

Carousel

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When 16-year-old Arakawa Masaki meets a mysterious boy at an abandoned carnival, she has no idea she's just run into the town's most famous vigilante, The Black Cat. She yearns to discover what sadness lies behind his eyes... but at what cost?

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Prologue

The Town of Pacol: 1906

" Who the hell... who the hell are you!?"

" For the love of God... spare me, please!!!"

" What is he....?"

His golden eyes gazed upon their lifeless corpses venomously as he poured the contents of each bottle across the mahogany floors of the blood-ridden tavern. Rage was all he felt for them. He did not pity them, nor did he feel sorrow for them. For he had done this to them. And he would do it again. And again and again if that's what it took. To find him. To find their leader. He would make them all pay. He lit a single match as he headed for the door, and tossed it behind him. Heat brushed his back as their bodies ignited. It only burned him half as much as the pain he held inside. But it wasn't pain for them. It would never be pain for them. His blood-splattered trenchcoat flapped as he stepped out into the night air, the tavern erupting in flame behind him. He felt no remorse. But he still wasn't satisfied. Their leader would have to surface sometime.

" Whatever he is.... it's not human."

Chapter One

Present Day

" Daddy! Daddy, where are you? Daddy!!!"

I frantically glanced back and forth around me. The whole house was aflame. I coughed, running back upstairs in fright. I was so scared. I didn't know what else to do but hide. Hide and maybe the mean flames would go away. As I reached my room, I coughed again, the smoke filling my lungs. Someone grabbed me from behind then, and charged through my bedroom, leaping through the window. The windows in the house burst then, and I screamed, the stranger shielding me from the shards. He wore a tattered, wool cap, and a priest's cassock. I assumed he was the town priest.

" Are you all right?"

He asked. I nodded, my frightened little eyes looking up into his. He held sadness inside them...

This was eleven years ago.

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She gasped as she opened her eyes and quickly sat up in bed. The sun poured in brightly through her window, and the birds outside chirped happily. Kneeling on the mattress, she pushed open each glass pane, allowing the morning to come into her room. This was to be her first day attending school at St. Lucie's, and she intended to enjoy it. Well, as much as she could, anyway. Climbing out of bed, she stretched, and walked over to a nearby chair. There sat her suitcase, full of her clothes and her uniform. She made sure not to get settled in case her aunt did not wish to take care of her, after all.

Opening it up, she pulled out a white, capped-sleeve blouse, and a black skirt. She pulled the skirt on first, then exchanged her baggy, blue night shirt for the blouse. A yellow, wool vest came soon after, as well as a crimson tie. Next came a pair of white, knee-socks, which she pulled on slowly. Yawning, she grabbed the pair of brown, penny loafers next to her bed and slipped them on. Her briefcase sat idly by the door as she finished pulling her hair into a half ponytail, and bent down to get it, heading on out into the living room.

Her aunt had already gone to work that morning, and had left her some money on the counter for breakfast and lunch. Sighing, she grabbed it and placed it in her chest pocket. A fluffy, grey kitten hopped up onto the counter with a little 'meow' and she giggled, patting its head lovingly,

" Got to go, Jimei... I'll be back later."

She then hurried for the door, the cat meowing again as it shut behind her.

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The streets of Pacol were what she considered to be the most hospitable streets in the country. Mainly, because nobody was on them this early in the morning. She wasn't really the type that liked dealing with others, but that's probably because she felt not many people liked to deal with her. What was she supposed to think after being handed around from relative to relative for nearly five years of her life? Before that, she'd been living comfortably with her grandmother. Things had been nice there, in that village high up in the Setari mountains. The people there had been kinder, more willing to befriend a little girl who had just lost her father. Six years later, however, and on the night of her 11th birthday, her grandmother had been killed in a robbery.

She and her friends had hidden in the closet as the robbers searched through the house, her grandmother calling the police in the nearby bathroom. The robbers had found her... and stabbed her to death as she screamed into the phone. When they had gone, the first thing the girls had walked out to see was a room drenched in blood. Her grandmother's body was lying on the bathroom floor...

Shuddering, she closed her eyes and came to a stop, grabbing onto the tall, decorative iron fence to her left. She took a few deep breaths, her right hand clenching her shirt as she dropped to her knees. Everytime she thought about that night, it was always the same. Her heart would race rapidly in panic, almost reliving it all. She could even remember the shrillness of her grandmother's cries, and the police sirens outside that had prompted the robbers to run away. After that, she had moved in with her uncle, who was too drunk and strung out to take care of her. Then it was to her eldest cousin's house, then to

her other uncle, then to her great aunt Rika's, then to her other grandparents' home in Jillane, then to her uncle Rotero's in Kalcione, and from one relative to the next until finally she came to live here, in Pacol, with her aunt Anessa and cousin Ai. She took short, deep breaths, nearly hyperventilating at the thought that maybe they would not want her, either. And this was the last place that social services would send her.... after that, she'd be forced into foster care.

A soft sound, like the tinkling tune of a music box, met her ears then, and she stopped, glancing up from her spot on the sidewalk. Following the harmonious little song, she pushed open the tall, rusted iron gate at the end of the walk, and stepped inside what appeared to be an ancient carnival. At her far right she could see a dull, dusty ferris wheel towering over the booths that lined the deserted fairway, most of the booths weathered and worn with age. Some booths still held prizes within them, and she stepped into one in particular that lingered to her left. Inside she found a soft, brown bear. It was falling apart, raggedy and molding from the weather, and crawling with ants. She left it alone.

Walking on, she glanced up to see a faded, crimson and white wagon. On the side, a weather-beaten banner read, "Fortuneteller". A soft breeze caused the old wagon to creak, and she jumped, nearly screaming as one of the wheels collapsed, the wagon smacking the ground with a loud thud. Placing a hand to her heart, she turned away from it, and gasped, the brilliant view of an antique carousel meeting her eyes. It was set at the middle of this tiny carnival, obviously having been it's main attraction. Illuminated by the morning light, she gaped at it's beauty. The delicate carving on each horse... on the base decoration. Every single part of it seemed to have been carved with love. And now... look what time had done to it. She ran her fingers along it's dusty base, the dirt easily gliding off onto her skin. Delicate cobwebs hung at a jumper's chin, connecting in a line of sparkles to it's paint-chipped hooves. It was the saddest thing she'd ever seen. It made her wish she could travel back in time, just to see it in all it's glory.

As she rounded the machine, the music grew louder, and she gasped, stopping short as she saw a young man sitting on the steps of the gorgeous, old contraption. He wore a faded, grey cap, and a dusty, black trenchcoat. In his hand was a tiny music box, the carousel inside it spinning round and round. Seeming to sense her standing there, he shut it quickly, and stood, turning to her,

" What are you doing here? This place is off limits."

Gasping, she took a step back, nearly dropping her briefcase,

" I-I'm sorry, I didn't know. I-I'll be going now. I'm sorry to bother you, sir."

Quickly she turned and hurried away, daring only one last glance as she reached the gate. He was still staring at her. Taking a deep breath, she rushed down the road toward St. Lucie's. It wasn't too far from the carnival, afterall. The boy watched her as she ran off, a small, black cat leaping off the carousel to stand at his side,

" Is it...you?"

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The school bell rang as she hurried into class, and she quickly took an empty seat in the back. Sighing,

she lowered her head, remembering the look that the young man had had on his face. It had been one of shock; surprise. A cough led her to look up, and she was met with the annoyed, hazel eyes of a red-haired girl. The girl folded her arms,

" Excuse me. You're in my seat."

Gasping, she quickly gathered her things and stood, apologising,

" I'm sorry."

She then walked back up to the front of the isle, anger brewing within her as she heard the red-haired girl mutter,

" Idiot..."

She wouldn't say anything, though. She didn't like dealing with other people, anyway.

" Hey, you! New girl!!!"

Gasping again, she glanced around the room for the source of the shout. What had she done, now? In the far corner of the room, was a short-haired girl with bright green eyes, waving her back. Letting out a soft sigh, she walked over to her, the girl offering her the last seat in the row. She smiled thankfully, sitting down.

The ebony-haired girl turned completely around in her seat, batting her eyes at her,

" I can tell you like the back row, so I'll let you have my seat."

She blinked, nodding shortly,

" Th-thank you."

" Wow, your hair's so beautiful! Wish mine was that long..."

" Th-thank you..."

The green-eyed girl grinned, her chin-length hair bobbing as she winked at her,

" You're the shy type, aren't ya?"

" Ah, don't worry. I'll break you of that. Hee. Name's Sakura! What's yours?"

She straightened, lowering her head with a blush,

" M-my name? It's--"

" Settle down now, class! Settle down."

They both turned their attention to the front, then, the teacher clearing her throat,

" Now, as you all may know, we have a new arrival here at St. Lucie's. Miss Arakawa, would you like to introduce yourself?"

Sighing, the chestnut-haired girl stood, heading to the front of the class. Nervously, she bowed to her peers,

" H-hello. My name is Arakawa Masaki."

The class replied with a short hello, most using a low grumble. Sakura's cheery shout could be heard above the mumbling, and Masaki blushed, suddenly embarrassed,

" Hiya, Masaki!!!"

The teacher nodded to the girl, smiling brightly,

" Tell us a little about yourself, Masaki."

" Yes, because we're all dying to know..."

Came a quip from the red-haired girl in the other corner of the room. Sakura scowled, balling a fist to the girl,

" Keep it up Keiara and you'll be the one who's dead!!!"

" Miss Fujima, please. Do not threaten your fellow classmates. Now, Miss Arakawa, you may continue."

Nodding, Masaki turned to the class, taking a deep breath,

" My name is Masaki--"

" You already said that..."

Masaki gulped harshly, keeping her eyes from Keiara,

" I'm 16-years-old. I live with my aunt and my cousin in an apartment just east of here."

The teacher smiled, nodding her on still,

" And what are some things you like to do in your free time?"

" Who cares--?"

" Miss Jitan, you will refrain from making such comments in my classroom!"

Keiara smirked, setting back in her chair in satisfaction,

" Whatever."

Sighing, the teacher adjusted her glasses,

" Now, Miss Arakawa, please continue."

Groaning, Masaki turned back to the class, tucking her hair behind her ears,

" In my free time, I like to play video games, watch TV, chat online... um... I like collecting miniature carousels....um.... I like to bake.... um--"

" Is 'um' something you enjoy in your free time, too?"

Masaki groaned, her face burning as she lowered her head. The teacher sighed, giving Keiara a stern look before turning back to the red-faced girl,

" That will be all. Please, have a seat now."

The girl nodded, quickly rushing back to her chair. The class snickered, all but Sakura, and Masaki slammed her head down onto her desk, sighing deeply.

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" So, Masaki, where are you from?"

Sakura eagerly asked. It was lunch time, and the cafeteria was packed. The two girls were lucky enough to have been able to grab a table by the window, where they could look out and see the carnival. Masaki sighed, delicately nibbling at her turkey sandwich,

" All over."

The ebony-haired girl giggled, taking a huge bite from her PB and J,

" Wow, your parents must like travel then, huh?"

" I don't have any parents."

The girl straightened, her emerald eyes wide as she looked to Masaki. The chestnut-haired girl was gazing out the window as she spoke, her mind seeming to be far away,

" My mother died when I was three...and at age five, my father was killed in a fire."

" Oh.... I-I'm so sorry! I didn't know. I'm such an @\$\$_--"

" Don't worry about it, you didn't know-- huh?"

Masaki straightened as she spotted the young man from earlier outside on the street. His long, black coat flapped in the softly in the wind, and his grey, wool hat shaded his eyes from the dim sunlight. Sakura blinked, waving a hand in front of the girl's face,

" Masaki? You there?"

" There's a boy..."

She then turned in her seat to see if she could spot what the girl was staring at,

" What boy? What are you talking about?"

Masaki gasped as she stood, shaking her head. The young man was gone,

" There's no one there...?"

The bell rang suddenly, and the chestnut-haired girl jumped, dropping her juice in the process. Sakura giggled, helping the poor girl clean up the mess,

" Wow, Masaki. You really scare easily, don't you?"

Masaki blushed in embarrassment, lowering her head as she took her napkin and wiped up the table.

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Sakura grinned as they descended the steps of St. Lucie's, grabbing Masaki by the arm,

" So, whaddya say we both go take a look inside that carnival, huh?"

The brunette sighed, shaking her head,

" We can't."

" Uh.... why not?"

" It's off limits."

The green-eyed girl groaned, even louder as a car horn honked at her, and she sighed, waving to her new friend,

" Ugh... my mom's here, anyway. Guess I'll see you tomorrow, Masaki?"

" Okay, sure."

Masaki watched quietly as the girl hopped into the tiny, evergreen station wagon, her mother smiling at her,

" How was your day, sweetheart?"

" It was great! Guess what--"

The car door shut then, and they drove on down the road, Masaki sighing deeply as she headed back to her aunt's apartment. Ai would probably be home by now. Her classes only went from 8 till noon. Masaki glanced down at her watch with a frown, idly wondering what time it was. Five. School had of course been out since two, but Masaki had decided to stay after at the drama club meeting with Sakura. The meeting had really just been Sakura introducing her to all of her friends. After that, they had decided to start a chat about the town's history. Apparently, St. Lucie's had originally been a boarding school for girls.

Another hot subject with the drama club had been that of 'Old Man Pacol', the oldest living resident of the town. He was going to turn 105 this year. They had all then made a trip into the church next door, and had taken to playing a game of 'Manhunt' in the sanctuary. Masaki had thought this a bit odd, considering where they were, and during the whole time, she couldn't help but feel that she was being watched. Sighing, the chestnut-haired girl glanced through the gates at the old carnival, the wind rustling the orange and brown leaves that littered it's fairways,

' " What are you doing here? This place is off limits..."

A cold breeze blew through then, and she grabbed hold of her skirt as to keep it from flying up. Once the wind had stopped, she took a deep breath, quickly hurrying home.

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He watched her silently, crouching atop the long-dead carousel. His sapphire eyes shimmered brightly in the dying sun, and he stood, his lengthy, black coat flapping in the breeze,

" The sun..."

His raven hair, hair that closely resembled a pair of cat's ears, swayed softly back and forth, glimmering a deep purple in the sunlight,

"...it's going down."

He leapt down from the carousel and took a wool, newsboy cap from his pocket, a small, black cat padding after him as he made his way toward the iron gates.