

The illustration depicts a young woman with long, dark brown hair and a small halo, smiling and holding a large, ornate sword. She is dressed in a white short-sleeved shirt with a blue sailor-style collar and a blue bow, paired with a blue and white plaid skirt. Her right leg is encased in a large, complex mechanical prosthetic. The background features a bright blue sky with a distant city skyline and a body of water. The overall style is a vibrant anime aesthetic.

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Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE MIRAGE PALADIN



16 STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE MIRAGE PALADIN

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Kojou Akatsuki

The Fourth Primogenitor

The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Shizuri Kasugaya
Castiella

Paladin

A pure and noble knight of
the fiery blade



Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

Yuuma Tokoyogi
Witch of the Blue
The Fourth Primogenitor's longtime
friend who bewitches the city

Rui Miyazumi

Magic Gunner

An exceptionally talented student
and a sniper without peer

Yuno Amase

**Beast-Person
Kung Fu Fighter**

A cheerful and carefree feline
who fights with her fists





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STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE MIRAGE PALADIN

16

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

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ON
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 16

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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INTRO

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The ocean roared.

Lazy waves lapped at the moonlit shore quietly and steadily.

Beneath a navy-blue sky, which complemented the vast sea, there lay a teenage boy in a soaked parka. The sky, dotted with stars, filled his entire field of vision. Silver moonlight illuminated the white, sandy beach.

The humid wind bore the scent of a summer evening. The sea spray that coated his cheek was reminiscent of fresh blood.

As if seduced by its warmth, he slowly came to life. Remnants of crushed coral slipped between his clenched fingers.

The boy had a face one might see anywhere.

He was around sixteen or seventeen years old with pale, thin hair reminiscent of a malnourished wolf's fur. Even so, he lacked distinguishing features. He was just another student, common to every habitat.

Despite having stirred, the boy remained there, prone at the edge of the waves, unable to sit up.

The drenched clothing and nighttime breeze had robbed his body of warmth, leaving him weak. His limbs were numb, as if his flesh and blood belonged to someone else. He could feel nothing but the sand against his skin. The sensation felt oddly raw and vivid.

Pushed around by the force of a wave, the boy rolled onto his back. He listlessly shook the water droplets from his face.

A moment later, he heard what sounded like footsteps on sand. Once he opened his eyes, he saw a slender human silhouette, that of a young girl wearing a fairly long coat.

She had refined, doll-like facial features, her large eyes standing out in

particular. From the gaps in the long wimple she wore, reminiscent of a nun's, protruded hair as white as snow.

She stopped at the boy's side, looking down at him without a word. Her gaze was cold.

"I've finally found you, Kojou Akatsuki."

The girl spoke with a hint of reproach in her voice. Her attitude was aggressive, but thanks to the soft, serene tenor of her voice, the impression she gave was not as barbed as her choice of words.

The boy looked back at her with bewilderment. "...Kojou...Akatsuki?"

"Do you not remember?" asked the girl, raising an eyebrow in visible exasperation. "That is your own name, is it not? You are Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor."

"I'm...the Fourth...Primogenitor?" It was an ominous-sounding title, one that the boy couldn't help casting suspicion over.

"Yes." The girl mixed a sigh with the sagging of her shoulders. "You are the fourth of the original vampires, which should not exist. You are immortal and immutable. You have no blood brethren, order is not among your desires, and you are served by twelve Beast Vassals that are destruction incarnate. You drink people's blood, thereby slaughtering and destroying them. You are a cold, heartless monster astray from all doctrines of the world—that is what you are, Kojou Akatsuki."

"So, I'm a vampire primogenitor, huh...?"

Still resting on the sand, the boy gazed at his own palms. It was an unexpectedly calm reaction. Mysteriously, he felt no distress at having been told he was the World's Mightiest Vampire.

"Do you remember now?" The white-haired girl's tone still remained cold.

He smiled. "Being told I'm one of these primogenitor-somethings doesn't ring a bell, but I do remember my own name at least."

"Very good," said the girl, nodding.

The boy named Kojou Akatsuki then sat up and stared at her. "So where am I?"

What am I doing in a place like this...?”

“This is Onrai Island.”

“...Onrai Island?”

“An isolated island floating in the deep sea some three hundred and thirty kilometers south of Tokyo, *Japan’s one and only* Demon Sanctuary—a special self-governing district that manages demons such as yourself.”

“*Manages*? Don’t you mean *isolates*?” Kojou replied with sarcasm.

If the goal was merely to manage demons, going out of their way to construct a self-governing district at sea, far away from the mainland, would hardly have been necessary. He felt that the island’s existence was clearly for shutting demons in and isolating them from human society.

The girl’s emotionless eyes locked with Kojou’s provoking stare.

Without warning, she thrust her right hand forward, which had previously been concealed in her coat.

She was holding a long, glowing vermilion sword in that hand. The serrated blade undulated like billowing flames. She positioned its tip against Kojou’s neck.

“Who are you?” he asked, conscious of the blade’s weight as it grazed his skin.

“My name is Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella,” she answered with the utmost gravity.

“I am your watcher.”



CHAPTER ONE
THE COLLEGE OF
MAGICAL ARTS

CHAPTER ONE

THE COLLEGE OF MAGICAL ARTS

1

The stench of the sea breeze was stagnant within the old building, seemingly an abandoned factory.

Rays of afternoon sunlight filtered through the broken windows, reflecting off the white dust hovering in the air.

It was a poorly lit passage in the shadow of a rusted steel pillar. Crouched down on the cracked concrete floor, the small-statured figure was surveying the situation around her. The girl's large eyes gave the impression of a mischievous kitten.

She was wearing a low-cut workout top and other sporty articles. Metal covered the back of her gloves, and her armored-toe, high-cut boots were oddly eye-catching. Most noticeable of all were the pointed, bestial ears sprouting from her head.

The girl's irises were wide, as if she was peering deep into the night. Her curly, chestnut-colored hair swayed with a flutter, and her ears twitched in surprise. She had detected the presence of an anomaly concealing itself on the other side of a wall in the building.

"Target acquired. Seems to be lurking in the next room over. Can you tell, Ruirui?"

Nodding at the girl's words was a boy on standby outside the abandoned factory. He had the air of an honors student, a subtle gentleness coming through his actions even while he peered through the scope of a sniper rifle.

"I've spotted it, too. That's Ms. Magatoki's Type Fourteen Armored Shikigami.

It walks on two feet and its max armor thickness is ninety millimeters. Whaddaya wanna do, Squad Leader? It's a pretty tough one."

"Yuno, any other bogeys in the area?" asked a third person listening to their radio exchange.

She was a white-haired girl clad in a coat with metal shoulder guards and a cobalt-blue wimple. Her name was Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella, a transfer student dispatched from a small country in southern Europe. She was a paladin-in-training and an expert in anti-demon combat.

"Mmm, doesn't seem to be any. None active, at least," Yuno said, quietly leaning out from the shadow behind the pillar, her animal ears twitching.

Yuno Amase was an L-type—a so-called beast person; her vision and hearing were tens of times sharper than those of a non-beast person's.

Shizuri smiled at the report. "*Bene*. Well then, let us launch a surprise attack before the target notices us. Yuno, keep the target occupied. Rui, cover fire, please. I shall approach and handle the direct strike."

"Roogger that!"

Yuno let her canine teeth poke out slightly in an aggressive smile. Her gloves made a creepy little squeak as she clenched her hands.

"Roger from me as well. I will prepare a ritual for slowing it down."

Rui Miyazumi, the boy with the sniper rifle, attached a slender torpedo-shaped cylinder to the gun's barrel. It was a military spell-fragmentation round, which deployed a ritual for capturing demon beasts from its point of impact.

Noticing that her squadmates had finished their preparations, Shizuri said, "I'll let Yuno decide the timing for when we begin our attack. Capiisce?"

"Gotcha," replied Yuno innocently.

In the midst of this was a fourth person, standing behind Shizuri. Bewildered, he nervously chimed in, "Wait a sec. What about me? What should I do...?"

"...Oh right, you're here, too, Kojou Akatsuki." Shizuri looked back at him, seeming to just remember him that moment.

Compared with Shizuri and the others' apparent familiarity with combat, the boy had zero defenses. He bore no weapons such as a gun or even a single piece of protective equipment. All he wore atop his standard-issue uniform was a gray military parka. He was also not very perceptive of his surroundings, standing wide-open like an amateur on the field of battle or a civilian who'd wandered into the fray.

"Your role is to support us. Please politely stand there, and do not get in the way."

"You make support sound easy, but what am I supposed to do, exactly?!"

Shizuri's cold dismissal left Kojou further at a loss. Unable to watch Kojou so conflicted, Rui narrowed his brows slightly as he maintained his sniping position.

"Kojou. Sorry. If your hands are free, I'd like you to buy some bread for me. This week, there should be *kinako* bread on a limited-time sale; so if you please."

"I'd like something to drink. Sweet, but not carbonated," Yuno added as she continued crawling ahead on all fours.

"R-right," Kojou muttered, nodding for a second before suddenly objecting, "Wait, that means I'm just your errand boy!"

That ain't what support means, y'know.

However, Yuno ignored Kojou's plea, crudely kicking off from the concrete floor.

Leaving behind an afterimage, her tiny body accelerated like a hunting dog that had picked up the scent of its prey.

Using the walls and steel girders in the factory, Yuno made small corrections to her trajectory as she sped toward a huge, solitary doll left in place.

It was about four meters in height. Covered in thick armor, it gave off the impression that it was less of a doll and more of a four-limbed tank. It bore no visible weapons, but the sheer size of the metal construct was plenty menacing in itself. The silver-colored knight statue sensed Yuno's approach and whirled to

life. In contrast to its weighty appearance, its movements were bizarrely smooth.

Even so, Yuno was undaunted. Making no effort to slow down, she approached the doll head-on, performing a somersault as she pounded a heel strike into its steel-helmeted cranium. Sustaining that single blow from the small-statured girl, it faintly wobbled.

“Let’s gooo! White Rabbit Kick Number Six: Falling Moon! And, from there—”

Using the recoil from the heel drop, Yuno vaulted into the air once more. The doll stretched an enormous arm right before her eyes. However, Yuno slipped past it with movements befitting a ninja. Then, she slammed both of her palms into the doll’s now wide-open chest.

“Lion King Fist Number Four: Clawed Star!”

As Yuno’s voice resonated, a heavy blow simultaneously penetrated the doll. Using the acceleration from her fall, the shift in the doll’s own center of gravity, and her own brute strength as a beast person, she launched a fresh attack. Heavily thrown off balance, the doll crashed through the building’s wall before hitting the ground and rolling onto its back.

“It’s in my line of fire. Yuno, stand back.”

“Roogger!”

Yuno evaded pieces of rubble flying in various directions as she retreated, putting distance between herself and the doll. As if to pursue her, the doll leaped back to its feet with unbelievable speed. It was then that the spell-fragmentation round from Rui flew in.

With a pale glow, its spell barrier deployed and enveloped the doll, becoming invisible chains that sealed the huge silver body’s movements.

“Shizurin, the rest is up to you!”

“As if it even needed to be said—!”

As Yuno left the field, Shizuri ran straight ahead to take her place. She was wielding a silver mace: a close-combat weapon with a meter-long metal flange at the tip. With Rui’s ritual spell having halted the doll’s movements, Shizuri

mercilessly swung her mace down toward its head. The blow triggered the fuse of the explosive inside the mace. A flash of light erupted along with a roar, and explosive flames engulfed the doll.

The ground seemed to ripple as it shook, the roof of the abandoned factory creaking from the blast winds.

Sparks and hot air blew even as far as the corridor where Kojou was standing.

Still surrounded by flames, the doll did not move. Its armor broke, fragments scattering apart as they became a shower of scrap metal.

“Well... ’Twas nothing, really.” Shizuri, lying on the ground to avoid the blast wind, held her flapping wimple down with a hand as she exhaled.

Having been in the thick of the explosion, she was, of course, not in tip-top condition.

Thanks to protective ritual spells, her body was unharmed, but the coat she had worn was torn and ripped, and even the clothing under it was singed. It was sad to see her pale white skin exposed from the gaps of her torn-up stockings.

Convinced the matter was taken care of—she had surely felt the doll fall to her blow—she tossed away the mace’s shaft, its tip having broken off even before the explosion. She then began touching up her disheveled clothes.

It was a fatal opening.

“Squad Leader, it’s not over! The doll’s magical energy hasn’t vanished!” Rui shouted as he loaded another spell-fragmentation round.

Giant footsteps echoed once more. Waving away the smoke lingering after the explosion, the enormous silver doll emerged right before Shizuri’s eyes.

“Wha—?! That shouldn’t be...!”

Shizuri threw herself at the ground and into a roll, just barely evading the doll’s colossal downswing. Its head, despite having taken an explosion point-blank, was largely unharmed. Only the silver helm was lost, exposing the chiseled face beneath.

It was a crude human face, seemingly made from glazed mud.

“It can’t be... This doll has scapegoat rituals inscribed on its armor...?!” Shizuri sharply bit her lip as she realized the reason behind her failed attack.

Charms, amulets, scape dolls—ritual spells on such things activated when the main body was attacked, transferring the damage to the item instead. It was a very common tactic with numerous variations.

This doll had such rituals inscribed on every piece of its armor, and thus had it withstood Shizuri’s attack. Like reactive armor on a tank, the scapegoat inscription had likely employed recoil and shattering spells to mute the blow of the explosion.

Once you understood it, the trick was simple. However, the simplicity of the trick was what had brought Shizuri to the brink of peril. Surely a doll, nothing more than an artificial construct, would never employ a scapegoat ritual—Shizuri was paying the price for that arbitrary assumption.

“Shizurin!!”

To support her fallen squadmate, Yuno went punching after the doll once more, but her mighty blow was only able to make the enormous silver body tremble slightly. She grunted, tapering her lips in chagrin as she evaded the doll’s counterattack and put distance between them.

It was too huge to destroy with brute strength, even from a beast person. They’d known that from the start. That was why Shizuri had resorted to the crude method of explosives. However, the mace had already been broken.

“Not good... This doll is a higher level than expected. We can’t engage it with our current equipment.” Rui fired a fresh spell-fragmentation round, but the doll’s movements were dulled only slightly. Unfortunately, the force of his sniper rifle was insufficient to inflict any further damage.

“We’ll pull back and regroup. Yuno, retreat ahead of us!”

“But, Shizurin, then you’ll be...!” Yuno opened her eyes wide at her friend’s plea.

Their opponent’s monolithic frame was far more agile than they had expected. Thanks to the earlier explosion, their escape route was buried under a pile of rubble. Unless someone served as a decoy, safe retreat was impossible.

“I can handle this much on my own with ease!”

A stout smile came over Shizuri’s lips as she drew the sword at her hip. It was beautiful, with a blade that resembled flickering flames, but Yuno didn’t think it could penetrate the thick armor covering the doll.

Shizuri boldly stood straight in front of it. She was drawing its attention so that Yuno might escape. Of course, Shizuri engaging in such action in the narrow confines of the abandoned factory exposed her to even more danger.

Kojou found himself sprinting forward before he could comprehend the situation.

“Huh?! Akatsuki...?!”

Rui was the first to notice Kojou’s unexpected move. Even he was not composed enough to hide being shaken by the newbie—so fresh they’d forgotten he even existed—charging toward the front line.

“Ah, Kojou Akatsuki?!”

“Kojikoji, what are you doing?!”

Shizuri and Yuno stopped moving when they realized Kojou was drawing near.

At that moment, Kojou was completely unarmed. He was not equipped with a weapon to penetrate a doll’s armor, let alone proper defensive gear. Even so, Kojou did not slow down. Vaulting over a collapsed wall, he approached the doll until he was forty to fifty meters away. If the doll detected his presence, it would surely hone in on him and attack across that distance in the span of a single second.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds!”

Standing still, Kojou raised his right arm overhead. Gushing out from his entire body was a torrent of demonic energy resembling a blast of wind. The incredibly oppressive power made the air shudder and made Shizuri’s cheeks go pale.

Kojou Akatsuki was the Fourth Primogenitor: the World’s Mightiest Vampire, served by twelve enormously powerful Beast Vassals.

And it was one of those Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, each said to rival a natural disaster, that Kojou summoned at that very moment.

“Please stop, Kojou Akatsuki!” Shizuri shrieked.

The doll slowly turned toward Kojou. Its creepy, monstrous gaze was reminiscent of that of a Grim Reaper as it studied Kojou’s wide-open body.

It was this silver doll at which Kojou glared, thrusting his right hand toward it.

“C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Five, Regulus Aurum!” Kojou howled, ferociously baring his fangs.

Demonic energy coalesced at a single point, adopting the form of an enormous, phantom beast—or so it seemed, when suddenly the space in front of Kojou’s eyes seemed to shimmer, twist, and distort.

A *poof* rang through the air as Kojou’s demonic energy dissipated.

All that was left was cold tranquility.

“Er... Huh...?!” With his right hand still dramatically thrust forward, Kojou cried out in bewilderment.

However, the fact that his Beast Vassal summons had misfired remained unchanged.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Shizuri angrily shouted at Kojou as he stood there astonished.

“Er, ah, that’s...”

Kojou subconsciously let his gaze wander all about as he stammered apologetically. As he did so, his field of vision abruptly darkened. Before he realized it, the steel doll’s huge frame had reached right in front of Kojou’s eyes and nose.

“Run! Quickly!”

“Huh?!”

Shizuri’s shout set Kojou into motion, hastily turning his back toward the enemy.

But it was too late.

The doll's fist shot out with the force of a cannonball straight toward Kojou's back.

"U...uoooooooooooo!"

Kojou's voice did not make it to the very end of his cry. His bones were broken, turning into a spray of fresh blood. It was over in an instant, leaving him with no time to even feel the pain.

"Ah... Kojou Akatsuki..."

The murmur trickled from Shizuri's lips, but there was no one left to respond to her call.

His flesh had been annihilated, ruined beyond the point of remaining in recognizable shape. Kojou Akatsuki was dead.

"No... nooooooooooooooooooooo—!"

Shizuri's roar echoed through the abandoned factory that reeked of blood.

The long sword Shizuri clenched in her hand wavered menacingly like a flame. Its undulating blade was enveloped by a vermilion glow. Shizuri's eyes were dyed crimson, and then... And then.....

2

The next time Kojou opened his eyes, he was lying on a hard, plywood sheet.

The scents lingering in the air were a mix of antiseptic and the sweet smell of shampoo.

As Kojou lay there, a girl was resting atop his chest, producing the soft sounds of sleep.

She'd probably fallen asleep at some point while sitting in the chair at the bedside. Hair as white as snow tumbled out from the gaps in the blue wimple on her head. Still unable to grasp the situation, Kojou hazily surveyed his surroundings.

It was a cramped, rather Spartan room. The bed was placed in the center of the room, with light-green curtains swaying over the windowsill. There was a

bottle of mineral water and a glass on top of the bedside table. Also, there were medical diagnostic devices he did not recognize.

When he looked harder, he saw a number of cords stretching from the diagnostic devices wrapped around his upper arm. It seemed that this was a hospital, and a very stereotypical medical facility at that.

It was still dark outside the window. He figured it was just after daybreak.

“I see... I...”

Recalling the scene immediately before he lost consciousness, Kojou let out a tired sigh. Kojou had died once-over from being punched by that Type Fourteen Armored *Shikigami* contraption.

The fact that Kojou’s body, squished by that mass of steel and torn to shreds, had recovered in such a brief period of time was no doubt due to the shocking regenerative ability possessed only by vampire primogenitors.

Though the stupid-sounding title of World’s Mightiest Vampire rang hollow to him, at the very least, he was forced to accept that the immortality part was indeed fact.

“Ah, Kojikoji, you’re awake?”

The door to Kojou’s patient room opened and Yuno entered, carrying a paper Post Exchange shopping bag.

Her wavy chestnut-colored hair was the same, but the bestial ears that should have been poking up from her head had vanished. She’d released her bestialization. Instead of the low-cut athletic outfit she had been wearing, she now wore a regulation school uniform.

“Guess that’s the World’s Mightiest Vampire for you. Incredible regenerative power, huh?”

“Normally you’d be totally dead... Ah, I suppose you were dead till just earlier.” Yuno smiled cheerfully, her voice completely sincere.

Rather than voice a single word of complaint at that, he settled for the single, pouty murmur of “Who’s Kojikoji supposed to be?” He sluggishly sat up, his bandage-covered torso coming into view. “Come to think of it, what about the

doll? What happened to that monster?”

“Shizurin beat it.” Yuno pointed to the girl still sleeping on the bed.

“Kasugaya... Cas did it all by herself?”

Kojou drew his brows together in surprise. At the very least, right up to the point Kojou expired, the doll should have had Shizuri backed into a corner. He didn’t think it was a situation that could be turned around that easily.

Rui entered shortly after Yuno. “That’s because Squad Leader’s Hauras is a magic sword that amplifies its power by consuming the demonic energy of opponents it slices—Gisella’s secret armament. No doll for mock combat is going to hold up against that.”

He had changed into a school uniform as well, but the impression he gave off was the same as during combat. Thanks to the glasses he only wore when he was reading, his honors-student vibe increased all the more.

“Magic blade... Well, it certainly looked like an expensive sword...”

“Yeah. That said, since she used it during a mock battle for combat evaluations, our team got docked major points and we’ll have to retake it. We’ll be writing self-reflection letters until nightfall today too, y’see.”

Slumping his shoulders with a pained smile, Rui put down the bundle of printouts he’d been carrying. They included apology letters for having used a secret armament without permission, reports related to accidents during training, request forms for reimbursement for hospitalization and injury treatment fees, and paper for handwritten self-reflection letters.

Apparently, these dozens of documents were all to be written up that day.

Rui seemed to have already finished writing some fraction of the documents thereof.

“Sorry... This being my fault and all,” Kojou said.

“Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t your fault you couldn’t use your Beast Vassal, Akatsuki.”

“I’m a bit disappointed, though,” Yuno said. “I kinda wanted to see what a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor looks like.”

They both smiled at his apology and shook their heads.

It had been about half a year since Kojou had joined their squad, and he felt like he'd done nothing but cause them trouble in all that time. He felt grateful that they still showed consideration to him as a fellow teammate even so.

"Ah, that's right. Give Squad Leader a word of thanks later," Rui said. "She's been glued to your side the whole time until you came back to life."

"...She was?" Kojou asked in suspicion.

Because Shizuri was so overly serious, Kojou thought she must have found him, the one holding the team back, rather annoying.

"Seemed like Shizurin was pretty down about it, you see. She said Kojikoji dying was her fault."

"That's...unexpected. Didn't think Cas was the sort of girl to have something like that on her mind."

In the first place, the cause and fault of Kojou dying rested solely with him ignoring her orders and racing out in front of the doll strictly on his own judgment. There was no reason whatsoever for Shizuri to feel responsible.

But when he saw she was sleeping right beside him on the bed, he realized the comment of Shizuri being glued to his side must have been true...

"...Who is this Cas of which you speak?" asked that very Shizuri softly, sounding a bit sleepy still. Apparently, she'd awakened at some point, listening quite intently to Kojou and the others' conversation.

"Are those the words one speaks to his savior, who gathered his scattered pieces of flesh and brought them all the way to the hospital?! Is this not exceptionally rude, you incompetent vampire?!"

"Er, but, you know, Kasugaya and Castiella are a mouthful, so..."

"That's Castiella! Cas-ti-ell-a!"

Bringing her face right before Kojou's eyes, Shizuri emphatically sounded out her own name so that Kojou wouldn't forget it. The bridge of her nose and her white skin broadcast her noble features. The eyelashes on the rims of her almond eyes were long, and her eyes were a deep blue, reminiscent of a

tropical sea.

If she could just keep quiet, she would be a delicate beauty, but with her elegant eyebrows raised and her white teeth bared, she resembled a small animal one never tired of looking at. Kojou felt he was dealing with a haughty, prideful cat.

“If it is so difficult to say, I do not mind if you call me Shizuri, Kojou Akatsuki—Sorry, Kojou,” she corrected herself, trying to speak more casually.

“Ah...er, that’s a little...”

“Are you dissatisfied about something?!” Shizuri exploded as her rare act of compromise went to waste.

Watching her squadmate, Yuno narrowed her eyes with amusement. “Pffft—”

“What is it, Yuno?”

“Ah. It’s nothing. Well, Kojikoji’s corpse was definitely pretty gross, with the bones and even the internal organs showing. Thanks to that, I’ll never be able to eat beef again.”

“Hey, cut that out.”

Yuno’s indiscreet comment made Kojou shudder. Yet, the twisting in Kojou’s stomach came out as a low growl. The word *beef* reaching his ears had provoked his empty stomach.

“You were dead until not long ago, and the first thing you want to do is eat?” Shizuri exhaled in visible exasperation, turning a scornful gaze his way.

“Oh, shut up. Coming back to life really burns through your stamina!” he retorted, cheek twitching.

As a matter of fact, Kojou hadn’t had a bite to eat since the previous morning. He would’ve been hungry even without his body draining his physical energy to restore his flesh.

“The school cafeteria should be open now. How about we grab a bite?” Rui suggested gently.

The hands of the clock placed in the patient room indicated that it would soon

be 7 AM. It was around time for the dorm students to rub the sleep out of their eyes, get up, and head to the cafeteria.

“Oh, okay. That’d be great.”

With a stretch of his back, Kojou pulled off his blanket.

That instant, he felt the oddly cool, liberating feeling of air against bare skin.

“Aaah!”

Placed directly in front of the sister-in-law was a metallic pedestal about five meters across.

It seemed both like a parabola antenna for measuring something and an electromagnetic turret for firing something or other. Or perhaps it looked like a stage—the sort on which priestesses made holy dances to the music of the gods.

“I get it, sheesh. You’re such a worrywart, Moegi,” the girl said as she operated the device.

The screen switched, and new 3D images floated up one after another. One was an extravagant, beautiful girl improperly wearing her uniform in an adorable fashion. One was a boy with a flippant, smiling face with headphones dangling from his neck. One was an amiable-looking girl with her hair tied up. And one was a vampire with a languid expression hovering over him— “You can’t take any luggage with you, so you have until you leave to memorize all these faces.”

“It’s all right. I’ve already memorized them.”

It’s not like they’re people I don’t know, the girl murmured inside her own mind.

Not that she could hear that voice, but her older sister let out a sigh once more.

A small alarm sounded. It was an electronic noise from the device alerting them of the time that the experiment was scheduled to begin.

“Are you ready?”

“Anytime.”

The girl shot a confident grin at her worried older sister.

The lighting in the laboratory dimmed, which was less her sister being considerate than the electrical supply being diverted to the experimental device. The girl showed no particular hesitation as she smoothly stripped off the bathrobe.

Her pale, naked body was highlighted amid the dim emergency lighting.

The girl had not a single stitch of clothing on and carried only a golden spear. Still clutching that spear, the girl stepped onto the metallic platform.

“—Reina.”

“What, Moegi?” The girl smiled as she gazed at her sister-in-law.

A synthetic voice narrating the countdown echoed within the laboratory room. Thick cables deployed in a spiral glowed dimly as vast magical energy coursed through them.

Magical energy gathered from every corner of the artificial isle was converging upon the metal platform.

This was a large-scale sorcerous device meant to support a temporal shift ritual.

Just before the countdown finished, Reina saw a seemingly bashful Moegi waving to her.

“Be careful. Take care of Papa Fourth Primogenitor and company for me.”

The girl listened to the gentle voice of her older sister-in-law as her consciousness was swallowed up by light...

Afterword

So there was some demolition work.

Not at my place but the building next door to my workplace.

Trucks and construction machines were going in and out, swapping places with one another from early morning to late evening. The resounding roars. The fragments of concrete scattering away. The floor at my workplace shook enough that it could be mistaken for a 4D theater, and if I blithely opened a curtain, I would go through the hell of being eyeball to eyeball with unfamiliar construction dudes. To deal with the boisterous noise, I wore headphones and played music quite a lot, though on occasion I gave up partway and retreated home or to a family restaurant, but at any rate, there is no mistaking that this work was written in the cruelest environment of the entire series. This precious experience made me appreciate the untold happiness of being able to write in a room that isn't shaking and without noise in my ears. It was really rough.

Anyway, the demolition work finally finished, so just as I expected I would be able to write the next volume on a real tear, the end of the building demolition naturally meant that construction of a new building would now begin. These cruel days shall continue awhile longer, but I still think I will deliver the next volume a little faster. I humbly ask for your best regards.

So there you have it, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 16 with the much-awaited Part Two.

More precisely, rather than a Part Two, this volume feels a little, or a lot, like it was written as a prologue. There were things I was trying that wouldn't have worked if the timing had been any different, so if you had fun with it, great. I've talked Part Two up to such a grand extent, I wondered if some might consider this volume's contents to be some kind of bait and switch.

From the next volume onward will be the new series in earnest. I'm not sure

which will come out first, but I am preparing a short-story compilation volume in parallel, so I'd really be happy if you picked that up, too.

I believe you are already aware of this, but the second season of the *Strike the Blood* OVA is scheduled to go on sale right around the time this volume is to be published. It starts with "The Black Sword Shaman" as recorded in the ninth novel volume. This is an episode I personally like very much, so I'm really pleased. It'll be lots of fun. They had me write a little short story to go with the first printing.

Also, the ninth collected volume of the comic version of *Strike the Blood* serialized in *Monthly Comic Dengeki Daioh* has gone on sale. I humbly ask that you give it your best regards, too.

I guess this is the last part.

To Manyako, who's handling the illustrations for this novel; TATE, who's handling the comic version; everyone related to the anime version; and everyone involved in the production and distribution of this book, I salute you from the bottom of my heart.

And of course, I unreservedly thank all of you who have read this book.

I very much hope to see you again in the next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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