things done, Rosalia and I approached the door. I did the honors and knocked, expecting to find some withered old man like that Bolo Bolobo on the other side.

The face that did pop out, however, totally betrayed those expectations.

“You’re...”

“Oh, hello there,” she said. “I’d tell you to make yourselves at home, but I fear that’d be asking too much.” She giggled, putting a hand to her lips—obscuring that thin, thin smile of hers.

It was Olga Eulogia.

“Um, excuse me for the rude question, but—have you always lived here?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

“No need to be discreet.” She chuckled. “I’m perfectly aware of how strange it must seem to you.”

“Er, well...” I looked away, scratching my cheek. In doing so, the shoddy wooden wall filled my vision, and I once again took notice of how small her ‘house’ truly was. All it consisted of was a small bed, a dresser, a chair and a table, upon which sat an unlit candle and nothing more. Were it not for the small window on the right side of the room, I’d have said it was no better than sleeping in that forest shed.

“To answer your question, no, I’ve only been staying here for a short while. My family used to live in a house near the village center,” she said, taking a seat on the chair and inviting us to sit on the bed. I took up her offer, while Rosalia just leaned against the door.

“Well, um, what made you move here?”

“You recall how my father is away from the village, having his illness treated, yes? As for my mother, she has been dead for many years now. I don’t have any other living relatives, so it would have just been me living all by myself in that big house.

“So, well, it was decided that it would be better for the village as a whole if another family with a stronger need for that space was to take the home.”

“Huh?” I gaped. “A—and you were okay with that?”

“It’s a perfectly reasonable request. I didn’t know what to do with all the empty space, myself. And,” she said, gazing through the window, from which you could see the church in the distance, “this place isn’t so bad either, once you get used to it.”

“...Your father—He was the one who built that shed out in the forest, right?”

“Indeed. He was a builder. He also helped build the house we’d lived in ever since I was born—as well as the one that collapsed in the rain. Among many others you see here in the village.”

“...What will you do once he comes back from his treatment?”

“Hm.” She looked into my eyes. “If he comes back, I suppose the village will once again come together to make the best decision. I’m sure we’ll find a way.”

“If?” I asked.

“I’ve heard they say that the effectiveness of any treatment also depends on the patient’s will to overcome their affliction, no?” She asked casually. “Even if he survives, my father’s illness is one that is sure to leave him unable to work for the rest of his life. Even in spite of Father Ixio’s immense graciousness, I can’t see that man wishing to live on without his work. He has nothing else beyond that.” Her composed smile never wavered.

Nothing else. I swallowed down the obvious question, fearing what the answer might have been.

“That’s not what we’re here to talk about,” grumbled Rosalia, her arms crossed.

“Ah yes, my apologies for wasting your time with chatter.” She put her palms together. “You’re here to ask about what I was up to yesterday morning, correct?”

“Huh?” Rosalia looked up at her. “How’d you...?”

“Word travels fast around here, you know? I’d wager by the time you crossed half the village, the other half was already waiting for you.”

“Wow.” Everyone had been so hospitable to us from the very beginning that I hadn’t really noticed the difference.

“I regret to disappoint you, but I probably don’t have whatever you’re looking for. I’m no different, I was also at the morning exchange, albeit without much of anything to exchange. If you want, I can direct you to a few people who can confirm that.”

“...You sure are prepared.” The nun muttered.

“I just wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.” And then, as if she’d just remembered something, Olga spoke up again to the nun facing away from her. “Ah yes, speaking of rumors—I heard you scolded the mayor quite harshly when you learned of our treatment of Father Ixio after his death.”

“Wh—Now how the hell did you hear about that?” Rosalia yelled, astonished.

“Well, when you were yelling at him, the window seemed to have been open. The next-door neighbor seemed to have heard it. And then when you angrily stormed out of the house, another neighbor saw you. That’s where the story started,” Olga calmly explained, looking somewhat amused.

“Damn...” The nun fiddled with the Luminary hanging from her neck, her cheeks slightly reddened. “You weren’t lying, shit really does spread like wildfire ‘round here.”

Olga chuckled. “I understand your feelings, but don’t be too harsh on the mayor, please. I heard he was considering resigning from his post and submitting to whatever punishment you’d have in store for him.”

“W-wait, I never said he should do anything like that! I was just venting!” Seeing the nun flustered for a change was an impressive sight. It seemed that Olga was a formidable young woman indeed.

“You should tell him that the next time you see him, then.” She paused for a moment, before looking into Rosalia’s eyes. “—But... I’m happy to have met someone that would get angry like that on his behalf. Someone who would yell over nothing more than sincere compassion for someone they’d never even met. I’m sure the father would have been happy as well. Thank you.”

Sister Rosalia stared back with her mouth agape, unsure of how to reply. Finally, she just looked away, quietly muttering “S-sure.”

Olga and I shared a knowing smile as we watched the bashful sister. Then, Olga spoke up once again, addressing both of us. “If you would not mind, I have a proposal. Once you have wrapped up your business, let us all meet at the church. I have something to show to you.”

“Hmm?” Neither Rosalia nor I could guess at her intentions, but we agreed nonetheless. Whatever it was, it couldn’t have been any less fruitful than our investigation thus far. And so, agreeing to reunite in about an hour, we left Olga’s home.



As I left the house and took note of the Sun, now low enough to almost graze the tops of the houses in front of us, I sighed audibly. A day almost over and no results to show for it. Not that I'd worked a full day's amount of work, but the sentiment was still there.

I looked out to the north. All that there was beyond here was the church, more fields and, further in the distance, a wooden fence and gate that signaled the edge of the village. No more houses.

"Should we start on the other side t—" And then as I turned my head around to voice the question, I suddenly noticed a lanky middle aged woman standing in front of me.

Well, to be more accurate, she was standing below the frame of her open front door, looking directly at us with a wide, expectant smile.

They sure are waiting for us at this point. Can't believe I didn't notice it. I sent a questioning gaze to Sister Rosalia.

She just shrugged. "Might as well."

And so with that half-hearted determination we walked up to the woman.

"Phew, I'm so glad I caught you. I heard you were out visiting everyone's homes to bless them. It just would not do if I missed something like that," the talkative woman went on, once we finished our routine questioning. *Is that how these people see what we're doing? I'm not sure what part of this is blessing anyone.*

"I saw you went by Olga's earlier too. Oh, I'm so glad. The poor girl really deserves it. No mother, father's not around."

"Yeah..." I couldn't help but find it somewhat distasteful, talking about her like that.

"Other girls her age are already getting married, yet she's all alone. Poor thing, wasting her youth like that." The woman spoke, putting a hand to her cheek.

"W-what?" Her statement startled me into focus. "What are you talking about?"

"Mm?" The woman seemed confused. "Without her parents around, who's going to pick a husband for her? Her father has to approve, but he's in no shape to come back. She'll spoil at this rate, the poor girl."

I looked over to Rosalia, but her hardened expression didn't give way to any emotion. The woman seemed liable to keep going, but we soon cut the conversation off and went on our way.

I must have been frowning, because Rosalia took a glance at me and said, "What, too much of a romanticist?"

"No, it's not like that, it's just..." I looked away.

"That's how these things go in places like this, y'know. No point being surprised." She chuckled to herself for a moment. "When I was a brat, I got determined to become a nun partly 'cause I found the idea of getting hitched gross."

I smiled. "Really now?" That was somehow easy to picture.

I cast my head downward again. I was well aware that marriages weren't solely a matter of love, even among common people and especially in rural villages like this. But even so... "—I don't know, it was just hard to listen to. She talked about her like livestock."

"How ironic," she said, looking ahead. "You'd think a bloodsucker wouldn't have any issue thinking of people as livestock."

"Come on," I said, turning to her. "You know I'm—"

"Yeah, I know." She sighed. "You're not that kind of guy."

I looked at her, wide-eyed. It was a simple acknowledgement and nothing more, and that in itself was enough to make it stick out.

We continued on in silence for a while, not looking at one another. The road was oddly empty, that same emptiness we'd felt when we first entered St. Purgatorio—it was not deserted, and yet the indications of life only drove home how lonely it was. It was a sight I hadn't been able to register as we busied ourselves with knocking on every door.

"I..." Sister Rosalia spoke up, only to trail off. I didn't try to prompt her. After a few moments of silent hesitation, she began once more. "You've lived with those humans for your entire life, right? Tell me about them."

"Huh?" I stared wide-eyed at her.

"I'm just curious about what kind of idiot would keep a vampire for so long. Indulge me."

As I watched her stiff back, still unwilling to face me, a wry grin crossed my face. "Fine, I don't mind telling you. Though just so you know, this might devolve into nothing more than rambling."

"That's fine by me," she said.

"Both of them must have been a little crazy from the start. If they weren't, there's no way they'd have agreed to a life of constantly moving and

never being able to maintain long-term relationships just so they could cover for me. But that kind of life seemed to suit Vincent just fine. Even as a kid, he was the type that couldn't sit still. It always felt like he was looking for something. Whether or not he ever found it, I can't say.

"As for Valentina, she was basically his opposite, but in exactly the right way for them to get along. She had her sights set on exactly one thing, and her focus never wavered. If Vince was the type to always look for somewhere new, then Tina had only one place where she belonged, a place that she refused to budge away from. That place just happened to be by his side.

"And then there's me. Somehow always stuck between them. When the other kids at the orphanage bullied me for being so pale, it was them who'd stood up for me. And I guess it must have been like a puzzle piece clicking into place. Or maybe a knot getting tangled up. We just never managed to come undone. And none of us ever tried to, either. I don't know how it was that we became so irreplaceable to one another. By the time I realized what we'd become, I didn't have any kind of desire to change anything. Looking back on it now, even though we've lived in so many places and done so many things, my life seems like a static picture. The background may shift around, but the foreground is the same. That's how it was for years.

"When Vince died, it felt like I'd been living all those decades pointlessly—I was no more prepared to come to terms with his death than a child. Compared to me, Tina was amazing. She never once wept—not in front of me anyway. But it felt like the year she lived after that was for my sake alone. She seemed see-through, ethereal somehow, like she'd just float away if I wasn't there to drag her down.

"And then the day came when I was no longer heavy enough." My gaze had drifted upward as I spoke. And then, my string of words coming undone, I once again returned my eyes downward. "—I'm sorry. You asked about them, but I ended up talking about myself more than anything. I really must be a real self-centered guy."

"...I get the picture," Rosalia calmly replied. "Bunch of idiots", I heard her muttering under her breath. I gave a bitter smile.

"Since Tina died, I've been in a daze. I have no idea how I should live without them by my side. So in that sense, maybe I should be grateful for you guys chasing me like this. It's a way to distract myself, if nothing else."

"I have no need for your stinkin' gratitude." With that typical rudeness I'd grown used to, Rosalia rebuked me. She then stopped in her tracks. Turning her head back to me at last, she uttered, "Vio Valakia, you really are a vampire through and through."

“Hmm?” My mind still somewhat lost in memories, it was her clear declaration that brought me back to the present.

“Once you sunk your teeth into them, you never let go. Just a taste of their kindness was all it took. Like a parasite, you kept devouring that love. Greedily, greedily, until they forgot what happiness was like without you biting into it. And even now that they’ve expired, you still aren’t satisfied.” Rosalia delivered this speech without any of her typical signs of aggression or anger, simply looking into my eyes. I found myself unable to look away.

And then, a few moments later, I let out a slight chuckle, my mouth once again forming a bitter smile. Looking up to the sky once more, with those two’s faces on my mind, I said, “In that case, they must really have been amazing. No matter how much I took, it never ran dry.”

“You’re someone I have to exterminate, there’s no doubt about that.” And then, turning around again, she added, “so thanks.”

“—Huh?” I almost failed to register it.

“Talking about my sister, thinking about her, for the first time in a long time... I think it was a good thing. And it was because of you. So I’ll thank you for that, and nothing more.”

She refused to look me in the eye, but her earnestness was plainly conveyed. I could feel a smile creeping up on my face.

Treating people nicely gets you somewhere after all, see? I knew that saying so would earn me a glare and a punch to the head, so I kept my self-satisfaction to myself.

Still, I wanted to see what kind of expression she had on her face right now. With those impure motives in my heart, I started circling around her.

More and more of her profile revealed itself. Her fair cheeks, ever so slightly reddened, and her ashen bangs, and the corners of her amber eyes, and her full lips, tightly pressed together in consternation, and her neck—

Ah.

I stopped in my tracks. I looked at my hands, belatedly noticing that I’d balled them tightly into fists. I clenched my jaw, trying and failing to keep saliva from flowing out.

I was almost to her side now. She hadn’t turned to look at me yet, but she could have done so at any moment. She could have seen *this*.

No! A moment later, I’d dashed past her, running deeper towards the village.

“Huh!?” I could hear her startled voice behind me. “Where the hell are you going?”

“Gonna go find Father Iscario!” I yelled back. “I’ll be back in a moment!”

Probably leaving her in awe, though I didn't have the courage to turn back and look, I ran ahead as fast as I could.



A minute or two of sprinting and Rosalia's figure had fully faded from view. Panting like a dog, I stopped to catch my breath.

Hands on my knees, I looked at the ground. It would be tough to explain all that later, but in that moment, more than anything, I didn't want to be seen in a state like that.

I slowly breathed in and out, trying to keep a firm grip on my rationality. *Grin and bear it. I'm above giving in to something like this. I have to be.*

Having calmed down as much as I could, I finally began paying attention to my surroundings again. A few villagers gave me incredulous looks from their window sills. And then...

Hm?

I could hear the hint of a familiar voice filling my ear.

Is that Father Iscario? I could hear his voice coming from a small gap between two houses.

Reconfirming that I felt ready to face someone else, I began casually walking in his direction, but when his voice passed the threshold of coherence, it immediately froze me on the spot.

"I'm not wrong to trust you, am I, Miss Rafflesia?" He said, his voice clear as a bell.

He seemed to have been facing Rafi in the narrow space, his height dwarfing hers as she looked down at her feet, her back to the wall.

I instinctively hid behind a wall as I listened in.

"If you'll allow me to be vulnerable with you for a moment, this case has truly stumped me. It's like there's no direction, no destination to it. It's unlike anything I've ever worked on before.

"When I step foot into a town, I know what it is that I should look for, and I know how to spot it. Here, though, it's different. No matter which thread I pull on, nothing gives way. That's no wonder, I suppose. Nobody has even realized that there's any problem, any incident here to begin with. And it feels like no one is looking for any kind of resolution either."

"..." Rafi listened in silence, not even her breath being audible.

“So then that made a certain itch stick out to me, it made me wonder once more—you, Miss Rafflesia, who should be the first to know what transpired, claim to know nothing, to remember nothing. Is that really true?”

“...” Rafi said nothing.

“Are you hiding anything from us? From myself, Sister Rosalia—or from Vio Valakia?”

“...” Under the priest’s gaze, Rafi stood frozen in silence. A part of me desperately wanted to jump in there, to chide the man from doubting a victim like her. Another, however, stood in its way, afraid of the priest’s scorn and perfectly aware that I couldn’t be the one to assuage his doubts. And both looked away from the unwanted, uncontrollable desire within me to hear her answer to that question.

And as those doubts swirling in my head kept me from moving, Rafi instead spoke up for herself.

“...No.” A clear answer. “I’m not hiding anything.”

“...I see.” The priest nodded in satisfaction. “Very well. Thank you, Miss Rafflesia, and my apologies for doubting you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief to myself.

“I’m sure the fellow hiding over there is equally pleased to hear that,” the priest then added, turning in my direction.

“Ah.” I should have realized it sooner. There was no shot I could hide from him—that was what had brought me here to begin with. I left my half-hearted hiding spot with a wry smile on my face.

“...” Upon seeing me, Rafi wordlessly trotted over in my direction and settled next to me, slightly behind me.

I frowned at the priest. “Do you get your kicks from scaring young girls? What kind of priest are you?”

“Perish the thought,” Iscario laughed. “If you find yourself afraid of a priest, I fear that it’s your own sins haunting you instead.” *You’re the one haunting me, you murderous preacher.* I swallowed my comments as I glared at his cool smile.

As we walked out onto the main path, a wave of vertigo hit me, perhaps from the sudden relief of tension.

“There you are. What the hell was that about?” Seeing Sister Rosalia come into view as she jogged towards us, I shook the sensation off and faced her.

“Oh, you know, I just thought we should regroup, since we were done with our side and all.”

“So you just ran off alone?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Haha, not my brightest move, huh?” I fully exerted whatever acting abilities I had in trying to play that off casually.

“...What’s even going on in that empty skull of yours,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, did you tell them about Olga’s proposal?”

“Ah, right.” We quickly explained our agreement with Olga to the others.

“Intriguing.” Iscario brought his hand to his chin in contemplation. “I have a feeling that whatever Miss Olga has in store for us is worth paying an ear to.”

“What about the rest of the houses?” I asked. “You haven’t visited them all, have you?”

“No, about a fourth of the village is left.”

“If we split up and hurry we might get through it all in an hour,” Rosalia suggested.

“I worry that rushing might make for sloppy questioning, but—well, it is better than nothing,” the priest acquiesced.

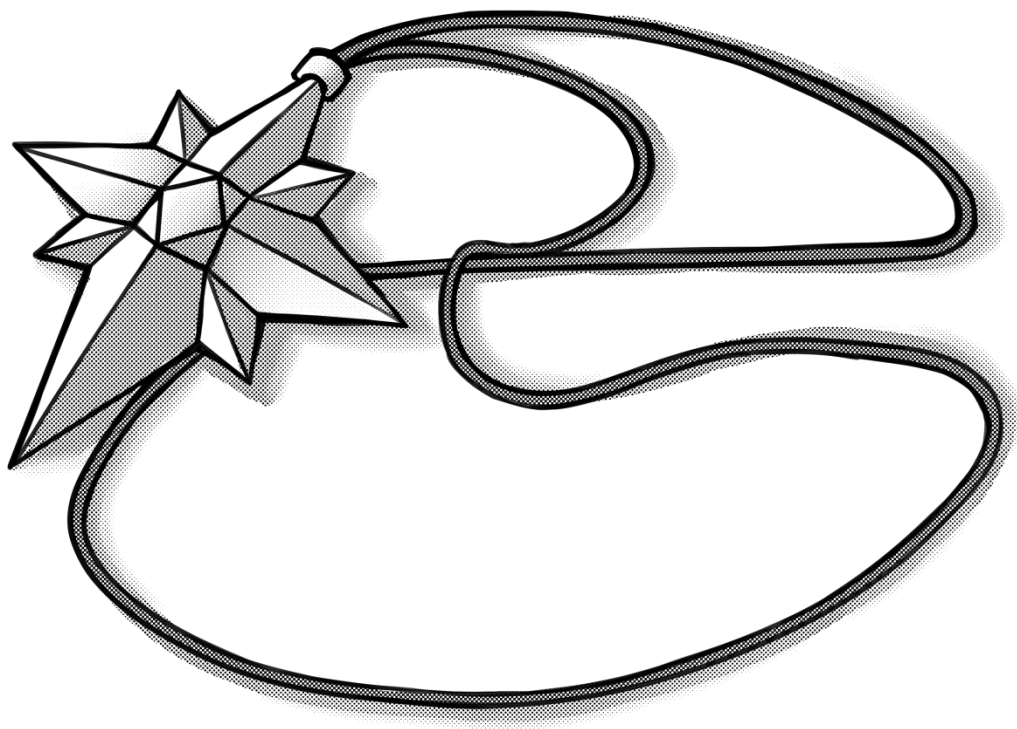
“What are we waiting for, then?” Rosalia hurriedly stepped forward. Iscario followed suit, and Rafi quietly trailed along, keeping a slight distance from the two. Like that, three heavy sets of footsteps resounded against the ground—and a few moments later, the missing pair caught the sister’s attention.


She turned back towards me, clicking her tongue and impatiently urging me to hurry. “Hey, move it already—huh?”

Her widening eyes were the last thing I saw. My wobbling feet stepped forward—and I unceremoniously tumbled to the ground.

◆ Record V ◆

「The Heliocentric
Principle」



 *don't want to be alone.*

That's all it came down to. I didn't want to be alone. I couldn't bear living alone. I would rather die than be alone.

But I would be alone in death. I was sure of that. I couldn't believe in any grand vision of paradise, and I'd never met a single person who'd offer the path to paradise to a creature like me.

So I didn't want to die. Beyond anything else, I just didn't want to die. Even if it was a betrayal to those who'd been with me until now. I didn't want to die. I was sure I wouldn't be together with them in death—from now on, I could only feel their warmth in the memory of their smiles. I couldn't allow that memory to end.

There was one more memory—an unexplainable little glimmer of beauty that I couldn't let die.

I couldn't yet see. I couldn't yet speak. I couldn't understand the world.

And yet I saw. I saw, and my mind formed words of meaning. And I understood all that I needed to understand.

I was held in someone's arms—though they ran desperately throughout the dark, they nonetheless cradled me softly, gently, giving me the warmth that I needed to be sure that my world was still complete. And so I didn't cry. No matter how hard the wind hit my tiny face, I didn't whine. I entrusted my whole being to them.

To *her*.

But it didn't last. It didn't last nearly as long as it should've, though in truth I had no clue how long I would've wanted it to be. Perhaps a millennium. If we truly aren't made to exist forever, then why is it that partings always come too soon, endings too suddenly?

Please, I don't want to be apart from you. I want to be with you forever. Even though that feeling was all that went through my head, I knew the parting was inevitable. I knew that once we said goodbye, we would never see one another again.

As she laid me down on the ground, I at last began to cry. I could feel her intention. I desperately tried to hold on, but my infant form could put up no struggle. Though I cried and cried, she refused to pick me up again. She knew that she wouldn't have the strength to leave me behind if she allowed herself that.

And so instead, she offered me a smile, wet with tears.

And then, ever so gently, she offered me a red kiss on the forehead.

Whether that kiss had managed to stop my tears from flowing or not, I don't know. I can't know.

—Why was it?

Why was it that I held such a memory, so crystal clear in the depths of my being, even though I had been too young for my brain to possibly be capable of registering it?

It's because—I am a bloodsucking demon. I feed on blood, and I make others' memories my own.

And as she—as my mother laid her bloody lips upon my forehead in front of the orphanage that day, a trail of blood must have flowed down my face alongside the tears, and entered me.

And then, I was given a piece of her soul—The sole memory I held of the woman who'd birthed me, a woman I would never know. Our story had ended before it began, and I would never be able to reclaim it. I understood that better than anyone.

And yet she'd given it to me—her love for me, and her sadness at our inevitable parting. Her ardent hope to never leave my side, even as she said her goodbyes to me forever.

And so I couldn't die. I couldn't give up this memory, this sad little teardrop of a reminiscence which had made me who I was. I would never allow it to leave my grasp.



When I finally awoke, a soft orange light had enveloped the world. We were in a deserted corner of the village close to the fields, the houses lined up some distance away.

“You’re finally up. What the hell happened to ya?”

What first caught my freshly opened eyes, though, wasn’t the sky but the faces curiously peering at me from above.

“Ahh... Good morning... No, I guess that’s not appropriate here.” My groggy mind took a while to adjust to consciousness. “How long have I been out?”

“About twenty minutes,” she replied. “No way we’re covering the whole village now.”

“I’m sorry.” I looked down. “I don’t know, I... I must have just been exhausted.”

“I’ve no doubt in my mind you’re exhausted, but that just now—there’s clearly more to it, is there not?” The priest looked knowingly at me from above, his already tall frame now feeling like a skyscraper from my vantage point.

“...” I didn’t reply to him as I rubbed the back of my head. Rafi helped me get my sluggish body up. My legs still felt wobbly, so I leaned on her a bit.

“If I must be the one to make it clear—*that*, was the condition of a vampire suppressing their bloodlust.”

“Oh.” Rosalia’s face lit up in understanding. I guess she must have been more used to gouging blood out of a vampire than minding how much they’ve got in them.

“It must have been quite some time since you last fed, come to think of it. Your benefactor passed away a few days prior, and you wouldn’t have had anyone else to rely on thereafter.”

“I... guess so. Then this is akin to making you hear my stomach gurgling. Haha, I apologize for my lacking manners.”

I tried to laugh it off, but the frailness of my voice must not have been very convincing.

A vampire’s immortality was like a perpetual motion machine. No matter what, they would not die, even from starvation. Therefore, in the strictest sense, the need for blood wasn’t a physiological one—it was a

psychological one, closer to lust than hunger. Suppressing that urge could really take a toll on the mind—fainting like this wasn't an uncommon result.

The priest sighed lightly. "It will disturb the investigation if you keep passing out like this. You ought to satisfy that urge."

"A-and how would I do that, under the circumstances. Whose blood should I drink?"

"Would mine do?" Iscario gave a composed smile. "I may be a man of the cloth, but I don't have any vampire-repellent toxins in my blood, I assure you."

"W-wha—" "What!?" Rosalia's shock far dwarfed my own. "Father Rozenkranz, are you seriously planning to give blood to a vampire!? You're a—"

"I know what I am, Sister Rosalia," he forcefully interrupted. "I haven't forgotten my mission, and I never will. But I keep my word. I couldn't in good faith call myself a believer if I didn't."

"Compared to the lifespan of the divine Sun, my time on this Earth is akin to the moment it takes a raindrop to hit the ground, but even so I plan to lead that infinitesimal instant with honor. That's what makes me, what makes us different from these wretched monsters."

"—So." He glared sharply at the nun. "Do I have your approval?"

"..." Gulping, Rosalia eventually broke down under his gaze, and, looking away, she answered, "—Do what you hafta."

"Then," regaining his smile, Iscario followed up, "may I borrow your spear for a moment."

Without another word, Rosalia produced her long silver weapon and handed it to the priest. He lifted up his sleeve and, without hesitation, used the sharp blade on the end of the spear to sever the flesh on his arm. The smell of iron reached my nostrils and made my instincts flare. I unconsciously took a step forward.

With an amused snort, Iscario extended his arm in my direction. "Go right ahead, Vio Valakia."

"T-then... Thank you for the meal." With uncertain yet undoubtedly willful movements, I closed the distance between myself and the tall man and extended my mouth towards his hemorrhaging wound.

As the water of life hit my tongue, my mind was once again assailed by memories not my own, another's life becoming my own.



It was a small town like any other. Not small enough to be called rural, yet not big enough to be considered a city. The kind of place you'd pass through and never consider stopping by to visit—a boring, commonplace sight. But for its residents, that was enough. The adventurous types in search of a new life might move towards one of the fast-growing new cities, but those that stayed behind were those satisfied with a small life of peace and stability.

He, however, could not yet be fit into either of these categories, for the mere fact that he was too young to consider such issues or take such decisions. For a young boy like himself, every day amounted to a new adventure, a new experience, a fresh new thrill.

Saying goodbye to his mother, he rushed out of the house and towards one of his favorite spots—near the edge of the town, a park which connected to a nearby wooded area. The place felt like a peninsula—upon crossing into the green-filled land, you could continue on forever and only find more and more nature. Of course, in reality, both the park and the forest beyond it had their limits, but he had yet to be taught the lesson that everything in this universe has an end—he would never believe it, not unless he saw it with his own eyes.

Getting together with his usual group of friends, the youngsters set forth to explore the unknown. They had made it their mission to chart the entire forest—in reality, that task could have easily been accomplished in a single day, but as the children kept getting distracted time and time again with various games, so did their mission extend longer and longer. That didn't matter to them in the slightest, though—They had no time limit. Even if they didn't finish today, the forest would still be there the following day—something so unfathomably huge could never possibly vanish.

If human beings aren't made to live forever, if the world isn't made to last forever, then why is it that every goodbye feels like it's uttered too soon, every ending come too soon?

They played in all manner of ways. They chased each other around the park, ducking and weaving between the greenery and the winding trees. They formed teams, taking each other out in mock warfare. When they got tired, they'd lay down on the grass, and look up at the blinding blue sky.

But a young boy like *him* had plenty of energy, and rest was hardly welcome. Of course, after tiring himself out for an entire day like this, he'd

probably collapse into bed like a rock, but for now the idea of pacing himself never crossed his mind.

Still, his energy was a bit much for the rest of his friends, who didn't want to budge from the grass. Fed up, he gave up on them, and decided to challenge his strength by himself. For someone like him, that meant only one thing—climbing a tree.

More so than being able to run fast or earn good grades, among children his age, the ultimate status symbol was being able to climb the tallest tree. Perhaps it was an inherent trait in the human heart, to admire the one who takes down the largest adversary. Be it surmounting a difficult challenge, taking down a terrible beast, or scaling a staggering mountain, everyone admired the one that was able to dominate something far greater than themselves—perhaps everyone thought that by doing so, they might prove themselves to be great and immovable as well.

Whatever the case, the child didn't question it. Such ideas never even crossed his mind—in that moment, he simply wanted to see the sight from up there.

And so, arduously, painstakingly, he climbed the tree. Resting his feet on the grooves marked into the tree bark, holding onto the trunk with his arms for dear life, he slowly yet surely made his way up. This stage constituted the hardest part of the climb—once he was able to reach the branches, victory would be as good as his. Still, for now, he couldn't relax. Any wrong step and he would be sent tumbling down shamefully. By now, all of his friends were watching him—he wouldn't allow it. His hand could almost reach the branch—triumph was just a few inches away. And yet he couldn't find any other surface to ascend on. It was as if the tree was made to taunt him, to show him victory and then snatch it away at the last moment.

But he wouldn't allow himself to lose. He was meant for greater things—he truly believed this, for no other reason than that life had yet to steal that inherent confidence from him. And in that moment, that confidence was all he needed.

He jumped, propelling himself upward towards the branch. It was a gamble—fail to take hold of it, and he would fall down hard, maybe even injure himself. But he couldn't worry about a trifling thing like that—picture defeat in your mind and you've already lost. And so, with all his strength, he took hold of that branch, and using the momentum, he spun himself upwards, landing atop the branch. His friends were all cheering for him now, and for good reason. Truth be told, that movement was far beyond what a boy his age would normally be able to do. His natural physical prowess could even be

called prodigal—not yet having any frame of reference, though, his pride was one bereft of arrogance.

Not wanting to stress the branch he sat on and break it, he quickly grabbed hold of another branch, and then another, slowly but surely getting farther up in the tree. Finally, he reached a branch sturdy enough that he could be sure it wouldn't break, one near the very top. In truth, the tree wasn't really all that tall, but it didn't matter—he felt on top of the world. His friends now yelling his name like that of a king returned victorious from the battlefield only strengthened that feeling. As he leaned back, resting on the trunk behind him, he looked upon the park and the townscape beyond with satisfaction.

Thanks to the park being located on a hill relative to the rest of the town, the top of the tree was a good vantage point. He could see to the outer ring of buildings that bordered the empty plains beyond—and that's why he might have been the first to notice the approaching discrepancy.

Eyebrow rising in incredulity, he looked to the sky. An immaculate blue, with no cloud in sight. He looked down again, at the ground. Beyond his friends, still looking at him with excitement on their faces, beyond the immediate vicinity—a shadow. The ground was dark, as if the sunlight had been blocked off by some giant curtain in the sky. And yet looking up again, he could plainly see that there was no such thing there. And then, as he looked back down, he noticed an undeniable fact.

The shadow had grown.

It was closer to them now. It had encroached through the buildings, and was making its way throughout the town. From his point of view it seemed like a slow advance, but in actuality it was moving at speeds far exceeding any vehicle to have ever been crafted by humanity without the use of magic.

He squinted his eyes. Something about the shadow was strange. He couldn't tell if it was some kind of mirage or heat haze—the surface of the shadow almost appeared to be boiling.

Sizzling blackness wafted up from the ground and into the sky. As it got closer and closer, the true nature of that smoke made itself clear.

Bats.

Bats. Chiroptera. He had seen a book at the library before, one about animal species. He squinted even more, trying to discern what species the flying bats belonged to. However, his memory seemed to have failed him, for he just couldn't fit them into any category.

Perhaps his mind was desperately trying to focus on the questions that even an ignorant child like him might answer. To pry him away from the foreign, unexplainable mass.

As the shadow encroached closer and closer, he noticed something else. The people that stepped on it seemed to just vanish.

He blinked. He thought that maybe his vision was failing him. It must have been. But for the life of him, he could not see anyone through that dark miasma.

The enigma made no sound. There was no hint of alarm, no emergency signal, nothing to suggest any kind of calamity. It gave the boy a strange sense of ease. Like if he just closed his eyes and waited a while, a few seconds, a few minutes, a few hours, everything would be over and it'd all return to normal. Every storm passes. The people might get a little frustrated, a little sad, but they all go on with their daily lives eventually.

The shadow would soon reach the fence around the park. His friends were still entirely focused on him, still laughing at his achievement. He looked at them. He knew that he probably ought to say something, but his throat couldn't produce anything beyond an inaudible rasp—no, perhaps it was his mind that couldn't form any legible words of warning to offer.

At the back of the entourage, however, one little girl's smile vanished from her lips. Perhaps she had noticed something unnatural in the boy's expression. Truth be told, he'd had something of a crush on the girl for a while. Nothing he'd ever admit to, but he admired her calm, rational disposition and her considerate personality, qualities that the energetic boy sorely lacked.

Confused, the girl turned around to see what he'd been so rattled by. She turned around, and behind her, she saw—

Just a few feet of grass. Beyond that, nothing.

She hadn't the time to make even a single sound.

Moments later, the boy's friends were gone. There was no indication that they were ever there in the first place. There was no slow descent—it was like dropping a pebble into a lake. With a *plop*, without even any visible ripples in the shade, they'd been swallowed up.

His eyes remained fixed on that point below him, for a while. Suddenly, his eyes flitted upwards. Another change in the townscape. From the other side, the shadow was shrinking. No, rather, it was moving on. Whatever massive object could have projected a shadow like this, it was moving away from the town. Just like the boy had thought, it was true. Every storm passes. All the rain clouds clear up. And everyone returns—

He looked back down. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the greenery of the park had returned. And then, where his friends ought to have been—

His mouth twitched. It twisted strangely.

—They were like raisins. Big, human-shaped raisins.

Hematolegion, the Nightless Night.

That was what it was called. What others called it. Whether it had any name for itself, no one knew, and no one would ever probably find out.

One of the world's most ancient vampires. Reported sightings of the demon went back as far as fifty thousand years ago, though its true age was anyone's guess. In truth, barely anything about its true nature was understood. All anyone knew about it—all they had to know—was that a life led without encountering it once was a fortunate life indeed.

And that a life that did encounter it would likely end right then and there.

It was less of a vampire than a voracious natural disaster, a calamity of malice. It was indiscriminate. It called no one its ally. Vampires and humans both lived in fear of it, for it made no distinction between the two.

It was called the Nightless Night for a very simple reason.

Like a tumor upon the Earth itself, it manifested out of the ground. Fusing with the very matter of the ground, it became a part of the land—and yet, like a blight upon the name of nature, it opposed life. Anything that stepped upon the sands of the Legion was mercilessly eaten—drained of all blood, left as nothing more than a dry husk littering the ground.

There was no conversation to be had, no reasoning, no begging to be done—What use was there in begging the winds to slow down or the rain to return to the sky?

That day, over ninety percent of the town's population was erased in an instant. Inside or outside, it didn't matter, for the calamity fused with dirt, concrete or the very foundations of buildings. The only ones spared were riding horses or other living creatures. The calamity was interested only in intelligent life. It spared all other parts of the wildlife.

The only other person spared—was a young boy, who happened to have climbed a tree, at the very moment the Legion appeared.



I blinked a few times. My throat felt oddly dry.

“Are you all right?” Noticing me staring blankly into nothing, Iscario asked me that as he patched up his bleeding hand. He didn’t sound particularly concerned.

“Oh, uh... Yeah, I’m fine.”

I shouldn’t be surprised that someone in his position has a past like that. It would have been strange to look at him with different eyes at this point. Viewing someone’s deepest memories like this was something I could never grow used to, but I’d at least learned a little tact throughout my years.

Shaking off all the unnecessary thoughts from my mind, I turned towards him with as sunny a disposition as I could summon.

“Thank you. I’m really grateful.”

“There’s nothing you should thank me for.” He shook his head. “Not considering our positions.”

“Regardless of anything else, you gave me a part of your life. That’s something I have to be grateful for, whatever else may happen between us.” I looked up into his thin indigo eyes.

“...I see. My apologies.” Shutting his eyes in concession, a tranquil smile crossed over his face. “Allow me to retract my previous statement then.”

“If you’re done here, what’s our next step?” Off to the side with her face turned away from us, Sister Rosalia asked impatiently, tapping her foot. *That’s right. We have to go back to the investigation...*

“There’s no point in hurrying anymore. Let us cover as much ground as we comfortably can in the time we have left. Do not let your haste drive you to unreasonable conclusions.” With the priest’s order, we finally got moving, with myself as the shameful rear guard. Rafi’s consoling pats on the back did little to raise my spirits, though I appreciated her efforts nonetheless.

Without splitting up this time, we managed to visit four more households. As expected, the results were nothing much to speak of, but since my expectations were nonexistent, I didn’t feel all that disappointed.

Since the questioning appeared to have taken on some kind of religious meaning for the villagers, we worried that the remaining ones that hadn’t received a visit would have felt alienated in some way. Accordingly, we decided to communicate that the last remaining few would also receive a

visitation the following day. Afterwards, we left the houses behind as we advanced on the dirt road, the church looming quietly in the horizon.

And in front of that lonely building waited a single girl, her dark hair standing out against the dull gray of the walls behind her and absorbing all of the sky's orange light. Noticing us, she adopted that thin smile of hers that I'd become so familiar with, and bowed deeply.

"I have no words to thank you, Father, for spending your precious time entertaining my request."

"Nonsense. Please, raise your head," Iscario said, looking down at her with a gentle countenance. "Were I unable to lend an ear and ease the hearts of believers like you, my title would be worthless."

"You're far too kind." Bowing once more in gratitude, she then turned and indicated the church behind her—or, more specifically, the small dirt road leading towards the back of the church. "Please, follow me."

And so we began following behind the young woman, who advanced with unhurried yet determined steps. Behind me, I noticed Rafi hesitate for a few moments, but before I could ask her anything, she too started quietly following along.

Uncertain of our destination, we made sure not to overtake Olga, maintaining the slow rhythm of her deliberate gait. We soon overtook the church, and then continued on through a field of grain that the dirt road ran through, the tall golden crops grazing us as they blew in the evening wind.

Once that field, too, ended, we still kept going, ascending the slight incline of a hill. In the distance beyond us, we could see the tops of trees as we got closer to the eastern edge of the forest.

And eventually, below the crowns of those trees, another shape came into view.

"Is that...?" I mumbled instinctively.

Sticking out of the ground was a clearly man-made shape. Made of roughly cut stone, the rectangular structure bore a wooden ornament atop it—its craftsmanship could hardly be praised, but the clumsy symbol was nonetheless easy to read. It was a Luminary.

What stood before us was a grave.

Stopping in our tracks, all of us looked on in silence. Though no name was engraved upon it, we were nonetheless able to deduce who it belonged to.

"That's right," Olga said. "This is Father Ixio's grave." She turned to a wide-eyed Rosalia. "It's not much, but the village gathered together to build it. I wanted to show you that, even in our inadequate, foolish way, we truly did grieve over his loss."



As the nun flapped her lips open before closing them again, ultimately unable to come up with anything in response, the priest approached the grave. He kneeled down in front of it and, clasping the Luminary hanging from his own neck, closed his eyes in silent prayer.

“The role of traveling priest is a harsh and thankless one. Before anyone can truly come to appreciate their work, they’ve already moved on to their next destination. I may not have known Father Ixio myself, but I have no doubt that he was a truly selfless man to be able to perform that role. I believe he would have been glad to learn that his resting place would be one where he’d be shown so much consideration.” Iscario’s soliloquy was sincere, his solemn and level tone clearly filled with emotion.

“Hearing that means the world to me, father.” Olga said. “His work truly was thankless. He risked his life every day, and let no one know of it.”

Hearing her words, the priest suddenly turned a confronting gaze to her. Unperturbed, Olga continued, the smile still plastered on her face.

“I learned of Father Ixio’s true occupation—slaying vampires, yes?” Her admission filled my mind with danger signals, but she continued on smoothly. “Getting it out of him was truly difficult. I had guessed that there must have been more to him than a simple priest, but he truly insisted on keeping that aspect of himself hidden. Doubly so, it seemed, from those of us who are ignorant about such matters.”

“—But he did tell you, in the end,” the priest said.

“Indeed. I was quite persistent myself, to say the least,” she said, looking off to the side as if embarrassed of the memory. “But, Father Rosenkranz, Sister Rosalia—am I incorrect in assuming that you, too, perform a similar duty?”

The two clergy members shared a look, before also meeting my eyes. Eventually, Iscario stood up from his crouching position and, turning to face the young woman head on, gave his reply.

“—You aren’t mistaken.” He bowed to her, putting a hand to his chest. “Of the 6th Division of the Thirteenth Chamber of the Phaethon, number IV, Iscario T. Rosenkranz. My apologies for keeping it hidden from you.”

“You needn’t waste your breath apologizing to me, father.” She gave a kind look to Sister Rosalia too, whose head was downturned. “Knowing that you were his compatriots, I’m even more glad that I invited you here.”

She hadn’t once looked in my direction. Even though she now knew that the two were vampire hunters, I was unable to tell whether or not she had put any of the pieces together regarding who—what I really was. Unable to ask one way or the other, I simply stood there, petrified, as I took in the scene.

For a few moments, a deep silence permeated into the air as Olga gazed at the gravestone, her thin smile indecipherable. However, as she turned to look at Rafi, who'd been quietly standing off to the edge of the gathering, that smile faded from her face.

With heavy footsteps, she approached the unmoving younger girl. She gently put her arms around her shoulder, and in a firm yet regretful tone, addressed her.

"Rafflesia. I'm sorry to ask this of you, and I know that it's nothing more than my own selfish desire, but I can't bear the thought of them not knowing about his deed. Will you allow me to tell them?"

Receiving this question head-on, Rafi's face remained expressionless. After an instant, however, she turned her face away from Olga's intense gaze.

In a low voice, she replied. "I... I wasn't trying to hide it. I don't mind."

"I see," Olga said. "Thank you. And I truly am sorry." She gave the blank-faced girl a tight hug. Below the now dimming, purplish hue of the sky, the two ebony-haired girls appeared as sisters.

And then, releasing her, Olga once again turned to the priest. "I apologize. When I told you the circumstances of Father Ixio's passing, I hid certain details from you. I will now tell you everything."

Her voice was resolute. Iscario accepted her declaration, waiting in silence for her to continue.

"During the storm, a house did collapse, and a piece of debris was about to crush someone. Father Ixio pushed that person out of the way, saving their life. And in the process, he took their place, and died under the rubble."

As we listened to her clear words, we put the pieces together ourselves, and the realization dawned on us before she could actually mouth the words. Nonetheless, she didn't spare us from the truth.

"That person was Rafflesia."

As she made her devastating confession, I faced away from her. And as I did, a single thought, arbitrary and entirely unbecoming for the scene at hand, nonetheless crossed my mind.

Why... aren't there any other graves here?



The four of us walked back on the dirt path crossing through the field. Olga had decided to stay behind. By now, the sky had already darkened significantly, though the tense silence between us dispersed any feeling of refreshment the moon might have given me.

Rafi walked along slowly, showing no sign of any particular emotion, even as the priest glared coldly down at her.

Finally, he asked her directly. "Why did you keep that hidden from us?"

"...I didn't," she said clearly, not gazing back. "You just didn't ask."

He smiled sardonically. "You didn't think that might have been an important detail?"

"No." Another clear reply, bereft of hesitation. "I don't know what you would consider important."

Looking at her nonchalant attitude, he sighed. "As it stands, it's impossible to know whether there's more that you aren't telling us. We need to properly communicate. Neglecting that was my failure."

As we left the field behind and neared the church grounds, father Iscario became determined to seriously question Rafi. I looked between the two, the back of my neck covered in cold sweat. I had to say something.

Eventually, just as we were about to circle the church, I spoke up, awkwardly loud in my delivery. "U-um! I have something to talk about with you, father!"

"Huh?" Bewildered, he turned to me. "Well, what's keeping you?"

"I..." Stealing a glance at Rosalia and Rafi, I replied weakly. "...Not here. Can we talk privately?"

"Hold on a second, what're you up to now—?" Rosalia snarled at me, but Iscario raised his palm to signal her to back off.

"Very well. I'll hear you out."

Father Iscario and I remained at the back of the church while the two girls moved on further on the path. The tall man looked down expectantly on me as he leaned his back against the stone wall.

"So, then, allow me to hear your confession," he said, gently urging me on with a smile.

“I, um—” Unsure of how to reveal this fact to him, I hesitated for a few moments, trying to gather my words. Finally, not wanting to test his patience, I just blurted out an apology. “Look, I’m sorry. I know I should’ve talked about this sooner, but I had no idea how to take it, and I just—”

“It’s fine. I won’t judge you. That’s not my role—not right now, at least. So just come out with it.”

“...Okay. The truth is, when I sucked Rafi’s blood, I saw something really alarming in her memories.”

“Oh?”

“It was... a woman. She...” As I felt the memory replay in my mind, as clear as if it were my own, I struggled to string together a sentence that could accurately describe its atrocity. “—They killed her.”

“What—?” He stood up straight, widening his eyes.

“They killed her, Father! They murdered her right in front of me—no, right in front of Rafi.” Left without any pretty words to dress that truth in, all I could do was spit it out, like I was coughing up something disgusting which just wouldn’t leave my mouth however much I tried.

“Slow down, Valakia. What did you see? Who committed the crime, and where?”

“I—I don’t know, it was a bunch of men I couldn’t recognize. Rafi was peeking through a door that was slightly ajar, so I couldn’t see much of anything in the room.”

“What does this mean...?” Iscario frowned, putting a hand to his chin—even he couldn’t remain cool in the face of such a revelation.

However, I wasn’t done—I gripped his sleeve and looked up at him. His eyes widened, waiting for me to continue, more out of stunned speechlessness than consideration. “I thought there must have been some kind of mistake when I saw her. I figured I must have misunderstood something. It’s a contradiction that’s just too strange for me to rationalize.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Father, the woman that was killed—

“Her face... She looked just like that Olga. Their faces were identical.”



Regrouping with the others, we walked together below the dark sky. The village lights now felt like they affirmed its life as, once again, plenty of villagers walked about or spoke to each other in the yards of their homes, laughing boisterously.

Iscario walked quickly, a gulf having formed between him and the rest of us trailing behind which none of us felt inclined to close. It was clear that he was deep in thought.

I took a look at Rosalia. She had been eyeing me suspiciously. Noticing my gaze, she spoke up.

“I don’t know what the hell you and Father Rozenkranz talked about, but just so you know, I really don’t appreciate having you sneaking around behind my back.”

“R-right... Sorry about that.”

“But...” she hesitated, overtaking me with her fast steps. “Well, for now I guess I’ll choose to trust in you—in your spineless character, that is.” With that performatively insulting line, and refusing to show me her expression, she walked on ahead, leaving Rafi and I behind. I couldn’t help but grin wryly.

And then, as I turned to look behind me, I saw Rafi, having momentarily stopped, looking out at the church in the distance. Without any lights burning in the building, its silhouette was just barely distinguishable against the darkness beyond, only slightly illuminated by the village next to it.

“I wonder if she’s still out there at that gravesite...” I idly mumbled. Rafi gave no reply. As I turned to face the transfixed girl, I felt compelled to ask her a question.

“Say, Rafi... Were you happy to see her?”

“Olga...?” she asked uncertainly. “...I see her every day.”

“Doesn’t change my question. Were you happy?”

Momentarily staying silent, she turned back to the church. Then, still facing it, she said, “...I was happy. But... maybe I was also a little bit sad. I wonder why.”

“If you feel sad, it must be because something sad happened.”

She never said another word. She just kept on watching the church, not with any intense desire to keep its details burned in her memory but as if simply anxious to let the sight disappear from view.



Once I reached the mayor's house, I split up from Rafi and went inside. Rosalia and Iscario had arrived there quicker, and it seemed that they'd secluded themselves in their respective rooms immediately. I wasn't all that tired, having just fed, on top of having woken up in the afternoon, but with nothing left to do I soon decided to go to bed myself.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed until my rude awakening, but it clearly hadn't been a full night's sleep. The reason I had gotten up so early was thanks to an unexpected intruder.

I had no idea how, but a giant black bird had snuck into my basement room and was cawing as loudly as it could. As I groggily looked up at it, I realized it was a cormorant—likely the very same one Rafi had christened before. In other words, Helga.

Seeing me get up, Helga thrust its chest at me insistently. Wrapped around its trunk was a pouch which held an envelope.

"A message...? ...Is this for me?"

The bird, naturally, just continued staring at me, producing no answer. I reached out my hand and took the black envelope out from the pouch wrapped around Helga. It bore the sigil of Heliocentrism on it.

Cautiously, I opened the envelope and read the letter within.

"Hello? I'm here, but..." Opening the creaky wooden door, I entered the dusty space that had become so familiar to me—the storage shed where the crime had been committed.

"Ahh, finally, there you are, Vio Valakia. Sorry for the roundabout summons." Iscario, standing on top of the crate opposite to the entrance, welcomed me with a pleased look, while Rosalia off to the side acknowledged me with the briefest glance before returning her gaze to the opposite wall.

"What's going on? If this is about the investigation, can't it just wait until daytime, when Rafi can join us?"

"Now, now, all in due time." He was plainly evading the question. Sending a dubious glance at him, I leaned against one of the crates along the wall.

"Tell me, Vio Valakia," he began with an impenetrable smile, "do you feel responsible for that girl only because you believe you've saved her life? Or

have you become attached to her simply because, right now, you have nothing left but her?”

“...Is that supposed to be a rhetorical question?”

“Not at all. Please, give me your answer.”

He had the eyes of a judge. Or maybe he just looked that way through the eyes of a sinner. “...It’s probably a bit of both.” I was going to wait for my sentence with as defiant a smile as I could muster. “It doesn’t take much to capture the heart of an old man like me. I suppose I’m just waiting to see her smile.”

“Hmph.” The priest nodded. “My thanks to you. That answer will be of reference.”

“Huh?”

He hopped off of his crate and approached me.

“I want to try a little practical experiment that I require your help for.”

“Oh, o-okay. If it’s for the case, sure.”

“Brilliant. Then, please, bring out your chiropteran friend, would you?”

“You need Morry? Well, alright...” Still uncertain of his intentions, I summoned Morry out of my body. He chirped happily at seeing me, until—

“Kiiii~”

Iscario grabbed him by the torso, provoking a terrified squeak. Not minding it in the slightest, he examined its wings and poked around at it. I was about to complain to him that he was being too rough, but as Morry was technically nothing more than a part of me, the awkwardness of such a request stopped me in my tracks.

“Very well.” Satisfied, he finally unhanded Morry, who immediately flew back behind me. “Sister Rosalia, prepare the scene.” Saying so, he grabbed a rope from on top of one of the crates and handed it over to Rosalia. Grumbling, the nun headed outside with it.

“Huh?” I sent a questioning look to the priest, but he ignored me. Moments later, I heard the roof of the shed creaking. Through the gaps in the wooden planks, I could see Rosalia crawling on top of it. She passed the rope through one of the larger gaps at the top of the roof, and tied a knot around the plank. Then, she dropped the rest of the rope into the shed.

Grabbing the free end, Iscario took out a certain object from within his coat and tied the rope around it.

“And with that, the stage is set.” He smiled with satisfaction at the contraption.

“Is that...?”

“Indeed it is.”

“...”

Rosalia soon came back into the shed. With all of us present, Iscario turned to me again.

“Now then, what I need is for your bat familiar to hold this up over to that side of the room.” He held up the end of the rope, and with it—the stake attached to it.

“...” I was a bit concerned about having Morry come that close to the stake, but I couldn’t refuse at this point.

“Morry, please.” The little bat squeaked hesitantly but approached the rope nonetheless, grabbing it with its legs and holding it up above the entrance.

“Now then, when I give the signal, I want it to let go of it.” He then eyed Rosalia, who grabbed a large sack from a corner of the room and, carrying it in front of her chest, moved to the spot where I’d found Rafi collapsed before.

After a brief moment of silence, Iscario, eyeing everyone in the room, clapped his hands. “Now, release!”

And once Morry let go of the rope, the stake swung in a wide arc, flying past me and traversing the entire length of the room and—stabbing directly into the sack in Rosalia’s arms.

“Aha!” Studying the weapon embedded into the bag, the priest whistled in satisfaction. “Perfect. Now then, could you have your vampire chew through that knot holding the rope up?”

“Well, I’ll have him try. Morry, can you do it?”

Squeaking in affirmation, the bat flew up and vigorously chewed through the rope. The rope didn’t appear to be made of particularly sturdy fabric, because a few minutes into his attack, the last thread was cut, and the rope fell unceremoniously to the ground in a bunch. Morry flew triumphantly back to me.

Putting his hands together, the priest applauded the display. “Wonderful! My eternal gratitude to you, it’s exactly what I needed to see. Ah, you can put away your bat now.”

For the moment, I acquiesced, inviting Morry into my arms. He energetically flew directly into my chest, going inside my shirt through the collar and then phasing inside my body, once again becoming a part of me.

However, I was still unsure of Iscario’s intentions. Of course, I could tell he was trying to demonstrate a trick used in the crime, but I didn’t see how this could be applied at all.

“Uhm, so, is this—”

“Don’t be in a hurry now. Let’s take it one step at a time. So, with that done...” Iscario put his hand to his chin and thought for a while, pacing

around the room. Rosalia took that as a sign to unceremoniously drop the bag to the ground, and go back to leaning against the wall.

“Right.” Coming to some kind of conclusion, Iscario took his seat once more on the crate at the back of the room, and set his gaze firmly on me. “Say, Vio Valakia...”

“...What?”

“Are you proud to have saved that girl?”

“Huh?”

“From our perspective, all you’ve done is spawn another accursed heretic into this world—but that’s surely not how you see it? You believe you’ve rescued an innocent girl from the jaws of tragic death, do you not?”

“I—”

“The sentiment, alone, I can praise. You may be a heretical wretch, but your intentions were pure. That may mean nothing to my faith, but it does to me.

“However,” he said, his face suddenly growing stern, “are you prepared to shoulder the burden of responsibility for the one whom you’ve saved?”

“Responsibility?”

“Salvation doesn’t come through one single act alone.” The priest stood up from the crate and began walking towards me. “Are you ready to see it through to the end? To truly save her? Or will you just satisfy yourself with the meager act of prolonging her life but a little?” Stepping right in front of me, peering down at my face, he continued. “Are you even capable of anything more than that, Vio Valakia? You can’t even imagine what it means for someone to depend on you, do you? You, who’s lived solely by consuming the goodwill and the blood of others?”

“I...” My mouth would open and then close again, but no other noise came out. I couldn’t muster any more of an answer than that.

Iscario kept peering down at me, his eyes stabbing into me. Frozen together like that, neither of us moved for a significant amount of time, significant insofar as every fraction of a second felt deeply painful. A few torturous moments later, however, Iscario released me with a smile.

“Be glad, for I will spare you from that burden shortly.”

“Huh?”

He walked back to the crate with light steps, and resumed his monologue from a totally different direction. I could barely follow along, and I had certainly failed to see what he was getting at.

“You’ve noticed how strange this village is, right?”

“W-well, yeah, somewhat.”

"I've been trying to put a finger on what the nature of this strangeness really is. I hadn't planned on giving it much thought, as I figured it had nothing to do with our case, but it just kept bugging me. Naturally so, considering it wound up being key to the whole affair."

"What do you mean?"

"Truth be told, this is slightly embarrassing for me to admit. It wounds my professional pride slightly," he said with a bashful laugh. "—That I'd failed to notice it for so long, I mean."

"..." Beads of sweat formed on my forehead.

"Well, let's address it in order, shall we?" He produced a black leather-bound notebook from within his coat, and opened it to a page around the middle. So he'd been taking notes the entire time?

"A small village like this, locked between a forest and a mountainous valley, not present on any known maps." He began pacing back and forth along the width of the shed, his profile in darkness, lit from the other side by the sole torch in the room. "Their trade with the outside world is at an absolute minimum—could they really provide for an entire population like this? Even if they could, it can't be a comfortable life. What reason would they have to remain isolated like this?"

Reaching the wall, he turned in the opposite direction.

"There is not a single medical expert of any kind in this village. Even if there is no doctor, I would have at least expected there to be an apothecary or something of the sort. But no, that's not the case. According to the mayor, 'it's not a village where a medicine man would want to reside'. Perhaps because there'd be no reason for one."

Once more, he turned around.

"The villagers are rarely seen around during the daylight. There are few residents to begin with, and Rhizantes Valpurga claimed that they're concerned with their own jobs. But even so—it's far too desolate. And yet, when the Sun goes down, exactly when you'd expect the village to be at its most desolate—the people strangely come out of their homes."

Once more, he turned around.

"The church has no protection against blasphemous creatures—the previous priest allegedly passed away a few years ago, but there's no sign that he ever got a formal education as a priest for the Heliocentric Church. And conveniently enough, he's absent."

Yet again, he turned around, and walked to the center of the room.

"But perhaps, most compelling of all—" Iscario said, pausing his pacing and turning to me, "—is you, Vio Valakia."

"Huh?"

He began walking again, this time slowly approaching me.

“This entire situation we find ourselves in rides on one lone miracle. Without it, I would not be talking to you like this, nor would you have any ears to hear me with. That miracle is you, a weak vampire far below the line of mediocrity, so powerless that he cannot even competently run away, let alone threaten us in any way, shape or form—could somehow manage turn a human into a vampire, a feat that not even those millenia-old bloodsuckers of infamy are steadily able to accomplish. What kind of odds would that require? What ridiculous turn of fate would that be? And most of all—what right have you, a heretic, to be granted a miracle? Once I began thinking that way, the conclusion was a foregone one.”

The priest stopped centimeters away, looking down on me with eyes obscured in shadow.

“S-so you’re saying that—” Feeling lightheaded, I held my head in my hands. *He has to be wrong. It doesn’t make any sense like this!*

“Yes. You didn’t turn *Rafflesia Valpurga* into a vampire, because *she already was a vampire to begin with*. Because this entire rotten village—” he said, his voice as even as ever, just calm enough to obscure the venom seeping in, “—is nothing more than a nest of bloodsuckers.”

“That’s not true!” I stood up, ready to push the man away from me, but the piercing glare of Rosalia stabbing into me from behind him sat me back down. “That... That doesn’t make any sense...!”

“Why use the Sealing Sacrament as a weapon if the victim was a mere human? It had stood out to me, but I hadn’t given it much thought. I figured the culprit had just arbitrarily chosen it because it fit their purposes. But that doesn’t make much sense, does it? The late Number X’s belongings were kept in the mayor’s home. In other words, the sacrament must have been kept there as well. Even with their lax security measures, the culprit would have had to steal it, which would be an added risk they wouldn’t take for no reason, not when the hunters’ storehouse is left unlocked and plainly accessible to anyone.

“But if we consider the victim to be a vampire and not a human, suddenly it makes a lot more sense. I suppose strictly speaking this was never a murder, but as long as *Rafflesia Valpurga* had that stake stabbed into her, she would be rendered immobile.”

“Wait, wait, wait—” No, I still couldn’t accept it. “How do you explain the villagers that died? The priest, or the mayor’s family, or—”

“You sure are quick to take their word, aren’t you? Well, you are one of them, so it only stands to figure. But I’m not so naive. They could very well have been lying to make themselves seem more human. Even if you want to

take them at their word, it could very well be that they were just caught by a hunter upon exiting the village. For a vampire, that might as well be death.”

The graveyard with only one grave flashed through my mind once more.

“Okay, well, you mentioned the church earlier. Why would a vampire village even have a church, priest or not?”

“Camouflage, maybe?” he replied, undeterred. “It would be suspicious to find a village without a church, considering that almost all rural populations are dominantly believers—Well, that’s a suitable explanation, but the majority of villagers we’ve encountered seem to be deeply pious, and on that front I don’t doubt them. Tell me, have you heard of the Ecliptic Church?”

They’d made the news a few years ago. A cult of people who worshipped vampires as divine beings. Their leader, a weak vampire, held absolute control over them, and used them not only to escape extermination, but also to satisfy his every desire. He was eventually captured by the Heliocentric Church, and the human followers are still being monitored.

“Cults can be formed around anything. Humans worshipping vampires was certainly a strange sight to behold, but the believers weren’t just human. Some vampires had taken part as well, and by all accounts it wasn’t just manipulation—they truly believed the doctrine. Of course, I don’t doubt that it was easy to buy into a faith that held them up as deities, but the argument stands: vampires are just as capable of religious beliefs as humans. And that’s what I believe is happening here. A true perversion of our doctrine, only Heliocentric by name, one that heretics can use to mollify their wretched guilt at existing.”

He spoke with disdain at the very idea. He was clearly convinced of the truth of his claims, but I couldn’t give in.

“T-then, if they’re vampires, why all the hunting and the farming? They wouldn’t need to eat to begin with!”

“Oh? You don’t *need* to eat either, yet I saw you chowing down happily on Sapria Valpurga’s food all the same. Why do you assume they wouldn’t want to eat just because they don’t have to? You seem to think a village of vampires would be quite an alien bunch. You could stand to have a little more empathy for your fellow kind.”

“Then!” I still couldn’t back down here. “A village of vampires wouldn’t have any old people in it, would it? How do you explain that?”

“A vampire can look old if they really want to, you know? But you’re right, it wouldn’t be very logical to go out of one’s way to look elderly, even if it was for the sake of appearances.

“—However, I’ve only ever seen people up to their middle age here, you know? When we went to question every single household in the village, I

didn't catch a single person that looked over fifty. Did you?" As he gave me a moment to reply, I could only return silence. "They couldn't *all* be bedridden, could they?"

"Wait, you're wrong!" Remembering something I could grasp onto, I yelled excitedly. "What about the first villager we met after Rafi, huh? Old man Bolo! There's your counterexample!"

Iscario smiled amusedly, like I'd just danced impeccably within the palm of his hand. "You're right, that Bolo Bolobo certainly acted like an old man. His voice sounded like one too. And everyone called him an old man."

"So—"

"But—you don't *really* know that he's an old man, do you? After all, you've never seen his face."

"Ah!"

His smile widened. "His face was almost entirely hidden by bandages. I don't know about you, but I couldn't clearly spot a single wrinkle between them. So? Can you confidently say he's an old man?"

"..." There was no point in budging any further. The seed of doubt had sprouted inside me, and he could tell.

"So? May I continue my explanation?"

"No, wait, I—" I still couldn't just give in. "Whose blood are they sucking then? I'd definitely go crazy if I didn't regularly get blood! You're not gonna tell me they kidnap random travelers and eat them, are you?"

"Why would they? There's a much simpler way—they're just sucking each other's blood."

"—Huh?"

"You ought to get it. You've done it yourself too, now, after all—I don't suppose you could give me a taste comparison, could you?"

"B-but...?"

"You've never met another vampire in your life, Vio Valakia. I suppose it stands to reason that you're ignorant. But why assume that a vampire couldn't just suck another vampire's blood?"

"But then why...?"

"Why drink human blood? I couldn't say. Some have claimed they can feel the difference, and don't like vampire blood. Maybe it's for the same reason you and I don't eat dragon meat all the time—pure convenience.

"And come to think of it now, it was the very memories you extracted from the blood of a vampire that gave me the final push I needed to accept this theory."

I understood which scene he meant—any time I was reminded of it, it bubbled up to the surface like boiling blood from a hemorrhaging wound.

“Rafflesia Valpurga saw with her own eyes a woman that looked just like Olga Eulogia being killed—and yet, with our own eyes we can see Olga Eulogia alive and well. She might be able to lie, but her memories cannot. And so we have to take it as truth. And there’s only one way in which a woman coming back to life like that could be true—within this world now empty of Magic, the only way to revive from a wound that serious without a priceless artifact would be for her to be a vampire.”

“...” Even though it overturned all my preconceptions about this incident, the explanation seemed to fit. But no matter how much my mind seemed to agree, a deeper, core conception within me rejected the claim. I didn’t even want to hear his voice anymore. *Is it just my pride? Had I just wanted to believe that I saved that girl?*

“Now then,” seeing me fail to protest any further, Iscario, stealing a glance at his notebook, swiftly moved along in his itinerary. “With the setting out of the way, let us focus on the particulars. As for how this crime was committed—well, not that it can really be called a crime anymore—my earlier demonstration should suffice. I trust you can connect the dots yourself, but if not, I’ll go over it again.

“In preparation, the culprit tied the Sealing Sacrament to one end of the rope, and the other to the ceiling of the shed, through the gaps in the wooden planks. It must have been difficult to secure the Sacrament in place, considering he couldn’t touch it himself, but with a deft hand it’s feasible.

“Then, leaving the shed himself, he left his bat familiar in place to hold up the rope end with the weapon. Like that, he could create an alibi for himself and remove suspicion. And then when the victim walked in, locking the door behind her and then walking to her family’s crate, the bat released the rope and commenced the attack.

“I suspect the culprit didn’t actually expect the victim to lock the door behind her, as that only complicated his plans. He must not have realized the door was locked, for if he had he would have had the bat unlock it for him, since I presume he wanted to retrieve the inert body later.

“Either way, after that, he had the bat chew through the rope on both ends, undoing the knots, and then dragged the rope through the same hole that your bat used to enter into the shed to begin with. With that done, all traces of the trick were gone, and it appeared as if someone had merely gone in and stabbed Rafflesia Valpurga directly.”

“...Would the momentum of the swinging rope really have been enough for a deadly wound like that?”

“I imagine the wound would’ve been quite shallow. If the victim was a human, it might not have been enough to kill them. But that doesn’t matter

for a vampire. The culprit didn't care what kind of wound it was, after all, he just wanted the Sealing Sacrament stabbed into her."

"But he couldn't guarantee that it would stab her in the heart that way!"

"True, it wouldn't have been a thorough elimination. But I trust you're aware of the properties of the Sealing Sacrament?"

"..."

"For an average vampire, even being stabbed somewhere other than the heart would lead to paralysis, albeit only of the body—the mind would still be fully conscious. And that was all the culprit needed, to paralyze her. She wouldn't be dead either way, so what difference would it make for him?"

He had seemingly thought of everything.

"Is that all? Well then, that's my explanation over and done with. Shall we leave this dreary place once and for all?"

"W-wait!"

"Huh? What now? Have you come up with some other point of doubt? I'll happily clear it up for you."

"No, it's not that, but... what about the culprit? Who did this anyway, and why? You didn't mention any reason why someone would have wanted to kill—to harm Rafi. Why would someone have it out for a young girl like her?"

"Again, you sure take everything at face value, Vio Valakia. She may look like a young girl, but she could very well be older than you.

"But hm... Motive, huh—well, who knows? Could have been anything." Iscario lightly shrugged his shoulders.

"What!? That's not an answer!" I yelled at him with all I had, halfway taking out my frustration on him. "How can you say you solved anything like—"

"You seem to be misunderstanding something." His stern voice cut me off. "I've made a promise to you to solve one innocent girl's cruel murder, so that we may lay her to rest for good. What I didn't promise to do was speculate on the intentions of a pack of angry vampires. That doesn't concern me in the slightest. Their destination is annihilation at our hands—until that moment, they can stab one another all they want."

"—" His cold words were dripping with venom. It wasn't like I had ever doubted his allegiance, but it was only at that moment that I could truly feel hatred emanating from him. I couldn't take my eyes away from it.

".....Stop glaring at me like that, would you? What I'm saying is perfectly true, you know? I'm only adhering to the terms of our agreement. But—ah, well, I suppose a slight bit of speculation couldn't hurt. Let's call it satisfying our intellectual curiosity."

“Huh?” He had given in incredibly easily. His visage instantly returned to his mild-mannered gentle persona too. What was he thinking?

“Let’s see. If I had to take a guess, I’d say the motive has everything to do with the story we heard about the demise of our poor comrade.”

“Ah! That’s right!” Somehow the contradiction had slipped my mind. “If Rafi is a vampire, then why would that hunter give his life to save her? It makes no sense!”

“It’s unseemly to grab onto every bone thrown at you like that, you know?” He commented, raising his eyebrow at me. *It might be pathetic, but I’ll take whatever I can get, damn it!* “But regardless, don’t just take the story at face value again. See, just like a religious text requires interpretation, sometimes you have to look at a level below the literal to arrive at the truth. So let’s interpret this tall tale a little bit, shall we?”

“When you get down to it, the core of the story is such: because of Rafflesia Valpurga’s incompetence and inattentiveness, Number X lost his life. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I would *not* agree with that victim-blaming phrasing, but I suppose someone could put it that way if they really wanted to,” I said, my disdainful look not affecting him in the least.

“So then, let’s take that core and apply it to the new facts we’ve uncovered. What results from that might go a little like this:

“Number X arrives in the village, which for our vampire fellows is quite a conundrum. However, as long as they don’t give away their nature to him, they might yet skirt away unnoticed until he leaves. That must have been their hope, and yet—during some interaction with Rafflesia Valpurga, she must have given away that she’s a vampire. With no choice left, she killed him. That might have extinguished the danger momentarily, but a hunter dying here would probably be discovered eventually, and when it is, the probability of them being found out and exterminated would rise considerably.

“The town becomes full of anxiety after that. Everyone awaits the day when someone will finally come for them. And amidst that tense situation, someone develops a grudge against the one who put them in that circumstance to begin with. Perhaps their goal is to knock her out and sell her to the church in order to save themselves—a foolish notion, but I’ve seen such bargaining attempts before. Either way, that’s one possible explanation.”

“That’s it? The culprit is just ‘someone’? And you have no proof to ground that story at all.” I said, though my protests lacked any vitality at this point.

“Certainly, it is just speculation. But as a preliminary motive, it should suffice. If you’re really unsatisfied, I could always get the truth out of the culprit one way or another and inform you later.”

“...” I bit my lip in frustration. *Is this really it...?*

“Very well! With that out of the way, let us go?”

“Go? ...Go where?”

“Back to the village, naturally.” Iscario smiled widely. “Let us test our theory.”



On the way back to the village, I had to force my trembling legs to keep up with the briskly walking priest and the nun beside him.

“U-um, how exactly are you planning to prove your hypothesis?”

“Hypothesis, huh? Well, perhaps I should give the first person we meet a papercut and see what happens,” he said in a light tone. “—Or perhaps a little more than a papercut.”

“—” Since he walked ahead of me, I couldn’t see Iscario’s face. I didn’t have the courage to ask whether he was being serious or not.

Left without any other words to say, I continued my walk up to the gallows, or at least what felt like it. I didn’t know how long we’d spent in that shed, but the sky had already begun to slowly but surely lighten up.

We soon passed the forest, and a few minutes later we were on the cusp of reaching the clustered houses. I desperately wanted to slow down, to have some time to think, yet my feet raced to catch up to the priest nonetheless—I was mercilessly dragged forward like some mutt on a leash.

“Hm?”

And while my mind raced hopelessly, the priest registered the familiar figure walking ahead of us. One who’d been on all of our minds thanks to the earlier discussion.

Swaying on unsteady steps was old man Bolo Bolobo, or at least the individual masquerading as such. His bandaged, mummy-like figure was unmistakable.

“...” I narrowed my eyes, observing him from behind. No matter what, I couldn’t see him as anything other than a withered elder. Could he really just be putting on an act *that* convincing? I looked up at Iscario, finding his eyes full of similar scrutiny.

Without any regard for our suspicion though, the man simply went on tottering forward, muttering some indecipherable words that probably only held meaning for himself alone.

Having seemingly decided on something, Iscario quickened his pace, intending to approach the old man. Seeing that, I too followed suit, trying to catch up.

However, before that could happen—

“Hey, Father Rosenkranz! Good to see you today!”

A deep, booming voice stopped us in our tracks. It was one we knew well—Rhizanthès Valpurga.

“...Good morning to you all. And good work today too,” he said with a practiced smile, not showing any signs of frustration.

Slightly behind us, four hunters struggled to carry a large wooden cage. And within that cage—a great boar sat, showing no signs of movement or life, a great many arrows stuck into its back. Today’s catch, it seemed.

Setting the cage down momentarily, the four men walked up to the priest and bowed.

“Please, you needn’t,” the priest said, urging them to raise their heads. “Anyhow, you’re working awfully early today.”

“This big lug fell into a pit-trap. You wouldn’t believe how lucky that is!” Rhizanthès happily explained. “I got the boys to come early so we could carry the thing out. We’ll have to leave it to the butcher.”

“I’m glad to see that fortune has been smiling upon you,” Iscario said. “Oh, right, thank you for letting us borrow the rope. Sister Rosalia, you may return it now.”

“No problem!” Rhizanthès said, slinging it over his shoulder. “Hope you got some use out of it”

“Oh, we most certainly did.” The priest’s gentle and friendly countenance never betrayed a hint of ominous intent. “Well, gentlemen, I don’t want to keep you from your work. I’ll be on my way now, but—could I perhaps ask you for one final request?”

“—Huh?” Rhizanthès, who had been on the verge of turning back, suddenly looked at the priest again. “Well, as long as it’s something I can do, of course.”

“It’s not a difficult task at all,” Iscario said, before taking something out of his coat—the Sealing Sacrament. I almost fell backwards in shock, but he continued calmly. “You’ll be passing by the mayor’s house, right? I’d be grateful if you could just leave this at his doorstep for me.”

“That’s...” Rhizanthès look in surprise.

“Yes, I’ve shown it to you before. It’s a tool used by those in charge of executing the church’s holy decree, but—well, it’s not so important. I was thinking of gifting this to the village, as thanks for all of the hospitality you’ve shown us.”

“Oh, father, you don’t have to do that! We’re honored to just have you here at all!” Rhizanthos argued back.

“Please, I insist,” he continued cheerfully. “I do so want you to have something to remember us by.”

“Well, if you’re so set on it, I guess I can’t refuse.” Saying so, and with a bashful smile on his face, Rhizanthos stretched his hand out.

However, it would never end up grasping the silver stake.

So absorbed into the current conversation, none of us had noticed *it*. Not any of the hunters, nor Rosalia and I, who watched the men’s exchange of hands with bated breath. We didn’t pay any attention to the cage, left on the ground, with the slumbering beast within it.

Even having been pierced by six arrows, even as it appeared to lay there lifeless—the boar had not yet died. It had clung on to life. And as we spoke, it mustered up the last dregs of power left within it.

And so we’d only noticed it once it was too late.

Crash!

It effortlessly smashed through the wooden cage and burst out of it like a cannonball. As we all froze in awe, it ran directly forward, fueled only by its instinct to demolish everything that stood in its way. It was misfortune alone that placed the slow, tottering old man Bolo directly in its path.

“Wait, sto—!” I finally gained control of my body again, and desperately tried to call out, but it was in vain.

Crash!

Yet another crashing sound, accompanied by the subtle yet infinitely disturbing sound of bones crumbling, and the old man was sent flying into the air, blown an incredible distance away.

Wasting no time to celebrate his accomplishment, the boar, perhaps finally sensing where its true home was, turned backwards, now running towards the forest, intent on demolishing all of us for the sake of getting to its destination. Foremost in that line of obstacles was none other than Father Iscario, rooted to the spot.

But just as it seemed that the priest would become its next victim, he, with movements so instantaneous they seemed to defy the limits of human dexterity, sidestepped the attack, his coat fluttering behind him.

However, he wasn't merely dodging. His hands outstretched, Iscario ran his fingers over the boar's neck and back in a seemingly gentle gesture, like he was merely petting the animal's fur.

In response though, the boar's legs stopped their movement completely. Its roars, too, gave way to silence, and though its advance continued for another few feet, fueled entirely by inertia, the animal eventually rolled over into place, arriving just centimeters in front of me.

I'd been so captured by the spectacle that I forgot myself, but catching the tips of my shoes within my line of sight as I observed the boar, I finally got back to my senses.

I didn't have to check again to instinctively realize that the boar was finally and fully dead, so instead I darted my eyes around the area, finally seeing the collapsed old man, lying face up in the dirt close to the entrance of someone's home.

The heap of bandages and tattered clothes was now faintly tinged in red and giving off an iron smell. He seemed to have been punctured by the boar's tusks before being thrown away, so his wounds weren't just internal but external too. Moreover, the force had slightly unfurled the bandage over his head, so that portions of his face were now visible.

And the face beneath—not that of a monster or pretender, but just an old man, his wrinkled skin marred by burn marks.

“_”

I felt another foolish impetus rising within me. The old man would surely die. A lonely pathetic death in a heap of rags. What kind of life was that, if it ended up this way?

Maybe the man had had something else in his life at some point, but now it was gone. All he had was mind and his memories, and he was losing even those, too. But at least he had his damned fields and his damned rags and his life! But now he'd be losing even that, and that'd be the end of his story. What the hell kind of meaning was there to this?

My rooted feet suddenly felt light. I was ready. I kicked the dirt, prepared to run to the old man, prepared to summon another miracle no matter what it took—but a forceful hand put on my shoulder pinned me in place, sealing all of that initiative away.

“Huh—”

“It's a terribly sad occasion when any human life is lost. A tragedy, that the miracle of life could be swept away so easily. Don't you think so?”

“_”

“It’s unavoidable, and irreversible. When the reaper comes knocking at the door, there’s nothing you can do to delay the appointment. You could even call it cruel.”

“_”

“But I think it’d do us people well, as we watch this terrible spectacle unfold, to remember that our lives are not our own. We are not the ones that summoned ourselves within this world. We live on at the behest and invitation of the greater forces that allowed us here. The Sun, and this beautiful natural world we live off of.”

“_”

“And so, when time runs out, when it’s time to pay our dues, rather than decrying the cruelty of it all, I think we ought to be grateful. Grateful that we’ve lived at all, that we’ve been able to experience so much of this world. When death comes, we should face it with an accepting smile on our faces. Don’t you think so, Vio Valakia?”

“_”

“Hey, don’t you think so? You think so too, don’t you? Speak up, let me hear it, Vio Valakia. You agree, do you not? You weren’t about to sully life itself right in front of me, were you? You weren’t about to perform yet another heretical travesty upon that poor man, turn him into an undying wraith cursed to degrade this world for the rest of time, were you? That was just my own silly preconception, a needless worry, was it not? Tell me.”

“_”

I couldn’t move an inch. I couldn’t even breathe. His firm hand on my shoulder felt like it was squeezing my heart in place, like any untoward movement would make him decimate me, flay and skin me and leave me a purposeless waste rotting in the sun.

“Hey, Vio Valakia. Look. Look at that man whose existence you were about to belittle and shame. Look well.”

Fear gripping me, sending warning signals to every inch of my body, I used all my strength to force my eyeballs into motion. And so I could see, as he bled out on the ground, the dry and cracked lips of the man forming raspy murmurs, so aimless like the wind merely passed through his vocal chords, yet somehow tinged with some intention from somewhere deep within him, the last standing core of his mind.

“W-was I... we... un... unworthy of you... after all?”



As he looked up at the dark sky, his final murmurs felt like pleading. For a time, the world stood still, only his pained, choked breathing signaling the advance of time.

Slowly, though, something changed.

The early morning had arrived. The Sun, yet timid and not showering us with its vast brilliance, nonetheless graced the world with a few white rays, all that horrible light.

And as the light touched the dying old man's face, his lips curved upwards. He closed his eyes, for even through his eyelids he could feel the kind warmth of the Sun.

"T-thank... you..."

And just like that, he'd paid his dues. Even so, in his final moments the man looked like he'd been the one rewarded far beyond measure.

◆ Record VI ◆

Carmilla's Smile

「Smoke of Soul,
Smoking Soul」



The following evening.

Every one of the villagers had gathered in the open space at the center of town. They had congregated to honor the death of old man Bolo. The church was down the road, in view of the square. In place of the would-be town priest, Iscario had conducted a sermon for the sake of the deceased there, and after that, his body was carried here.

The body would be reunited with all of his worldly belongings, which didn't amount to much. The useful possessions: clothes that could still be worn, tools that hadn't rusted away yet, they would be shared among the villagers. Everything else: torn clothing that hadn't been thrown away, left-over toys made of reeds tied together, as well as the bandages that had hidden his face, which had been blackened due to the grime, they would all be burned to ash.

According to Mayor Horheldorfel, the significance of the practice was to shed all of his earthly possessions, and send the energy imbued into them up into the sky in the form of smoke, where it could be reunited with the old man's soul.

After that, the body was to be entrusted to the hunters. They would carry it into the forest, where the wild animals could feed on it: in the same way that they'd subsisted on nature, now they would give back to it with the death of their own.

It was a funerary ceremony I had never encountered before. The canonical ritual for the main branch of Heliocentrism was burial, so it was unusual to see such a practice in this country. But every group, every

individual had a different way of dealing with death, of rationalizing it. None of us were about to object to their traditions. Not in this circumstance.

“...”

I kept my head down low. Both to avoid the setting Sun's rays, as well as anyone else's line of sight. Most of all, I didn't want to look at the smoldering pile in front of me, the light of what used to be a human being's life warming my face to an unbearable degree, beads of uncomfortable sweat rolling down my forehead.

My mind flashed to the conversation I'd had with the priest the previous day.



“So is that enough proof for you?” I hollered at Iscario in a nook hidden away from the villagers busily cleaning up after the boar's rampage. “Or are you going to claim that he was the only human and everyone else is still a monster?”

“...” He returned my glare with a stony expression, and after a pause of hesitation, “...No, I won't. I acquiesce. I was wrong. Call it an occupational disease. I guess I just wound up thinking along the same lines I usually do.”

“Is that all you have to say?” I yelled, taking a step forward. However—

“What else d'you want from him, huh?” A rebuttal came from an unexpected source: Rosalia, who'd been entirely silent up to that point. “Want a personal apology? Maybe you want one written by the Grand Cardinal himself? We're here to solve a crime, and we won't get anywhere if you blow up at every misfired accusation! He's done a whole hell of a lot better than you, at least, in that he at least came up with *something*!”

“Please.” Iscario raised a hand to stop her irritated offensive. “We'll get nowhere bickering. Now,” he said as he turned back to me, “if an apology is what you want, then I'll gladly give you one. But what's more important is what we do from here on. I will admit fault—I let my suspicions get the better of me. I believe I was the one who said that hurrying too much would only lead to mistaken conclusions. I failed to take my own advice. It was a shameful display.

“However, know that we don't have infinite time. I may be dedicated to honoring my promise, but I alone don't get to decide your fate by myself. If I

let a vampire run free for too long, I will be the one getting penalized. I want you to keep that in mind, Vio Valakia.”

“...” The priest's level-headed warning poured cool water over my flaring anger. I had no way to fire back. This couldn't go on forever—it would have to end soon. The only question left was—who? Who would be the one to end it?



Words of appreciation rang out from an all-too-familiar stranger's voice next to me. Words of appreciation for an old man's life work, his contribution to the village. I heard none for the man himself—I doubted there was anyone left who could mouth them.

I looked down to the ground, even lower than before. I no longer had the luxury of choice—not that I'd ever had it to begin with. I needed to reveal the truth behind this case, and bring the perpetrator to justice.

But would anyone really be saved if I did? Would that girl be able to smile and accept her fate?

“—Tch.” I clicked my tongue, silently so that no one would hear me.

Accept her fate? What fate is that anyway? Who has the right to proclaim that she's already a ghost on two feet? She's still alive!

I balled my hands, gritting my teeth together as I focused on the tips of my shoes, faintly lit yellow by the fire. I was so tense that I failed to notice even as that pale light was snuffed out by a small shadow.

It wasn't until a cold hand mercifully shielded my cheek from the fire's warmth that I raised my face to see its owner—Rafi, looking at me with a tinge of inquisitiveness on her otherwise expressionless face. She must have been worried about me. It only occurred to me then that I hadn't seen her in a while. And it only occurred to me then that she must have had worries of her own, that it wasn't just me selflessly carrying her burdens upon my shoulders. And the realization of my arrogant frame of mind brought a murmured apology tumbling out of my mouth.

“...I'm... sorry.” There must have been a lot I ought to have said to her, but in that moment that was all I could come up with.

“Vio, right? You should smile at an occasion like this.” It was then that I noticed the young woman next to Rafi—Olga Eulogia, wearing a gentle smile

on her face. Seeing her here brought me out of my reverie, and back into the present.

“...I don’t see why this occasion is anything to smile about.”

“This occasion is precisely when you should be smiling. I’m sure it would hurt grandpa Bolo to be seen off by morose faces. That’s why we’re all smiling for his sake.”

“Is that so?” For the first time, I looked up, above Olga’s face and into the smoke rising far into the sky.

It felt like my life had revolved around funerals lately. I wondered if Tina, and Vince before her, would have been sad that I hadn’t been able to wear a smile for them, at the end. And then I thought about how simpler my life would have been, if I’d been the kind of person capable of entertaining a question like that.

The old man won’t get to see any of those smiles. I stopped myself from mouthing the horrible comment on the tip of my tongue, and looked down again.

As the fire died down, the villagers began spreading into groups and talking amongst themselves. As everyone shuffled around me and pushed me around, I somehow found myself next to Sapria Valpurga.

“Oh, g-good evening,” I said. It just then occurred to me that it had technically been her husband’s error that had led to the old man’s death. After we exchanged pleasantries, I felt the need to reassure her. “Um, listen, it was kind of our fault as well for distracting them during their work, so if anyone says anything, we’ll definitely back Mr. Rhizanthos up, okay?”

“Huh?” She seemed confused at my reassurance. “Whatever for?”

“Oh, well, I just thought that your husband might be blamed for what happened...” I said discreetly.

“Ahh. You don’t need to worry about that. We would never consider it his fault.” She smiled at me. “It’s sad and useless to blame someone for a tragedy like this. All we can do is live on and get through it.”

“You must all be very kind people, then,” I said, looking down. As I thought back to the man sprawled out in bloody rags, I couldn’t help but feel guilt over it. Guilt that I couldn’t save him.

“I’d be glad if you thought so, but I don’t think it’s a matter of kindness,” Sapria went on, still smiling. “The world has its own rhythm, its own principles far grander than we could ever understand. Whatever befalls us, it all must fit within that rhythm, even if we can’t understand it. So it’s better to just accept it.”

"So you think everything happens for a reason..." I couldn't help but scowl as I thought back to that scene. And then to the scene before it, of Rafi with that stake stuck in her back. *What possible reason could justify those pathetic sights?*

"We can't do anything but accept it," she said, looking up, "but you all are different."

"Huh?"

"The holy men and women are the ones that actually decide. I mean, if Father Iscario hadn't stopped that boar, we would have been helpless. Perhaps more people would have perished in its rampage. Thank you, thank you so much."

"H-hold on, I'm not—" I tried to argue back, but as I looked into her eyes, I couldn't say a word. The smoldering, almost extinguished fire looked reflected in her eyes like a powerful inferno. I had no idea what I should have said to her.

"Hey, it's you!" Suddenly, a voice called out to us from behind me. Turning away from Sapira, I saw none other than Rhizanthès Valpurga, walking casually towards us. "Thanks for keeping my wife company."

"N-no problem..." I mumbled a weak reply as I looked at him. He had that same cheerful smile on his face as ever.

As he settled next to the fire and gazed peacefully at it, putting his arm around his wife's back, he muttered gently. "Man, real shame about poor Bolo."

"..." I didn't say anything.

"You know, I can't believe he went out like that. I could've seen that wily old man tilling his soil for another ten years," he continued.

"..." I stayed silent.

"You really never know who the world will take away next..."

"...Please, excuse me." Saying so, I walked away from the Valpurga couple, swaying on unsteady legs but not waiting for a reply.



"You never did smile in the end, did you?" Olga asked me, her face a gentle mask.

After the burning ended, the villagers went their separate ways, Rhizanthès and the other hunters setting off for the forest with the body in

tow. Rafi had disappeared somewhere. I aimlessly started walking in some random direction, but unexpectedly, Olga followed behind me.

I turned my head back to her, still walking. "...Neither did you."

"..." She looked taken aback for a moment.

"Your mouth might have been smiling," I added, "but it didn't reach your eyes."

The fake smile vanishing from her face, she studied me closely. Then finally, she lightly chuckled. "So you noticed. I guess I should try harder."

"You're right. I tried to smile for grandpa Bolo, but I just couldn't manage it." She looked up at the sky. "I can't find anything to smile about. Not at a time like this."

"...I'm glad," I said, finally managing a pained grin of my own, "that there's at least one person I can understand in this village."

"You shouldn't say that. It wasn't just us, you know?" Olga pointed out with kind eyes. "Rafflesia wasn't smiling either."

"She..." Her words brought me to a halt. "She never smiles."

"That's right."

"I wanted to be someone who could understand what's going on under the surface with her. I wanted to be someone she could open up to. But I've not been able to manage a thing. I've not broken through to her at all. I just—I just don't know what she's thinking."

"Then ask her."

"Huh?" I looked up at Olga's face. She put a hand on my shoulder.

"Just ask her, if you want to know what she's thinking. It might be hard to understand her, but if you ask, I'm sure she'll express it to the best of her ability. Just so you know, I can tell she's grown quite attached to you."

"I..."

"Or is it..." Olga continued, looking deep into my eyes, "that you're afraid of knowing?"

"...!" She'd seen right through me. "Ha...haha. Wow, I really am a predictable coward, aren't I?"

I couldn't look away anymore, when someone brought it up to my face so directly.

"Thank you, Miss Olga. I'll go look for her."

I turned away from her, getting ready to run all over the village in search of that expressionless girl. Before I could do so, though, "Hey!" Olga called out to me one last time.

"Huh?" I turned my head to her.

"...Father Ixio was quite similar to you. He acted all stoic, but beneath that he was always awkwardly searching for ways to get closer to others. I just wanted you to know that."

"...I see." I thought about that man I'd never gotten to meet, the one who'd saved Rafi's life at the cost of his own. He would have probably hated me. I smiled at the thought. "Thank you. Goodbye, Miss Olga."



I ran all over the village. People shot me dubious looks as I turned every possible corner I could, but I didn't mind.

Finally, as I traversed the path leading to the north exit of the village, a desolate road with nobody on it, I saw a dark shape beneath the setting sun: Rafi crouching on the ground, looking up at the windmill spinning in the distance.

When I saw her, I slowed my approach. She must have heard my footsteps, but she only turned to me once I'd gotten sufficiently close to her. She eyed me from below with the same expressionless face as ever.

I gave her a smile, leaning down to meet her at eye-level. "Hey, you're exhausted, aren't you?"

"..."

"You haven't fed since becoming a vampire. The hunger might not have settled in yet, but you're not at full strength, are you?"

"..."

"I'll... I'll give you my blood. It's my responsibility, since I turned you into this. I won't let Rosalia or Father Iscario shoulder the burden."

"...When," Rafi finally began, "you bit into me... I wasn't awake, but—"

I listened intently, not interrupting her.

"—I saw things too. It wasn't just you."

"You mean you also saw some of my memories?"

She nodded slightly.

A few moments of silence later, I asked her. "...Are you afraid? Of seeing them again?"

"I... don't know." She looked down. She was being honest with me. She truly didn't understand how she felt. I believed that.

“Well, I can understand being afraid. I’ve had to do this my whole life, but it must be a terribly confusing experience for you. I can’t do much about that.

“But at the very least, I can promise you you’re not going to see anything too bad. When I weigh it against the last few days, I come to realize I’ve had it exceptionally easy.”

“...” She just looked down at the ground, avoiding my line of sight. *I guess my reassurances aren’t all that effective.* I looked away, awkwardly rubbing the back of my head, but then—

“...Okay.” Rafi stood up, taking a step forward and coming closer to me.

“A-are you sure you’re fine with this?”

Rafi gave me a resolute nod, finally looking into my eyes. In response, I steeled my own expression.

I kneeled down on the ground, Rafi following suit. I took my jacket off, and rolled my sleeve up to the elbow. The white flesh of my right forearm exposed, I presented it to her, palm out such that she could see my arteries.

I nodded to her once more, and receiving that signal, with slow and uncertain movements, she got closer to it. I could feel her breath on my skin. And then, finally reaching it, she opened her mouth, fangs glistening in the twilight, and, with as much determination as she could muster—bit down.

I was hit with a slight pain, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle. I’d been the one biting into others up until now, so finally being able to know what it is they felt during those times was a reward that far outclassed the hurt.

I could feel the blood leaving my body, slowly but surely. Having fed just recently, I would regenerate the lost blood almost instantly. Even so, there was a slight dizziness that came with the experience, even as Rafi refrained from taking too much.

I kept my arm steady so as not to disturb her. I tried to keep my expression steady as well, though I doubted she’d be able to see it at that moment. After all—

Right now, Rafi is seeing inside my soul.

I was very literally sharing my life with her, giving her access to the most pure form of experience, memory unblemished by forgetfulness, the exact instant of perception as it had occurred for me. I couldn’t know what it was she saw, but I was ready to give her anything.

Finally, having gotten her fill, Rafi removed her face from my arm, her bangs hiding her eyes from me. Blood dripped from the sides of her mouth.

My wound healed almost instantly. I took out a handkerchief to wipe the remaining blood on my arm, and then moved it closer to her face in an attempt to wipe it as well, but then—

“...!” I noticed it, from the corners of her eyes.

Tears.

She was silently crying, the tears pouring down her face, eventually reaching her mouth and mixing with the blood. Her lips trembled as her eyes stared unfocused somewhere beyond me, beyond time.

I grabbed her shoulders. “Hey, what’s wrong? Why are you...?”

“—I don’t know,” she sobbed. “Why do I... feel like this?”

“—” I didn’t say anything else. I just wrapped my arms around her, burying her face into my chest. I didn’t need to ask. Not now, at least. I just let her sob silently, rubbing her soft hair.

I had been a coward, undeniably so. If it had just been me, I wouldn’t have minded the fact. I didn’t have all that much pride I needed to swallow down, so I was content to keep my head down and pretend to be lost forever.

But I wasn’t alone. Not anymore.

As I rubbed her hair with my left hand, I gazed at my right hand, the one she’d bitten into. I clenched it into a fist. I had to face the truth. Not for myself, but for her.

As I felt her weight against me, I thought about the night after Vince’s funeral. Tina never cried like this in front of me, never allowed me to comfort her like this. But I always knew I should have. I knew she’d probably needed it. I’d regretted it ever since, and I’d always continue to do so.

But at the very least, I wouldn’t allow myself to regret the same thing again.



“So what’s your angle, inviting me here alone like this? D’you like this view that much?” Sister Rosalia spat out that derisive comment.

“No, actually, I never wanted to step foot into this terrible place ever again. But given how my last time here went down, I figured I should come here once more just to give it a proper goodbye.” I gave her a meaningful look. “This will be the last time, after all.”

“Hah?” She raised an eyebrow, looking at me dubiously. “What are you planning, you critter?”

I chuckled, crouched down to the floor of the shed, the scene of the crime. The blood had long since seeped into the floorboards, the smell of iron never to come out of it.

I ran a finger along the ground, then examined it in the faint light of the torch. It was a sooty black, the dust and grime on the floor readily dirtying it.

I stood up, wiping my finger with my handkerchief as I resumed talking. “As for why I called you to come with me, well... I’ll admit it was for a pretty selfish reason.”

“Huh? You’d better not be wasting my damn time. I don’t got a whole lot of it, unlike you.”

“I don’t either. At least, not the kind of time in which I could talk to you like this. Once our deal is over, I doubt we’ll be on speaking terms. So I wanted to say it while I could—

“—Goodbye. I’ve enjoyed our time together. I wish it could have lasted longer.”

“...H-huh?”

“Honestly, I’d prefer leaving the case unsolved, if it meant getting more time to spend with you guys. But that can’t go on any longer. So I’d like to honor the end of this period properly. The brief time when a holy man and a sinner managed to shake hands.”

“W-what...” Rosalia stammered uncomfortably, looking at me like an incomprehensible beast. “What the hell are you on about? What do you mean ‘you’ve enjoyed our time together’? We’re enemies!”

“We will be, soon enough, I guess. But right now I’m not sure there’s any apt word for what we are. And—” I added with a coy smile, “—I happen to enjoy these undefinable relationships. Maybe that’s why I’ve found it so comfortable.”

“How the hell could you find it comfortable? I’ve been treating you like shit the whole time!” Rosalia yelled, seeming almost desperate.

I laughed. “We’re definitely not what you could call a good team. But you know,” I continued, “you’re a good person. Even with all the foul mouthed posturing, it’s pretty easy to tell. I can’t say I’ve led a particularly fruitful life so far, but my years haven’t been entirely wasted either—I’d like to think I’m at least that good a judge of character.”

“...” Rosalia stared at me, mouth agape, left with nothing to retaliate with.

"Father Iscario too—he's someone I will probably never be able to see eye to eye with. I don't know what will happen next, but—right now, in this moment, I don't hate him. I think there's worth in making that clear."

Rosalia didn't respond. I looked around the room, scanning each of the weathered walls of this cramped interior, drinking in the light spilling from within its gaps—and confirming the truth of what happened in this room.

"Well, I think that's about it for this place. I'm ready to go when you are—I truly never want to set foot in here again."

Swing.

I said my line with a carefree smile, but before I knew it, the tip of a silver spear was lined right beneath my eyes.

"U-um, this is—"

"I-I'm—" she stammered slightly, gritting her teeth then speaking again. "Of the 6th Division of the Thirteenth Chamber of the Phaethon, number IX, Sister of the Heliocentric Church—Rosalia X. Dornenkrone.

"And it's my duty to exterminate you, vampire!"

She looked down and away from me, not letting me see her eyes. The spear quivered ever so slightly as she spoke, before becoming fixed into place, unmoving.

"I see," I said, gently putting my hand on the side of the metallic tip and moving it slightly to the right of me. "I'm Vio Valakia—just your commonplace, ordinary vampire.

"It's truly been a pleasure knowing you."

And with that said, I removed my hand from the spear, slowly walking by her and leaving the storage shed. I shut the door behind me, never looking back.

In the end, I never offered any parting words for the decrepit building itself. I won't bother to now, either. A place like this was best forgotten.



The nighttime chapel was illuminated by a few torches and the moonlight seeping through the high windows, its many corners left obscured by the dark. The actors on the scene were all in plain sight, and that was all that mattered.

Rafi sat on the front-most pew to the right, staring at me with her wide blue eyes, as expressionless as ever yet undoubtedly filled with anticipation.

Father Iscario sat on the front-most pew to the left, his arms crossed, wearing a dubious expression but waiting patiently for me to begin nonetheless.

Standing with her back to the left wall, Sister Rosalia looked away from me, as if waiting for the event to end, though showing no impatience.

And then there was me.

For what was undoubtedly the first time in my life, and also most likely the last, I stood behind the church pedestal, facing the audience. I would be the one delivering this sermon, though it was unlikely to provoke any peace in the hearts of the listeners.

“Shall we?” The priest prompted me.

“Yeah—

“—Let’s end this. I’m ready for the denouement.”

◆ Final Record ◆

Rafflesiaceae

「 May the Sun Never
Smile Upon Me Again 」



“We’ve been thinking about this locked room with the wrong approach,” I bluntly began. “The end result is that Rafi died, and so we’ve been trying to find a means of killing her while leaving behind a locked room. But instead, consider this:

“Just as she survived thanks to a one-in-a-million miracle, so too did she die thanks to a one-in-a-million miracle.”

“What...?” The priest instinctively reacted with a dubious glare. I inhaled a deep breath.

“When we came back to the village with Rafi in tow, not one person we’ve met seemed surprised to see her. I understand that a killer would normally try to blend in, but is it really possible to stifle an instinctive reaction to that extent? After all, to the normal person, someone they’ve killed walking around without a care in the world is the kind of scene to make one question their sanity.”

Iscario put a hand to his chin in consternation. I shot him a smile, then continued.

“That sense must have dulled for a vampire hunter like you. You must be used to those for whom death isn’t permanent. But I’m not sure a normal person could disguise their shock that easily. And we never saw anyone express any kind of shock.

“Now, naturally, it could be that we’ve just missed it. But, it made me think—what if the method was one that didn’t provide any assurance? It would mean that not even the killer themselves could be sure whether their

plan had been executed or not. In other words, any method where the killer is present for the crime, familiar or not, can be ruled out.”

“...A trap?” Iscario muttered faintly.

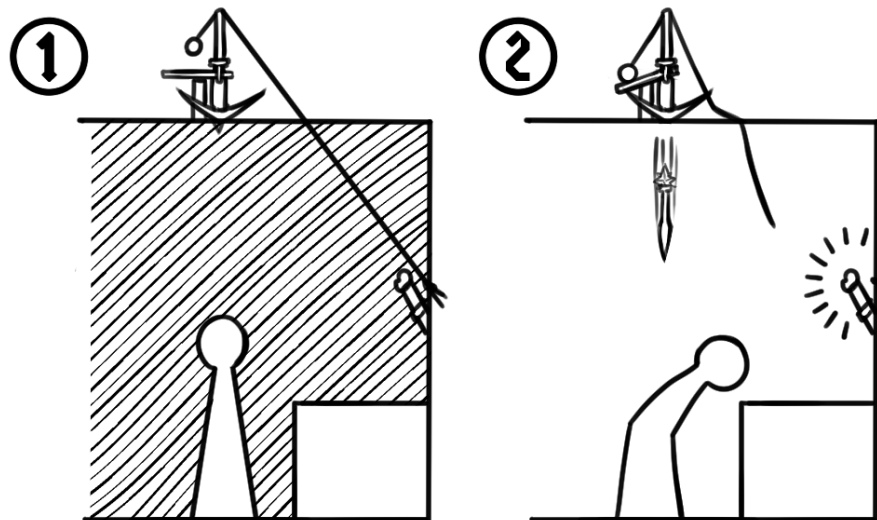
“Let’s reiterate all the steps that Rafi took upon entering the shed. She first locked the door. Then, she walked to the back of the room, and lit the torch on the wall. Then, she bent down to open the crate. And that’s as far as she can remember. Do I have all that right?” I turned a questioning look to Rafi. She gave a light nod, not meeting my gaze.

“So then, if we are talking about a trap, what would be the trigger?”

“...! The fire!?” A look of realization hit the priest’s face.

“Yup. That strange cut-off point made us think she’d lost her memories of death due to the shock. But that’s not really the case. Her account was complete. Let me lay out what I’m thinking here.” I made the priest hand me his notebook and a writing implement. He acquiesced without much resistance.

“Above where the torch’s fire would be, a thread was tied to the wall.” I spoke while sketching out a simple diagram. “The thread ran upwards through a gap in the ceiling. That’s because, of course, attached to the ceiling and pointing downwards, was one of the crossbows belonging to the hunters, only loaded with your spike instead of an arrow.” I could see through the corner of my eye that even Sister Rosalia had given in and begun eyeing me curiously.



“The thread was draped over the crossbow, and a small weight was attached to the end of it. Now, when the torch was lit, the fire would start burning the thread above it. And so, seconds later, when the thread finally burned through, it would release the weight above onto a small wooden plank

or something, seesawing it—right into the trigger. It just so happened that, at that moment, Rafi leaned down to open the crate, and so she was successfully shot right through the back.”

“But wouldn’t she have noticed the thread?” he asked.

“It was probably thin enough to not be visible in the dark. And after the torch was lit, the trap would probably have gone off before she’d be able to figure out what it was for—or so the culprit’s logic goes, I assume.

“After that, once we made our deal and left the scene, the culprit simply came back to retrieve the contraption, and that was that.”

“But wait, the ward I placed...!” Iscario piped up, pointing out an apparent inconsistency.

“Oh yes, that handy thing. Well, you said it would tell you if anyone walked into the room, but...what about someone climbing onto the roof? Would it be able to detect that?”

“.....”

“Well then, there you have it,” I bluntly said, having no energy to pull any theatrics like bowing to my audience.

Iscario and Rosalia both stared wide-mouthed at me, while Rafi’s blue gaze was accompanied by her usual expressionlessness. It felt like she was still waiting for something from me.

“T—that’s—But this trick is—”

“Completely absurd? I agree,” I readily assented to the bewildered priest. “The fact that it went off as expected is something of a miracle on par with what happened afterwards. I doubt there’s any need to list off all the different potential points of failure.”

“But then why would someone possibly employ a method like this? I understand the idea of wanting an alibi, but if anything had gone wrong, the culprit’s whole scheme would have been instantly exposed. It couldn’t possibly be worth the risk!”

“Risk, huh?” I chuckled at his misguided idea. “I’ll get to all that. To do that though, I first ought to explain—just what this village really is.”

Saying so, I looked into Rafi’s eyes, communicating my intentions. And in turn, after a moment’s hesitation, she nodded back.

“...All right. This village is clearly strange. We’ve all noticed it, though it’s hard to put one’s finger on exactly how. It’s ominous enough that it made Father Iscario think it was a den of vampires for a good while.”

A confused Rafi tilted her head at me in response, to which I smiled. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll tell you a funny story once we’re done here.” The priest shrugged in resignation.

“Anyhow, I’m sure it’s something we’d have all noticed soon enough, but our minds having been consumed with trying to find a singular culprit, we misunderstood the true nature of this place.”

“Well, what is it that has so thoroughly escaped us, Vio Valakia?”

“If you had just found your child covered in blood, what do you think your first reaction would be?”

“Huh?”

I sighed. “Look. This village is isolated from the outside world, with almost no trade at all. It’s entirely self-sufficient—but is that really enough to provide for everyone? Can people truly live comfortable lives like this?”

“When we arrived here, Miss Sapria offered us a feast. And yet, the meal we had was all but ordinary—by our standards, at least. But what if it really had been a feast from her perspective?”

“Everyone we’ve met is emaciated. And the shadow of death is palpable around these parts. We’ve seen almost no one older than fifty here—is that not deeply unnatural?”

“To put it plainly, this place is rotting. The people are barely hanging on. I can tell you that confidently, because I’ve experienced it myself.”

“Huh?” Iscario and Rosalia eyed me with confusion.

“The memories I see when I drink blood are complete. I connect to all of their senses. And so I felt it on my own skin—she was starving, a hunger far greater than I’ve ever felt in my life.

“But that alone isn’t what’s strange. What’s strange—is how imperceptible their situation is.”

I looked at each of the people in front of me one after another, settling on the priest. “Tell me, father—I ask you because I’m sure that you’re far better acquainted with real desperation and suffering than me—*were these really the faces of people barely hanging onto life?*”

Iscario chewed on my question, letting it bounce along the walls of the spacious chapel—before delivering a definitive answer. “No... I couldn’t see it in their eyes at all.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to exist in constant suffering. And yet the continued existence of this settlement could only mean generations of living on the brink of starvation. People naturally ought to have left this place, let it die—but that didn’t happen. In this one village where outer norms could not interfere, a different phenomenon took place. If these people couldn’t remove their suffering, *they just had to make the word suffering lose all meaning*. And the cure for their desperation—was faith.”

“Faith...?” Iscario gaped at me.

“It has some real power, wouldn’t you agree? It’s for the sake of your faith that you risk your life every day, isn’t it? Even though all of your natural instincts should tell you to stay far away from that danger, you nonetheless push on, risking it all to defeat the monsters you consider blasphemous time and time again. Well, in that same vein, these people had to take their natural instinct of pain and self-preservation and reverse it through dogma.

“And that’s how *it* was born—an outlier among outliers, the most remote sect of Heliocentrism, practiced by no more than a single village: a sect which dictates that *individual human life has no value*. Where all pain is merely a gift of nature, meant to be accepted. Where all that matters is the continued existence of the village as a unit. And for the sake of that continued existence, the villagers will gladly suffer whatever is necessary. Pious, isn’t it?”

“B-but!” he stammered, “That’s a complete perversion of what our doctrine is!”

“You may call it a perversion, but I call it adaptation—they simply adapted their beliefs to suit their needs. That’s all that is required for religions to change form. It might be a hard fact for you to swallow, but you’re the one who mentioned that vampire cult, the Ecliptic Church, before—if I recall correctly, the foundations of their beliefs are adapted from Heliocentrism as well.”

“...”

“You and Sister Rosalia are representatives of the church—even though your faith and theirs have almost nothing in common at this point, you are still nominally bearers of holy truth. Thus, their treatment of you, and by extension me, was entirely different. However, you would be wrong to take it as a commonplace show of empathy—what we got was, in their eyes, special treatment. And their concern for you in no way extends to treatment of those they consider their equals.”

“...Let’s say I accept this preposterous notion of yours. What of it then?”

I grinned weakly. “It’s necessary to properly tell the next part of the story—that is, the case of Rafi’s seemingly inconsistent memories.”

“Ah!” Iscario leaned in, seemingly having just remembered that matter.

“I want to preface this with the fact that I’ve told you no lies. I really did see a memory of Rafi’s where a woman with an identical face to that of Olga Eulogia was murdered. That much is true.” Though I did tell him that fact at that moment precisely in order to throw him off the track. I never thought it’d lead to such an extreme misunderstanding. “However, think about it—isn’t it odd? This is a memory of many years ago, when Rafi was much

younger, I could tell that much. But the woman didn't look like a younger Olga would—she looked identical to what Olga looks like right now.”

“T-that's...” The simple conclusion left him floored. I couldn't blame him—it really was a simple punchline.

“The one who died must have been Olga's older sister or something...” I said.

“Helga.” Suddenly, Rafi butted in with a voice clear like a bell. “My dear big sis, Helga Eulogia. She died when I was ten years old.”

“Hmph,” I smiled. *And thus the name connects.*

Rosalia gaped upon noticing the connection. “Wh-why didn't you mention any of this till now?”

“Because—you didn't ask.” Rafi looked down, her simple rebuttal shutting away everyone's complaints.

“Helga... she died with a smile on her face, you know? Rafi saw it with her own eyes. What do you think that means?”

Iscario just looked back at me blankly. I stared him in the eyes. Slowly, in the corners of his corneas, I could see a sense of realization seep in, one that he desperately tried to deny. I continued staring at him. Finally, when he could no longer keep it bottled up, he said, “Y-you can't mean...?”

“I bet you've got the idea now.” I turned away from him, holding onto the altar for support. “This village has no failsafe. Right now they seem to have found a balance, however precarious. But they can't have enough money in reserve to feed the entire population with outside trade. And if they have nothing to sell, they won't get any money. In other words, if one year sees a particularly terrible harvest or the animal population in the forest decreases to dangerous levels, the villagers *will starve to death*. What other option did they have, in a situation like that?”

The priest put his palm to his forehead and looked down. I could see his hand faintly trembling. Rosalia, on the other hand, still didn't understand. Uneasily, she asked me, “What? What are you talking about? What did they do?”

“Helga,” I began, not looking the nun in the eye, “offered to feed the villagers. With—”

“—With her own flesh.” Sensing my hesitation, Rafi finished my sentence for me.

Rosalia stared at her, eyes wide, before looking down, grabbing the pew for support. She looked deeply sickened. I couldn't blame her. It was equally difficult for me to look up, too, when at that funeral, I could see among the villagers *the faces of the men responsible for chopping her into pieces*. Simply

living on, as if it was natural, as if they'd done nothing more than slaughter a pig to prepare for the roast.

"It may have been a natural act for them, to support the community that they were born in. Still though, I don't believe the villagers would be ungrateful enough to refuse a final request. Just as one would give themselves over for the whole, so too would the whole work to reward the one. So, before her death, Helga asked for something, didn't she?"

"..." Rafi stayed quiet, as if not hearing the question I'd posed.

"She asked for something that they'd normally never waste precious resources on, right? She asked—*for a dress, for you*. One that would look just like the pretty dresses worn outside the village, in the outside world. Isn't that right?"

"—Yes."

"She... She gave her life for a dress?" Rosalia asked in disbelief. "How... the hell..."

"In her eyes, it must have seemed like a fair trade. Getting a dress of that quality was probably not something she could have gotten her hands on, not for as long as she lived."

The room went quiet for a moment, the pair being unwilling to face my echoing assertion.

"Her memory..." As if in escape, the priest muttered, tugging on a forgotten thread. "When you asked her about the memories you saw, she said that she didn't remember..."

"Ah, that," I said, smiling bitterly at the misunderstanding. "At the time I compared the hunger I'd felt to torture. I called the killing she saw a horrific crime. I think both descriptions apply, myself. But that didn't mean anything to her. After all—"

"It was just normal," Rafi confessed. "...Neither of those things seemed like anything special."

Neither of them could bring themselves to look at her.

"...What's next?" Eventually removing his palm from his temple, the priest eyed me head-on once more.

I nodded. "The next part of the puzzle comes with the arrival of the traveling priest—Number X, was it? Ixio N. Kreuzigung."

"Father Ixio had realized the true nature of this village. He had his true mission as a vampire hunter, but he couldn't afford to abandon this place, not when its fundamental corruption pertained to his own faith. So he set about trying to mend things. He couldn't be too upfront, though, or he risked shattering the villagers' minds entirely. He tried teaching the villagers to

value their own survival, though subtler means. He's the one who sent Olga's father to see a doctor.

"He likely intended on contacting another branch of the church to take over for him at some point. Before that could happen, though—"

"—He gave his life to save Miss Rafflesia's." Iscario finished the sentence for me.

"Indeed. That was the spark for what would later become the crime we're here to discuss.

"The villagers view clergymen as beings of far superior worth than themselves. The death of one on their land, and furthermore to save one of their own, must have felt like they'd been responsible for committing the worst crime there is. As a result, they've considered themselves cursed, unworthy of feeling the grace of their object of worship—they've prevented themselves from setting foot into the Sun outside of the times when it's purely necessary.

"To add to that, the village priest recently passed away. As you yourself said, in this kind of rural setting, it's not the mayor that holds power—it's the priest. And his absence has created a power vacuum which amplified the uncertainty the villagers felt. That uncertainty was ripe to be taken advantage of by *someone*. Someone who wanted to implant a certain idea in the minds of the villagers.

"This tiny society is a collectivist one. They wouldn't ordinarily have pinned the blame for what happened purely onto Rafi, they would have shared that blame among everyone. And to a certain extent, that's what they did. But eventually, a certain someone propagated the following thought: 'Rafflesia was supposed to bear that sacrifice. That was her fate. And yet, the priest, in his infinite kindness, prevented that sacrifice. But she doesn't deserve that salvation, not any more than any of us do. So—*let us put her fate to the test, and see if she truly deserves to live.*'"

"...So that's what you're claiming is the truth behind this crime?" Iscario solemnly asked.

"It's an unreasonable thought. One that could only have occurred in this place, in this accursed village. If I've said anything you feel misrepresents this place, feel free to correct me now, Rafi."

"—"

"—No, you're entirely correct. That's the truth of our home, Mr. Vampire." Suddenly, a new voice, alien to this conversation—yet her presence in this church was anything but alien.

It was the face of the culprit, plastered upon it the same fake smile I'd parted ways with earlier that day—It was Olga Eulogia.



Rafi didn't—couldn't turn to face her. She just kept her blue eyes to the ground, not saying a word. For her sake, I looked at the young woman head on.

"Would it be unfair to refer to you as the culprit behind everything? Every villager was involved in a sense, after all."

"Who knows? Looking at her like this, I feel like I haven't accomplished much to speak of at all."

"Y-you're the one!?" Rosalia lashed out at her. "How could you? Wasn't she like a little sister to you!?"

"To my sister Helga, she was. To me, though, she was just—well, the girl my sister died for, I guess," she replied, a self-deprecating grin on her face. "Not that I can afford to complain about it. It was Rafflesia's own father who set up that surprise for her, after all. It looked pretty shoddy, but I guess it did the trick."

"—" The nun couldn't muster another word when faced with that. She had come prepared to bear the brunt of any vampire's malice, but the woman in front of her was no vampire.

"You're not like everyone else here, are you?" Without hesitation, I addressed her. "You don't have any faith at all."

She gave me a bitter smile. "I always played along, though I could never see much point in it. I guess I figured I'd get something out of it." She looked off to the side, studying the ornate walls of the church. "And eventually, I did."

"...You loved Father Ixio, didn't you?"

"Everyone else was too busy worshipping him to view him as an actual human being. I guess that's why he bothered talking to me. As for me—" Olga looked lost in thought. She must have been remembering his face. "He was just as much of an idiot as the rest of them. He jumped in to help others even at the cost of his own skin. But... he didn't wear an idiotic smile while doing so. He always looked conflicted, afraid. Yet he did it anyway. I suppose that's the sole reason I fell for him."

"And so, when he died to protect Rafi—you couldn't forgive it. Couldn't forgive her. And that's why you decided to pierce her with the only memento left of that man—the Sealing Sacrament."

"I was the first to check his body, you see, after they removed the debris from on top of him. When I found this on his person, I just..."

“You took it, huh?” Another piece had fit into place. “I had wondered why the mayor would lie to us about not recognizing it. I guess he’d been honest after all.”

“...If,” she began, hesitantly. “If Rafflesia had been able to wear a stupid smile like the rest of those simpletons, I might have been able to let it go. But she never did. Ever since Helga passed away, and even before then, she’s had that same expressionless face. I wonder why—I ought to prefer this to her laughing ignorantly, and yet...”

“I’ll tell you why,” I said, glaring at her. “It’s because you understood that she could feel regret the same way you do. Not for Ixio the priest, but for Ixio the person. Just like she did for Helga. And it’s because of that, that you wanted to take revenge against her—because, unlike any others in this village, you thought she’d be able to suffer wholeheartedly. She’d be able to truly lament her death. And that’s the kind of pain you needed to satiate yourself.”

“Ah...” She looked at me, wide-eyed. Then, slowly, she looked down at her hands—and a smirk crept up her face. Grinning from ear to ear, she uttered, “I guess you’re right.”

Whether that smile was real or not, I couldn’t tell. Because I couldn’t bear to look at it.

All the rage I’d been keeping in threatened to boil over. I stepped down from the podium, walking towards Rafi sitting in the pew to the right. All the while, I raised my voice at the woman with my eyes averted. “Well, I hope the thought that your revenge was briefly successful brings you some small comfort.”

“Hah, I wonder,” Olga responded dismissively. “I figured that if the shot missed, I’d just accept that I’d never be able to have a thing in this empty life of mine. On the other hand, if the shot had hit, I’d be able to revel in the fact that there was someone out there far more unfortunate than me. But this...” She chuckled derisively. “This outcome is beyond what I’d have ever imagined. For her to be saved by a vampire of all things... There’s no word for it except a miracle. Clearly, if there is some higher power out there in this meaningless world, it’s got a lot of love for Rafflesia.”

I couldn’t stand her voice anymore. I couldn’t stand any of this anymore. “God, you’re so off-base it hurts. Tell me, why do you think Rafi locked the door behind her after entering that shed? Why do you think this became a locked room murder at all?” Staring down at Rafi, who was seated in front of me, I directed that question to Olga.

“Huh?”

“Tell me, Rafi, what did your mother warn you to do before you set off to that storehouse.”

“She... told me to lock the door.” The girl hesitantly replied.

“And so, why did you lock it right after entering the room?”

“Because—” She didn’t want to say it. I put my hand on her shoulder, smiling reassuringly at her. Looking up at me, she found the resolve within herself and, moments later, continued. “Because I wouldn’t get to do it afterwards.”

“—” It was Olga’s turn to stare, mouth agape. “You—”

“Yes. She’d known about it the entire time. She allowed herself to fall for your trap. That’s the truth.”

“B-but then... why? Why did you...?”

“...Because... that’s what everyone expected from me.”

“.....” Olga was stunned into silence.

The priest, entranced by the outrageous turn of events, finally remembered himself as he directed a question towards Rafi. “If... If you knew the entire time, why didn’t you tell us anything?”

Rafi failed to meet his gaze. “B-because... you didn’t ask.”

I sat down next to her. “You don’t need to lie anymore. I understand.”

“...” She looked at me worriedly. I put on my best attempt at a heartening smile.

“May I say it?” I eventually asked her. And a few moments of consternation later, she quietly nodded.

“The reason why she didn’t say anything,” I resumed, getting back up to address the others, “is because she was ashamed. Ashamed of herself, of what she is. That’s... most likely my fault.” I added, rubbing the back of my head. “When I turned her into a vampire, it seems it wasn’t just me receiving memories. I also gave her some of my own memories. And whatever it is she saw from my life, it must have looked radiant in comparison to her own. She didn’t want me—didn’t want us to know what her death really was.”

Rosalia and Iscario looked at me with conflicted expressions, though ultimately said nothing more.

“You shouldn’t be ashamed, though,” I said to Rafi behind me. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. Compared to me—compared to all of us, you’ve lived your life in a brilliant fashion. None of us are anywhere near as shining a beacon of selflessness as you are.

“No,” I continued, “The one who could really use some shame is that woman.” Saying so, I sent one last disgusted glare to Olga—she just gazed back at me, a serene expression on her face.

She no longer wore any semblance of a smile, fake or otherwise.



For some time, all of us just remained there in silence, avoiding each other's eyes. None of us knew where to go from here—where was there to go, really, after a revelation like this?

As we all kept running away from each other's presence, one person finally mustered up the strength to break the silence with a deep, echoing inhale. It was Father Iscario.

"This has been a harrowing revelation indeed. I have no words that could possibly alleviate the tragedies this village has suffered. I will see to it that aid is delivered here as soon as possible, and moreover, that a new priest is dispatched to this place—one who will be able to mend the hearts of these people, little by little."

"You still think that's the answer to this?" I idly asked him.

"Just as it was faith that broke these people apart, it will be faith that can put them back together. Faith, most importantly of all, in themselves. I think that's something we can help with.

"However, it will not make up for what has already passed. I offer my deepest apologies to Miss Rafflesia, for whom no one has been able to make it in time. I hope this truth will be able to bring you inner peace."

"..." Rafi gazed silently at the priest.

"Now, with that all being said, I think we can say we've finally put this affair fully behind us."

"I sure as heck hope so," I sighed.

"And, with that out of the way—Sister Rosalia, prepare yourself. It's time to exterminate these vampires."

"—Huh?"

I muttered dumbly. My legs felt numb. My attention snapped to the priest. He had regained his gentle smile.

"What are you looking at me like that for, Vio Valakia?" He said, whilst taking out a Sealing Sacrament from within his coat. "That was our deal from the very beginning, right? You've elucidated this mystery splendidly, and thus brought peace to the deceased Rafflesia Valpurga, taken from this world too soon. All that's left to take care of now, then, are the two demons carefreely walking upon this sacred ground."

I knew it would eventually come to this. I knew it. This was what I'd been afraid of, what I wanted to avoid. But—somewhere in my heart, I still wanted to believe that, just maybe, it wouldn't have to be like this. Just maybe, we could coexist. But...

"I'm such an idiot..."

There was no compromise. There was no coexistence. We were natural enemies. Our existence meant sin. Their existence meant death.

Behind the smiling priest, I could see Rosalia readying her spear. She had steeled herself—in what she was about to do, she would show no hesitation. That much, I could tell.

"Now then, you two," he addressed us, grinning from ear to ear, as he held the Sacrament in a reverse grip. "I do hope you've said your prayers."

A bead of sweat rolled down my cheek. We had no chance. He could split my head open faster than I could turn around and run to the exit. Rafi was paralyzed too—this was our end.

As I prepared myself, knowing that any slight sign of movement would signal my doom—a voice cut through the air.

"Father Rosenkranz." It was Rosalia's voice.

"I do hate to state the obvious, Sister Rosalia, but—" the priest said, his smile unchanged, though his arms now raised up, palms open, "*isn't your spear pointing in the wrong direction?*"

So he casually pointed out, as Rosalia, steadily and with purpose—held the tip of her spear millimeters away from his back.

"Father Rosenkranz," she reiterated, unwilling to budge even an inch. "Let those two go."

"Who are you, Sister Rosalia?"

She responded by roughly poking the man with the spear, making him tiptoe.

Undaunted, the priest repeated, "Who are you, Sister Rosalia?"

"...Of the 6th Division of the Thirteenth Chamber of the Phaethon, number IX, Sister of the Heliocentric Church, Rosalia X. Dornenkrone."

"Very good," he said, satisfaction evident on his face. "So tell me, have you truly let these two monsters shake your convictions?"

For the briefest of moments, Rosalia shifted her gaze to us, studying the two quivering vampires before her from top to bottom. Then, she looked back to the priest's back. "No, sir, I have not. My convictions remain unchanged—I have joined this order to eliminate the vicious monsters that plague this earth. The horrific creatures that use their powers to subjugate the weak and feed on their lives, trampling them underfoot. Them, I will pierce

through without hesitation. But at this moment, it is not them that I am looking at.”

“—Haha.” The priest chuckled. Suddenly, he put his raised hands together, noisily clapping. The sister poked her spear deeper into him, surely enough to draw blood, yet he seemed undaunted. “Splendid answer. You are a marvelous believer!” He then turned his gaze to Rafi and I. “You two, leave us for a moment, would you? I have something to discuss with the sister, in private.”

Rafi and I quietly shared a look, and, not a moment later—I grabbed her hand and sprinted in the direction of the exit. Olga was still standing there, stock-still and completely bewildered. Not bothering to slow down or call out, we barrelled right through her, sending her down to the ground as we exited the chapel.

With no time or concern remaining to look back and see how she fared, we ran through the desolate church road back to the village.



Now alone in the old church, the priest and the nun faced one another. Sister Rosalia mustered up all the fierce spirit she had in her, gripping her holy spear tightly. Meanwhile, Father Iscario looked as relaxed as a man could be, looking down at his subordinate gently.

“So, tell me,” he began. “When was it that you decided on rebelling?”

“...If you’re asking me when I made my mind up, then that would have to be a few minutes ago. But...” she narrowed her eyes. “It probably wouldn’t have ended any differently, from the moment that girl became a vampire.”

“Oh?” The priest raised an eyebrow. “So it wasn’t fondness for that vampire boy that made you do this?”

“Pah, that bastard’s about as likable as a bag of fertilizer.” she cackled. “He’s got nothing to do with it. He’s gotten his share of life, plenty of it. I got no problem disposing of him if I gotta. But...” Rosalia glanced down, only for the briefest of moments, before returning her eyes to Iscario. “He’s probably what she needs right about now. So I’ll overlook him.”

“I see.” Father Iscario looked pleased. “You’ll become a great servant of the church. I don’t doubt it for a second.”

“What...?” She looked at him dubiously.

“Did you think that your rebellion would make me hate you, would turn you into an enemy of the church? The fact that you made your decision under that misconception is even more splendid. But don’t worry—I now know what a principled woman you are.”

As he spoke, he began slowly stepping forward, getting closer and closer to the nun. In response, she thrust her spear closer to him, yelling “Stay back!”, but the priest just kept on steadily advancing.

“Principles, however,” he spoke, spreading his arms, “are not enough. One day you’ll find yourself facing a conflict that will never end as long as both parties remain standing, one in which you won’t allow yourself to cut anyone down. How will you deal with that, when you’ve taken away violence from yourself as an option?”

He was now clearly in range of the spear. If she wanted to, Sister Rosalia could easily have pierced him and left him incapacitated. Instead, however, she merely inched backwards herself, beads of sweat rolling down her face.

“To put it plainly, you won’t hurt me. And you know you won’t hurt me. Because you know I am not evil.”

He began to quicken his steps, closing the distance quicker than she could widen it. Panicking and plagued with desperation, Sister Rosalia tried half-heartedly to swing her spear around, but her threats had no effect.

“So,” Iscario said, grabbing the weapon with his right hand and extending his left towards her face, “What will you do, Sister Rosalia?”

As she looked on in horror at the approaching gloved palm, she could do nothing but pray.



As Rafi and I arrived at the village’s main dirt road, we didn’t slow our advance at all.

“North exit, okay!?”

“O-Okay!” She hastily replied.

Deciding that cutting through the forest would be dangerous, I elected to steer us towards the mountain region to the north of the village.

Soon enough my burst of adrenaline-fueled energy died down, and as I slowed down slightly, Rafi got faster. As we ran next to one another, her hand still in mine, not bothering to even look at the surprised villagers watching us

from the fields as they worked, the north exit of the village drew nearer and nearer. It was pitch-black outside, the moonlight our sole guide, and though the road was free of any major obstacles, we were unable to clearly make out what lay in the distance much farther than a dozen feet.

As we got closer and closer to the north gate, we gradually noticed something uncanny—shapes in the darkness, their outlines initially a blur yet gradually becoming more and more visible as we neared them. They numbered in the dozens, forming a wall around the exit.

We stopped in our tracks, staring open-mouthed at the reality before us—dozens of black-clad individuals, their eyes hidden by dark hoods, blocking our way forward. They wore priestly garb, the star of Heliocentrism gleaming in the moonlight on all of their chests. We turned backwards, intending to go towards the other exit, when we noticed a new set of dark figures approaching us from the other side.

We were surrounded.

I pulled Rafi closer to me, glaring at the robed opponents in my only meager display of resistance. Soon enough, a familiar figure joined the approaching horde.

“My apologies for the surprise party.” It was Iscario, his appearance unchanged from before, walking up with his ever-present smile. The piercings on his ear shone in the faint light. “They weren’t intended for you. Truth be told, I got a little hasty thanks to my earlier hypothesis and called for reinforcements.”

“...” This was the worst possible situation. If breaking through Iscario and Rosalia was hoping for a miracle, then breaking through this army was a downright pipe dream.

“There’s no vampire village for them to exterminate, so it’s likely that they’ve trekked all the way over here for nothing, but—say hello to Divisions 3, 4 and 5 of the Thirteenth Chamber.”

The priest walked closer and closer to me. I shielded Rafi behind me, well aware that she was no less safe either way. “...What did you do to Rosalia?”

“I only restrained her, nothing more. You’ve no need to worry about her. This wasn’t a particularly unexpected outcome.” Seemingly coming to a realization, the priest then asked me, “Hey, how many vampires do you think she’s exterminated up until now?”

“Uhhh...” Caught off-guard, I stammered, not knowing how to reply. Smiling eagerly at me, the priest continued.

“The answer is zero.” He smiled like a child who’d pulled a prank. “This is her first job. None of the other veterans wanted to take care of a rookie, you see. The job typically falls on me.”

“—Haha,” I laughed truthfully. “Imagine that. So she really was all talk, huh? I do hope her punishment won’t be too harsh.”

“No worse than a scolding, rest assured. It’s not particularly rare for rookies to have doubts. That’s why they always get sent on missions with a more experienced counterpart.” And with a wink, he added. “Our organization is a merciful one, you know—to our fellow man, that is.”

With a defiant smirk as my sole weapon, I replied derisively, “Oh yeah, real paragons of virtue I’m looking at...”

“Her convictions, though, are truly beautiful.” He said, stopping close to me and looking wistfully into the sky. “I meant that with every fiber of my being. On that front, I will always support her. However—”

Suddenly, his gaze still directed upward, he gripped my collar and yanked me to him. Rafi tried holding onto my leg, but he mercilessly kicked her, sending her down on her rear. He then raised me up to his eye level, my feet dangling pathetically far above the ground.

“Creatures such as you, that violate death, simply cannot be allowed to exist in this world.” His frozen gaze chilled me to my very core.

“Ghh, tell me,” I struggled to speak while in his grasp, unwilling to let my question go unvoiced. “When that monster razed your town to the ground—ghhk—what was it that you felt?”

Unfazed at hearing me speak of his deepest memory, the man bestowed upon me his answer.

“I felt—amazed.” He spoke plainly, honestly, without decorum. “I had never known death until that moment. I thought of myself, of the people around me, as immortal. Yet arbitrarily, in a split second, that naive world was shattered.” He smiled. “I felt nothing but amazement. At that moment, I understood what it truly meant to be alive. That there’s no such thing as eternity.

“And looking upon that black hell, I vowed to myself that I would personally watch that creature meet its end. Because nothing, not even a being that colossal, would be spared from the engine of existence.” He delivered his answer, the personal philosophy that made up the man named Iscario T. Rosenkranz, with a smile as serene as the settled snow.

Ahh, I thought. *He’s truly gone.* The person that he once was had disappeared for good—it would never return.

“Now then,” he said, looking refreshed, “you will meet your end shortly, but before that, as we’ve shared quite the amicable relationship over the past few days, I will allow you to voice any desires and regrets you might have left. After that, you can go ahead and pass on in peace.”

“Gh, thanks for the—*agh*—overflowing generosity,” I said, barely able to squeeze out a few words. Seeing my pained expression, the priest loosened his grasp slightly with a curt apology. *How about you let me down instead, dang it!*

Seeing that there was no shot of that in his peaceful smile, I swallowed my complaints and, turning to the girl worriedly watching us from the ground below, began talking. “Rafi, listen—I’m sorry. I talked big about wanting to find the truth of your death and give you peace and all that—that was just me saying whatever popped into my head. Really, all that was going through my mind back then was how much I wanted not to die. I wanted to live longer, however I could. And I used you for that. I’m sorry.”

“...” She just stared at me, saying nothing, her mouth quivering sadly.

“Even as we went about that investigation, I didn’t try to find the truth at all. I just wanted to prolong it as much as possible, so I could live as much as possible. Even when—even though I had a feeling, that it was only bringing you pain. And to avoid having to face that reality, I didn’t even try to get to know the real you, not until the very end. All I am is a selfish old bastard. So you don’t need to be grateful to me for a damn thing, you hear?”

“...” She looked at me with her expression frozen in place, yet I could see the tears form in the corners of her eyes.

“But you know, Rafi—being selfish like that, I think it’s a good thing! Compared to being a saint, I’d rather be a selfish bastard any time! Because being a saint is really hard, and... and painful, and sucks a whole damn lot! So compared to that, it’s better to be selfish. And if you’ve hurt someone in the process, all you need to do is apologize! That’s it! You don’t need to live your life holding the door open for someone else! If there’s something you want, just grab a hold of it! And when you’ve had enough, ask for more, dream bigger!

“Take it from me. I’ve been a pampered child my whole damn life, leeching off of others as I pleased, and you yourself saw what it was like: it was a blast! My life has been amazing! And even having lived it all out, I’m still not happy! I’m still shamelessly asking for more! And that’s perfectly fine! You know why?

“Because the world is so much bigger than this!

“There’s so much out there to see and to feel that one lifetime isn’t enough! And I can guarantee you, there are so many more wonderful things out there past these village walls! So you don’t need to keep everything bottled up inside anymore, and don’t hesitate! Be as shameless as your heart tells you to! Your world is bigger than a pathetic wooden shed!”

“...Y-you’ll,” she mumbled, the tears rolling down her unmoving cheeks, the stilted, awkward expression she’d forced upon herself having become stuck on her. “—You’ll allow it? You’ll permit me to be selfish?”

“I’ll do you one better!” I said, holding out my hand towards her. “I’ll be right behind you, laughing alongside you at whichever sucker tries to stop you! How about that?”

In response, Rafi looked down, wiping her tears with her white sleeve. Then, she unsteadily got to her feet, looking like she might topple over at any second. Still, undaunted, approached me, and took my trembling hand in hers, squeezing it tightly for just a moment. It was a cold, cold hand, yet in it I felt a warmth I’d almost forgotten. *Ah, right—this was how their hands felt, wasn’t it?*

Then, almost as suddenly, she pulled away, taking a step back and freezing in place. For a moment, the world was quiet.

Watching the exchange between us with disinterest, the priest, still holding me up in the air, nonchalantly asked, “So then, are you quite done?”

And then as the final syllable left his mouth, he froze.

What?

The danger alerts blared in his mind. *Something* was here, some incomprehensible *something* that had the power to shave him down to nothing right where he stood.

But why? From where?

The questions kept popping up into his mind, but no answers would accompany them. It was like his many years of experience in deadly combat against vicious immortal monsters had just become a lie in a split second.

He felt defenseless, seen through right down to his beating heart. *From where did this new foe appear?*

And then, as he regained the modicum of composure necessary to force his eyes into moving, he saw *it* and realized.

Realized the error of his judgment. Realized that he had doubted a miracle not once but twice, and that now the price was to be paid.

He saw the pair of eyes staring at him.

They belonged to the little girl he’d accompanied over the past few days, the little girl he’d mourned and sworn to eliminate.

Her glare shot through him, burning away all the unneeded packaging and allowing only his essence to remain—the essence of a weak, impotent mortal soul.



Her inescapable glare—beautiful, haunting *vermillion* eyes.



At the opposite end of the village.

Spared from the commotion, the southern exit was barren.

All of the clergy's forces had focused their attack on the northern exit, where their two enemies laid. And so, all that sat in this forgotten corner of land—was the village's welcome sign.

The pathetic wooden board with its weathered lettering had been placed there by one of the previous village mayors on nothing more than a whim. It represented a mere facsimile of the outside world—for there were no travelers to welcome in the village of St. Purgatorio. It had sat there for however many years, and it would continue to do so, until a storm or some other whim of nature would finally sign its death sentence.

At least, that was what the hunters that passed by it every day had privately thought.

And yet, now, starting from the upper corners of that weathered sign and working its way down, a gentle destruction spread.

The dirty-brown wood darkened as if burnt to a crisp. It darkened until the lettering disappeared from view, until its every corner was covered in obsidian.

And then, from those upper corners, something was blown into the sky. It wasn't ash, however, nor soot.

In big, dark clumps, that *something* separated itself from the sign, leaving it chipped and broken, as if a massive beast had taken a bite out of it.

The disintegration progressed, until there was nothing left standing that could be called a sign, and yet it continued to progress, further and further until nothing stood there at all, until it seemed preposterous to imply there had ever been anything there at all.

What was it that this damaged, unsung sign had burst apart into?

Bats.

Hundreds and hundreds of bats, flying into the dark night sky, their mauve wings blurring together in the night, only one distinguishable feature clearly visible from the ground.

A million vermillion eyes dotting the sky.



Klimnt Horheldorfel stood in front of his house, slack-jawed and blankly staring upward.

In that moment, he was no longer the mayor of St. Purgatorio, no longer a leader or a representative, but merely a lost lamb awaiting his fate.

In truth, that was all he'd ever been.

He had left the village before. He had been exposed to the way of life of outsiders, and to their thought processes. And in truth, a part of him had begun to doubt.

He had always buried that part deep inside of him, though. Because accepting it now would mean nothing short of despair.

Not when he'd lost his family. Not when his blind faith was all that kept him from breaking apart.

He looked upward. He saw a horizontal line of blackness spreading across the center of his two story home's exterior.

As the rot spread, something pushed the top floor of his building upward. The force of the escaping *creatures* lifted up the walls at an angle. Soon enough, an enormous slab of brick had become almost entirely detached from the building, and looked ready to topple over—and when it would, it would certainly crash down upon the man below and turn him into a forgotten memory.

He made no effort to move. He stood at the ready, waiting for the debris to crush him.

"Please," he muttered, *"welcome me into your gentle light."*

The brick wall began its descent.

He closed his eyes.

And so, he was unable to see—that while in midair, the corrosion continued, eating away at the wall. As it neared the man, it became almost entirely black, indistinguishable from the night sky above.

And then, the impact.

Klimt Horheldorfel was swallowed up by the blackness.

He felt like being hit with a powerful torrential rain, far stronger than he'd ever experienced. The 'drops' smashed into him, grazed him, and fell to the ground below.

And then—from there, they began their ascent once more, scattering upward in every direction.

He could see those 'drops' staring into him. Staring with their cold vermillion eyes.

And then, once all the blackness splashed upon the ground and flew away—there he remained, the same man, not even a single wound carved into his flesh.

"Why," he squealed powerlessly, "won't you take me there?"

He fell onto his knees, looking down at the ground.



The Valpurga house had been eaten away by inky blackness and transformed, joining the other screeching creatures in their dance below the moonlight.

The Valpurga couple stood in front of what was once their home, holding one another and viewing the mayhem with entranced looks.

They were nothing more than painfully average. They had gone about their lives in the only way their predecessors had taught them, and they likely intended on doing the very same thing until the day they perished.

Neither Sapria nor Rhizanthès thought a single thing about the prospect of each other's deaths. Whatever fate had in store for them, they were ready to accept with open arms. They had no more ambitions or designs for the world around them. They would exist until the day existence stopped.

When faced with the prospect of his daughter's demise, Rhizanthès Valpurga thought much the same. If she died, she died—if she lived, she lived. There was nothing more to it.

That was why, whatever these two simple people felt at that very moment, watching the world they knew being ripped apart before their very eyes, was impossible for anyone else to understand. Did the sight provoke any spark in their withered hearts, or would they accept the view as but another turn of fate?

Only time would tell.

For now, they stood rooted to the ground, watching the spectacle, until...

Directly in front of them, with absolutely no warning, a flower sprouted from the ground.

A massive flower, spanning over ten feet in diameter, its pink petals seeming to glow with an impossible, unnatural light.

“*Rafflesia...*” Her daughter’s name escaped from Sapria’s mouth as a whisper. Though she would never know it, the sound of her child’s name had once been that of a beautiful, magical flower whose giant petals had disappeared from this world after the end of Magic.

Sapria hesitantly stepped upon the giant flower in front of her. Rhizanthès followed suit.

Holding each other, they boarded the flower. As if in response to their weight, it gently enfolded them within its petals, shielding them from the chaos of the word. And then—though they couldn’t see it through the thick petals, they felt it in the wind—they were raised up into the sky, joining the many millions of dancing bats.



A few moments before every villager was enveloped by a protective flower—

“Goddamn—unhand me, you rotten bastards! I’ll kick the shit out of you!” Rosalia, unarmed and held in place by four of the hooded priests, screamed obscenities at her captors while desperately trying to wiggle out of restraint.

“...” The silent priests didn’t budge an inch. They were all veterans who’d felled many powerful vampires in their time, and they certainly wouldn’t yield to a rebellious rookie.

—Their confidence wasn’t shaken until they noticed the abnormality taking place below their feet, by which point it was far too late.

“Huh?” Rosalia belatedly realized that something strange was happening only when her opponents began to *sink into the ground*.

They all let go of her, trying their best to free themselves, but the earth itself seemed to be sucking them in—looking closely, it had turned pitch-black.

And then, just as Rosalia realized that she alone had been spared from the phenomenon—a giant pink flower sprouted out of the ground beneath her, raising her far above her would-be captors.

Taking a closer look around her, she saw total pandemonium—the entire village had been toppled to the ground, every building melting into a swarm of vampiric bats. However, the villagers seemed to be safe, held aloft by similar flowers.

Then, as she looked in the direction of the vampires' path of escape—she finally saw 'her'.

"Hah, I'll be damned."

She couldn't stifle a laugh. From the very beginning, they hadn't stood a chance.

Rosalia then thought about her sister. She remembered how Azalia used to gaze at her from above.

Over the past few days, whenever she'd looked at that girl, it had reminded her of her younger self. And then, it made her think that, maybe, this was what it had been like for her older sister as she watched her.

It wasn't a feeling she was ready to experience, and so she'd always looked away, but now—

—she was entirely captivated.

She thought about her sister. About the fact that she was no longer here. And about how beautiful she would be, if she could be here right now.

That thought filled her with sadness and regret. And yet, it also made her smile. It was a simple thought, but she'd avoided it for far too long.

And so, with tears in her eyes, she grinned a toothy grin as she watched the younger vampire rip the world apart in her place.



With a single word, the world was torn asunder.

"Rafflesiaceae."

Her vermillion glare unshaken, she muttered that word. It was a word that spoke of the family she'd lost, and of the life she'd gained, and the innumerable things that she'd lose and she'd gain from then on.

And then she began to hover above the ground. Her black hair flew upwards as if blown in the wind, and with the moonlight shining upon it, it almost looked like a pair of dark wings carrying her into the sky.

The priest was entranced. Even though he was still holding me up, he'd likely entirely forgotten about my existence. All that existed for him in that moment was the overwhelming *threat* he faced.

"...! What the!?" What finally shook his unbroken gaze was the alien sensation around his legs. He felt like he was being dragged down into the ground. He tried shaking around to escape, but it was useless.

"Haha!" I laughed earnestly. "I see you can dream big after all! How's that for a first night as a vampire?"

"—This entire village is already yours!"

Hearing my gleeful comment, the priest spun his head to face me. "What!?"

"Quite foolish of you to challenge a demon in her hometown, don't you think?" I sent him a victorious smile. "When I bit into that girl, I really wanted her to live on. And what's more, she *really* wanted to live on. That's all there is to it."

"B-but that's—that's preposterous! If this is her natural state at birth, then—" The panicked priest never got to finish his sentence, though there was no real need for him to.

The answer was obvious.

If this is her natural state at birth, then—*she might just be the strongest vampire that's ever lived.*

"W-woah!" I was suddenly snatched from his grasp, flying into Rafi's arms. "A word of warning would be nice, you know!?"

"You're the one who taught me... that if I want something, I should just reach out and grab it." Her eyes fixed forward, she answered me in her typical monotone voice.

"Ha!" I burst into laughter. "I guess you did!"

The priest was already buried up to his knees, and so was the rest of his entourage. Some of them readied ranged weapons trying to hit us from afar, but they were assailed by a torrent of bats that tore apart the tools in their hands. None of them could accomplish anything anymore.

Rafi let me out of her arms, having a dozen of her bats grab onto me and hold me afloat. She still held my hand though, grasping it firmly and refusing to let go.

In the blink of an eye, we'd gained so much altitude that we could now see the entirety of the village—or what had remained of it anyway, a forest of

demonic flowers and bat-eaten buildings. Scanning the ground below her, Rafi quickly located her next target.

Sitting idly in front of the church, the only building that had yet to be devoured—Olga Eulogia. The chaos seemed to have exceeded her understanding. She just watched it all unfold, dazed and impotent.

Rafi nosedived down toward her, dragging me along with her and letting the wind mercilessly smash into me.

Reaching her level, Rafi floated slightly above the ground, gazing directly into her eyes.

“Olga. Do you hate me?”

Bluntly, boring into her with her vermillion gaze, she asked that question.

Olga, left without a single emotion to cover herself in, looked back at the monster she’d birthed with an equally emotionless face. Soon enough, she slowly gave her an answer.

“I... don’t know. I don’t know if I hate you. But I envy you. I want everything that you have. I want to be everything that you are.

“I want Ixio. I want my sister. I want that dress. I want—”

Then Olga’s voice abruptly stopped. Whether it was because she felt too ashamed to continue—or because she’d mentioned everything she could—only she knew.

“I see,” Rafi plainly responded. “But I’m not interested in fighting with you over scraps.”

“S-scraps?” Olga gaped at Rafi’s disinterested answer.

“Right now, what I have—is nothing. That’s why—I’m going to go out and find things. Things worth being envied for.”

“W-wait—”

“Goodbye.” And with that, Rafi flew back into the air, once again dragging my face against the air resistance. She just flew forth, never once looking back at the woman. For a moment, I thought about turning around to see what had become of her, but then I thought better of it.

As we flew above the village, we caught sight of Rosalia sitting on a flower, waving at us fiercely with a smile on her face. We both briefly shared a look, before waving back at her ourselves.

Soon enough, we left her in the dust too, as we flew farther and farther away from that isolated little village, absent from any maps.



“So not all of her smiles are malicious, huh?” I said, looking down at the nun waving towards us. Next to me, Morry cheerfully flew around, trying to up with the army of bats surrounding him. “I wonder if we’ll get to properly thank her someday.”

“We will,” Rafi said, lacking any proof yet entirely certain.

“Yeah... You’re right.” My smile faded away, though, when I next thought about the priest. “You know, Iscario—he wasn’t always like that. His memory of that moment... It’s become totally distorted. I felt what he felt for myself, so I can tell.”

People’s memories can become so twisted and knotted up, they’re almost unrecognizable from the initial moment. Colored by time and self-reference, they change shape. They gain meaning, and lose meaning in turn.

Rafi gazed at me for a moment. “Who knows? Life is... long and weird. Maybe one day he’ll regain the self he lost.”

“You sound confident about that,” I said, smiling at her.

“I am. I’ve experienced it for myself, after all,” she said, nodding in her typical expressionless way.

“Well, it’s about to get a lot longer and a lot weirder. Hope you’re ready for that. I’m not sure how proper a guide an old man like me can be, though,” I said, smugly nodding to myself.

“You really can’t decide whether to play a young man or an old man, huh?” Rafi commented, as monotonously as ever.

I stared at her, wide-eyed.

She looked back at me, tilting her head in confusion. “What?”

“Pff!” I burst out laughing. “Nothing at all!”

And so, we flew out into the horizon, over the sunset, and into the far off distance. Out where we could see the vast world for what it is.

And so, that was the tale of a legendary vampire’s birth: Valpurgisnacht, the most selfish and most fickle vampire there ever was—and of myself, her ordinary, commonplace companion.





Postface to the Chronicle

Thus ends this night's chronicle.
I do hope you've enjoyed yourselves.

As I promised, I've regaled you with nothing but the unvarnished truth. As truthful as a tale can be, for it's a firsthand account by none other than my dearest friend, Vio Valakia.

That cowardly, ordinary vampire yet lives, bragging all about his adventures the way any commonplace simpleton might. This is his story to tell, and it's his story I've written down.

I do wonder how many of his memories remain authentic, as pure as perception itself. And how many have been colored by his many years of life, twisted beyond measure.

No one could possibly know, though I welcome you to ponder it.

Now then, it is time I laid down my pen for tonight.
As always, I have been your chronicler—G. M. Ziggurat.

Afterword: Bloody Fun [Stoker's Count and His Charming Eyes]

I was so desperate to get this book out before my twentieth birthday—my birthday is in August, so evidently I have failed. Still, beyond just pride, I think the reason for that desperation was fear.

As I write this, I've yet to lose anyone in my life. Nobody I ever valued or knew well has ever died, no family members, no friends, not even any artists or authors I really admired. And so I was afraid that, if I were to have a true brush with death, I would no longer be able to finish this novel. I feared that I would become someone who could no longer love that little weak vampire and his reluctance to let anything go. Perhaps I'd find him childish, I'd tell him to just accept reality and kick him out of my heart. Fortunately, that hasn't happened yet, and so I was able to conclude this project without any existential crises. All that's left is to see how I'll feel once reality does finally catch up with me: will I still be able to root for this selfish protagonist of mine?

All that aside, let's talk about vampires.

You know, I once swore to myself that I'd never do a vampire story. Because everyone's done a vampire story! Certainly most of my biggest inspirations have. It would just be too on-the-nose, too derivative if I did it too!

But then I watched *Hellsing* and I couldn't resist anymore. The idea formed itself in my head—funnily enough, not the idea for this book you've just read, but the idea for what will become the second installment. I won't

spoil the surprise here, but anyway, once it got in there, it just wouldn't go away. And so, reluctantly, reluctantly, I indulged the forbidden desire.

So, since I'm here anyway, having failed spectacularly at upholding my principles and with a vampire book figuratively in my hand, I might as well sing the praises of all the vampire stories that have inspired me thus far.

The aforementioned *Hellsing* ought to come first—not *Hellsing Ultimate*, mind you, though that too is a legendary series, but I mean the original TV series *Hellsing*. Whatever else you might say about its incomprehensible plot and somewhat ugly early digital animation, it had the aesthetics down perfectly. It exudes the quality of *vampirism*, of being a quintessential *vampire story*, which not even the OVA could match (not to mention the masterpiece of a soundtrack).

This book probably wouldn't exist if it weren't for Ryohgo Narita's *Vamp!*, whose strange world, eccentric characters and original vampire mechanics have charmed me deeply. I must also pay my respects to the definitive vampire romance, *Tsukihime*, whose character dynamics have no doubt influenced this story, as well as to Hirohiko Araki's *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* and Nisio Isin's *Monogatari Series* for their contribution to the canon of really weird vampires.

And with that, I've proverbially paid my dues. The aesthetic of vampirism is somewhat rooted in referencing past works, I think. You need to build it up while taking from the pile of ideas we call the vampire mythos, and that pile is one we each build up story by story. So I hope I've been able to contribute just a tiny bit to that charming pile.

And now for the acknowledgements: a big thank you to Ced Naru and Volt McVolt, whose unrelenting criticism has forged this book into the best version of itself that it can be, as well as to Persia, Life, Jeff and Sam for their help in proofreading. Thank you to the members of the Honkaku and Zaregoto communities for always providing encouragement. And most of all, thank you, to the reader that's followed me through to the end. See you on some other night.

Genma496, September 2024
BGM "Moonlight (Gekkou)" by Hideyuki Fukasawa
from *Tsukihime ~A piece of blue glass moon~*

