

# Bara no Konrei

## The Vampires' Prelude

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### Kapitel 1: The Beginning

Kouji was 22 years old when we met first. I was older. His family had just bought a beautiful mansion up the streets of the village, not far away from where I used to live. Carriages brought all the family's belongings and it was a day full of work, until everything was into place. The people were buzzing through the streets, anxious to see the noble family members, who were hotly discussed after the master's first visit here. Nobles in a small village as ours was something unusual and new for all the habitants. Of course discussions increased rapidly after the master had bought the mansion. I heard a lot of stories. And I didn't believe in one of them. But I have to confess, that even I was curious and wondered if I would see them the next sunday in church after their moving in.

I did, but only the lady and the master, their son did not come along. Guessing that I might knew a bit more about the village and the people, the lady and the master stayed until everyone was gone to talk to me. I still don't know why they had chosen me, for everyone knew I did not talk much.

„It's beautiful in here, I like the windows.“ The first words of the lady, I still remember them. She was right, the windows of my old church were nothing but beautiful. They were surely no masterpiece of art, but they simply fit and they had always such a warm light, even in winter.

„Do the people attend prayer regulary?“ the master asked me. He had a deep and soft voice.

„Not everyone, but most of people here do so. We don't have enough space for everyone, it's so small in here.“

„I see. May I ask your name, sister?“

„Mana.“

„What an extraordinary name.“ he said, scanning me with his green eyes. „Are you feeling well, sister?“

I was used to be asked by people wether I was ill or not. But I wasn't.

„You sound as if you had a cold. We all have to watch our health, this autumn is supposed to become a rough one.“

„I heard about it, sir. Thank you. We should pray to God for our and our children's health.“

„You are gentle.“ the lady said. „And beautiful. Just like a doll.“

The master laughed, seeing my irritated face at that compliment. „Forgive her, sister. My wife speaks what she thinks, no matter how direct it is. But she's got a good

heart."

I smiled shyly. True, the lady was a very good-hearted person as far as I could tell. I remember very well her portraits of all the different people and her generous attitude towards them. The day she died, 2 months after the moving in, I felt a lot of sadness. The master could hardly bear the loss and after he had lost his son some days later, he decided to part from this world to the heavens. At that time, I had already lost my ability to feel compassion.

After prayer and my brief talk to the master and the lady, I went up in the tower of the church where I would always meet with the old man that played the pipe organ for us. He had problems to handle the staircase alone, but his fingers were as skilled as they had been years ago. I liked his playing. Sometimes, he gave me lessons, let me try to play by myself. He somehow knew he made me happy with it and if I made him happy because he had company, I saw no point in being wrong to meet with him. Great Sister Ann did not like it. She said I should not waste my time to the babbling of an old man, but help my other sisters with arranging flowers, sewing and preparing meals for those who could not. To make up for my visits, I did most of that in the late of the night on Sundays, I did not want to deny the old man and myself the company. His wife had died years ago before I became a nun and it seemed that no one really cared for him honestly. His family cared because it was their duty, but it was no secret, that they regarded him as a burden. No one really liked being with him and for that, he didn't have anyone to talk to except me.

The more I was surprised when I saw he wasn't alone that Sunday. A red-haired young man was with him and he talked to him. He wore fashionable clothes and was about my height, a little taller maybe. I hadn't seen him before.

"Mana!" the old man said joyfully once he realised I was there. He always spoke very loud because he was almost dumb and he always called me 'Mana', but I didn't object.

"Good morning." I answered politely, "I see you've got already a visitor?"

"Yeah, kind 'o. The young master o' the mansion, he's int'rested in playing!"

I could tell he was happy. He smiled brightly and revealed his rather toothless mouth. My eyes wandered to the young master. He was, no doubt, a very handsome young man. When he faced me directly, I saw the unusual about his hair. The side I saw first, was red and curly, the other was cut short and black.

"You wonder about this?" he addressed me.

"I wonder about many things. Since you asked, it's your hair." I answered, knowing I could backfire such shameless assaults.

"And I wonder about things, too. For example why such a beautiful woman is hiding herself under a nun's robe."

"Oh Boy!" the old man exclaimed, chuckling. "You're going to burn yourself!"

He was. A typical, little heartbreaker. My inner eye already saw many of the young ladies in town in tears. But there were more troublesome things than a first, innocent love, I thought at that time. Today, I wouldn't say so anymore. Kouji was my first love, I have to admit. I never understood the feeling and I can't understand it anymore. The time, in which I was aware of my feelings was too short to grasp it entirely. I don't even know if one who's been in love his whole life could ever grasp love in all its facets.

I watched the old man explaining the pipe organ to the young master enthusiastically. By listening, I also got to know his name and asked myself, why the old master thought my name was extraordinary. As if Kouji wasn't just as strange, maybe a little more. By the end of this explanation of the pipe organ the old man had talked so much that I could hear how dry his mouth must be.

„Sir, it's time. Let's go. You wouldn't mind some water, too, would you?“ I offered him. „You're 'n angel, Mana.“ he let me know and reached for my hand, so I could lead him down to the ground floor. The young master followed us in silence, but he watched us very attentively. Once the old man had got a goblet of water from me and we had exited the church, I said goodbye to both of them and made my way back to the nun's dormitories to fetch some things for lunch. I needed some time to realise that I was followed by the young master. I turned around, and walked back to him.

„Is there something you'd like to ask me?“ I wanted to know.

„I saw you talking to my parents from up there.“ he said. „Did they say something about me?“

„No, sir.“ I answered honestly, but I was sure this wasn't the reason why he had followed me. „We just talked briefly about the weather and the town.“

„All right.“ he waited a moment, then: „Are you always at prayer on sundays?“

„Yes.“

„I didn't mean to offend you earlier.“ he said, almost a little unsure. „It's just that I speak quite openly ...“

I had to smile, he was truly the son of his parents. „Don't worry. I'm glad you were there. He had so much fun to talk to you, I'm happy for him.“

It took him a moment to realise I wasn't angry with him and he held out his hand to me.

„My name is Kouji.“

I shook his hand. „I am Mana.“

The days went by, nothing but routine. The daily chatting, the daily worries and the daily schedules. The only thing I had to get used to was the young master, who always greeted me when I walked on by in the streets. The lady hardly left her home, I had heard she was an artist and did paintings and for having such a great garden and an even greater view from the mansion over the area, it wasn't suprising at all. Her husband was always busy, he seemed not to have time for anything during the week. Their son, however, was everyday at leisure. The little heartbreaker on tour, and the girls at his heels.

I hardly got used to strangers, being the quiet and shy nun that I was. Even the other nuns thought I was strange. If they could, they'd avoid me. I didn't care, I appreciated the privacy I was given involuntarily.

Saturday evening, after the bells rang 6 o'clock, I went out to the fields to help a family picking up the apples that were now all of a healthy rosy colour. Even the ones that had fallen on the ground were looked at, everything was valueable. I was in a little hurry, but I arrived in time. The old lady of the house had children, all old enough to help, but only the youngest, Mary, did. She was a pretty, brown-haired girl, young 16 years old.

„Where is Mary? Doesn't she help?“ I asked as the old lady and I collected the baskets. „Oh, she's already on the field. She says she has ‚something to do‘ there, but I know her to well. She'll meet with a friend, I expect.“

„She surely has many friends.“ I said.

„Oh yes, and the boys simply love her. I wonder who will finally be the lucky one?“ she said amused. Surely, Mary was old enough to get married. For a brief moment, I imagined being at her wedding, sealing the will of a young couple to share life together in the name of God. I saw her happy.

„Sister,“ her mother addressed me, interrupting my thoughts. Her voice had become

heavy. „Mary wants to talk to you. But she wouldn't say what's the matter.“

„To me?“ I was surprised, but I did not show. „Yes, of course. She's welcome to come and see me.“

„Thank you. I'll let her know.“

„Thank God.“

„No, thank you.“ she insisted. „You are such a good soul, think once a little bit more about yourself, will you?“ She laid a hand on my shoulder, looking as gentle as a mother does when in worry about her children.

„I'll try.“ But truly, I did not know what to reply to this. Silently we walked up the path the fields with the baskets under our arms. When Mary saw us coming, she launched into a run, her long hair bouncing up and down.

„Good evening, sister!“ she greeted me, then took the baskets from her mother. „I'll take them for you.“

„Good evening, Mary.“ I greeted back, but something else had already caught my attention. I saw another figure emerging from the place where we had spotted Mary first and no doubt it was a man. Her mother also had noticed the man in the distance, apparently waiting for us to come up.

„Oh!“ Mary exclaimed laughing, seeing where her mother and me were looking.

„Mother, I have to introduce you to someone.“

„Mary, who is it ...?“ her mother said, a little startled by her own thoughts, but I exactly thought the same. Thinking about wedding. The images jumped to my mind again and I was about to ask her, when I recognised the man. Or rather, his hair.

„No, it's not this.“ Mary said. „He's the young master of the noble house. He wants to help us with the apples. And we can use a strong hand, don't we?“

The smile in her face betrayed her, it was obvious she didn't waste a thought on a strong hand and the apples, she was interested in the young master. Her mother simply nodded to what her daughter had said. She would not question it, she would not even object. A wealthy husband, what more could you ask for in times like these? And if her daughter would be happy with it, it sounded like a perfect match. But to be honest, I never believed it could become true. I expected the old master would forbid it, but he never came in the situation to deal with it. Mary was dead three days later and I found myself not attending her wedding, but her funeral.

The circumstances of Mary's death were, for normal people I may say, beyond reason. She had died in her sleep, in the middle of a stormy night. Nothing was wrong with her, she didn't have any injuries except two small wounds on her neck. The people said, it must've been the Devil's strike. I didn't believe the devil had come to get the virgin girl, but I was expected to say the very same story to comfort the people in the village. Preach them God will fix it and the Devil won't stand a chance, if we all had strong faith and courage. And for a brief moment and the first time, I felt it was ridiculous what I said. Now I question myself, if I had already become a traitor then for having such thoughts. But my faith had never been shaken, so why would it now?

Mary had sought out my help, the day before her death. She had told me about her believe in God, her feelings for the young master and that she wished to marry as a virgin, to show that she held dear all what God had taught us. But since a few days, she continued, her dreams were haunted by ghost, and she saw herself having intercourse with another man. She had been so ashamed about it, tears had dropped from her face. All I could do had been to comfort her, give her strength and encourage her, not to believe so much in dreams. If I had known this night would be her last and I

would have been the last to see her beautiful face alive, I would have never let her go home. I felt miserable the following days, hoping her funeral would allow me find a little peace for myself. But humans did not let me rest. Sunday's prayer was as crowded as it hadn't been in years, people even gathered around the building, all in fear the Devil could chose them as his victim as well. My mind troubled me and once the local police and the pastor from the next bigger town came to investigate me about this extraordinary death of the girl, I already felt like a convicted. Somehow, I could not manage to tell them about Mary's dreams, I constantly saw her face in tears, her eyes full of shame. She had trusted me to tell nobody else and even in death, I would keep that promise.

They interrogated me in the council one day before the funeral. I tried my best not to show how much this all affected me. In the end, I did not know wether they believed that I really had told them everything I knew or not. But I felt relief when they were gone and it was over, or at least I hoped it was over. Someone knocked on the door, unwillingly but still politely, I answered to open the door. The young master entered the small room. He looked pale.

„What can I do for you?“ I asked, having a good guess myself.

„It's nothing with me,“ he let me know and I was surprised. „I came to ask you if you were all right?“ Now I was surprised eben more. Since the girl had died, no one had asked my wether I was all right, everyone expected me to be strong. Yes, strong I seemed on the outside, but not on the inside.

„I am fine.“ I lied. I knew, I shouldn't lie. „But I fear you don't. You look so pale, sir.“

„So do you.“

„I've always been like this.“ I tried to smile, but I must've failed. The young master came over to me and sat down on the chair opposite to me, staring out of the window. I watched him.

„Are you sad?“ he asked me all of a sudden.

„I am. She was a good girl.“ I answered, trying to ignore the quicker rhythm of my heart. If he kept asking so many questions, I would not know what to do. The interrogation hadn't been soothing for my nerves, nor was this. I wasn't used to people asking about my feelings. My feelings had always belonged to me and God.

„Maybe she was ...“ he said absently.

„Didn't you like her?“ Tactlessly it came out of me before I could stop myself. He just turned to me, apprently confused.

„I did. But not as you might think it is. She was fun. And pretty. Nothing more.“

Heartbreaker, it shot into my mind.

„Don't get me wrong.“ he added. „It's not that I would not feel sad about what happened to her.“

„I didn't intend to give you the impression.“

„Would you like to eat dinner with my parents and me? They like you and you must be exhausted.“

The last thing I had expected had been an invitation. Elder ladies sometimes invited me to drink tea and to have company. Others invited me because I should come to see an ill or dying family member. But never I had been invited to dinner for my own sake.

„It's alright if you say you don't like.“ the young master said hastily. I was sure he did not know how to deal with the fact that I didn't say anything. But I was unsure, wether I should or not. Wether Great Sister Ann would need me or not to prepare the funeral tomorrow.

„Thank you very much. But I'm afraid, I cannot accept. My help is needed, I'm sure you

understand, sir?"

„I do ... still, if you like to come, you're welcome. We always eat at 7 o'clock."

He got up from his chair, went to the door, said goodbye and he was gone.

The rest of the day, I proved myself to be useless for anything. I couldn't say what had caused it exactly, but fact was that Great Sister Ann decided I should better rest and calm down for the funeral tomorrow. I tried to distract myself by reading, by sewing, by trying to catch some sleep. Nothing helped. The bells rang 6 o'clock and I hadn't had one single minute of peace. My mind wandered again to what Mary had told me. About the man coming to her through the window in the middle of the night. But it was just a dream, wasn't it? Yet, she hadn't dreamt it once ... three, four times she had said. What, if such a man did exist? Had he been her murderer?

I came to the conclusion that for once being alone did not do me any good and maybe others could achieve what I could not. And since I didn't know much about the new noble family, it seemed a good chance to get to know them a bit better. About 10 minutes later and still in my nun's robes, I made my way up to the mansion. I was welcomed by a servant I had not yet seen and was lead into a very beautiful living room decorated with many paintings. I guessed the lady had painted them. I saw they were done with much talent and skill and I liked them. Mostly landscapes, but I really found myself attracted to the only one showing an angel, lamenting over the people's pain. I had not much time to admire the artworks any longer, for the servant came back and told me, the young master would arrive in a few moments. I thanked him, then continued to explore my environment with my eyes. There was a piano, four very comfortable looking armchairs and a small table in the middle of them. Maybe the master talked here to business partners.

„Do you like it?"

I heard the voice of the young master behind me.

„Yes, I do. Good evening." I greeted him. He smiled back at me.

„I am surprised you've come here."

„I am, too." I admitted and I expected him to ask me why.

„My parents haven't arrived yet. Would you like to see our garden?" he asked and offered me his arm to link in. At least, he had manners. Still, a nun wasn't supposed to walk in such a way with a young man. I apologized for declining and so we walked slowly next to each other. The young master did talk a lot. I rather listened, except for the times he asked me something. To my own surprise, he did not want to know any reasons why I came although I said I wouldn't have the time. After the master and the lady had arrived from their visit of a friend who lived two towns north, we turned back to have dinner with them.

In the end, I should have known better than believing sharing dinner would make me think of something else but Mary. It was the subject of the evening, at least for the young master's parents. I wasn't even sure if they knew their son had met with the girl sometimes and helped us picking the apples. My head started to ache and I was sure I would leave as soon as possible. The young master accompanied me to the gate of the mansion later the evening, followed by the lady's words that I was welcome at any time again. Yes, but never again after some mysterious death.

„I'm sorry." the young master said at the gate. „I thought it could make you feel better."

„I thought the same. It wasn't your fault. The dinner was excellent, please tell that the one who cooked it."

„I will. Shall I go with you? Just in case."

„It's not that far. I can watch myself. I doubt a madman will fly to me from nowhere.“ I said, but sarcasm filled my words. The young master instead grapped my arm. Puzzled I looked at him.

„She told you, didn't she?“ His eyes stared into mine.

„I don't know what you mean.“

„Mary ... did she tell you about her dreams?“ he repeated. I was battling with me, but then:

„Yes. I know about them.“

He released my arm. „And?“ he asked, sounding impatiently.

„What?“

„What do you think? Do you believe her?“

„I'm not sure. It sounds phantastic. ‚A man comes flying to my window‘ ...“ I answered tonelessly.

„Yeah, it does ...“ His voice made me clear that he did believe in Mary's dreams as little as I did and that he had the same doubts about them. But we both seemed not to question that Mary herself had believed in her dreams and that she therefore had not been lying.

„Sorry, I intended that you would not have to think about it, now I mention it myself.“ he said, looking at the ground.

„Don't worry. I'll be fine.“

„I apologize, sister.“

And before I realised, he had taken my hand and kissed it. „Good night. Sleep well, you'll need your strength tomorrow.“ And with that he turned and went back to the mansion.

I stood there paralyzed. After some moments, I hurried to get home. Breathing heavily I arrived in my room within the nun's dormitories. I was worried.. With a simply kiss -a kiss that did not mean inevitably a thing- the young master had caused me to feel entirely uncomfortable and that I should beware of him. I checked the clock on the wall. It told me to go to bed, and while I undressed myself, I noticed how much my fingers trembled. Looking down my naked body always reminded me of the greatest lie I kept with my constantly, a lie I could never throw off me.

Today it doesn't matter anymore. The only advantage of being condemned. You don't have to care. Anything that matters are your own needs, wishes and desires. But back then, the idea someone could find out what I was simply terrified me. And Kouji ... he had made a step no one else before had dared. I prayed to God he would not let Kouji discover my secret and it took ages for me to fall asleep that night. A million thoughts rushed through me, all about what would happen to me if someone got to know. Would they put me into jail? Would they say I was insane? Would they go that far and kill me? I wished my brain would stop thinking. After hours I fell into an unsteady sleep. Outside, thunder and lightning made the weather of the night.