









TUNERS

《 Ace Detective》 Nagisa Natsunagi

In charge of investigating and resolving all sorts of global crises. Post formerly held by Siesta, who succeeded Danny Bryant.

《Assassin》

Fuubi Kase

Assassins sometimes fight the world's enemies directly but often take on dirty, covert jobs. Many are killed in the line of duty.

《 Vampire》

Scarlet

A special post that's only been given one specific mission. Has the highest sheer combat power of all the Tuners.

《Oracle》

Mia Whitlock

Uses clairvoyance to predict disasters and record them in the sacred text. Often supports other Tuners.

《Inventor》

Stephen Bluefield

Provides other Tuners with weapons and is researching unique technologies that could prevent unknown global crises.

《Revolutionary》

Youkaki

Has a hand in the politics of all the world's nations and secretly preserves the world's balance from the shadows. Post previously held by Fritz Stewart.

《Hero》

**Full-Face** 

Usually uses supernatural physical abilities to fight the world's enemies directly. As a rule, this role is given to those who have a visible public presence.

**《Enforcer》** 

**Douglas Amon** 

Was in charge of secretly disposing of criminals who couldn't officially be brought to justice. After Amon's death in the line of duty, the position has been suspended.

《Magical Girl》

Reloaded

Must fight various enemies of the world. The position's original title was "Magician," but it was changed at the request of its current bearer.

《Information Broker》 **Bruno Belmondo** 

Uses vast knowledge to support the other Tuners. Bruno was an active Tuner longer than any of the others.

《Men in Black》

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A group with countless members all over the world. They perform a wide range of duties, from acting as couriers to conducting investigations, and other Tuners may use them as necessary.

《Phantom Thief》

Arsene

A traitor who was once entrusted with a hero's mission. Was imprisoned for the crime of stealing the sacred text but escaped. Whereabouts unknown.

# Det ECtive Is Already Dead

8

nigozyu

Illustration by Umibouzu



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#### The Detective Is Already Dead, Vol. 8

nigozyu

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Umibouzu

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A past that's gone with the wind

**Yen Newsletter** 



# A prologue from the future

"This is what I found in Grandfather's study."

One afternoon at the Shirogane Detective Agency, our client—Noel de Lupwise—held out a scrap of notepaper. Siesta, Nagisa, and I leaned in to look at the line of text on it. It was brief, just three words long:

"The Akashic records"

The three of us exchanged looks.

"A dozen other notes turned up as well, but every one of them contained this phrase in other languages."

Taking several pieces of paper from her bag, Noel spread them out for us. I couldn't read most of them, but she was probably right about what they said.

"And Bruno wrote these?" I asked.

Noel nodded. "I believe so."

After Bruno's death, Noel had begun organizing the mansion where he'd lived, and a week ago, she'd contacted us to tell us she'd found these. She wanted us to see the notes in person, she'd said, and she'd hastily flown over from France.

"Something's wrong with the world." Siesta the Ace Detective took a sip of her black tea, then went on. "Bruno held the world's wisdom, and he relayed the truth to us with the final gamble of his life."

Two weeks ago, a peace ceremony known as the Ritual of Sacred Return had been held to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Great Cataclysm's resolution. At that ritual, Bruno had rebelled against the Federation Government and all humanity, passing himself off as a resident of Another Eden.

At the end of his life, he'd told me his true motive: He'd been trying to warn the human race, which had grown numb and complacent in peaceful times. Bruno had said that the world had forgotten something important. Just before his death, he'd predicted that a crisis would occur soon.

Ever since then, Siesta, Nagisa, and I had been independently collecting information in an attempt to learn what exactly was about to happen.

"These notes are hints about that, aren't they?" Nagisa, the other detective, gazed at the legacy Bruno Belmondo had left us. Bruno had mentioned the "Akashic records" at the ritual. I didn't know what that meant, and he had reacted with despair when he saw as much on my face.

"We should know what the Akashic records are," I said.

And yet we'd forgotten. All of us had, even the detectives.

Bruno had asked me several other questions that day, and it had seemed to confirm to him that what we knew didn't line up. For example, he'd asked me what "the Singularity" meant, and how many Tuners there were.

"It can't mean the memories of everyone in the world have been rewritten, can it?" Nagisa asked dubiously.

"It may not even be that simple," Siesta told her, pointing out that the situation could actually be worse. "If we've only lost our memories, all we'd need to do is retrieve the information from some other source. But what if we search the whole world and there is no such source?"

"...No way. That would be ridiculous."

Was she suggesting our memories weren't the only things that had been rewritten? Had records been affected, too?

"Bruno had an abundance of knowledge; he may have recovered part of those lost records somehow."

Were these brief notes the fragments of data he'd retrieved?

"Want to look it up in a dictionary?" Nagisa hauled over a thick book and opened it on the table in front of us. "So, um, what are the Akashic records? 'The concept of the world's memory, in which everything since the beginning of the universe or the world has been recorded.' ...Hmm. Okay!"

"You have no idea what you're talking about, do you?" I pointed out.

"...Ngh." Nagisa winced and turned to Siesta for help.

"I knew what the term meant, at least," Siesta said.

"There you go again, immediately trying to one-up me!" Nagisa scowled and shook Siesta hard.

"I'm sure that isn't what Bruno was trying to say, though." Patting Nagisa's head, Siesta looked down at Bruno's notes again. "I think 'the Akashic records' had another meaning, one that wouldn't be in the dictionary."

Silence fell.

What exactly were we forgetting? What had been lost?

"I think Grandfather entrusted this to you."

Noel raised her head to look at the three of us. Then she glanced over at the empty spot on the sofa next to her. "A month ago, he sat here. At the time, he said nothing definite. However, I think he came here in person because he had a case for you. He visited your detective agency as a client."

Noel's words made me think about the day Bruno had suddenly stopped by.

Bruno knew his own death was approaching, and he'd still traveled ten thousand kilometers over land and sea to meet with the detectives. He'd wanted them to pick up on the impending global crisis no one knew about.

"Allow me to make a formal request on behalf of my grandfather: Please save the world."

Noel bowed to us. Siesta and Nagisa nodded firmly to each other, while I gestured to Noel to raise her head. "First, we'll need to get a handle on the problem, huh."

It was easy enough to talk about saving the world, but what specifically did we need to resolve? We had to figure that out first.

"The first issue is that we seem to have forgotten whatever these Akashic records are. Not only that, but records all over the world may have been rewritten as well."

Although at this point, that last part was just Siesta's theory.

"Why don't we try asking the five W's and H?" Siesta suggested. That seemed

like a good, simple way to start. "What is the fact that we've forgotten these Akashic records. The remaining questions are when, where, who, why, and how."

"Should we start with when, then? But we don't know when we forgot, do we? We only recently learned we forgot anything at all," Nagisa said.

"True. Next is *where*, but we probably didn't forget in a specific location. It isn't as if everyone in the world got together in one place."

Siesta continued, putting our current issues in order one by one. After that came *who* had taken the memories and records of the Akashic records from the world, *how* they'd done it, and *why*.

"I think there's a good possibility that the *who* was someone connected to the Federation Government."

Noel suspected her colleagues. It was a reasonable assumption, given Bruno had spent the last days of his life opposing them.

"In that case, would the *why* have to do with the government as well?" I asked. "Maybe they took those memories because it would be inconvenient for them if we remembered?"

"If that's true, then how did they erase our memories?"

Even Noel, who was a member of the Federation Government, frowned and fell into thought. She wasn't a high-level bureaucrat, and she said there was a lot of information that she didn't have the clearance to access. Was there really a way to take a specific, isolated memory from everyone in the world?

"Let's start back at the beginning. When did our memories and the world's records start being wrong? Why don't we check into that?" Siesta asked, getting up from the sofa.

"How, exactly?"

"Well, by reminiscing, of course." Siesta returned with a box of snacks.

That got a reaction from Noel. "My, those look delicious."

"They're rice crackers softened with soy sauce."

"Japanese snacks intrigue me."

The conversation had suddenly shifted to a lighter topic.

"We'll need tea, then." Even Nagisa went to the kitchen to brew some green tea. Was this place actually a detective agency? I smiled wryly.

"This is how we've always been, though, isn't it?" Siesta smiled back at me. "We've never let the gravity of a situation weigh us down with worry. The two things we've never forgotten to do are banter and take tea breaks."

"...Yeah, I guess that's true."

At this point, it had been seven years since Siesta whisked me away on a rambling journey around the world. We'd resolved all sorts of incidents, we'd traded jokes, and we'd paired black tea with shortcake to bring out the bitter and sweet.

Before long, Nagisa brought us tea. As I sipped mine, I asked Noel about something that had been tugging at me. "By the way, what's the wooden box?"

A box made of what looked like paulownia wood had been sitting on the table ever since Noel had arrived and set it there. Guess it wasn't just a gift for us after all.

"I'd been waiting for an opportunity to tell you. Grandfather left it for me. He said it contained a picture book I'd loved when I was a child. However..."

With visible confusion, Noel opened the box. Inside was a small, bronze-colored, pyramid-shaped...art object? Or maybe a really old ritual implement.

"Was it a gift from his travels or something?"

"I don't know. I even wondered if he'd given me the wrong box."

...I doubted it. I couldn't see Bruno making that kind of mistake.

"May I...?" Siesta asked. She picked up the mysterious object, then examined it from various angles, murmuring half-formed theories about what it was made of and when.

The object passed into Nagisa's hands, then mine. It was hard and cold under my fingertips. What on earth was it?

"…"

Suddenly, a memory flickered through my mind.

I froze up for a few moments. The other three watched me, confused.

"Sorry. We were telling old stories, weren't we?" I tried to get the conversation going again. When had our memories started to go strange? Why had we forgotten the Akashic records and the Singularity, among other things? If we wanted to find hints in the past, we needed to retrace our memories.

"Where do we start, though? At the Great Cataclysm, maybe?" Nagisa set her teacup down.

"Mm, a little earlier might be better. While I was asleep, for example," Siesta said. That was two years ago.

We'd told Siesta about that time after she woke up, of course, but she seemed to think there was more to discuss about it. I agreed.

"I'm guessing we should start with that one story, then?" For some reason, Nagisa gave me a chilly look. "You know. The time Kimihiko cheated."

"That's one heck of an accusation. And a lie." Although, I did get where she was coming from.

"My brother, cheating? I certainly want to hear about that."

"Noel, didn't I say you weren't allowed to call me your brother?"

"Huh. My assistant, cheating? Color me intrigued."

"Siesta, don't polish your musket."

Weirdly enough, though, that time was the very thing I'd just felt the urge to talk about. Setting down the whatever-it-was, I thought back to two years ago.

"This happened three months after we defeated Seed and Siesta fell asleep..."

We were about to embark on a journey to the past, in search of clues to the Akashic records.



# **Chapter 1**

# ◆ I'm the star of the show today

"Happy birthday, Yui!" Natsunagi called in a singsong voice. Several party crackers burst, and then applause filled the room.

"Heh-heh! Thank you!"

In the Saikawa mansion's magnificent dining room, Yui Saikawa, today's leading lady, sat beaming in front of a cake.

"Go on, Yui," Charlie said. "Blow out those candles."

And Yui did, all fifteen. It was a big cake.

"I didn't think you'd all really celebrate with me. This is wonderful." Yui clasped her hands tightly in front of her chest, blissfully soaking in the celebration.

"Well, we did promise we'd throw you a birthday party. Even if it was a day late."

We'd talked about it three months ago, when the four of us had visited Singapore on business. Today—December 24, Christmas Eve—we'd made that party happen at the Saikawa residence.

"All my fans celebrated with me at my Birthday Festival concert yesterday, and then you three came over today. I'll just have to make every day my birthday!" Saikawa kicked her feet happily while Natsunagi and Charlie cut the cake.

"If every day's your birthday, you'll be an old lady before you know it."

"It's all right, Kimizuka. Idols stop aging when they turn eighteen!" Saikawa told me, punctuating her weird logic with a peace sign. I hoped she hung on to her energy, charm, and that trace of sassiness after she grew up, too.

As the four of us were eating our cake, Natsunagi said, "Oh, that's right."

Rummaging in her backpack, she pulled something out. "Here, Yui. It's your birthday present!"

"Oh, I've got one, too. I didn't really know what would be good, though." Hesitantly, Charlie also handed Saikawa a wrapped present.

The gifts turned out to be a mug and several different types of hair accessories. Saikawa held them in both hands, and her face lit up.

"I'll use them right now! I'll have a café au lait in the mug Nagisa gave me and put my hair up with one of Charlie's accessories, and then we can go on with the party!"

As soon as she said it, the maids who'd been standing by zipped in and skillfully made it all happen, and soon Saikawa was cheerfully sipping coffee with her hair pulled back in a new scrunchie.

"See? I told you it would be fine," Natsunagi told Charlie, who looked relieved. Apparently, they'd picked out Saikawa's presents together. (I hadn't been invited.)

"And, um, by the way...what about you, Kimizuka?" Saikawa was stealing glances at me.

Hoping she was keeping her expectations low, I got a small package out of my bag.

"A foreign novel? That's a surprisingly respectable present from you."

"It's a translated edition, so you won't have any trouble reading it. Also, quit acting like this is the biggest shock of the day or something."

Saikawa giggled. "I'm happy," she said, she and hugged the book to her chest.

"Come to think of it, Kimizuka, you and Ma'am did that sort of thing, didn't you?" Charlie reminisced, propping her chin on her hand. "You'd loan each other books or DVDs, then share notes afterward."

"Yeah, that was Siesta's idea. She said there were as many interpretations of art as there were people who saw it, so we could deepen our readings by seeing the same things and sharing our thoughts."

I got the feeling I was the only one who'd actually learned anything as a

result, though.

"I see," said Yui. "No wonder I sensed the influence of an old flame."

"Quit saying things people are gonna misinterpret. Siesta wasn't my... It wasn't like that."

"No, she wasn't your old flame," said Natsunagi. "She's your current one."

"Why are you getting all depressed?"

I mean, it was clear to everybody that Siesta and I had never had that sort of relationship. Nodding to myself, I took a bite of cake.

"This is really sweet."

Hastily grabbing my cup, I used the bitter coffee to cut the sugar.

"I really do wish Siesta could have been here as well," Saikawa murmured, looking down at her hands. "...Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." She hastily retracted the remark, hunching up.

"What, we're not enough for you, Yui?" Sensing the shift, Charlie teasingly poked Saikawa's shoulder.

Natsunagi joined in. "It's fine. On your next birthday...she will be."

"...Yes!"

Charlie and Natsunagi smiled, and Saikawa raised her head as if she'd gotten her energy back. "Still, it's hard to believe that was already three months ago."

By "that," Saikawa probably meant the business in Singapore. A few months back, the four of us had been summoned there by the Federation Government, and Natsunagi and I had met with Ice Doll, a high-level government official. And in that meeting, we had talked about—

"I never thought you'd really become the Ace Detective." Charlie gazed at Natsunagi, the set of her lips softening slightly.

Three months ago, Ice Doll had officially recognized Natsunagi as a Tuner. Siesta's post of Ace Detective currently belonged to Nagisa Natsunagi.

"What do you think of it, Charlie? Be honest."

Natsunagi and Charlie had gotten off to the worst start ever when they met on that luxury cruise. Natsunagi had declared that she'd be the one to inherit Siesta's will, and Charlie hadn't taken it well at all.

Now, though...

"Didn't I say so before? I'm proud of you."

In the time since, they'd weathered many crises together. Sometimes, Natsunagi had literally fought with her life on the line, and as an agent, Charlie had the utmost respect for her.

"...I see. Heh-heh. Yes, I see."

Grinning, Natsunagi reached across the table to Charlie and tried to poke her cheek.

"Quit it," Charlie said, twisting away, but she didn't seem genuinely irritated.

"Kimizuka, I believe I'm seeing a lovely lily or two blooming over there. Is that romance in the air?"

"I'm just glad they're getting along."

I'd been eating my cake throughout the entire exchange. It was so damn sweet.

"Well, I may be the Ace Detective, but I haven't done any new jobs yet." Natsunagi shrugged a little awkwardly.

The Seed incident had ended four months ago, but Natsunagi hadn't been assigned a new mission. Conversely, that did mean there hadn't been a crisis big enough for the Tuners to get sent out.

"Maybe they think of me as a figurehead. Maybe they just needed to put somebody in the Ace Detective position."

Apparently, Natsunagi wasn't satisfied with that state of affairs. She puffed out her cheeks sulkily.

"But didn't Noches say a long time ago that you'd be appointed as the next Ace Detective? I doubt you're just a figurehead..."

"Yes, but back then, she was still in my mind. I bet that's why," Natsunagi told

Saikawa. By "she," Natsunagi meant Hel. Hel had been a former SPES executive and a really tough enemy for us. She'd also been Natsunagi's alternate personality, but during our fight against Seed, she'd gone to sleep inside the massive tree known as Yggdrasil.

That meant Natsunagi didn't have as much power as she'd once had, and she'd been appointed to the Tuners as a regular human.

"Even Ice Doll acknowledged you as the Ace Detective. You could stand to be a little more confident."

"You think so? There's no telling what was going through her mind behind that mask," Natsunagi told me, remembering the frigid government official. "I bet she had her own reasons for making me the Ace Detective."

"You mean Ice Doll's plotting something?"

"It's just a hunch, not a deduction or anything. Still, even if she did have some sort of hidden motive, I'll work so hard that she and her people will ask the Ace Detective for help someday and mean it," Natsunagi declared.

"And you won't regret it?" Charlie asked Natsunagi again. "You're not just following in Ma'am's footsteps. You've decided to live that way because that's what you want?"

"Yes. I'm not a proxy detective. This is how I'm going to live my life."

Natsunagi tucked her short hair behind her ear, and the part of her face I could see was filled with resolve. Being at her side now made me prouder than anything else ever could.

"I see. Then I'll be praying for your success from a distance." Smiling a little, Charlie sipped her tea. Wait, that sounds like... "I'm going to be leaving Japan for a while."

"For an assignment?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm headed to a war zone for a bit."

That was how Charlotte Arisaka Anderson lived; it was routine for her. Before, we'd worked toward a common goal together, but now that our enemy SPES had been defeated, Charlie didn't have a reason to stay. The agent was leaving

for another battlefield.

"Why do you seem almost bummed?"

Uh, I wasn't. Not really.

I'd just been thinking I'd finally be free of our dumb arguments for a while.

"Kimizuka, guy tsunderes aren't cool these days." Saikawa sighed and shook her head.

"Don't tell me you're going somewhere, too, Saikawa?" I pleaded.

"Ah-ha-ha. I'm planning to stay in Japan for the time being. That said, I've been taking frequent breaks from my work as an idol, so I'll have to do better there!"

True, Saikawa had been so tied up in the sequence of SPES-related events that her idol career had taken a big hit. But as for the coming days...

"Charlie and Yui both have places to return to. We shouldn't hold them back," Natsunagi reprimanded me gently.

Our fight had reached a stopping point, and now it was time for new departures.

But...

"None of us have forgotten your wish, Kimizuka."

With her sharp blue eye, Saikawa had read my mind.

The next thing I knew, Natsunagi and Charlie were both gazing at me, too.

"Yeah. It's still too soon for an epilogue."

Until the day that wish came true, our story wouldn't end.

## Lost memory of Christmas Eve

The party went on for a while after that, and it was after nine thirty when we finally split up.

As everyone except Saikawa headed home, I grabbed a taxi and stopped by a Western sweets shop that wasn't quite closed yet to pick up a strawberry

shortcake and a Mont Blanc. Then I got back into my waiting taxi and headed for a certain destination.

"I must look like I've got the worst sweet tooth ever."

Remembering the sugary cake I'd been eating just a little while ago, I smiled wryly. But this was for someone else, and I absolutely had to deliver it.

Ten minutes later, I reached my destination and got special permission to enter the building.

After taking the elevator up to the third floor, I walked down a gloomy, familiar hallway until I reached the door at the very end. I knocked three times. Nobody answered, but let no one say I don't mind my manners. After all, the person on the other side of that door might get mad at me if I didn't observe that basic rule.

I slid open the door and stepped into the hospital room where she slept.

In a private room lit only by pale moonlight, Sleeping Beauty lay on the bed. Turning on the room lights didn't feel right somehow, so I turned on the lamp instead.

"Is that too bright, Siesta?"

Siesta, the previous Ace Detective. Once, death had firmly separated us. Thanks to Natsunagi's desperate gamble, my former partner had awakened for a few weeks, but then she'd fallen asleep again. In order to keep the "seed" buried in her heart from going out of control, Siesta had chosen to rest, believing we'd find a way to save her someday. She'd been in this hospital room for three months already.

"Which do you want, strawberry or chestnut?" I set the cakes I'd brought on the bedside table.

Today was Christmas Eve. Seasonal events had always been of the utmost importance to her. At the very least, she needed cake.

"Don't tell me you're going to have both again. Save some for me."

There was no answer. She just kept breathing peacefully. Geez. I didn't think I'd ever seen anyone sleep this happily.

When I looked at the cupboard by her pillow, the flowers on it seemed brandnew. Noches must have come by to visit today and changed them. We'd invited her to Saikawa's party, too, of course, but she'd said she had a previous engagement. Apparently, that keeping Siesta company.

She'd gotten the jump on me. Siesta wouldn't have been lonely anyway, would she?

"Well, Siesta? What about it?"

As usual, there was no answer. I didn't know what she was thinking right now. Even so, coming here today was a necessity.

As for why, the answer was in a memory from a long-ago Christmas.

"Welcome home, Assistant."

Christmas Eve, several years back.

That night, when I got back to the hotel we were basing ourselves out of, the room was inexplicably decorated for Christmas. On top of that...

"You're late, though. I've already eaten half of it."

...Siesta, who'd been working her way through a whole cake, was wearing a triangular red hat.

"Uh, I was out on a job you asked me to take over for you, remember?"

And it wasn't a half that was gone; it was more like two thirds. I sighed.

"Here you go," Siesta said. She held out a wrapped package that turned out to be handkerchiefs. Apparently, it was my Christmas present.

"I didn't get you anything."

"I don't expect these things from you," Siesta bluntly replied.

She was being tough on me, but that was normal. She didn't seem angry or anything.

"Here we've got this cake, but it's late, and caffeine's probably not a great idea. Want some cola instead?"

"...Hmm. Sure, why not?"

Just then, though, I noticed something. Since we were together all the time, I noticed. Although the Ace Detective was always calm and collected, she was pouting very slightly. She wasn't mad that I hadn't bought her a present... She was disappointed.



"Want me to go buy you something now?"

"All the stores are closed."

"Want to go somewhere tomorrow, then?"

"They say a hurricane is going to hit this whole area."

"This knack for attracting trouble is getting out of hand. ... In that case."

"There's another option?" Siesta glanced up at me.

"Tomorrow's Christmas. For just one day, I'll do whatever you want."

To give a cute example, I was thinking of something along the lines of those coupons for back rubs or helping out that little kids give their moms. However, as far as I was concerned, it was unprecedented carte blanche: For one day only, I'd do anything Siesta said. That was all I could think of when I hadn't gotten her a wrappable gift.

But when she heard my idea, Siesta blinked at me, then giggled.

"Did you seriously just say, Your Christmas present is me?"

How had I responded to that?

Had I told her to shut up, or had I gotten sort of flustered?

The one thing I was sure of was that Siesta had been smiling then. On that Christmas Eve, she'd been there with me, and she'd been smiling.

"The cake will be in the fridge, okay?"

As I put my memories back in their box, I opened the little fridge.

It was completely packed with fruit and European sweets. I hadn't been the only one visiting her.

"You're as popular as ever, huh."

I managed to clear enough space for the cake in there. Somebody would probably eat them sooner or later.

Sitting down on the stool beside the bed, I took another look at Siesta.

Did she know I was here as she slept peacefully in the moonlight? Or was she dreaming about something more fun?

"Just once, couldn't you answer me?"

It had been three months. Nobody would punish her for breaking the silence for a minute. I could deal with a little rudeness or a cutting remark. She could even ask me if I was stupid. ...So how about it?

"Heh. Kidding."

Siesta smiled at my witty joke.

Hm? That smile was there the whole time? Well, that's because I said something funny in her dream. Yeah.

"Oh. Is it really that late already?"

It was eleven PM. I got to my feet just a little reluctantly and said "I'll come again" instead of *Merry Christmas*.

Someday, I'd wake Siesta from her long sleep.

That was my only wish, and this story's final destination.

## **◆** The new heroine's name is...

"That's weird. Why is it midnight already?"

When I checked my phone outside Siesta's hospital room, it was the twenty-fifth.

True, I'd sat back down again, thinking I'd watch Siesta's face just a little longer before heading home. I'd reminisced about the past and thought about the future...but how could that possibly have taken an hour?

I needed to head home already. It was past midnight, and I had plans in the morning. I had to take a shower and get to bed. With that thought, I hurried to the elevator. Except...

"It's out of order?"

For some reason, the elevator wasn't responding.

It had worked a couple of hours ago; it was weird for it to break out of nowhere. Or had they shut it down for the night? There was nothing I could do, so I headed for the stairs.

"Man. I hate that this always happens to me."

Blaming this stroke of bad luck on my predisposition, I made my way down the poorly lit stairs.

The relative darkness wasn't very reassuring, and that's before you take into account that this was a hospital.

I picked up the pace. Five steps, ten steps, twenty, until I reached a landing where moonlight streamed in through the window. I looked up, then noticed something strange.

"Siesta's room was on the third floor. Right?"

No, I was sure about that. I'd been there a lot over the past few months.

So what the hell?

I stared at the floor number on the wall of the landing.

"Why am I still on the third floor?"

I'd come down quite a ways, but here I was in front of a 3F sign on the landing. I felt my hair stand on end.

"...Oh, come on," I said to nobody in particular. Then I ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time. When I reached another landing, I looked at the number on the wall—3F. I ran down more stairs. The number on the next landing was—3F. I ran down another flight, and—4F.

"The fourth floor?!"

Was I losing my mind, or was the hospital a fancy trick building created by some up-and-coming designer? I ran downstairs—and sometimes up—in search of the truth, but I found no answers.

It was the dead of winter, but my forehead wouldn't stop sweating. Where

was I, and what was I running toward? Just then, I sensed something behind me.

I don't want to turn around, I thought, but my body did it anyway. All I saw was darkness. And—a hand dyed with red reached out of that darkness.

"When did I wander into a horror story?!"

If detectives were mystery experts, who did you call for horror? Who would take down this monster? A medium? A Shinto priest? An exorcist? I just needed to get away from that hand, so I took off up the stairs. This time, I was definitely heading up.

At last, I reached the top and saw a metal door, which I promptly kicked open. The outside air brushed my cheeks. Finally, I was away from all the weirdness—"—Huh?"

The next moment, the only thing in front of me was the night sky.

The city lights formed a beautiful scene under my feet.

And I was in the process of slowly jumping into it.

A floating sensation swept over me.

What the hell was happening? All I knew was that I was falling.

"Grab on!"

I didn't know whose voice that was, but I knew they were talking to me.

At the same time, I saw a bright, flashing, aqua-colored light in the darkness.

My hand instinctively reached toward it and grabbed onto some stick-shaped thing. All my weight came to bear on it, and I dropped like a rock. But the shining staff held firm and slowly pulled me up until finally, I collapsed onto a hard surface.

"...Hff. Hff."

I was breathing hard and sweating buckets. Feeling faintly dizzy, I looked around.

Was this the roof of the hospital? What was I doing up here?

"Was I about to jump?"

The answer I'd reached sent a shiver through me. Naturally, I hadn't tried to dive off the roof on purpose. That bizarre phenomenon had pushed me into it.

"Have you caught your breath yet?"

I heard a girl's voice.

It was the same person who'd held out that shining staff and told me to grab it.

As I looked around curiously, I heard her speak again, above me. "Up here."

She was sitting on top of the water tower.

That pale-blue light glowed in the darkness, shining from parts of her clothes and the staff she was holding. That was what had saved me.

"...Oh. Haven't seen you since...the Federal Council in New York?"

Moonlight illuminated the girl's face.

"What are you doing here, Reloaded?"

## Sixth-sense fantasy

"Pandemonium," Reloaded told me. "The demon horde."

That was her answer to the question I'd asked her on the roof of the hospital, under the night sky: "What the heck was that?"

"So that was the cause?"

"Yep. What you encountered was one of those demons."

Reloaded looked at me and snorted for some reason, then gave me the rundown.

"Pandemonium" was a blanket term for bizarre phenomena caused by countless monsters, demons, and spirits that had adapted to the modern age. Apparently, it was a global crisis that had broken out here in Japan. I couldn't really picture it, though.

"Then are snake-necked demons, water sprites, and Miss Hanako of the Toilet

part of this?"

"They don't include super-famous legends like those in Pandemonium these days. It's only evil spirits that haven't really gotten established here yet. They just keep wreaking havoc."

Ah. Still, from the way she was talking, this wasn't the first time Pandemonium had happened.

"This crisis has broken out time and again for ages, all over the world. There's a collection of material on it that includes past records and predictions for the future." Reloaded was looking down at a thick tome that lay open by her hand. It was a whole lot like the kind that turned up in anime or manga. And if the book seemed straight out of an anime, so did the girl who had it. She flipped it closed and thumped her magic staff on the ground.

"Sealing Pandemonium is Rill's current job."

Reloaded, the self-styled Magical Girl.

I'd first met her at the Federal Council a little over three months ago. This Tuner had spent most of the meeting arguing with Ms. Fuubi, Mia, and Siesta.

At first glance, she looked like the sort of magical girl who'd be at home in a fictional world, but there was also something slightly futuristic about her costume and her staff. It was like a magic-science hybrid.

"So what exactly was happening?"

The stairs had been endless, I hadn't been able to get out of the hospital, and a mysterious red hand had attempted to drag me into the darkness. Trying to run away had nearly led me right off the roof.

"The cause is in you." Reloaded narrowed her eyes. "You wanted to stay here forever, didn't you? That's why it went after you."

"No way. I was running so hard because I wanted to get home, not hang out in a creepy, dark hospital..."



No, wait. Earlier, I had wished to stay in the hospital just a little longer. Siesta was here, and I hadn't wanted to leave yet.

"Basically, if you have a strong wish to stay in a building, that curse prevents you from leaving. There's an evil spirit that cast it on this building."

Reloaded told me that its name was Parasite.

Should I be picturing something like an earthbound spirit that had possessed the hospital itself? If I'd jumped to my death, would I have become part of the curse? It was a pretty convincing urban legend.

"In other words, blame your ultra-needy feelings toward the Ace Detective."

"Don't talk like you saw it."

She couldn't have been watching me this whole time, could she?

"So as a Tuner, how are you going to deal with this?"

If we left it alone, someone else would get dragged in next.

"With this," Reloaded said, pulling out a small piece of wood and showing it to me. For a second, it looked like a wooden grave tablet, and there was something that looked like a spell written on it.

"Apparently, a Diviner left it behind long ago. That position doesn't even exist anymore."

"Meaning it's a retired Tuner position?"

"Yeah. Rill's job is just to deal with it by doing what others have done before. This is a pretty easy one."

With a *whirrr*, Reloaded jumped, rising to the top of the water tower, then promptly returned. She must have left that wooden tag up there. The former Diviner must have left it to seal Pandemonium.

"And we're done here."

"We can't thank that former hero enough, huh."

This global crisis was quietly happening all over the world, though. That meant the Ace Detective would probably be getting a new mission soon. When

it happened, what could I do for Natsunagi?

That was when I remembered I hadn't even thanked Reloaded yet. "Either way, you saved my butt. Sorry for causing you trouble."

If she hadn't been here, right about now, I would've been...

"Oh, that was nothing."

With a flick of her hand, Reloaded swept her orange hair back. She wasn't acting especially proud, but her self-confidence came through in the gesture. Even though she had to be about my age, she really did look more grown-up.

A few months ago, when I'd first met her at the Federal Council, I'd thought she was a prickly, bossy-princess type, but now that I was actually talking to her, she seemed surprisingly down-to-earth.

"All right, what now?" Reloaded tapped her own shoulder with her staff. "Rill saved your life. What will you do for her?"

"...You're telling me to pay you back? Seriously?" Geez. There went my good impression. "So heroes don't save the common folk for free?"

"What common folk? Rill doesn't see any of those here."

Reloaded scanned the area in an exaggerated way. Apparently, I didn't count as an adorable, helpless civilian.

"What are you trying to get me to do?"

"Be Rill's familiar." The magical girl pointed her staff at me sharply.

She'd said the same thing several months back at the Federal Council, but Siesta had turned her down.

"Frankly, as enemies of the world go, Pandemonium isn't all that formidable. Not compared with Seed."

Reloaded explained that global crises were assigned levels corresponding to how disastrous they were. The Ace Detective's "Primordial Seed" crisis would have been ranked A-class. Pandemonium was C-class and not likely to plunge the whole world into grave danger anytime soon.

"Still, Rill wants to get this over with ASAP. The individual enemies may not be

that tough, but there are a lot of them. That's why she needs you."

"I'm not proud of this, but I have to say, I'm not as sharp as the Ace Detective or the Information Broker, and I'm nowhere near as strong as the Assassin or the Vampire."

"Rill knows that."

Oh, you do, huh? Then why me? I was about to ask, but then it hit me. "You need a decoy, huh?"

For the first time, Reloaded gave a little smile. "Bingo. You draw all sorts of disasters to you. Rill's going to use that to trap her enemies, then take them all out fast."

"That idea sounds really familiar."

The déjà vu made me rub my temples. This was going to be a pain.

"As the Singularity, that's your mission, you know."

Reloaded gazed at me with narrowed eyes.

The "Singularity." I'd heard that term a few times before. People said it was an irregularity that sometimes changed the state of the world and even overturned the future the Oracle saw, but...

"Sorry, that doesn't really click for me. A knack for getting dragged into trouble still feels more accurate."

"Haaah. For the person at the heart of all this, you're so chill about everything." Reloaded rolled her eyes as if she was dealing with a little kid who was a handful. "Rill doesn't know everything about it, either, but anyone who does this job hears about you whether they want to or not."

"So what, I've got a worldwide fandom?"

"Rill doesn't get why you're acting so proud of that, but yes, in a way. The world could end up revolving around you, and Rill's not the only one who wants

you. Other Tuners have targeted you before."

I had no idea people had been fighting over me. Siesta must have won that battle.

"Geez. So she wanted me around badly enough to do a thing like that, huh? She's a real problem, isn't she?"

"What's that little smirk for?" Reloaded gave me a dubious look, then got the conversation back on topic. "Anyway. It's Rill's turn to use you. You're going to help her out with this job."

"Didn't Siesta already turn down that proposal?"

"The Ace Detective is napping below us as we speak, isn't she? Rill doesn't have time to listen to her if she's not even gonna wake up. Besides..." Rill spun her staff around so that its handle pointed at my throat. "Rill thinks it's pretty clear which of us is in control here."

"They'll let anybody be a hero these days, huh?" How had someone this dangerous managed to become a Tuner? *Not fair*.

I heaved a big sigh and shrugged.

"How...?" Reloaded asked. "How can you smile in a situation like this?"

I didn't realize I was.

Rill seemed confused—weirded out, even—as she withdrew her staff.

"Oh, no real reason. It's just...you're not the first one to drag me into something this way."

That one had gone for my throat—well, technically, she'd shoved her fingers down my throat and forced me to take her job. Now she was a Tuner and my precious partner. Was this another coincidence, another encounter like that one?

"Well, I do owe you."

Besides, whatever I learned here would come in handy later. The Ace Detective was bound to be assigned a new mission soon. My job was to be right there with Natsunagi, supporting her. If I could learn a few things from another

Tuner beforehand, I'd benefit from this, too.

Then there was my nature as the Singularity. What would happen if I tackled a global crisis with Reloaded, fully aware of what I was? Finding out might not be a bad idea.

"I want to check on one thing, though," I said.

Reloaded motioned for me to continue.

"Since I'll be helping you with your job, you'll keep me safe, right?"

Long ago, a detective had recruited me as her business partner—but before we'd left on our journey around the world, she'd sworn to protect me no matter what happened.

"Haaah. You're pretty naive, aren't you?" Reloaded gave me a cold look. "The moment you step onto a battlefield, you're responsible for your own life. That's Tuner 101."

"And who exactly is trying to force me onto that battlefield, huh?"

"If you become an extremely cute pet, Rill supposes she could protect you."

Yeesh. She's pretty reckless for an owner—uh, employer, I mean.

"As a matter of fact, Rill's staff can transform into a collar and leash."

"Why do you fight with a weapon that assumes you'll be keeping a human as a pet?"

"Shake."

Since there didn't seem to be any other options, I knelt and took the hand Reloaded held out to me.

"Good boy." She ruffled my hair, and I felt like I might be about to discover something about myself.

"So, Kimihiko."

"Wait, first-name basis?" I stood up as reality crashed back in.

"You may call Rill 'Rill' as well."

"Not sure how that gives you permission."

"Give Rill your phone. Rill will enter her contact information."

Well, if we were going to be working together, we needed a way to stay in touch. I got out my smartphone and handed it to her.

"Listen, can I ask one thing?" I said. Reloaded was standing a little distance away, messing with my phone. "Why are you the Magical Girl?"

I'd been wondering about that for a while. At the Federal Council a few months back, Reloaded had said her position used to be called the "Magician," but she'd had them change it to the "Magical Girl" when she took over.

"No real reason. It's just..." Reloaded tossed my phone back to me. "A long time ago, Rill knew a girl who liked magical-girl anime. That's all." She turned on her heel.

When I glanced up at the sky, there seemed to be more stars in it than usual.

#### ◆ The romcom is a cover story

My encounter with Reloaded had wiped me out. Once I got home, I slept like a rock.

When I woke up, my phone was ringing insistently next to my pillow.

"...Nnuh," I groaned, mouth dry. "Hello?" I looked up at the clock on the wall. The short hand and long hand were both pointing to the number twelve.

"...Hello?" said a reproachful voice from the phone. It was Natsunagi.

I bolted up in bed.

I'd had plans with Natsunagi that morning, and it was already past the time we'd agreed to meet. I hadn't forgotten about it, of course; I'd just overslept after an exhausting night.

"So, um. The train was late. I'm on my way over, but..."

"A minute ago, you made a noise like you just woke up."

Busted, huh? Without hanging up, I headed for the sink.

"I've been waiting since eleven, you know?"

"Weren't we meeting at half past?"

"...I just happened to get here early. Or something."

Did people normally get to places thirty minutes early by accident?

"Sorry, I'll be right there. Are you waiting somewhere warm? Stay in a café or something and don't let any weird guys try to chat you up, okay?"

"There he is: the occasionally overprotective Kimizuka." Natsunagi giggled. "I'll be waiting," she told me, and she hung up. Right then, I got a text from Reloaded.

The text said she was going on a Pandemonium patrol at eight this evening. That was fast; we just met yesterday. I replied that I'd be there if I finished in time. I didn't know when Natsunagi and I would be done. It was probably better than using the cliché I'll be there if I can.

I hastily got ready, then left the apartment. Twenty minutes later, when I reached the café near the station where we'd planned to meet, I spotted Natsunagi sitting at the counter through the window. Once she noticed me, she trotted over to leave her cup on the "used dishes" shelf, then came out, pulling her coat on.

"I thought you'd stood me up," she pouted. Her lips looked a little redder than usual. Her makeup was a bit more striking overall, and the way she was dressed seemed almost like...

"You look really grown-up today."

"Why don't you just be honest and tell me I'm pretty?" Natsunagi raised one eyebrow.

"Sorry I was late," I apologized again.

"It's fine—just forget it. More importantly, you look...the same as always, Kimizuka."

Natsunagi gave me a full once-over. Even I admitted that my outfit was nothing special, and I hadn't styled my hair. I'd been prioritizing speed.

"So about the reason we met up today...," I started. Natsunagi averted her eyes. "It's just for fun, right?"

"...Mm, well, yes."

Even though Natsunagi was the one who'd asked me out, she looked uncomfortable. When she noticed me watching her, she hurried to add, "But I did tell you why, remember? Even if we're just here to have fun, it's part of the necessary communication between a detective and her assistant."

Yeah, I knew that. During those three years, although Siesta and I had carried out jobs and our mission, we'd also played around quite a bit to let off steam. Siesta had usually been the one to suggest it. We were partners whose lives were in each other's hands, which meant we needed to take time to clear up any friction between us.

When I'd told Natsunagi that old story the other day, she'd said that since we were in a similar situation now, we should make that sort of opportunity for ourselves.

"Come to think of it, we've hardly ever spent any time together that's completely separate from work, have we?"

"Yeah. And even when we had some, we were with Saikawa, Charlie, or Noches."

That meant I understood Natsunagi's logic, and I was here because I agreed with it.

However, there was one thing that bothered me.

"Did it have to be today, though?"

This was December 25. Christmas. Everywhere you looked, there were couples, couples, and more couples. At this rate, Natsunagi and I would seem...

"Yes, every day except today was out. I'm booked up for the next five years."

"What are you, a superstar?"

Yeesh. If she was going to insist that today was the only possible day, then that was how it would have to be.

I stretched lightly. "Okay, shall we go?"

Natsunagi nodded, falling into step on my left in a rather satisfied way.

And then...her right hand drifted up, hovered, then lowered again.

"Did you just start to raise your hand, then change your mind?"

"Weren't you pretending you hadn't seen it?!"

#### **◆** A Christmas vow

The first place Natsunagi took us was a hotel dessert buffet.

The time limit was ninety minutes. Natsunagi quickly loaded up plates with the sweets she was after and lined them up on the table. After doing the typical high school girl thing and taking a photo, she dug in happily.

"I'm impressed you can eat all that sweet stuff after yesterday." I sat across the table from her, eating coffee jelly with a spoon.

"Huh? Don't you like sweets, Kimizuka?"

"I don't mind them, but I'm not crazy about them. I did eat a lot of them since Siesta did, though."

"Oh, that's why. No wonder." Natsunagi nodded, her hand temporarily falling still. "In the stories you tell me, you're usually eating sweets with Siesta, so I just assumed you liked them."

"Don't make it sound like I'm constantly talking about Siesta," I retorted.

Natsunagi simply said, "Mm-hmm, I see." Pursing her lips, she took out a notebook. "'Kimizuka doesn't like sweets that much. That isn't necessarily true of Siesta, though.'"

"You don't need that last bit. Put down that I like soy sauce crackers better than cake."

Natsunagi kept asking me about foods I liked and didn't like, noting down what I told her. Was this supposed to help us understand each other as detective and assistant?

"Actually, don't you have any questions for me, Kimizuka?"

"Let's see... Where do you get that shampoo you always use?"

"I think your knack for getting dragged into trouble isn't the reason you can't make friends, Kimizuka."

Our fun little conversation continued as Natsunagi and I enjoyed the cake buffet, then left for a nearby bowling alley.

After we checked in, we switched to bowling shoes. I grabbed a six-kilogram ball. "Do you usually come to places like this, Natsunagi?"

Natsunagi was polishing up a four-kilogram ball. "I'm concentrating. Don't talk to me."

"Not fair..."

Taking up her position in the lane, Natsunagi pressed her lips together and rolled her ball at the pins that stood twenty meters away.

The ball thudded against the ground, rolled fast, and knocked down the pins. And then...

"Six, hm? Up against you, though, Kimizuka... Well."

"You're not even aware that was an insult, are you?"

Apparently, she was seriously planning to beat me. After one gloves-off match...

"No way..."

Natsunagi looked up at the scoreboard, dazed.

Her score was ninety on the nose, while mine was pretty close to a hundred and fifty.

"Kimizuka, I thought you were bad at this!"

"You're just really biased. Nobody ever said I was bad at athletic stuff."

People kept comparing me with Siesta, and she wasn't normal.

"So you're actually pretty clever, you're relatively toned, your face is a little blah, but your features are clean-cut, and you're unexpectedly reliable... Huh?"

"Come on, the second game's starting."

After that, our "team-building" day continued. When we were done bowling, we played some games at the arcade that was in the same building, went shopping, and had dinner at an Italian restaurant. Somewhere in there, eight

o'clock came and went.

Deciding it was about time we called it a day, we were walking to the station when we saw a street of trees decorated with pure-white lights.

"How pretty." Natsunagi smiled at the Christmas scenery, her breath misting in the cold air. Standing beside her, I enjoyed the sight for a little while, too. "Hm? Did you forget to say *You're prettier*?"

"Were you waiting for me to say it?"

I didn't want people developing shoujo-manga-hero expectations for me.

"I don't think complimenting girls ever does any harm, you know?"

"Well, good point. I'll remember that." Maybe that was part of building mutual understanding, too. I made a mental note. "And? Did you do what you came to do, Natsunagi?"

Had we reduced the chances the detective and her assistant wouldn't quite connect? In the end, I didn't think spending the day together had changed our communication all that much.

"Mm... I knew less about you than I thought I did." Still facing forward, Natsunagi smiled wryly. "I don't know much about the foods you like or what you're actually good at. I bet she knew all about them, though."

It was clear which "she" Natsunagi meant.

"I don't think that information was really important to her."

"Really? If she were here now, I bet she would have been one-upping me constantly. I know everything about my assistant."

"That was a weirdly good imitation."

Natsunagi cracked up a little, but only a little. "You and Siesta spent a lot of time together. You have experience. You have a bond. I know I shouldn't make comparisons, and I'm not trying to run myself down, but I really do think my relationship with you is no match for hers. But listen..." Natsunagi turned to face me. "I'm not going to stop. I won't stop learning things. I'll learn more about you and teach you more about me, and our working relationship will get even better. ...There's no deeper meaning behind that, okay? I just want us to

be partners who can trust and understand each other better."

The cold wind blew, toying with Natsunagi's earrings. I'd bought them for her when we were shopping earlier that day.

"So you want to know more about me?"

"Yes. I mean, Kimizuka, you're really weird." Looking at me, Natsunagi giggled.

That wasn't the reaction I'd been expecting.

"There's nobody else out there as weird and funny as you, so I'm not letting you get away."

Natsunagi turned her head away slightly as she said it, but her hand hesitantly caught a little of my sleeve between her fingertips.

A thought occurred to me then. Was that why I'd accepted Siesta's invitation and headed off to see the world with her? The ace detective had been incredibly weird, incredibly funny, and indescribably magnetic, and all of it had drawn me in... Somewhere along the way, she'd made me want to know more about her, and I'd let her call me into the unknown.

But in the end, I hadn't tried to learn about her. I'd chosen to assume she had her reasons for not telling me anything, and I hadn't pushed for anything more than the information she gave me. I knew nothing about who Siesta was, what she was actually fighting, or what sort of future she'd imagined. I hadn't even tried to find out. I'd had no idea I'd end up with the regrets I'd had at the end of our journey.

Not that everything would have gone well if I'd known, of course. Still, over the past six months, I'd learned I couldn't afford to be oblivious to the fact that I knew nothing. And so...

"I'd also like to know more about the detective. About you, Natsunagi."

Natsunagi looked up. Her mouth fell open slightly, but as my words sank in, she smiled again. "You can stay Siesta's assistant, Kimizuka. From now on, though, would you be my assistant, too?"

The hand that had been holding my sleeve reached out to me again.

"Yeah. Please make me your assistant."

My right hand was still free, and I took Natsunagi's hand.

For a little while, neither of us spoke.

It was a winter night, and Natsunagi's hand was cold...but still warmer than I'd expected. I also got the feeling it was a little sweaty, but that sweat could technically be mine, so I didn't bring it up.

"Natsunagi, why are you swinging my hand?"

"...No real reason."

I got the feeling our handshake was turning into something else, but when I saw Natsunagi's face, I couldn't bring myself to pull my hand free. ...Although, I'm not saying what her expression was.

"Listen, Kimizuka."

"Hm?"

Natsunagi opened her mouth, then shut it, then tried a couple more times.

"You see, there's something I would like to tell you."

I wanted to joke about how awkward she was being all of a sudden, but looking at her made it impossible to tease.

"It's less that I want to say it and more that I've gotten the urge to say it."

As if she'd made up her mind, Natsunagi drew a deep breath, then gazed at my face.

I had a sense that she was about to say something decisive to me, but—

"Maybe this isn't the time." Natsunagi gently released my hand. "The scales aren't balanced yet." Her smile was slightly troubled, but her expression wasn't completely pessimistic. Now just wasn't the time. Even if she hadn't mentioned anything specific, she'd probably said the very best of what she could say now.



That being the case, I only said, "I see." For a moment, I wondered what one of the heroes in Natsunagi's beloved shoujo manga would have said at a time like this. Either way, I was sincerely glad I wasn't the protagonist of this story. All the readers would have slammed me for being a fool who couldn't give her a real answer.

"We'll continue this conversation later."

"When, specifically?"

"That depends on how hard you work, doesn't it, Kimizuka? The same goes for me, of course."

...Oh yeah, probably. That someday was the day our wish came true.

Everything would wait until the sleeping beauty woke from her long nap.

Gazing at those silvery-white Christmas lights, I visualized that future.

"Yes, it's fine. Once we're grown-up, I'm sure somebody will be more honest about his feelings."

"Natsunagi, I didn't really catch that. Did you just foreshadow something?"

## ◆ Solving the mystery will wait until after the heroine race

And so the detective and her assistant's slightly different day came to an end. It wasn't as if anything major had changed. Even if it was just a small mutual adjustment right now, though, if it managed to head off a major breakup down the road, it was massively important.

"Thanks for today," Natsunagi told me as we reached the station. "Can I ask you out again sometime?"

"Yeah. Although, we'll start seeing each other at school again in two weeks."

"Huh? Seniors only have to come to school if they want to after New Year's, remember?"

...Come to think of it, she was right. I had so little interest in school that I'd forgotten.

"Actually, Kimizuka, what are you planning to do after graduation? Are you

going on to college, or will you get a job?"

"Natsunagi, don't talk about the future. I want to be a kid who never has to contribute for a while longer."

"This isn't some distant future. It's just around the corner." Natsunagi gave an exasperated sigh.

Apparently, I couldn't get out of taking a good, solid look at reality.

"You're going to a private university on a recommendation, right, Natsunagi? ... That was shrewd."

"Well, I've been keeping up with my studies during the past three months. Unlike you."

Natsunagi had an excellent point, and it shut me right up. If I had to say, I'd just lost my motivation. Our fight with Seed was over, Siesta had fallen asleep, and my reality had abruptly gone flat.

To me, "reality" wasn't school, tests, and work. It was the extraordinary that I'd found after that encounter at ten thousand meters. Now that it was over, I couldn't visualize myself wanting more "normal" in my life.

"Does that school you're going to have general entrance exams?" I asked.

"Huh? Yes. I'm pretty sure they're in the middle of February."

Natsunagi had been in the same situation as I was, but her eyes were still fixed on her own future. In that case, I should also— "Um, Kimizuka? Do you hear something?" Natsunagi rose onto her tiptoes, peering into the distance.

I did, in fact. Loud voices... More like screams. There was also a loud noise that seemed to be chasing them—was that a motorcycle? By the time I put it together, a big black bike had already charged into the area in front of the station. Impulsively, I pulled Natsunagi into my arms to shield her.

"Oh, you smell kinda nice. And your arms are so rugged..."

"Good, sounds like you're fine."

Releasing Natsunagi when it felt safe, I faced the motorcycle's rider. The biker removed her large helmet, and very familiar orange hair spilled around her shoulders.

"Hello, Reloaded." I glared at her.

"What exactly are you doing here?" she snapped. "Rill said to meet her at eight."

She probably meant the Pandemonium patrol. I hadn't told her I was going for sure, though.

"How did you know where I was?"

"By magic, of course." Reloaded twirled her staff.

"Meaning GPS, right? When you grabbed my phone to enter your contact info yesterday."

"Huh. So you're not stupid. Well, took you long enough to notice." Reloaded tossed me another helmet. "Get on. We've already got a big, scary monster on our hands."

"That's the second one today, if we're going by the date. The enemy's keeping busy." My head drooped, but I took the helmet and started to put it on.

"W-wait just a minute. Kimizuka, what is this? Explain."

One of us hadn't managed to process the situation yet. Natsunagi's eyes were shifting from me to Reloaded and back; she looked confused. Come to think of it, these two hadn't met before.

Checking to make sure there was nobody nearby first (although the disturbance had attracted some attention), I explained to Natsunagi in a low voice, "This is Reloaded. She's a Tuner like you, Natsunagi; her position's the Magical Girl. ...Stuff happened, and I ended up becoming her pet."

"You're her pet? What stuff happened, exactly?"

Well, that was a long story.

Then as I was about to introduce Natsunagi to Reloaded...

"You're the new Ace Detective, aren't you?" Reloaded turned sharp eyes on Natsunagi.

Instantly, I felt the air go cold.

"Rill's heard the rumors. They said there was a Tuner who'd been given a conveniently empty position, even though she had no special powers. It's always a huge pain when the world loves someone for no reason, isn't it?"

At the Federal Council a few months ago, Reloaded had said something similar to Siesta. She'd said she didn't like people the world loved, the type who used luck and connections to make miracles happen, the rules be damned.

Moments after their meeting, Natsunagi was getting that spite in full force. She flinched back, then scowled. But then...

"Come to think of it, Charlie said something similar to me when we met for the first time." She took a deep breath and changed tacks. "Say whatever you want to me now. Someday, I'm going to yield solid results. I'll carry out my mission as the Ace Detective." That was a promise.

But what specifically did Natsunagi mean by "mission"? Was it defeating some new enemy of the world, or was it making that wish of ours come true?

Reloaded seemed to be trying to figure out what she meant, too. She narrowed her eyes. "Right. Well, it's none of Rill's business." The Magical Girl turned on her heel, closing the conversation for now. And then... "Anyway, Rill's taking him with her."

The next thing I knew, she'd grabbed me by the back of my collar and set me on the motorcycle behind her.

"Huh?!" Natsunagi reached out.

"Rill's borrowing your ex-boyfriend," Reloaded told her.

Then she sped off at full throttle.

The bike drove right past Natsunagi.

"Hang on," Reloaded told me, gripping the handlebars. I grabbed her waist. As everyone on the street watched, the bike roared away. The speed limit might as well not have existed, and the horns of oncoming traffic fell on deaf ears. Reloaded zigzagged between lanes, like we were in an action movie.

Geez. Are Tuners all like this? I was annoyed for a second, then remembered that the Oracle was the complete opposite. Even at the Federal Council, the two

of them had fought. No surprise, if their personalities were this diametrically opposed.

"You're clinging pretty tightly." Reloaded suddenly seemed to notice me.

I was just desperate not to get thrown off.

"Are you the type who pretends to be completely harmless and then sexually harasses people?"

"I was taught that it's important for business partners to communicate."

"What have the Ace Detectives been teaching this boy?"

Well, enough of that fun little tangent.

"And? Is it true we've got an enemy?"

"Yes, the Men in Black found it. There's a member of Pandemonium up ahead."

"The Men in Black take jobs like that, too? They really get around."

As a rule, the Federal Charter forbade Tuners from helping one another. However, the Men in Black formed a system that any Tuner could use without restriction.

"You really are all about efficiency, aren't you?" I said. She'd used both the Men in Black and the tool the Diviner had left behind, and now she was using my trouble-magnet disposition.

"Yes. Rill doesn't have time to stop moving," Reloaded said. Her tone was casual, and of course, she didn't turn around.

Maybe the magical girl never stopped running, but where was she trying to go? We didn't have the sort of relationship that would let me ask that, let alone get an answer.

For now, as her motorcycle cut through the night wind, all I could do was go with her.

# **♦** Magical miracle girl's action

"What is that?"

When we reached our destination, I found my eyes riveted to the sight.

An enormous fir tree decorated with all sorts of ornaments stood in a shopping mall plaza, and something that looked like a human figure draped in white cloth hung from the very top.

"It's a Fair-Weather Doll," Reloaded murmured; she'd parked the motorcycle somewhere out of the way. "That's what the ones that look like white cloth dolls are commonly called. It's one of the beings that's causing Pandemonium."

"So it's not a suicide?" I sighed in relief, feeling the tension drain out of my shoulders.

"Never mind that, look down."

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"'Down'? ...Hey—"
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I suddenly felt pressure on the back of my head—Reloaded was forcing my head down. I protested, although I kept my gaze on the ground. "What are you trying to pull?"

"Don't meet its eyes," she ordered briefly.

This was coming from an expert, so there was probably a reason. I looked away from the fir tree...then noticed something else. "Why is everybody ignoring it?"

The thing on the tree obviously didn't belong, but none of the people in the plaza seemed to notice it. They were just taking photos and admiring the tree as a work of art.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Kimihiko?"

"I've met an alien, so I sort of have to believe in ghosts, too."

As a matter of fact, I'd seen something pretty similar about twenty-four hours ago.

"Right. You and Rill can see that thing, but many people can't. Ghosts, devils, evil spirits—all those things on the edge of reality actually exist here." Keeping her eyes carefully away from the tree, Reloaded looked around. As the Magical Girl, she must have run into many similar enemies before.

"So I'm over on this side now, too, huh?"

During that three-year journey with Siesta, I'd been in constant contact with the extraordinary. Apparently, it had sharpened my senses to the point where I was able to register that sort of hazy entity.

"Rill gets the feeling you've always been that way, but..."

Reloaded's eyes came to rest on a young man in the distance. He was looking up at the sky, and his eyes seemed rather vacant.

"No, wait," I said. "He's looking at the tree."

By the time I realized that, fear had risen to the man's face.

He'd spotted the Fair-Weather Doll.

"—Can we just leave him like that?"

"Be quiet. The more people perceive the Fair-Weather Doll as something to fear, the stronger it will get." However, even as Reloaded was speaking, the man began to shake—with terror, I'd guess.

"What is that guy seeing? Isn't it just a white cloth doll like I saw earlier?"

"Fair-Weather Dolls can change their form at will." Reloaded had gotten out her grimoire. Did it have the details on that thing? "Anyone who makes eye contact with it will see what they most fear in that white cloth. That must be what that man is experiencing now."

"Then this is no time to stand around analyzing it!"

Just then, I caught a glimpse of a white shape. The thing was about two meters tall, and it swiftly changed direction, rushing straight at the man. Then I heard a brief, low scream as the attack began.

"...! Kimihiko, where are you going?!" Reloaded scolded, but I was already running. We didn't have time to sit there talking.

"That thing gets stronger as more people get scared of it, right? That means we should take care of it fast!"

I sprinted toward the Fair-Weather Doll and the man it was going after. At the very least, Natsunagi never just stood there at times like this.

"Hey!" Reloaded called after me. With her receding voice in my ears, I brainstormed ways to shut down that bizarre phenomenon.

"How am I gonna fight a ghost...?"

I didn't carry a gun, of course, and I wasn't armed now. I couldn't see physical weapons working on a ghost anyway. Prayer beads and salt seemed like better options. As I thought, I kept chasing the man and the phantom.

The enemy was an odd one, though. Even as it floated after the fleeing man, the Fair-Weather Doll kept its face turned in the opposite direction. Toward me. Like it was refusing to take its eyes off me.

Before I knew it, we'd turned onto a dark, nearly deserted street. If the enemy insisted on keeping me in its sights, then bring it. I followed it, rounding corner after corner, determined not to lose it. For now, I had to catch up with those two.......

"How did I know it was looking at me?"

The question occurred to me out of nowhere. The Fair-Weather Doll's head had been covered by that white cloth the entire time. I shouldn't have been able to tell which side was the front and which was the back. And yet I was sure it had its eyes fixed on me.

I'd been making eye contact with the Fair-Weather Doll.

"Where am I?"

The next thing I knew, I was in a pitch-black construction site. I looked around.

Aside from me and the Fair-Weather Doll, there was nobody there. I didn't even see the young man it had been chasing. It was as if he had been an illusion, too...and that's when it hit me.

"Was I looking that thing in the eye all along?"

The Fair-Weather Doll was floating a few meters away. Suddenly, its white cloth opened up, spreading out, changing color, shape, and size, until I found myself staring at— "Hey there, Betelgeuse."

The monster looked like a huge, five-meter-long lizard. It had nothing resembling eyes or ears—only a gaping mouth and a low, unpleasant growl that

sounded more like a machine's than a beast's.

This must be the enemy I subconsciously feared most. No surprise there—it had killed Siesta once.

"After all that, it's just this guy?"

That story was over already.

Brave warriors had defeated this monster ages ago. It wasn't something I should be fighting now. Plus, I knew it was an illusion.

"Dodge right."

In the next instant, a flash whirred past me and stabbed into the nightmare.

With a low groan, the thing turned back into a sheet-draped doll, writhing in midair as if it was in pain.

"Are you stupid?"

The voice made me turn around.

For a moment, I thought I saw someone I really missed.

I knew it wasn't her, though. She wasn't here.

"Thanks, Reloaded." I wasn't speaking to a detective armed with a musket but a magical girl holding a staff.

"That's a bad habit of yours," Reloaded said, coming closer. "You just charge the enemy without a plan when you don't have the power to actually help."

She shoved one of the staff's pointy bits into my face. It hurt a little—a lot, in fact.

"My former employer tended to send me into the fray first. Every chance she got, in fact."

"Ah. Rill has some sympathy." The set of Reloaded's lips softened slightly, and she withdrew her staff. "Good news, then. From now on, all that is Rill's job."

"Wasn't I supposed to be an attack dog?"

"You're just a pet with a good nose. All you have to do is lure out the enemy," Reloaded said.

She wasn't looking at me anymore. She was glaring with sharp eyes at something behind me.

When I turned back, there was the Fair-Weather Doll, and its spread-out fabric had sprouted a mass of knives.

"Wait, we weren't done yet?" I muttered.

A moment later, the doll slashed at us with all the knives at once.

"Down!"

It almost sounded like a dog command, but no, it was an alert directed at me. Reloaded tackled me, shoving me to the ground, and I got a face full of gravel.

"...I think that might've done more damage than the knives."

"Well, you thought wrong. There, look."

Reloaded had landed on her face, too. She slowly got up and pointed at the spot where we'd just been. The ground had a large scar, as if it had been cut with a large blade. This was a construction site, and steel girders clattered down right next to us as well. Assuming none of this was an illusion...

"So that wasn't a whirlwind or something."

"It's like a sickle weasel, although Rill isn't a fan of comparing it to another monster. Pandemonium entities attack physically by mimicking natural phenomena."

"I see. That aside, Reloaded, I hate to point this out when you're giving me a serious explanation, but your nose is bleeding."

It was probably because she'd slammed her face into the gravel. Looking a little uncomfortable, Reloaded wiped the blood away with a tissue. Guess she hadn't noticed it.

"...This is nothing." I didn't know who she was making excuses to. She got to her feet, moving rather heavily. Immediately after that, though— "Okay. Time to clean up."

—she vanished.

The next thing I saw was a magical girl racing through the night sky.

I didn't know whether it was science or magic, but she moved freely through the air, leaving a star-shaped afterimage every time her shoes came down on empty space. The mass of blades protruding from the Fair-Weather Doll's white cloth turned toward the magical girl.

"Reloaded, it's gonna do that slash attack again!"

Her shoes were probably the same special-made kind that Siesta had used, or an improved version. With those magic shoes, she could evade the enemy's attacks even in midair.

Or so I thought, but...

"No, that wouldn't be efficient enough."

The Magical Girl's expression changed.

The wind blades slashed through the dark sky, and Reloaded charged right into the attack. Slits opened in her clothes and skin, and bright blood flowed from the cuts she hadn't managed to avoid.

It was raw, unthinking courage, but it wasn't reckless.

As a matter of fact, she was selectively striking away the slashes that could have been lethal with her staff. Once she made it through the wave, the Magical Girl reached the floating villain.

"Sorry. Rill doesn't have time to waste on you."

She swung her magic staff like a sword—and cut the enemy in two.

The severed halves of the white cloth fluttered into the night sky.

"What did Rill tell you?" Reloaded looked down at me from midair. "Being afraid when you're up against a Fair-Weather Doll is a bad move. You're not augmented, so you're one thing, but if Rill got scared of the enemy's attacks and started evading..."

"You're not done, Reloaded! Behind you!"

"Huh?" When she turned around, there was the Fair-Weather Doll's cloth, still spread wide.

...And Reloaded made eye contact with it.

Anticipating the worst, I did what I could do right then. Assistant, Familiar, whatever—I didn't care what my title was. My job was to help my partner; that was all.

"—Rill won't let you get away!"

But the Fair-Weather Doll was the one forced onto the defensive. Reloaded's surprise had slowed her down for a moment, but then she launched herself off thin air in pursuit of the enemy.

The Fair-Weather Doll answered by turning its white cloth black, trying to escape by melting into the darkness. In that case— "I dunno whether that's a fair-weather doll or a ghost, but nobody needs them when the sun's out."

—I switched on the construction-site lights, illuminating the darkness. They revealed a vague white shape floating in the distance.

"Rill!" By the time I'd accidentally called her by her nickname, her staff had already begun to shine bright blue.

"Huh! You do pretty good work."

I still couldn't tell whether it was magic or science, but I knew that the light was the source of justice that vanquished evil. Passing the fleeing enemy so fast that she was just a blur, Reloaded circled around ahead of it, pointed her staff at it, and shouted:

"Let tomorrow be sunnyyyyyy!"

Pale-blue light enveloped the night sky, and then...

...this time, the Fair-Weather Doll really had vanished.

"Is the enemy shut down for good now?" I asked Reloaded—Rill—as she slowly descended to the ground.

"Yes. It needs human fear to manifest in the first place."

"I see. So basically, all humanity just has to be as brave as I am."

"You got plenty scared." Rill gazed at me coldly, then thumped my breastbone with her staff.

"What did that Fair-Weather Doll look like to you, then?"

Just a minute ago, I'd seen Rill stop moving for a second. She'd probably seen some sort of illusion, too.

...Or so I thought, but Rill just said, "Who knows?" and looked away. "Rill's not scared of anything. All she saw was white fabric."

The night wind tugged at her hair. Her voice had been firm, but I couldn't see her expression all that well.

"Still, you've got really strong legs," I told her, remembering how athletic she'd been up there. That definitely wasn't the sort of power either magic or science could just give her.

"Well, of course." She turned to face me, sweeping her orange hair back with one hand. "Rill used to be a pole-vaulter."

It was the first innocent smile I'd seen from the Magical Girl.

## **◆** A pale sequel

The next day, bright and early in the morning, two guests showed up at the apartment where I lived alone.

I only had a handful of friends and acquaintances, and having two of them stop by at once was rare. I felt like we should take advantage of this opportunity to get a pizza or pie and have a party, but...

"I understand the situation, but I'm not happy with it."

Nagisa Natsunagi was lying on the tatami flooring, hugging a cushion moodily. The cushion was shaped like an odd creature; someone had bought it somewhere on their travels abroad. Random stuff like that was all over the place.

"And if you can't completely accept reality, that means you're a child."

Meanwhile, the other visitor wasn't moody, per se, but was clearly making the mood in the room worse. Reloaded, who was dressed in her usual Magical Girl outfit, was drinking coffee out of one of my mugs and acting like she owned the place. "I'm a child? How old are you, huh? I bet we're about the same age."

"Oh, caring about actual ages is childish, too."

"Ngh! You picked a fight with me the first time we met, and I worked really hard to respond maturely!"

Dropping a spoiler about herself, Natsunagi hurled the cushion she'd been holding...at my face, not Rill's. Unfair.

"And you, Kimizuka. Why would you just go to her?" Natsunagi glared at me reproachfully.

Apparently, she had a problem with the fact that I was helping the Magical Girl when I was supposed to be the detective's assistant. Part of it was probably due to the way we'd parted the previous day. The three of us had assembled here today on Natsunagi's request.

"Kimizuka's my... And yet—"

"Kimihiko is your what?" Rill asked, sounding bored.

"K-Kimihiko is my..."

"Natsunagi, you just switched to using the name she uses for me," I pointed out.



For some reason, Natsunagi huffed. "Then you don't care if I cheat, Kimizuka?!"

Why was she acting a little like a girlfriend?

"Don't worry—she's not forcing me to do this or anything."

"That's actually the part that feels weird." Natsunagi sighed. "But you've made up your mind, so I can't complain about it."

At least she was going to respect my decision.

"What's this discussion for, then? Rill would prefer not to waste time."

"There was one thing I wanted to say to you, no matter what." Natsunagi turned to face Rill, her expression serious. "If anything happens to Kimizuka, there'll be hell to pay. And I won't be the only one angry; I'm speaking for one other person as well."

Natsunagi didn't specify who that other person was, but what she was saying came through loud and clear. Although, I dunno whether that Ace Detective would have said it straight-out like that, I thought with a little smile.

Rill seemed mildly annoyed by this, but she accepted Natsunagi's statement. "All right. Well, he did do decent work for Rill yesterday. As his master, it's Rill's duty to keep him out of danger as much as possible. That will do, won't it?"

This was a significant improvement over the first time we met, when she told me I'd be expected to keep myself safe.

But Natsunagi wasn't satisfied. "No, not 'as much as possible.' No matter what."

"Nobody likes needy girls." Rill got up, came over, and sat down next to me. And then... "Rill thinks guys prefer more practical relationships." She took my arm and leaned her head against my shoulder. I felt her softness and her warmth, and her beautiful eyes threatened to pull me right in. Her pink lips seemed to be breathing hot sighs and sweet nothings that were oh so convenient for guys.

"...Huh? What happened last night? She was already here when I showed up today; don't tell me she stayed over..."

Natsunagi seemed to have gotten the wrong idea about something; she'd started to tremble. Explaining seemed like the decent thing to do, but just as I started, the phone I'd set on the low table beeped.

"A video call?" What was that about? When I saw the caller's name on the display, though, I had a sneaking suspicion. Specifically, a not-so-great one. Setting my smartphone on its stand, I took the call.

"Hello, Kimihiko?"

A girl in a shrine-maiden outfit appeared on the screen. Mia Whitlock.

In the background, I could make out the clock-tower room I'd seen a few times before. It was the middle of the night in London right now, but she'd still called me. Did that mean this was an emergency? One look at her stiff expression was enough to clue me in.

"Mia, what's up? What happened?" I asked, squeezing my hands into fists. However...

"...Kimihiko, why are you with the Magical Girl?"

Come to think of it, Rill was still clinging to me.

"Oh, him? He's Rill's familiar." Explaining carelessly, Rill patted my head as if I were an actual pet. "Rill won't let you complain about it. He's going to help her complete the job you foisted onto her more efficiently."

"I am the one who predicted Pandemonium, but the Federation Government is the one that assigned the job, so..."

"Huh? You're mumbling; Rill can't hear you."

"Hey, Olivia, how do I end this call?"

On the screen, Mia turned to Olivia in tears. This was giving me déjà vu from the Federal Council a few months back.

"It's been a long time, Mia." Pushing her way between Rill and me, Natsunagi peeked in at the phone's screen.

"What? Hey, Kimihiko, exactly how many girls do you have at your place?"

"Three counting you, Mia."

As we were talking, Rill got up and went to refill her coffee. Apparently, she was going to stay awhile longer. In fact, was she planning to take me on a patrol after this? She'd shown up in costume.

"No, this isn't the time to talk about that," I said, mostly to remind myself, and I asked Mia why she'd called again. What had happened?

"The Ace Detective's next mission has been decided."

Knew it. I'd vaguely suspected as much. I'd thought Ice Doll or some other high-level bureaucrat would issue the order, but apparently, the Oracle had been charged with relaying it this time. Natsunagi and I exchanged looks. "Who's my next enemy?" she asked.

Mia drew a deep breath, then said:

"Vampires."

The first thing that word brought to mind for me wasn't imaginary monsters, but the white demon I'd actually met several times: Scarlet, one of the twelve Tuners.

"Specifically, the Ace Detective's next mission is to prevent a vampire rebellion."

Mia was holding an open volume of the sacred text, and I caught a brief glimpse of the words *Vampire Rebellion* on the cover. I had the feeling I'd seen them somewhere before.

"This crisis was predicted by the previous Oracle about thirteen years ago, actually."

"Thirteen years ago... Then why are they sending it to me now?" Natsunagi asked.

"Because Oracles don't necessarily see crises right before they occur," Mia told her. Apparently, there was a lag between seeing the future and the arrival of the actual crisis. "The Oracles' prophecies must be relayed to the government, but after that, government officials keep an eye on the global situation, then decide which crisis should be assigned to which Tuner and when."

...Ah. So thirteen years later, the time had finally come, huh? Still... "Is the vampire in the prophecy Scarlet?"

"I really don't know. There's a whole race of vampires, so there are several possible interpretations."

The sacred text really wasn't an omnipotent tool, then; it didn't foretell everything about the future in detail.

"Hmm," said Natsunagi. "If I met with Scarlet, he might tell me something, but..."

"You never know where that guy's going to turn up," I finished for her. "Could we meet him if we wanted to?"

The last time I'd seen him was when Siesta and I had gone to the Federal Council. Not at the council itself, though—we'd run into him on a deserted street, late at night. Siesta apparently had some kind of deep connection to him, and I'd only managed to meet him because I was with her.

"We might have a shot at running into him if we knew where he was working," I said.

"What is the Vampire's mission?" Natsunagi asked.

We were both stumped. He'd never mentioned it.

"Killing his own kind," Mia said casually. "The Vampire Scarlet has been given the mission of hunting the vampires running rampant."

"...Why would he take that job?"

"I don't know. Tuners are given various privileges, of course; I would imagine he weighed his options."

Would Ice Doll or one of her colleagues share the reason if we asked? No, if they were willing to answer, they would have informed us to begin with. Were they trying to tell us to do our own research if we wanted to know, that it was part of a detective's job? Or was there some reason they couldn't say?

"For now, it sounds like we should look for Scarlet. Not that we've got any clues," I said.

Now that Siesta was asleep, what bait could we use to attract Scarlet? I could think of all sorts of things vampires didn't like—garlic and holy water and crucifixes—but in terms of things they *did* like...

"What? You want to know about vampires?" Rill broke in. Sipping her fresh coffee, she rejoined the conversation without sitting down.

"Do you know something?" Natsunagi asked.

"Mm, well, Rill's had the opportunity to learn things indirectly," she said rather evasively, then immediately seemed to have a brain wave. "If you'll loan her your partner a little longer, she wouldn't mind telling you." Her expression was vaguely triumphant.

Natsunagi grimaced. "...All right. That's Kimizuka's decision anyway."

"Sorry. I promise I'll bring back information." That was one of the jobs an assistant could do. I gave Rill a wordless nod, and the corners of her lips rose slightly.

"Actually, you haven't had breakfast yet, have you? Rill will prepare something; let's eat." Rill started back toward the kitchen, making herself completely at home.

"Why exactly are you cooking here like that's normal?! I'll do it!"

"Oh? Well, why are you acting like his legal wife?"

Squabbling, the two of them headed for the kitchen. Geez, did I ever have noisy partners.

"Sorry about that. It's the middle of the night for you, isn't it?" I apologized to Mia, who was watching the situation unfold with an awkward smile. However...

"Hm? The day's just getting started."

...I caught a glimpse of a game controller on the screen. Mia said her hobby was online gaming; was she planning to do that all night?

"The person I most want to play with isn't here, though."

"...I see. I hope she wakes up soon."

Mia had averted her eyes in a lonely way, and she blinked in surprise. "Me too," she said with a smile. She reached in to end the call, but I hurried to get in one last question.

"So the detective's next mission isn't subjugating the Phantom Thief?"

The Phantom Thief, Arsene, was one of the twelve Tuners.

Siesta and I had run into him once before. He was a traitor; I'd heard he'd been jailed for stealing part of the sacred text. And yet...

"Arsene still hasn't been designated an enemy of the world?"

He'd meddled with the sacred text, which was considered absolutely sacrosanct. They'd captured him, but he'd broken out of jail, and now he was manipulating completely unrelated civilians into committing a rash of crimes. Several months ago, Siesta had declared that Nagisa Natsunagi would solve that incident someday.

"I've seen no futures like that, and the government isn't currently attempting to declare the Phantom Thief an enemy of the world."

"...I see. Then there's no way to make a move now, huh?"

I'd heard Arsene had been thrown in jail long-term for the crime of stealing the sacred text, but why hadn't his punishment been harsher? Siesta had said she didn't know, either, but there must have been a reason.

"You've changed since we first met. I can see it," Mia said out of nowhere. To me, apparently. "You've taken on more responsibilities since then."

I'd made a promise to Siesta about Arsene, too. But she was asleep now, so of course, I'd pick up the slack.

"So I'm cooler now? Hearing it so directly is kind of embarrassing."

"Um, no, I didn't go that far." Mia waved a hand in front of her chest in a straight-faced gesture of denial, then broke into a wry smile. "Don't push yourself, though. If anything happened to you, I'm sure more people would be sad than you think."

Was Mia one of them? Deciding not to ask, I nodded, and we ended our call.

In the kitchen, I heard the girls arguing noisily.

"Oh—I forgot. Kimizuka likes his eggs over easy. He just mentioned it the other day, too..."

"Aww, and here Rill asked, but you insisted that scrambled eggs were fancier."

"Sh-shut up. I'll make them again, so you get out of the kitchen!"

"Nobody likes needy ex-girlfriends."

I'd gladly eat both kinds, so couldn't we all just calm down?

"...It's peaceful, though."

Before long, my nose picked up the aroma of toast and frying eggs.

My days were like this now, a meeting place of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

And I was living in the belief that, someday, we'd reach a future in which all our wishes came true.

### ◆ Four years ago, Reloaded

I was waiting for the wind.

It was summer, and I was standing on the athletic field. Holding a long pole in my hands, I stood at the starting line and took long, steady breaths.

There were no wind measurements in pole-vaulting. However, it was normal to be given one minute to prepare, and I could use that to wait for a wind that was in my favor.

Fortunately, there weren't many athletes remaining now, so they'd given me three minutes instead.

I wasn't feeling particularly tense. I didn't worry about messing up. In some interview a long time ago, I'd been asked if leaping over a bar that high scared

me, but I'd never felt that way.

That was what made me suited to this sport. It was the only one for me.

"—There it is."

The direction of the wind changed.

It was a soft tailwind, the sort that was easiest to ride. A yellow flag went up, signaling the last fifteen seconds of my wait time. I drew one last deep breath, then started my run-up.

Leveling my carbon-fiber pole, I launched into a sprint.

One stride, two, three. The wind gradually wound around me, and soon, I was moving at top speed. I didn't have that much distance to make my approach run. Before long, a bar that was more than twice as high as I was tall loomed in front of me.

The next moment would decide everything. I jammed my pole into the box, bending it; I used my biceps, my pectorals, and every other muscle I had to flip my body over, pushing myself higher and higher. And then—blue sky was all I could see. Pole-vaulting is a leap into the sky.

I let go of the pole, and a floating sensation swept over me.

At that point, the competition was already over.

The bar wasn't shaking. The white flag that signaled success had gone up.

Then the crowd began to buzz. The height of that jump had been a new competition record.

On my back on the mat, I let myself savor a modest sense of achievement. Not for the cheers, but for this beautiful blue sky.

"Now, then ... "

I got up, clearing the way for the next athlete.

Ordinarily, I would already have won this tournament.

But the girl who stood at the starting line was attempting to jump the same height.

"She's..."

The girl's reddish hair was pulled back in a bun.

She was gazing at me from a distance, her expression filled with confidence.

Before long, I heard scattered applause. The girl was stirring the audience up. Lots of track athletes put on performances like this. I'd never done it, but...

Soon, the starting signal sounded, and she set off running.

She hadn't waited for the wind. I promptly realized she didn't need to.

She was the wind.

She sprinted her whole approach with beautiful form and sent her inverted body straight over the bar. It was a vault that stabbed right into the heavens.

"-Wow."

Even before the white flag went up, cheers broke out.

It was the first time I'd ever thought someone's practice jump was beautiful.

"Hey, you!"

I'd showered and changed in the locker room, and I was walking down the hall that led outside when someone called to me. Everyone else from my school had headed for the bus already. I turned, wondering who it could be. Then with a start, I recognized her.

Her hairstyle was different now, but I remembered that reddish color. I'd seen it so many times, I couldn't have forgotten it if I'd tried. It was the girl with the beautiful jump, the one who'd vied with me for the championship all the way to the end.

"Phew! I actually found you."

She had freckles on her cheeks and a friendly smile.

The girl walked right up to me. She had a key chain of some sort of anime girl on her sports bag.

"What's your name?!"

"...Huh? Me?" I was pretty sure my name had been up on the electric scoreboard, but whatever. "Lilia Lindgren."

"Okay! I'll call you Lill!" Even as she said it, she was shaking my hand energetically.

...She was unusual, the way she got so close to people so fast. Did she have communication issues that were the exact opposite of mine?

"And you were, um..."

"Call me Freya!"

I wasn't really accustomed to calling people by their first names. Still, that smile wouldn't let me refuse.

"So, uh...Freya. What did you need me for?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. I just wanted to try talking to you." Freya pointed to a nearby bench. "Want to sit down?"

There was still a little time left before my school group was supposed to meet at our bus, so I sat down beside her. "You wanted to try talking to me? Does that mean you knew about me before?"

"Well, yeah. There's no one in this sport who doesn't know you."

"Then why did you ask my name?"

"Ah-ha-ha! I mean, when you meet somebody for the first time, you're supposed to introduce yourself, you know?"

Was that how it went? She'd been taking the lead in this conversation the whole time.

"I finally caught up to you a little bit, though." Freya smiled at me. "Competing with you at a tournament has been my goal for ages."

This was the first time the two of us had been the last remaining contestants at a meet.

The truth was, though, I'd known about her for a while. I'd heard rumors that there was a girl at a nearby school who'd taken up the sport just six months ago but was renewing her records at a ferocious pace. Today, in front of a crowd,

Freya had demonstrated that her ability was the real thing.

"I didn't quite make it, though. Just a little more, and I would've won." Freya kicked her legs lightly, reviewing the day's match.

In the end, Freya and I had jumped the bar set one notch higher, and we'd both set tournament records. However, I'd succeeded on my second try, while she'd succeeded on her third. In accordance with the rules, since I'd needed fewer practice jumps to succeed, I was declared the winner.

"Well, neither of us made the notch after that, so we technically tied."

"You can say that 'cause you're the queen..." Freya growled comically in frustration. "Well, I'll make it next time," she declared. She sounded both indomitable and completely sincere.

I couldn't figure out what she was trying to say.

"You know what happens if I do, right?" she said. "If I make it, you'll definitely jump that same height. And if you make it, then so will I. We'll just keep renewing our records to infinity."

That thought hadn't even occurred to me.

We were competing against each other? Track and especially pole-vaulting were individual sports. I'd assumed all I'd ever compete against were my own records.

"That way, we'll both set lots of new records, and we'll get into bigger tournaments, and someday, we'll go international. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

Freya grinned, flashing white teeth. She'd smiled so much in just a few minutes. I was pretty sure she'd already smiled more in this conversation than I had in the past year. What an odd girl.

"You sounded as if you respected me earlier. Now you think we're on the same level?"

"Ah-ha-ha! Well, we already competed against each other today. Starting now, we're rivals!"

Rivals. That word made my heart jump, although I didn't know why.

For some reason, though...my body felt slightly warmer. A very tiny bit.

"Huh? ...You don't want to be?"

Freya peeked at my face. She seemed a little worried by my silence.

I shook my head. "I was just thinking how you're the kind of person I couldn't be friends with, so 'rivals' is perfect."

Freya thought about what I meant for a minute, then bristled. "Excuse me?!"

For the first time that day, I smiled just a little.



# **Chapter 2**

# **♦** What these two hands hold

That day, I visited Siesta's hospital room for the first time in a while.

"How are you feeling? Having any good dreams?"

Lowering myself onto the stool, I gazed at my former partner's face.

Her breathing was gentle and relaxed, and her chest rose and fell slowly beneath the comforter—proof that she was spending another day napping. "Sorry I haven't been by lately," I told her.

It had been about two weeks since the last time I saw her face. My previous visit had been last year, late on Christmas Eve, the night I'd been attacked by that grotesque phenomenon. I'd been visiting once a week until a little while ago, but I hadn't been able to manage that lately.

"My new partner's pretty demanding, see."

Reloaded, the Magical Girl.

For the two weeks since she'd roped me into this, I'd been helping her with her job. I'd done it over the New Year's holidays, of course, but even after school started up again, Rill kept riding her motorcycle to the schoolyard, grabbing me after class, and taking me off to hunt Pandemonium. Naturally, the other students were stunned every time it happened.

I complained to Rill, of course, but for some reason, I kept doing what she said. If the sleeping detective had been awake, I knew she would have told me not to abandon a job I'd already agreed to.

I also wanted to help Natsunagi now that she was a Tuner. There was a possibility that Rill's information on vampires would help her carry out her new mission.

That was why, for now, I had to stick with the demanding but reliable magical girl. Her personality might be a problem, but she was definitely good at her job.

I did think she shouldn't keep charging ahead by herself without any regard for the danger, though.

"Why do you suppose she's so desperate?"

Siesta had once said that, as a detective, helping people was in her DNA. Mia and Natsunagi had both become Tuners because they'd admired the way she lived.

Then what about Rill? Had the Magical Girl lived by a hero's code from the start, like Siesta? Or had she picked it up later, like Mia and Natsunagi?

"I was wondering who was here. Hello, Kimihiko."

A voice joined the room with me and Siesta. Then its owner walked in, carrying a large paper bag.

"It's been a while, Noches. I guess not that long, though, huh."

The girl could have been Siesta's identical twin. She came to take care of her mistress, and she was here more often than everyone else, but this was the first time we'd met face-to-face since the year had begun.

"What a surprise. I didn't think I'd ever see you here again," Noches said expressionlessly (although that was her default).

"Just how heartless do you think I am?"

"You've forgotten Mistress Siesta and grown infatuated with another woman, you know—"

"Don't talk like you've seen it! There's never been a single day when I forgot Siesta..."

"—or so Nagisa said."

So Natsunagi was the one putting crazy ideas into her head, huh?

Well, she probably did have a bone or two to pick with Rill.

"By the way, what were you about to say? What came after 'There's never been a single day when I forgot Siesta...'?"

"Don't bring that up again. Just put your stuff down and have a seat."

At that, Noches finally smiled (or that's how it looked). Briskly, she took a towel and a change of clothes out of the bag. Apparently, she wasn't planning to sit down and take it easy.

"I wanted to wipe down Mistress Siesta's body, but I suppose I'll leave that for another time."

"Why are you shooting looks at me, Noches? I'll turn the other way; you don't even have to tell me."

Wiping Siesta's body down and changing her clothes were jobs Noches and the other girls always took care of. That meant the only thing I could do when I came to visit her was tell her about all the super-duper fun things that had happened lately. ... Was I being a nuisance?

"I'm joking. No need to turn," Noches said, putting the towel and clothes away in the cupboard.

That's weird. She hadn't trusted me after all.

"You don't really need my trust or confidence, do you?" she said as if she'd read my mind. "It's fine. The one whose trust you really need is sleeping peacefully here."

"...I'm not so sure about that."

Was it still okay to assume Siesta trusted me?

"Have you forgotten that day?"

Noches meant the day Siesta had fallen asleep.

The last words I'd exchanged with Siesta had been something like this:

"Someday, I swear I'll wake you up."

"Yes, I'll be waiting."

Siesta was still waiting for me to keep my promise. She was believing in me and sleeping. That meant I couldn't let her down.

"At this rate, though, Siesta's gonna be disappointed in me," I said ruefully.

I'd sworn I'd wake Siesta up one day. That wish was real, and my heart was in it.

The question was—how?

"Stephen said the seed in Siesta's heart has already begun to sprout. The sprout has tangled around the muscle so that they're basically inseparable."

"Yes. That's why even a brilliant doctor can't simply remove the seed. The one way to save Mistress Siesta is..."

A heart transplant.

That was the simplest way. Problem was...

"Not that I expected anything else, but donors aren't that easy to find."

"That's right. Even if Mistress Siesta's body is special, there's no way around that."

It wasn't as if just any heart would be compatible with Siesta. Quite a while back, Hel had been in a similar situation. A year and a half ago, her heart had been damaged; she'd attacked Londoners one after another in search of a new heart, but none of them had been perfect matches. In the end, the heart she'd taken had belonged to Siesta, another girl who'd inherited Seed's DNA.

"For starters, I'd like to talk to Stephen more."

I wanted to ask him if there was any way to save Siesta, but the Inventor hadn't visited this hospital lately. Not since Siesta had fallen asleep, in fact. Natsunagi and I had recruited the Men in Black to look for him for the past three months, but there was still no news.

As I was thinking, Noches set a chair beside mine and sat down. "Frankly, you and I aren't really friends, Kimihiko."

"Way to bring down the conversation." Between this and that, we'd known each other for almost half a year...

"That being the case, I can say something harsh to you. And I will."

As Noches continued, she kept facing straight ahead, without looking at me.

"Kimihiko, haven't you been doing everything by halves lately?"

For just a moment, I sneaked a glance at her.

She wasn't angry, but I knew her blue gaze wasn't about to let me weasel out of anything.

"Who do you consider your partner now? Is it Nagisa? Mistress Siesta? Or is it the Magical Girl?" Before I could answer, she added more questions. "What is your current mission? Is it averting the vampire rebellion? Is it stopping Pandemonium? Or is it apprehending the Phantom Thief? How far down the list is your wish to awaken Mistress Siesta?"

"Well, it's—"

The answer was simple.

What my first wish was went without saying, but the current situation was enough to give Noches cause for doubt. That was undeniable; I couldn't make excuses.

"I'm not blaming you," Noches said.

She was watching me now.



"But if you try to hold everything at once, something precious may slip through your fingers someday. If nothing else, remember that."

She'd warned me she was about to be hard on me, and her gentle lecture resonated somewhere deep inside me. Her words would stick for a while.

Who would I stand beside, and what wish would I make come true? I was the only one who could choose. As far as I was concerned, this was probably the story of my choice.

## **◆** An eye for an eye, cheating for cheating

After that, I headed out to meet Reloaded. Meeting up with her right after hearing that from Noches made me feel guilty in a way I couldn't even describe, but I couldn't break a promise.

In addition, we weren't meeting for one of her usual patrols. In a way, to me, this was something more important. I headed for the roof of the commercial building she'd called me to and finally spotted her at a table in a terrace café.

"You're late."

Rill sat at a table for four, chin in her hands, glaring at me. As usual, she was dressed in her Magical Girl outfit.

"I'm ten minutes early."

"It can't possibly be okay for a pet to keep his owner waiting."

"Not fair."

I started to take the seat across from Rill, but she pointed to the one next to her. I sat down in that one instead, then looked around. There didn't seem to be any other customers. Had she actually reserved the place?

I'd asked her why we were meeting here, but all she said was "The view's nice, isn't it?" which wasn't much of an answer. Although, she was right about the cityscape.

"Do you like high places?"

"Rill likes the sky."

She'd been gazing up, not out.

Today was a pleasantly clear, sunny day.

"And? Remember what you said?" Sipping the hot coffee the waiter had brought me, I got the ball rolling. "You said you'd tell me the vampires' secret, remember?"

That was the reason we were meeting today. Since I'd been her loyal dog for the past two weeks, I was supposed to get that information today.

"Wait until everyone's here," Rill told me, tapping her index finger on the table.

There were two empty chairs across from us.

Before long, I heard a familiar voice say, "Oh, there they are." It was Natsunagi.

Today's topic was directly related to the Ace Detective, so it was only natural that she'd be here...but she hadn't come alone.

"Who's that guy?"

The tall man was wearing a suit, and he looked like he was in his late twenties. He had large, sharp eyes that sort of seemed to be glaring at me; that and his thick hair made me think of a wild wolf. Who was he, though? He didn't seem to be a Man in Black.

"Oh, of course. This is Ookami," Natsunagi said by way of introduction.

Wow, even his name was wolf in Japanese.

"He's my new assistant."

The world faded to black.

"Um, Kimihiko? Rill thinks she just heard a crack open in the earth." Rill poked me with her finger; my forehead had connected sharply with the table.

"Rill, do me a favor and pinch my cheek."

"Let her state in advance that you're not dreaming."

Pain ran across my cheek—she sure wasn't holding back.

I felt like putting this in the dictionary as an example of When it rains, it pours.

"What's this 'new assistant' business...?" I sat up glumly.

Natsunagi had taken the seat across from me. "Mm, I suppose he's not a new assistant so much as...a proxy assistant?"

A proxy assistant. So a stand-in for me? I looked over at Ookami, who sat next to Natsunagi. He was scratching the back of his head, looking bored.

"I had the Federation Government introduce us a little while ago. He's going to help with the Ace Detective's job. You know, like Olivia does for the Oracle, Mia."

I see. So he was like an exclusive Tuner attendant. But in that case...

"But the Ace Detective has... You've got me, Natsunagi."

"Then why are you with her right now?" Natsunagi glanced at Rill.

So while I was helping the Magical Girl, the Ace Detective had also hired a proxy?

"Huh? You look really frustrated. Is there something you want to say to me?" Natsunagi was wearing a triumphant smile.

It was a glorious revenge on the part of the Ace Detective.

"Ookami, this is Kimizuka."

With that, she gave us the opportunity to talk.

However...

"Uh, I'm Ookami. That's it."

The man's voice was low and almost wild. Without even making eye contact with me, the newly appointed assistant started on his coffee. I'd suspected as much from my first impression of him, but now I was sure he wasn't planning to make friends.

Well, that was fine. I'd just give my name, too, and we'd get down to

business. In other words, Rill would start talking about vampires. Or so I thought, but...

"Hey. You know you need to greet him properly." Natsunagi tugged lightly on Ookami's necktie, scolding him.

Ookami hadn't been expecting that. He coughed a little, almost spitting out his coffee. "...Could you not?"

"You're an adult, Ookami. Act like one." Natsunagi glared at him.

Ookami awkwardly fixed his tie. Apparently, the only one the insolent assistant proxy couldn't defy was his employer.

"Ookami, why are you so antisocial?"

"My regular job doesn't require me to be social."

"Now you're splitting hairs. If you can't be a little cooperative, you can't function as part of your organization."

"I always work alone with no issues. This is the first time I've been put on a team."



"Huh? So I'm your first partner..."

Natsunagi acted disgusted with Ookami, but she was also wearing a smile that seemed to say she couldn't just abandon him. It was like a portrait of a girl domesticating a lone wolf.

"Say, Rill, what do you think of that pair's relationship?"

"Rill's interpretation is probably the same as yours. You don't mind if she delivers the final blow?"

"Actually, yeah, don't say the rest."

I couldn't stand to watch the two of them being all buddy-buddy right in front of me, so I raised my empty cup to my lips. There was nothing in it, but something still tasted really bitter.

"Ookami, what are you?" I finally asked, realizing I couldn't just let that slide. Sure, he was a proxy assistant, but what was his actual occupation and job title? She'd mentioned an organization...

"Security Police," Ookami said, lighting a cigarette.

"That cigarette..."

"Hm?" Ookami raised one eyebrow.

"No, never mind," I said, then asked him for details.

"I'm normally with the Security Police, but I also help out with private jobs like this one. I know quite a bit about this side of the world." Ookami was speaking to me pretty frankly, maybe because Natsunagi had yelled at him earlier.

Still, how many people could say their public identity was "member of the Security Police"?

"So you're on the force like Ms. Fuubi, hm? You're not a Tuner, though, right?"

"Titles don't interest me. I just carry out the jobs I'm assigned and see them through. Unlike some people." Exhaling smoke, Ookami gave a nihilistic smile. Was he implying that I, Kimihiko Kimizuka, had given up my job as Nagisa Natsunagi's assistant? Those were fighting words.

"Hey, Ookami," I said, "if you keep hiding behind the 'lone wolf' label, you'll never make any friends."

"Hm? Speaking from experience?"

Invisible sparks scattered between us.

"Okay, enough, stop bickering because you've got too much in common." Natsunagi clapped her hands sharply, saying something that made no sense. "Let's move on. All right?" Her gaze went to Rill.

Rill seemed to have gotten tired of waiting; determined not to waste time, she'd started on a meal by herself.

"Vampires aren't fairy-tale beings—nothing like it." Twirling pasta around her fork, Rill got to the point. "Kimihiko, you've seen Scarlet, haven't you? What did you think when you found out about him?"

"Frankly, I was only able to accept him because I already knew about pseudohumans. If I hadn't, I probably would have thought I was having a nightmare."

When I looked at Natsunagi, she nodded; apparently, it had been the same for her.

He used shadows as doors. He grew wings. He could resurrect the dead like it was nothing. Ordinarily, it wouldn't have been easy to believe a being like him even existed.

"Right. Then you've been brilliantly fooled." Rill laughed at me. "Scarlet and the other vampires really do defy common sense. However, their peculiarities are based in science. In that sense, they're more grounded in reality than Pandemonium."

Natsunagi raised a hand. "You're saying when he melts into the darkness and grows wings and things, that's science?"

"Yes. Those wings are mechanical; they're attached to Scarlet's spinal cord. With those, it's easy for him to refract light and make himself seem to disappear."

Those wings were man-made...? So all that vanishing into the shadows was an

#### illusion?

"In fact, Scarlet is the only vampire who has those wings. The Inventor gave them to him as proof that he's a Tuner."

The Inventor, meaning Stephen? He'd provided Scarlet with special weapons and technology, just like Siesta and Reloaded...

"Then what the heck was that? Even if his abilities are not perfect, Scarlet can resurrect the dead. What was that ability?" Long ago, Scarlet had resurrected Chameleon, a pseudohuman who'd died. I'd been right there and watched him do it.

"That power alone is the real thing. It's actually what makes him a vampire. Although the strength of their abilities varies, other vampires can resurrect the dead, too. They use a process based in genetic replication."

"And you're saying science made that possible, too? So what are they, exactly?" Even as I asked, a theory occurred to me. Remembering Chameleon had connected several dots all at once.

"Vampires began as an artificial, lab-created race."

I knew it. Like pseudohumans, vampires had been someone's creation. At this point, I also had a pretty good idea who that somebody was. "Were past Inventors the ones who created them?"

Rill nodded. Anyone who could create a race that was beyond human understanding would have to transcend common sense themselves. Previous Inventors had reshaped the world's common sense, producing the monsters known as vampires.

"Wait. Why did they do it?" Natsunagi asked.

"Who knows? Rill certainly doesn't." She shook her head.

Ookami, who'd been silently listening to the conversation, stubbed out his cigarette. "Asking a researcher why they did that sort of research would be a dumb question," he said. "What are we, politicians who want to trim budgets wherever we can?"

"You're pretty sarcastic, aren't you, Ookami?" Natsunagi said.

Ookami shrugged, playing innocent.

"How did you know what you just told us, Rill?" I said.

"Rill's been to Stephen's lab, or something like it. She just happened to sneak a peek at those research materials while she was there. He caught on fast and put them away, though."

"So you know where Stephen is? Where...?"

"No idea. When Rill's weapons or body need maintenance, sometimes, he contacts her through the Men in Black, but someone else has been handling that sort of thing lately."

Oh... Here I'd thought we'd lucked into intel about Stephen, but apparently, things weren't going to be that easy.

"I really do want to talk with Scarlet directly," Natsunagi said when Rill had finished her story. "There's still a lot I don't understand about vampires, and I need to know if they're really plotting a rebellion that'll threaten the whole world."

"Yeah, I second that. Not that I know where he is."

Using the Men in Black to locate Scarlet would be ideal, but we hadn't had any luck trying to find Stephen that way.

When I'd talked it over with Mia a little while ago, she'd told me there were Men in Black who did know where Stephen and Scarlet were. However, while the Men in Black functioned as the world's gears, they were constantly striking an overall balance by weighing which Tuner to align themselves with and to what extent, so there was no guarantee that they'd actually work with us.

If we couldn't count on the Men in Black, who else might help us out...?

"Where do you think the Information Broker is now?"

Bruno Belmondo, one of the twelve Tuners, was also known as the world's wisdom. Would he give us the information that would give us the leg up we needed? I'd heard Siesta had borrowed his help several times long ago...

"I hear he only cooperates with other Tuners when he wants to," Ookami said, shooting down my suggestion. It seemed to be true, though; even Rill,

Bruno's colleague, nodded.

"Our best move is to search for Scarlet directly, so let's do that," Ookami said, getting to his feet. Natsunagi followed suit.

"You're going?" I asked.

"Do you have any right to hold me back when you're here with another girl?" she said.

"...See you at school."

"Like I said, the exams are over, and we only have to attend if we want to."

Come to think of it, she had said something like that. For no particular reason, I ran my fingertip around the rim of a nearby cup. Natsunagi giggled. "You know, I think I wanted to see that glum look."

Then she left with Ookami.

It was my first total loss in quite a while.

"Okay, Kimihiko. We're headed out on patrol."

Yeesh. So we were going again today after all? Granted, I'd sort of picked up on that from her clothes, but...

"Come on, get over it already. Can you walk on your own?"

"...Just for today, could you put me on a leash?"

## **♦** What magical girls wear on the town

After that, my patrol with Rill was as rough as ever.

Specifically, a murder of white crows the size of eagles had descended on a busy entertainment district after dark and begun mobbing people. Rill said the crows were part of Pandemonium, and that they were trying to give the human race a warning of some sort. In other words, they weren't actually attacking; they were just yelling in their ears.

But nobody understood that, of course. People panicked, and Rill and I had our hands full dealing with them. We should have listened to what the whitecrow demons were saying, but of course, we had no way to understand birds or other animals. In the end, Rill attracted the crows to her shining magic staff, taking their entire rampage on herself...and while she did that, I played static at a frequency only crows could hear over the neighborhood's emergency broadcast system to shut down the riot.

"All according to plan," Rill said calmly, flipping her hair back. Her face was all scratched up, but that didn't seem to bother her. As always, she prioritized efficiency. She never flinched from the enemy or from injuries. Something about that side of her reminded me of the former Ace Detective, but I also sensed a decisive difference between them. I still couldn't pin down what it was, though.

"Why am I still going along with her anyway?"

My reward for helping Rill with her job had been the information about the vampires, and now I'd heard it. In that case, why was I still going on the patrols? And why am I meeting her again today?

I was currently standing near the clock tower in front of the train station, waiting for Rill to show up.

Was it because she'd saved my life, or was it because I'd developed the desire to know what I could accomplish as the Singularity? Or was it...?

"You really did get here early today," a girl's voice said.

I turned around. A beauty in a warm-colored coat was standing there.

...Oh. It was Reloaded.

"You're early, too. Way early. There's still twenty minutes left until we said we'd meet."

What would she have done if I hadn't gotten here ahead of time?

"If you'd showed up late two days in a row, Rill would have fired you."

"Now there's a tightrope I wasn't expecting to walk."

Who'd have thought she'd stay in work mode even when she was dressed like that?

"...What?" Noticing my gaze, Rill looked perplexed.

"I was just thinking I'd never seen you out of uniform before."

It had taken me a second to realize it was her earlier because of her hairstyle and the way she was dressed. Her long orange hair was tied back.

"Rill doesn't dress like that on her days off. She's only a magical girl for work."

So that was why. Meaning she wasn't particularly attached to those clothes?

"For a pet, you certainly are pushy. Calling your master out on her day off..."

I was indeed the one who'd suggested we meet. Because...

"Yeah. Today is a team-building day."

As I'd seen multiple times now, Rill always prioritized efficiency, and she'd charge right at the enemy without being afraid she'd get hurt. Sure, it was working for her now, but I kept warning her it could end up having irreversible consequences someday.

I'd suggested to Rill that we get to know each other a bit better—I wanted to find out why she was so aggressive about her job as a Tuner.

On Christmas, Natsunagi had tried to learn more about me. As Rill's business partner, I needed to do the same for her.

"Besides, yesterday, you said there was somewhere you wanted to go if we were doing this, right?"

I was the one who'd set this up, but Rill had decided on the itinerary.

"Rill knows. She's taking you for a walk today."

With a little smile, Rill strode off. Even in white sneakers, her steps were light and agile.

"So where are we going? You've got somewhere in mind, right?" I asked. I was staying three paces behind her.

"Wow, you're following just like a real dog."

"That's not fair. If you really think of me as a pet, then give me more treats."

"Rewards are much better when you have to wait and wait for

them." Rill turned to face me, still walking backward. "Stay."

I got the feeling my training was proceeding apace.

"Well, I guess my training started five years ago anyway."

"Did the Ace Detective put an invisible collar on you or something?"

After a few minutes of small talk as we made our way, Rill came to a sudden halt. "We're going in here for a bit."

"Here" turned out to be a small florist located on the first floor of a run-down building. Unsure what we were doing here, I followed her in. The shop was filled with flowers in all the colors of the rainbow.

Rill began picking up flowers and studying them. ... Was she shopping? I started looking for flowers to put in Siesta's hospital room myself—might as well. We were the only customers in the place.

"Why have you been the Ace Detective's assistant for so long?" Rill asked, still browsing.

I hadn't been Natsunagi's assistant for "so long," so she was probably talking about Siesta specifically. Was this more small talk, or was this what she'd wanted to discuss with me today?

"No clue. I understand that about as well as I understand why I'm your familiar."

"Ah. So you have a deep-seated predisposition for being a servant."

"It's a predisposition for getting dragged into trouble, actually."

"What's the difference?" Rill tilted her head.

What was the difference?

"I've definitely wandered around and into trouble for as long as I can remember."

"You don't appear to be wandering now."

Was that how it looked to other people? Come to think of it, Mia had told me something similar...

Noches had just pointed out that I seemed to be all over the place, though. She really was way tougher on me than everybody else.

"Still, there's one wish I want to make come true, no matter what. That goal has never changed at all."

"You mean waking the detective up again?"

I met Rill's eyes. So she'd known about that, too.

"Didn't you feel any hesitation about wishing to bring back the dead?" she asked.

"No. None," I said immediately. "I wanted to make that wish come true. I'd risk anything for it."

"...Oh," Rill murmured briefly. She looked at the ground for a moment. "This is just Rill talking to herself. It's a rumor she heard somewhere." She raised her head. "You are the world's only Singularity. The world has chosen you, and what you choose becomes the world's choice. From now on, Rill is sure that's the sort of life you will live."

"...Well, that sounds like a hell of a time."

There was no way my hands would be able to hold the whole world. But if Rill was right... If I wouldn't be able to get that wish unless I took responsibility for the world as the Singularity, what should I do, then?

"Okay. Rill's getting this, and then we'll move on."

Rill took her flower to the register, and that was the end of that for now. I followed her with my hospital-room bouquet.

After we paid and left the store, Rill led us to the station. Apparently, her motorcycle had stayed home today, so we took a train.

"Where are we going? We're not already done for the day, are we?"

In the swaying train, Rill gently leaned in close to me. "A place where we can be alone together and get some good exercise."

...For whatever reason, she'd given me an incredibly suggestive answer. I wanted to check the word *communication* in the dictionary again.

"Do you have any experience?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" I averted my face, aware that I'd gulped audibly. The car was crowded, though, and I couldn't move much.

"Have you done any of that with one of those girls?"

I had a vague idea who she meant by "those girls," but I wasn't exactly proud of it.

"What about you?" I asked. "By the way."

Rill blinked at me, her expression sober. And then... "Rill doesn't think a person's value is determined by whether they've spent a lot of time with the opposite sex."

"Right. I get you."

After that, we rocked wordlessly in the train until we reached our station. I followed Rill through the ticket barrier, wondering where we were going, and five minutes later, she pointed at a large, dome-shaped sports stadium. "Here."

When we walked in, there was a track around the entire place. As far as I could see, we were the only people there. Rill took off her coat and stretched. She kicked the toes of her sneakers against the ground, then turned to look at me.

"All right. Want to start with a little running?"

### A past that's gone with the wind

"Not fair..."

All I could see was blue sky, and the ground under my back was hard. I lay spread-eagled, my breath misting white. I'd had no idea sprinting would leave me this worn out.

"Rill's doggy is pathetic."

Someone leaned over me.

It was Reloaded, the winner of the two-hundred-meter race we'd just run.

Rolling her eyes, she held out a bottle of water she'd grabbed from the

vending machine. I took a swallow from it, then flopped back onto the ground. Sending my jacket out for cleaning was going to be a pain.

"Is it normal to collapse after only two hundred meters?" she asked.

"What else did you expect? I've barely attended any gym classes, ever."

Plus, I was wearing a jacket, trousers, and leather shoes today. Of course I could barely run in those.

"Well, Rill thinks you were faster than average, maybe. Not as fast as Rill, though."

Rill's expression was so cool and composed, she might as well have just stepped out of the shower. Come to think of it, she had mentioned a track team.

"Rill's primary event isn't track, though."

"And you're still that fast? Take those skills international, ASAP."

Rill smiled, then held out her hand. I sat up without taking it, then crossed my legs. Rill sat down next to me.



"So what was the point of that?" I asked.

Why were we here in the stadium? She couldn't really just have wanted to hold a track meet for two.

"What, it's not okay to run the two hundred for no reason?"

I wouldn't say it wasn't okay, but it wasn't normal.

"You seem like the type who'd get a late-night phone call from a girl and answer with What do you want?" Rill went on.

"Yeah, that ticks Natsunagi off sometimes."

"It sounds like you two get along well." Rill hugged her knees, smiling wryly.

I'd thought I was giving her an example of the opposite. Where had that logic come from?

*"……"* 

For a while after that, neither of us spoke. Still hugging her knees, Rill gazed absently at the distant sky. It was bright blue, with clouds streaming across it. She always worked like crazy; this was the first time we'd ever relaxed this much together.

"A minute ago, you said that track wasn't your main event. You were a pole-vaulter, right?" I asked. The point of getting together today had been to learn more about each other. She'd already heard about me at the florist. That meant it was her turn. Besides, she'd probably brought me here because there was something she wanted to tell me.

"Yes. That's all in the past, though." Rill gazed up at that endlessly clear blue sky. "Rill may not look it, but she used to be a pretty famous athlete. She always placed first or second in tournaments back home."

"Back home" probably meant the country Rill was from. She was only in Japan for work.

"Rill tended to jump around between interests, but this was one thing that stuck. It was part of her life, really, and she kinda thought it was something she'd always do."

"You're incredible, Rill. I don't have anything I can brag about."

"Then why do you sound like you're bragging right now?" Rill scowled at me. Our eyes met, and then we both grinned.

"I don't know much about the sport, but I bet you could get back into it, easy."

She'd just given me a vivid demonstration of how strong her legs were. Besides, over the past two weeks, I'd seen how phenomenally athletic she was. That wasn't just because of the magic shoes.

"Two years ago, there was a big tournament," Rill began. "Tons of people came. It was an event that could make or break our futures and our lives in the sport, but Rill wasn't really nervous. She just wanted to win—against *her*."

"'Her' who?"

"Remember what Rill said? In every tournament, she placed first or second. When Rill placed second, that girl was always first."

So Rill's rival?

"We were pretty close...in a way. We went to different schools, and we only met at tournaments and things. Rill says we were close, but it was more that the other girl insisted on starting conversations."

Rill was talking faster, and she scratched at her cheek in embarrassment. This was new.

"So your goal was to beat that girl at the tournament."

"Yes, and it was probably her goal as well." Rill reminisced about her rival. "We never talked about the tournament, but Rill knew it was on her mind. For both of us, it was the most important event there was. But then..." Rill bit her lip. "She wasn't there. Rill won, but she didn't win against *her*."

I didn't ask why she hadn't come. I was sure Rill was planning to tell me.

"The night before the tournament, she died while she was out on a practice run."

The wind turned cold.

"She was murdered," Rill said.

My eyes were drawn to the flower she'd set nearby. It was a white lily, the one she'd bought at the florist earlier.

"Did they find her killer?"

That was a bad habit. It wasn't the sort of question anybody should ask first thing. I'd even warned Siesta about that once. Who'd have thought I'd start doing it?

"They know. They haven't caught him, though."

Rill gazed into the distance, eyes narrowed.

She seemed to be glaring at something.

"She was killed by an enemy of the world. A horrible supernatural being who kills and eats living things that have outstanding genes. His code name is 'Gluttony.'"

I recognized that code name—or at least, the word.

"There are seven supernaturals, given the names of the seven deadly sins. Together, they were considered a single enemy of the world."

The seven deadly sins. They varied a little by country, religion, and era, but from antiquity, the term had referred to seven particular vices that were thought to be the root causes of sin: pride, greed, lust, envy, sloth, wrath, and gluttony. Rill was telling me that two years ago, Gluttony had killed her rival.

"They found a pool of blood on the road where she was killed, but no bones or flesh. Gluttony had eaten every last bit of her."

All that'd been left was a single running shoe.

"...Did you already know about Gluttony and the enemies of the world back then?"

Rill shook her head. "The local news treated it as a bizarre murder, nothing more, but Rill wouldn't settle for that. She investigated as thoroughly as she could, but there was no way an amateur was going to find anything...and then nearly half a year later, she met him."

I gave a questioning look.

"Stephen," Rill explained. "He told her she had potential and asked if she'd join his organization."

"So he recruited you for the Tuners?"

I'd never heard that Stephen was in charge of recruitment. However, I'd heard that Siesta had rescued Mia Whitlock, who went on to become the Oracle, from a villainous cult a few years ago.

Maybe the Tuners had been finding other Tuners that way for ages.

"He spoke at length about the hidden side of an untrustworthy world in improbable terms," Rill told me, thinking back over the conversation she'd had with Stephen. "Enemies of the world, the Tuners, the Federation Government. Rill didn't care about any of it. It bored her, so she interrupted him with a question: 'If Rill takes you up on your offer right this minute, will she be able to slaughter Gluttony?'"

"And he said...?"

"The answer was 'yes.'" Rill went on. "So Rill resolved to become a Tuner so she could avenge that girl's death personally."

Rill wasn't currently holding her magic staff. But her hands were gripping something tightly just the same.

"Is that why you put efficiency first when you take down enemies? So that you'll get to Gluttony faster?"

"That's right. However, due to certain circumstances, Gluttony's no longer considered an enemy of the world."

...Certain circumstances, hm? I hadn't known enemies of the world or global

crises could be removed from those categories. But Rill was talking like Gluttony was still out there somewhere.

"He's bound to appear again someday. Until that day comes, Rill will polish her skills, defeat enemies, and show the Federation Government and her colleagues that the Magical Girl is the one who should take care of him."

Rill's gaze was resolute.

At the Federal Council early last autumn, Rill had argued with the other Tuners. She'd said the Tuners should each focus on their own missions, that they only needed to do the jobs they'd personally been assigned. ... She hadn't wanted anyone else laying a finger on Gluttony. She'd wanted to make sure she could kill him herself one day.

"I don't count? I'm helping you with your job right now."

"Well, you're not a Tuner. You aren't against the rules. Besides..." Rill turned to look at me. "You're the Singularity. If you're here, Rill's sure the enemy will show up on their own. As a matter of fact, in the two weeks since you joined Rill, Pandemonium has been everywhere."

"I don't want to be that popular with monsters," I joked.

A smile flitted across Rill's face, but only for a moment. "You can make fun of me for putting efficiency first; I don't care. I'll use my own legs to take the shortest route to making my wish come true."

She'd switched from calling herself "Rill" to using "I."

She held out her right hand to me. "I don't have any more information to bait you in. I didn't tell you about my past to win your sympathy. I'm just asking you: Please keep helping me."

Her right hand was waiting right there. I reached out to take it, then suddenly remembered what had happened on Christmas.

Back then, Natsunagi had held her hand out to me just like this, and I'd taken it. I'd told her my left hand was already booked, but my right hand was hers.

Then what about now?

"But if you try to hold everything at once, something precious may slip

through your fingers someday. If nothing else, remember that."

Noches's words echoed in my mind.

Both my hands were taken. What could I do for Reloaded at this point? I had started reaching toward her, but I paused.

Something dark seemed to ripple in the Magical Girl's eyes.

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".....!"
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Right after that, she clutched at her chest.

"Rill!"

She crumpled to the ground, her expression agonized. Her breathing was ragged, and she was pouring sweat.

This was obviously not normal. I grabbed my phone, planning to call an ambulance.

"...W-wait." She grasped my hand. "A car...will...be here...soon... Just...get in..."

"Rill, stay with me!"

And then the Magical Girl lost consciousness.

### **◆** Another back-alley doctor

An hour later, I was in the waiting room of a run-down hospital.

It wasn't the same one Siesta was in; this was more of a small clinic. Just as Rill had said, a black car had promptly pulled up to the stadium, and it had brought us both here.

There were no other patients in the waiting room. There wasn't even anybody at the reception desk.

While I waited for them to finish treating Rill, I cycled between sitting on the bench and standing around. The sound of the clock's second hand was weirdly loud. That was probably just my anxiety, but all I could do was bide my time.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. She's settled down."

Thirty minutes later, the doctor—a thin man of about fifty, with salt-and-

pepper hair—emerged from the treatment room and told me that Rill's condition had stabilized. I realized I was standing and sat back down with a sigh of relief. So she was okay.

"Is something physically wrong with her?" I asked, since this was apparently her attending physician.

Reloaded's health had just crashed. She didn't have some sort of chronic condition, did she? She certainly hadn't seemed frail before today.

"The girl's a former athlete. Physically, she couldn't be in better shape, and she isn't ill. Ordinarily, she'd be the picture of health," the doctor reassured me in his low, thick voice.

That "ordinarily" tugged at me a bit, but what concerned me more was this man's identity. "Who are you?"

"A back-alley doctor," he said, with a smile that wrinkled his gaunt cheeks.

"You're not the first one I've heard of."

"I'm sure. As a matter of fact, I have a connection to the man who just came to your mind. I'm taking care of her on his orders."

I was pretty sure Rill had said something like that, too. She'd mentioned that someone besides Stephen was handling her medical checkups and weapons maintenance now. So this was him? In other words, it was safe to assume he knew quite a bit of inside information.

The back-alley doctor introduced himself as "Drachma." Was that his real name, or...? No, it was probably a nickname or a code name.

"Still, why did a car come to get Rill the second she collapsed? I'm guessing the driver was a Man in Black, but..."

"Telling you would be a violation of my patient's privacy. I may not much look the part, but I am a doctor," Drachma said, smiling thinly.

"Then why did she collapse? You did say she wasn't sick."

"Same answer. Once she wakes up, ask her. I can't promise she'll answer, of course."

An awkward silence fell. I couldn't exactly leave Rill and go home, though, and Drachma was still here, so I made another attempt at conversation. "There's something I want to ask. You're skilled enough as a doctor that Stephen's sending you work, so..."

"I'm not a skilled doctor; I'm a back-alley doctor," Drachma said. This was the first really human expression I'd seen on his face. "I'll answer anything except questions about the patient."

Yeah, this question wasn't going to be about Reloaded.

"A girl who's close to me has a serious heart ailment." At that, Drachma's eyes narrowed. "They say her only hope is a heart transplant, but of course, finding donors isn't easy. As a back-alley doctor, what other treatment methods would you consider?"

"Clone a heart with the exact same genes, then transplant that," Drachma replied smoothly. That was about as bizarre as you'd expect from a doctor who didn't follow the rules.

"Is that possible?"

"Stephen Bluefield is a virtuoso. He once created an organic android. I wouldn't be surprised if he could provide an artificial heart with zero chance of rejection."

...He had a point. In fact, Stephen had once made an artificial heart and created Noches...and yet he wasn't trying to do the same thing for Siesta.

He couldn't just be slacking off, though. That doctor considered saving lives his highest calling. If he wasn't treating Siesta effectively, there had to be a reason that hadn't occurred to me.

"Do you know where Stephen is?"

I really did need to talk with the Inventor more, but as soon as I asked—

"Get away from that guy right now, Kimizuka!"

—a girl threw open the door of the small clinic and strode into the waiting room. It was Natsunagi. Glaring at Drachma, she came to stand beside me.

"Natsunagi, what the heck?"

I was the only one out of the loop. Drachma gazed at Natsunagi with almost fond familiarity, then spoke in a low voice. "It's been a long time, Number 602."

A three-digit number. Not what you'd normally expect as a name.

Still, I did understand that number meant *Nagisa Natsunagi*. She'd told me about it once, long ago.

"I told you back then, at the facility." Natsunagi glared at Drachma with those red eyes of hers. "I said the Ace Detective had given me a new name."

Oh yeah. I'd heard that story.

Back when Natsunagi was still a kid, she'd lived in a research facility on a certain island. Those eyes were focused on someone she had a deep history with, and that realization pointed me toward the truth:

Drachma used to be in charge of SPES's research facility.

## **◆** A revenge tale with no villain

Six years ago, three girls—Nagisa Natsunagi, Siesta, and Alicia—had lived in a SPES laboratory on an isolated island far out in the ocean.

I'd been told that the place had gradually been incorporating Seed's DNA into the bodies of human children, calling the process "clinical trials." It had all been an experiment, an attempt to create a new vessel for Seed. The children who lived there were constantly subjected to harsh, agonizing medical procedures.

However, one day, the three girls had become aware of the facility's secret. They'd launched a rebellion against Seed—and failed.

Alicia had shielded Natsunagi and Siesta, taking the worst of it, and died when she couldn't tolerate what Seed had done to her. The shock of seeing that had switched Natsunagi's personality with Hel's. Although the facility had stolen Siesta's memories, she'd escaped and later picked me up as her assistant, then left on her journey to fight SPES. That was how the story of the three girls at the laboratory had ended.

"Natsunagi and the other girls at that lab... You're the one who—"

I'd heard that SPES had quite a lot of human collaborators back then. This guy was Exhibit A.

Both Natsunagi and I were focused on him, but Drachma's eyes were distant. "It's only been six years or so? It feels much longer."

"Where do you get off acting like it's not your problem?" I snapped. His attitude pissed me off.

When I'd brought up heart transplants a minute ago, he had to have known the patient was Siesta, but he'd been so cool and distant about it. And he was partly to blame for the situation in the first place.

"How has your throat been?" Drachma asked Natsunagi out of nowhere.

Natsunagi's shoulders flinched. "My throat?" she asked dubiously.

"Seed's seeds have drastic effects on human organs. Sometimes, they enhance cell and organ function, but their influence can also cause severe damage."

I could think of several examples of what he was talking about—Bat's ear, Saikawa's eye, Siesta's heart. So what about Natsunagi?

Was that why Drachma had asked?

"It hasn't been named yet, but recent research has discovered a mysterious organ hidden between the human nasal cavity and the pharynx. It's likely that seed put down the majority of its roots in that organ, enhancing its function."

"In my throat? There's something besides my red eyes...?"

Natsunagi put a hand to her throat, mulling over what Drachma had said.

Although she'd mostly used it back when she was living as Hel, she had the ability to brainwash people and make them follow her orders. According to Drachma, that power was based in a mystery organ near her throat, rather than in her eyes. The power lay not in her gaze but in her voice—word-soul.

"Since Seed had copied the human body just as it was, he may have been able to bestow special powers on an organ humans hadn't even discovered yet." Drachma narrowed his eyes as if he was reminiscing about the past. "Why were you helping Seed?" I asked him.

"Do you really want to know?" he responded. "Even if I related a history you could sympathize with, some convincing motive, would you two be satisfied?"

That was an annoyingly good point. As I tried to argue, Drachma held up a finger. "If nothing else, that girl doesn't seem very interested."

I realized Natsunagi was staring at a corner of the floor.

...Right. Her feelings came first. She'd been through something really painful; of course she wouldn't want to remember it. There was nothing I could say.

What I really wanted to do was make this doctor apologize. Considering what had happened to Natsunagi, Siesta, and Alicia, repenting for his sins was the least he could do... But that was just how I felt. I hadn't been directly involved, and I didn't have the right to vent my anger just because I wanted to. I knew that.

"I'm sorry, though, Natsunagi. It's now or never."

I'd grow up soon. In two years, I'd be a legal adult. I'd be more sensible, I'd be calm in the face of anything, and I probably wouldn't get emotional as often. ... So forgive me, Natsunagi. This is my last chance to rip into this guy.

"Kimizuka..."

As Natsunagi watched, I closed in on Drachma. He was a gaunt man in a lab coat, just about my height. When I thought about how much he'd hurt Natsunagi, hurt Siesta, hurt Alicia...

But the words wouldn't come. I couldn't find anything powerful enough to bury this anger and sorrow and take back everything we'd lost.

"I do regret it."

Drachma was the one who spoke first. Although his face was rather emotionless, he apologized to me—no, to those three girls in the past.

"I once stole time, memories, personalities, and lives from my test subjects in the service of my own mission and objectives. I took everything. Let me take the opportunity to apologize for that," he said. He put up no resistance. He didn't sneer at us like some evil commander in chief or cut loose with a villainous laugh. Drachma apologized, just as I'd demanded in my mind.

I didn't know what sort of person he used to be. I didn't know what he acted like or looked like. Maybe he used to embody the image of evil back then.

But Drachma wasn't an enemy we had to confront with deep anger and hate anymore. Time had passed, eroding the villain into a hollow-eyed man in his fifties. Evil didn't always wait for justice to come along and destroy it.

"That's why Reloaded was—"

Out of nowhere, what the Magical Girl had said at the stadium came back to me. She must have been afraid she wouldn't get the chance to hand out justice herself. Now I think I knew a bit of how she felt.

"I've got just one thing to say to you, Drachma."

This man wasn't an enemy any longer, but there was still one last thing I needed to tell him.

"You didn't actually take everything."

No matter what, I had to correct that assumption.

"Alicia lost her life, but she protected her precious companions and fought to the end. Siesta lost her memories, but she never forgot the enemy she needed to defeat. Nagisa Natsunagi lost her personality for a while, but she took it back, and she's standing here right now. You didn't take their pride."

Even I thought it made no sense. I'd wanted this man to apologize, and now it was the other way around.

Still, Drachma hadn't managed to inflict a single wound on Natsunagi, Siesta, or Alicia. Their souls and their pride hadn't been defiled, so—

"-Kimizuka."

Like a soft breath of wind, Natsunagi gently leaned against my shoulder. "Thank you for getting angry for us, and for crying."

Crying? Nobody's crying, I thought, but then I realized my vision had gone a

little blurry.

Guess I really wasn't quite grown-up yet.

"Atoning isn't necessarily the only option for people who've committed crimes," Natsunagi told Drachma. "We need to turn over a new leaf."

Natsunagi was still carrying Hel's crimes. That was why she could say this.

"You don't have to apologize to me, at least. I don't need you to atone, either. You don't have to repent or make excuses. You're a doctor—so save people."

Drachma's expression didn't change.

He didn't do anything cliché like break down in tears because Natsunagi's passion had moved his heart. The time for that had passed. He wasn't even an enemy now.

This sort of thing was bound to happen again, though. Someday, we'd run into someone Natsunagi's passion wouldn't work on, someone who wouldn't stop until their malice reached the whole world. When that person barred her way, what would Natsunagi do? What would we do? The silhouette of a man flickered through my mind.

"The Magical Girl needs to rest quietly for a while longer. I'll contact you once she wakes."

Drachma handed me a tablet. I hadn't really wanted to give this guy my contact information, so that was a big help. Natsunagi and I exchanged a look, then turned to go.

"I do have one last question, though." Natsunagi stopped, although she didn't turn around. "What did you want to do at that lab? What was worth risking your life?"

There was a moment of silence, and then...

"I wanted to research the creation of humans," Drachma said. "Perhaps I also wanted to become the Inventor."

"Even if Stephen's position opens up, you would never be the Inventor."

Without sparing him a glance, Natsunagi left, firing one parting shot as she

went.

"The world's greatest inventor has always been Ali."

### **◆** The sound of rain calls the detective

After we left the clinic, Natsunagi and I walked along side by side.

The things that had happened in there circled around and around in my head, and I looked at the sky, trying to shift my thoughts onto another track. The clouds had rolled in.

"It looks like we're going to get some rain."

"It really does. And here the forecast said today would be sunny."

That was as far as our conversation went. We kept walking, taking short steps over the asphalt. At the moment, we didn't have any real destination in mind. We could probably head for the nearest station, though. We didn't know how long it would be before Rill woke up, so going home for now might be a good idea.

"All we talked about was the weather, and then we had nothing else to say." Natsunagi snorted with laughter as if she couldn't hold it in any longer. "It's not like we're meeting for the first time, okay?"

"Sorry. I was thinking." I cleared my throat and chose a topic of conversation reserved for close friends only. "I heard if you take a laxative and diarrhea medication at the same time, the laxative wins, and you get the shits."

"Could you be any worse at small talk?" Natsunagi stared at me incredulously.

"The line between small talk and trivia is a tough one to draw."

"That wasn't even the problem."

"I like that you say these things but then stay in the conversation with me anyway, Natsunagi."

"Uh-huh, glad that's what you like and nothing else. Thanks a lot." Natsunagi fumed, swinging her handbag around. After the way we'd parted the previous

day, the fact that we were able to converse the way we always did was a bit of a relief.

"Come to think of it, how did you know where Drachma was, Natsunagi?" I hadn't managed to ask her earlier.

"Ookami and I stumbled onto him while we were trying to find Stephen. Learning about the vampires is important, but as far as I'm concerned, talking to Stephen matters just as much."

"...I see. You wanted to find a hint about how to wake Siesta up."

That was what Natsunagi had been working on all this time. Was that why she'd accepted Ookami so easily when the government had sent him? She'd use every resource she had for our wish.

"Where is Ookami? He's not with you today?"

"No. I was planning to take care of this on my own."

...Oh, so that was why Natsunagi had visited Drachma today.

"Sorry about that, then. I got in the way."

"Ah-ha-ha! I never expected to see you there. That was a shock." Natsunagi went a few steps ahead of me, then turned back. "I'm glad you were, though." She gave me a soft smile. "You were at the clinic for that girl, weren't you?"

She meant Reloaded, of course.

"She's really important to you, huh," Natsunagi said easily, setting off again.

"Sorry your assistant has been so unsociable lately."

"Ookami's seriously going to take that position from you one of these days."

Those words hit me like a knife to the heart.

"Still, you can't abandon her, can you?"

"Well, no. I also get the feeling she's a little like you, so I end up going with her."

"Huh. Really? I wonder if we're the same character type or something." Natsunagi got out her smartphone, used the camera app as a mirror, and

started pinching her cheeks. I hadn't been talking about her looks... "Hm? Wait, why would being like me make you want to be with her?"

"Aaanyway, if you wanted to encourage somebody like Reloaded, what's the best way to do it?"

Natsunagi was about to pick up on something inconvenient, so I changed the subject. There had to be something she and Rill had in common.

"Well... Even girls who seem to always have it together actually want to be taken care of a little sometimes. I think they want other people to acknowledge the fact that they're always working hard, especially when they're feeling discouraged or fragile."

"I see. Figuring out specifically how to take care of her might be tough, though."

I really couldn't see somebody as self-assured as Rill being actively needy.

"Maybe pat her on the head or something?" Natsunagi glanced up at me, bending down a little.

"I see. That's a really useful tip."

"Maybe pat her on the head or something!" Natsunagi was full of energy right now. *Great, that's good.* 

"Hm? Is it raining?"

I felt something wet run down my neck.

Scattered drops began to fall, and then the rainstorm hit all at once.

"Okay, Kimizuka, say you're sorry."

"I don't recall having a knack for making it rain."

Neither of us had umbrellas. We spotted decent shelter under the eaves of a building, but just as we started to make a run for it...a car stopped right in front of us.

A police car, to be specific. The window rolled down, and the driver poked her head out.

"Hey, you damn brat. Want a ride?"

It was the redheaded police officer, Fuubi Kase.

Natsunagi and I exchanged looks, then climbed into the back seat. You can't beat having a friend on the force.

"Thanks, but why are you here?" Natsunagi asked, drying her damp hair with a minitowel. The police car was already in motion again.

"A report just came in. There's a big office building up ahead, and somebody's apparently occupied the whole thing. I was on my way over."

"Someone's holing up in there? Any idea how many there are, and what they're armed with?" I asked.

Ms. Fuubi glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "Just one," she said. And then: "The fun thing is that the guy doesn't look human. He looks like a *tengu*."

Natsunagi looked puzzled. However, the word tengu rang a bell for me.

"That's the leader of Pandemonium." Rill had mentioned him during our patrol last night. The White Tengu.

Ordinarily, he lived deep in the mountains, away from humans. When he had a major warning to give mankind, he'd appear at the head of Pandemonium, accompanied by a horde of demons and spirits. Apparently, he was the one who'd been commanding that flock of white crows from the shadows last night, too.

"...So, uh, Ms. Fuubi. You're not planning to make us deal with him, right?"

"Y'know, I really am glad I accidentally ran into you two. Today's my lucky day."

Apparently, this police car wasn't a free taxi. She'd told us someone had called in a report; could they have been a Man in Black sharing intel?

"I'd do something about it myself, but you know how it is. The Magical Girl just haaates having other people horn in on her jobs."

"But by that logic, she wouldn't want us to— Oh, I see. You mean Kimizuka could get away with it?" Natsunagi dropped a fist into her palm as the realization hit.

"As a police officer, I'll 'control traffic' and clear the area for you, so don't worry about a thing."

"I'm going to worry about every single thing, actually..."

Then the car pulled up near the occupied building.

The weather had already worsened past a localized downpour; water was gushing from manholes and drainage ditches. I'd been told that Pandemonium sometimes appeared in visible form as natural phenomena. If Rill had been here, she probably would have explained that the White Tengu was manipulating the weather to make himself known.

"Over there." From the driver's seat, Ms. Fuubi pointed at a skyscraper. So the White Tengu was up in that building?

"You sure we should be the ones to go, though?"

We'd be up against the leader of Pandemonium, and we weren't experts. Would there be anything we could do? Waiting until Rill was back in action seemed like a better plan...

"I hear something," Natsunagi murmured. "A voice." She was gazing at the building.

Was somebody in there?

"They're asking for help."

At this distance, there was no way she could hear that. Especially not through the thunder. It had to be her imagination.

...That would have been the easy thing to say. But...

"Ms. Fuubi, make sure we can contact you at any time, just in case."

"What, you're deciding to go for it?"

"I've learned from a series of Ace Detectives that this is how you get the story going."

"A series, huh?" Ms. Fuubi echoed. With a thin smile, she twisted around in the front seat. "Here. Present for you." She handed me something black and shiny. "If anybody finds out about this, I bet your job isn't all you'll lose."

"Don't worry about it. I own that one."

"Police officers walk around with their own personal firearms now? The world really is going to hell."

Natsunagi and I got out of the car.

We were off to find the client the detective had heard.

# Brutality falls from the heavens

The gloomy office building was empty.

At first, I thought the White Tengu terrorist might have run everyone off, but there didn't seem to have been any fighting. It was as if there was some good reason people had never been there in the first place.

"Maybe there was a power outage, and they couldn't get any work done, so everybody went home?"

"That could happen. I'd rather believe that instead of assuming they got spirited away by the *tengu*."

Using our phones as flashlights, Natsunagi and I made our way up through the thirty-five-story office building. The elevator wasn't an option thanks to the power outage, so we took the stairs, checking each floor for people...and the White Tengu.

"Can you still hear that voice?"

"Yes, it's still above us. I can't make out what it's saying clearly, but..."

A mystery voice only Natsunagi could hear. How did that work? —But there was always a reason, a cause, for everything. That was why time flowed smoothly, and why the world turned without kicking up any contradictions. At least on the surface.

That surface wasn't totally smooth, though. There were inconsistencies; you just couldn't see them. Maybe the ones who quietly resolved these contradictions behind the scenes were the Men in Black, and maybe Pandemonium did the opposite. A crowd of invisible demons that technically

shouldn't have been there were using natural phenomena to make the contradictions apparent, advertising the fact that they existed.

We traveled around the building, checking thoroughly, and forty more minutes passed before we finally found something promising. It was standing in front of a big window on the twenty-seventh floor.

"...What is that?" Natsunagi was gazing at the leader of the demon horde, her face tense. It was about ten meters away. Technically, we didn't know if it was the White Tengu or not. If it had matched the description I'd been given earlier, even if it was grotesque, I might have been able to accept it a little more easily... but the thing lording over the office was a dog.

Not a red-nosed tengu. A white dog.

Even so, it obviously wasn't just a stray. Not even the biggest breeds grow to over three meters long.

The dog was vaguely wolflike, and its golden eyes were locked on Natsunagi and me. The tension in the air kept us still. Was this what frogs felt like when they were staring down a snake?

"Kimizuka, what do we do?" Natsunagi tugged at the cuff of my sleeve. We'd found the target, but now what?

Rill had told me how to seal the White Tengu the previous day, while we chatted about random other stuff, and I put it into action.

"Are you the leader of Pandemonium?" I got up the nerve to speak to it...but it didn't answer. Of course it didn't; I was talking to a dog.

"Kimizuka, if you ever became a pet owner, you'd be the type who never shuts up because you don't have friends to talk to in real life..."

"Not fair. They call it a tengu. I thought it might understand human speech."

Besides, I'd gotten this method straight from Rill, and she was an expert: "The way to deal with the White Tengu is to listen to what it has to say. That's all."

However, if we couldn't understand each other, we were out of luck. It would be last night's murder of crows all over again.

"I guess I should have had Rill domesticate me more thoroughly, huh."

"Because you could have talked to it as a fellow dog? Don't think like that; it's not that simple."

As we were bantering, the White Tengu moved, like it had understood us anyway. Shifting heavily, it lifted its huge body and opened its enormous mouth.

#### "======="

It said something, but I didn't know what. My ears had caught a noise that sounded like the growl of a beast. It really hadn't seemed like intelligible words.

"—Huh?" Natsunagi murmured. Still a little startled, she said, "It was you?"

"Don't tell me that's the voice you were hearing."

"Yes. It's the one I heard before we entered the building. I'm positive."

"I see. So you would have made a better pet than me, huh?"

"Double-kill! That's not it." Natsunagi's expression was serious. "It's wordsoul."

I flinched slightly at the term.

We'd discussed that ability at Drachma's clinic. It was likely that Hel had used that power in combination with her red eyes to force others to do what she said.

"Technically, this ability is a little different from hers. I don't know how to put it, though. It's as if it's speaking directly into my brain. That's what it feels like anyway."

"...Frankly, I don't get this at all, but you can tell what the White Tengu is saying on instinct?"

Natsunagi nodded, although she didn't look super confident. "I think so."

Could she understand the White Tengu's words because she'd also used word-soul once? Hel's personality had left Natsunagi, and we'd thought that ability had left with her, but...

### "======="

The White Tengu spoke again.

Nodding, Natsunagi attempted to interpret. "He says he's here as a representative of the demon horde. He wants to make us his apostles. ... What's an apostle? Do you know?" Natsunagi asked me. Apparently, the words appeared in her mind whether she understood what they meant or not.

"He probably wants us...well, you...to act as a sort of messenger for him."

Natsunagi nodded, then listened to the White Tengu.

"This world holds several devices for recording its past and future. The sacred tome, the clock of the end, the locked box, and beings like myself. They are there as warnings."

Maybe because Natsunagi wasn't completely following, either, she relayed the White Tengu's words in fragments. What kind of warnings?

"Is the warning something like Don't threaten the safety of the slumbering demon horde?"

"No." Natsunagi shook her head. "He's going to tell us."

Tell us what?

"If nothing changes, in the near future, both the demon horde and the human race will be swallowed up by an enormous cataclysm."

"An enormous cataclysm? A new global crisis?"

I had so many questions, and the next thing I knew, the White Tengu's eyes had turned to me. The beast's large mouth spat out word-soul again, and a moment later, Natsunagi interpreted. "It will destroy the world from the outside. It has a...code for that purpose. Only someone in the opposite position can stop it."

Still incredibly vague. All I got was that the White Tengu was prophesying an enormous cataclysm or an attack by a great evil, but what was the deal with a "code"? What did that mean? And what about "the opposite position"?

As I waited for the White Tengu to continue, something in my jacket vibrated. At first, I thought it was Drachma sending word that Rill had recovered, but no, my phone was ringing. The text on the screen read "Fuubi Kase."

I'd been planning to reach out to her if we ran into trouble we couldn't

handle. What was she doing contacting us? I hit the TALK button, but before I could say *Hello?* her voice burst out of the speaker.

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"—Run!"
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I almost jerked the phone away from my ear—she was so loud. I wasn't sure I'd ever heard Fuubi Kase sound like that.

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"Ms. Fuubi, what the heck...?"
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"He's already climbed to the top!"

He? "He" who?

Before I could ask, thunder rumbled.

"—! Natsunagi! Get down!"

The sound wasn't thunder. That roar was the sound of the ceiling cracking open and crashing down right in front of us.

Then *he* dropped down from the cavern overhead.

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"=========!!!!"
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This time, even I could tell the White Tengu was screaming.

Its huge, white-furred body had been pierced by a greatsword, the intruder's weapon.

A large man stood over the bloodied *tengu*. Was his body naturally gray, or was that iron armor? There were all sorts of blades stuck into his broad back and shoulders, from military swords to blades light enough to wield one-handed. Or no—were they growing there?

The man pulled the greatsword out of the White Tengu's body. Dark-red blood spattered, but the white dog didn't yelp. It was already dead.

"Natsunagi, get back."

That was what a cool guy would say at a time like this, but I was dripping with cold sweat.

The enemy stepped down off the White Tengu's corpse, then slowly turned our way.

He was easily over two meters tall. I finally got a look at his face, but it was covered by an iron mask that only left his mouth exposed.

His lower jaw jutted out like the jaw of a dinosaur I'd seen in a picture encyclopedia when I was a kid, and the iron mask couldn't contain it. The teeth were much too big and sharp to belong to an ordinary human. His long tongue writhed, and I got the feeling that this was the gaping mouth's version of a smirk.

"...Kimizuka. What...is that?" Natsunagi had grabbed my arm, and both her hands and her voice were trembling.

I didn't know this guy. I'd never met this kind of brutality.

Still, for some reason, I instinctively knew his name.

Even as I thought It can't be that and Please don't let that be it, I said it aloud.

"He's the supernatural Gluttony."

# **◆** Battlefield of revenge

Natsunagi and I desperately ran down the stairs of the deserted office building.

Thanks to the power outage, the elevator was still unusable. If we wanted to escape, we had to get down twenty-seven floors.

"This is our chance, while he's eating," I said.

Natsunagi gagged, clapping a hand over her mouth.

"Sorry," I apologized, but I kept running. Gluttony had promptly started to devour the White Tengu's corpse. He'd opened his huge mouth, sinking his teeth into flesh and slurping up the blood with his long tongue. That had to be the source of his name... Frankly, I didn't even want to think about it. I just sprinted down the stairs toward the exit.

"You know about that man, Kimizuka?"

"Not well, but...he used to be an enemy of the world."

I filled Natsunagi in on what I knew about Gluttony. Including him, there were a total of seven supernaturals named after the seven deadly sins. They had once been designated enemies of the world, but the designation had been removed for some reason. And Gluttony was Reloaded's sworn enemy.

"Apparently, he's in the habit of eating any living thing that has outstanding genes."

"...And we have to escape from it." Turning pale, Natsunagi ran down the stairs.

The nineteenth floor—the stairs seemed to go on forever. They reminded me of that night at the hospital last Christmas. I hadn't been able to use the elevator that time, either, and I'd kept running downstairs for all I was worth—

"Kimizuka! Look...!"

I'd been keeping my eyes on my feet, but Natsunagi grabbed my arm and yanked. Gluttony was on a landing a few floors up, peering down at us. Because of that mask, I couldn't tell whether his eyes were on us or not, but that protruding mouth was definitely smiling.

"Natsunagi, this way!"

I tugged her by the hand through the stairwell door, taking us into the eighteenth floor.

If we'd stayed on the stairs, he'd have caught us in no time. Racing down a hall, we looked for somewhere to hide.

Turned out I was right. There was a dull *crash* back in the stairwell, as if someone had dropped a ton or two of steel. The supernatural had jumped down, and now he was hot on our heels. Natsunagi and I ducked into a room with rows and rows of desks.

"For now, let's hide here."

I led Natsunagi to the very back of the room, where we hid behind what was probably a senior worker's desk.

It was five thirty PM; there was a thunderstorm outside, and the lights in the office were off. The two of us hugged our knees in the dark, holding our breath.

Before long, we heard a sharp, metallic clanking out in the hall.

"...Ah-ha-ha. That's really pretty scary." Natsunagi was doing her best to sound cheerful, but she buried her face in her knees.

What options did we have?

We couldn't use the elevator or the stairs. We were still on the eighteenth floor, nowhere near low enough to survive jumping out a window. We had no way to escape.

"I'll draw the enemy away."

In that case, we'd have to fight. I took out the gun Ms. Fuubi had given me.

"Natsunagi, if he shows up, you go through the opposite door. Don't stop; run all the way down to the first floor."

"...No. You're not strong, Kimizuka. He'll kill you in a heartbeat."

"Don't worry. He apparently eats the corpses as soon as he kills them. You should be able to get away while he's busy with..."

But Natsunagi had raised her head.

"Don't say that. Don't even joke about it," she said, looking me straight in the eye. "If we die, we're dying together." She meant it.

"That's a little codependent."

"Do you hate needy girls or something?" Natsunagi pouted.

I gave her a wry smile. "I could never hate you, Natsunagi."

Then I lunged out from cover and got up on top of the desk.

The supernatural was already really close.

"Sorry, but before you eat me, have a couple of bullets to chew on."

I pulled the trigger and fired once, twice. The shots hit him in the head and chest, but that armor or whatever it was deflected them. Then Gluttony tossed his greatsword away, leaning forward in a loose motion. That beast-like stance reminded me of the White Tengu he'd just eaten. Then he opened his big mouth and laughed.

Were those white fangs and long tongue going to devour me next? ... No way in hell.

Now on all fours, Gluttony leaped at me, and I jumped down from the desk and slid under him. Then I fired a shot from his blind spot. The bullet went straight through his jaw, his one vulnerable point.

It was the first time Gluttony had spoken.

Technically, it was more sound than speech, but the bestial cry had to be proof that I'd done damage. Like me, Natsunagi had pegged this as a chance; she darted out from behind the desk and started running toward us, except—

"Natsunagi, dodge!"

"Huh?"

—the supernatural wasn't down yet. Although we couldn't see his eyes, they were definitely turned toward Natsunagi. I leveled the gun, aiming at the supernatural's right arm as he reached for her and firing without hesitation, but the bullet cut through empty space.

I hadn't misaimed, and the enemy hadn't dodged. Just before I fired, someone else's attack had blasted Gluttony away.

"I heard protecting the detective was the assistant's job. Was I wrong?"

The newcomer taunted me lazily. He was holding a weapon that looked like a big sickle over his shoulder, and its tip was red with blood. Gluttony had collapsed a few meters away; his side had taken a whole lot of damage. Once Natsunagi saw that, she ran up to me.

"If it hadn't been for you, I would've shot that thing—Ookami."

The proxy assistant turned back slightly, glanced at me, and smirked. Natsunagi was staring, too, startled by Ookami's intrusion.

"Weren't you and Natsunagi acting separately today?"

"Guarding the Ace Detective is my job. I've been tailing you the whole time. I was never more than a hundred meters away."

So he was basically a stalker, then. Although, his enthusiasm for his job was impressive.

"Still, who'd have thought you were such a fighter?"

He'd said he was officially with the Security Police, but what was up with that huge sickle?

"As long as I've got this, no one dies on my watch," Ookami muttered huskily. Then he shot Natsunagi a sidelong glance. "Either way, we'll talk after that thing's down. That okay with you, Ace Detective?"

"Yes, absolutely! Let him have it!" Natsunagi thrust out her fist, entrusting everything to her dependable partner.

"He completely stole my job, didn't he...?" I grumbled.

Ookami nodded to Natsunagi, then faced forward. Even though Gluttony was bleeding heavily from his side, he got to his feet. He roared, and the fight was on. Tongue wriggling, he drew two of the greatswords that grew from his back. Now upright again, the supernatural sprinted toward us.

"This won't take long. I'll have my revenge."

Revenge? But there was no time for me to ask what he meant. Ookami dropped into a crouch and swept his great sickle in a horizontal slash, countering the enemy's attack.

With a violent, metallic *clang*, the blades locked. In terms of weapons, Gluttony had an overwhelming material advantage—when one blade broke, he just drew another from his shoulders or back.

And yet it was hardly an equal fight. How was that possible? Frankly, Ookami didn't look all that strong, but not one of Gluttony's attacks had even scratched him. Maybe he was just a combat genius, but...

"This room's a little cramped. Let's do this over there."

Pushing Gluttony with his sickle, he launched them both right through the office windows.

Without so much as a glance at each other, Natsunagi and I ran over to the broken windows.

What we saw was the combatants still grappling, weapons clashing, as they plunged down from the eighteenth floor.

"Kimizuka, we need to go, too!"

"...Yeah, let's get down there fast."

That said, it wasn't like we could jump. Instead, we headed for the stairs and ran down all eighteen floors without pausing to rest.

Outside, the sun had already set, but the rainstorm had mostly abated. We hurried through the drizzle, searching for the battle.

"Kimizuka, look!"

There they were, in an intersection a little way from the office building.

Gluttony was a lot more torn up than he had been earlier; Ookami had scratches, and his clothes were dirty, but he was steady on his feet. The pair were facing off across a distance of a few meters. The fight was just about over.

"Gluttony, I'll take on your sins."

Ookami got a better grip on his sickle.

Having lost his weapons, Gluttony opened his mouth and howled weakly.

"Nobody else is allowed to kill that guy."

A gunshot skimmed past Natsunagi and me, then past Ookami, heading straight for Gluttony. With a bellow that made me want to cover my ears, the enemy dropped to one knee.

I didn't even have to turn around to know who was responsible.

Reloaded was the only one who'd say that.

Hair wet, dressed in her street clothes, the Magical Girl staggered forward. Holding a gun instead of her magic staff, she approached her mortal enemy one step at a time.

"Rill won't let anyone get in the way. This guy is dead. Rill's going to kill him. That's Rill's, her only—"

In the next moment, she vanished.

The next thing I saw was Rill lunging at Gluttony, shoving her gun down his throat. Gluttony bit down on her arm, but that didn't seem to faze her. She pulled the trigger, but the gun didn't go off. It had been crushed between Gluttony's teeth.

"Let Rill go, you piece of—!" I fired my gun instead.

Gluttony dodged, but during that brief moment, his powerful jaws released Rill's arm. Ookami grabbed the opportunity to scoop her up and put some distance between them and Gluttony.

"Reckless courage is a sin."

"Let...go!"

Rill shook herself free and headed back toward Gluttony, bleeding arm and all. "It's him! Rill swears she'll kill him, if no one else! If she doesn't, that day, that promise with Freya, won't ever...!"

She reached into the distance with her bloody hand. Beyond it...

"This place seems a bit too chaotic."

Someone had spoken.

"The many wills of many people are intersecting, which makes it difficult to pull the tale back on track."

The voice belonged to a latecomer to this party.

I recognized the voice, though. In fact, you could say I'd been listening for it. Not that I was happy to hear it now.

The sun had set, and the streets were dark; he appeared from nowhere in particular.

"Have no fear—I will take on all of it. Who wishes to kill whom? Who wishes to let whom live? I can make it all happen. Yes, I, the Vampire."

The white demon, Scarlet—the vampire we'd been searching for—had shown up on his own. He walked toward Gluttony, who was breathing roughly.

"—Scarlet. Why are you here? Why now?"

"Ha-ha. It's been quite some time, human. Your expressions are as hysterical as ever. You should learn a bit from that woman's composure," the vampire sneered.

By "that woman," he meant the absent detective.

"Come, let us bring down the curtain for the moment. You may resume once all the preparations have been made."

Gluttony, gasping feebly beside Scarlet, began to vanish into the darkness.

"Wait!"

I hastily leveled my gun, trying to stop him—

"Kimihiko Kimizuka. This is not your time."

The vampire's eyes turned toward me. The next thing I knew, I was kneeling on the asphalt.

"W-wait...!" Rill screamed, but neither her voice nor her outstretched hand reached into that deep darkness. Both Scarlet and Gluttony melted into the shadows.

"Rill..."

In the dark, the Magical Girl's back was trembling slightly.

## The promised parting

After losing Scarlet and Gluttony, the rest of us relocated to a nearby hotel. Even with her wounded arm, Rill had kept trying to go after the enemy, and we needed to calm her down.

I thought we really should have taken her back to Drachma's clinic, but Rill had categorically refused. Besides...

"She won't need treatment for a wound like that," Drachma had said after I'd described her injuries to him over the phone.

It certainly didn't look like a minor wound from here. However, Rill hadn't wanted to go to the clinic, and we couldn't force her, so we'd split the difference and made her rest in a room at the hotel. Natsunagi stopped the bleeding, performed first aid, and somehow managed to get Rill to lie quietly on the bed.

"Thanks, Natsunagi. That was a huge help," I said, offering her a fresh cup of coffee when she emerged from the bedroom.

"I spent half my life in a hospital, so I know how to do that much." With a wry smile, Natsunagi accepted the cup, took a sip...and wrinkled her nose. Come to think of it, she wasn't a fan of black coffee, was she? I handed her a sugar packet. "We're lucky this place has bandages and pain medication."

"Yeah, it looks like it's just a regular hotel."

"Looks" might not have been the right word. It was just a regular hotel. If you showed qualifications proving you were a Tuner or the equivalent, though, this place treated you accordingly.

Of course, this wasn't true of every hotel. However, on the special electronic map Natsunagi had been given after she became a Tuner, facilities where she could get help from the Men in Black were marked with red pins.

Thinking back, during those three years I'd spent traveling with Siesta, we'd sometimes borrowed civilian facilities like this for special purposes. Back then, I'd just assumed Siesta had an insane number of connections, but...

Actually, I suspected we wouldn't have had to travel like paupers if she'd used the full extent of her Tuner authority. Once she woke up, I'd give her what for.

"Maybe I'll stay in the bedroom." Still carrying her coffee cup, Natsunagi started back toward the room where Rill was resting.

"Isn't she asleep?"

"This is Rill we're talking about. She may just fake like she's asleep, then sneak out through the window."

"You've got her personality down, all right," I told her.

Natsunagi giggled, then went into the bedroom.

Then I was alone in the room...almost. Aside from the enemy, there had been four of us at that fight: me, Natsunagi, Rill, and...

"Can I ask who you actually are now, Ookami?"

The proxy assistant had been gazing out the window. The great sickle was leaning against the wall beside him. From what I'd seen of that battle, there was no way he was just a detective's attendant.

"I'm pretty sure I told you I was with the Security Police."

"Oh, I see. Guess they reserve the super-weird weapons for the elite officers," I commented. It didn't even count as sarcasm.

Lighting a cigarette, Ookami turned around. "My public job really is with the Security Police. Privately, I also take special missions directly from the Federation Government. However, there's one other side to my life." Ookami's sharp eyes narrowed even further. "I'm an avenger."

The word Ookami had said to Gluttony came back to me. Revenge.

"Did Gluttony kill one of your people?"

"Yeah, an old friend...or rather, an old colleague. He was a Tuner," Ookami told me. "Have you heard of the Enforcer?"

"...His main job was secretly hunting down criminals who couldn't officially be brought to justice, right?"

I remembered what Siesta had told me early last autumn, when we went to the Federal Council. The Enforcer hadn't been at that meeting. He'd been killed in the line of duty.

"Douglas Amon, the Enforcer, had roots in Asia and South America. He became a valuable part of Japan's Security Police while he was still young. —A year ago, Gluttony killed him. The Enforcer's mission then was killing the Seven Deadly Sins, but they got him instead."

Ookami's voice was low.

"He died trying to protect a young child."

The smoke from his cigarette rose toward the ceiling.

"So dealing with Gluttony and the rest of them wasn't the Magical Girl's mission back then?"

Was that why Reloaded had been so anxious that someone else would kill Gluttony before she could?

"But if that happened a year ago, why was the 'enemy of the world' designation removed?"

Killing the Enforcer should have been a pretty hefty crime...

"After Amon died, another Tuner killed three of the seven supernaturals instantly. When they saw that, the remaining four went into hiding, and the Federation Government decided they were harmless."

"Who killed them?"

"Arsene, the Phantom Thief."

A chill ran through me; that wasn't a name I was expecting to hear.

"The Phantom Thief was in jail at the time, but he killed the supernaturals known as Lust, Sloth, and Wrath from his underground cell in an instant."

"...How? Like some kind of magic trick?"

Honestly, it wouldn't have been all that strange if he'd managed to pull off a stunt like that.

The Phantom Thief Arsene had been thrown in jail for the crime of stealing the sacred text. Even from his jail cell, he'd apparently manipulated humans around the world. Siesta and I had seen a sliver of the man's abilities for ourselves.

"In addition, I hear he escaped execution because that achievement was recognized."

"So the government pardoned him?"

I'd always wondered why he hadn't been punished more harshly when he'd committed a crime as serious as stealing the sacred text. Who'd have thought

that would come into play here?

"And so the problem was solved, at least on the surface. It wasn't enough for me, though. Gluttony, the one who'd killed my colleague, was still alive somewhere. I waited patiently and honed my skills so that I'd be able to end that monster myself someday."

...So Ookami's motive was the same as Rill's. He'd become an avenger.

"But you're not a Tuner, right?"

"No, unfortunately. The Enforcer post was fused with the Assassin's, since their duties were similar. I just inherited his sickle and became a plain old avenger. All so that I could kill Gluttony."

Ookami studied the sickle. Was he working on orders from the Federation Government because he'd been looking for a chance to get close to Gluttony? He'd become Natsunagi's attendant in the course of those duties, and he'd just so happened to encounter his sworn enemy today.

"What are the Seven Deadly Sins anyway?"

"We still don't know much. They're supernaturals who follow their desires and leave destruction in their wake, just as their names suggest. We don't know where they came from. Some say that they're humans who've had weapons transplanted into their bodies, and others say they're human-demon chimeras."

... There's nothing as unsettling as an enemy you can't identify.

"All we know for sure is that the supernaturals are monsters that embody human malice. Gluttony is far more brutal than the others. His byname is the demon Beelzebub."

"That's the Lord of the Flies, huh?"

There was a legend I'd heard somewhere. The name makes you think of an insect, but the Lord of the Flies is starved for power and devours everything. Even among the most notorious demons, he's the hardest one to handle.

"Do you have any idea why Scarlet appeared beside Gluttony back there? It looked like he was trying to save him. Is there some sort of connection between him and the Vampire?"

"Not that I've ever heard. I'd rather not think that someone might be cooperating with the Seven Deadly Sins, but..." Ookami expelled a big puff of cigarette smoke. "Either way, what I need to do is simple. Even if they do have a collaborator, it won't matter. There are four supernaturals left, and I swear I'll end them with my own hands."

"So you're inheriting the will of the Enforcer?"

The man who'd laid down his life protecting an innocent child.

"There's no point in putting it into words. However, I knew plenty about the way he lived before I took my place on the battlefield." Ookami stubbed out his cigarette in his portable ashtray.

I'd finally gotten a glimpse of Ookami's personality. It was still just a tiny fragment, of course. But for just a moment, I'd seen a trace of someone else in him.

The shadow of Danny Bryant, who'd often smoked that same brand of cigarettes.

"—Don't just barrel ahead without talking to me," a voice broke in.

I turned and saw Reloaded, her right arm bandaged. Natsunagi was behind her; she looked worried, or maybe resigned.

"Rill will give you the other three supernaturals. But Gluttony is her prey. You may be part of the former Enforcer's inner circle, but Rill won't let anyone get in her way."

She must have been listening to us from the next room. She really wasn't the type to stay in bed. She must drive doctors crazy.

"With those injuries?" I asked. Rill turned away from me. "Besides, you're hiding something, aren't you?"

Rill's health had suddenly crashed on her today, and she'd collapsed on the sports field. Drachma had told me to ask her about the symptoms. That had to mean the situation was serious enough that she was determined to hide it.

"We're partners. If something's going on, I want you to tell me."

Even if our relationship was "familiar and master," nothing said a pet couldn't

worry about his owner.

"Yes, that's right. Rill considered you her partner." Rill smiled just a little, but that smile was lonely. "You didn't take her hand, though."

"That was..."

At the stadium that afternoon, I'd paused when Rill had held out her hand to me.

I was already holding Siesta's and Natsunagi's hands; both of mine were full. If I'd taken Rill's hand, I knew I might end up causing her trouble. She hadn't missed that brief hesitation.

"Besides, Rill initially formed a contract with you to defeat Pandemonium. The White Tengu died, right? It wasn't the plan Rill had in mind, but now that Pandemonium's lost its leader, it should subside soon."

That meant my contract with her was over. I'd been dismissed.

"Rill, wait. I..."

"Don't try to get involved out of sympathy when you can't commit."

Can't commit. Those words made me remember what Noches had said.

"Something precious may slip through your fingers someday."

"I don't know everything about your past."

Although I couldn't find the right words, a girl spoke to Rill in my place.

"That means I won't lecture you like I know what I'm talking about, and I have no right to stop you. However..." There were flames in Natsunagi's red eyes, and passion in her words.

"...what is it you most want to accomplish? What have you been living for? What are your hopes for your future?"

Nagisa Natsunagi had asked Drachma something similar.

Faced with the enemy who'd stolen her time, her friends, and half of herself, she'd come up with one answer. That was why she was asking Reloaded this question, since the other girl was in a similar position now: *How do you intend to live?* 

"Rill has..."

She gave her answer.

"I only have one wish. I want to kill Gluttony with my own two hands."

As Natsunagi gazed at her sadly, Rill walked right past her.

I couldn't find the words to stop her, either.



# **Side Reloaded**

Late that night, on the day I'd encountered Gluttony, I left Kimihiko and the others at the hotel and went to the Mizoev Federation embassy in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

"Thank you for coming at such a late hour."

A screen on the wall of the big room showed a masked man in late middle age. Doberman was a high-ranking Federation Government official. He was also the one who'd summoned me here.

I didn't know what his real face looked like. We'd never met in person, but I'd connected with him this way several times for work. It was a business relationship.

That meant I could guess roughly why I'd been summoned. As I waited for Doberman to state his business, for some reason, he started to applaud softly. "Well done, Magical Girl. To think you'd resolve Pandemonium so soon."

...That remark sounded contrived. There was no emotion in his words, and yet his attitude was almost melodramatic. He was always like that.

"Pandemonium was never much of a threat. Rill hasn't done anything that would warrant praise."

Besides, it wasn't as if I'd finished the job alone. The White Tengu at the end was a prime example. I might lose even more sleep if I let him praise me for it.

"Stoic as ever. You'll accept any mission, and you always keep sacrifices to a minimum while producing maximum results. All we can do is marvel at your work."

Shut up.

Did he think I was a convenient jack-of-all-trades who'd accept the toughest, dirtiest jobs for a few scraps of praise? —Well, that was fine. I'd complain, but I planned to get my biggest wish anyway.

"Now, getting down to business: I need to assign your next mission," Doberman began.

That was obviously the real reason for this meeting.

"The Oracle's sacred text has predicted multiple crises again. I wonder which one you're best suited for..."

"You know which crisis Rill needs to resolve next." If he was going to play dumb, I'd say it for him. "A surviving member of the Seven Deadly Sins has appeared. A monster you once decided wasn't a threat to the world anymore."

I got the feeling Doberman's expression had changed beneath his mask.

"Give the Magical Girl that mission. I'll kill the supernatural."

There was a moment of silence. Then Doberman said, "I'm told you collapsed recently."

"So? You people have no reason to start worrying about the Tuners now." Or what? "Are you saying the supernaturals are too much for the Magical Girl to handle?"

Don't screw with me. I'll do it all. I won't let anyone get in my way just because they were close to the Enforcer. I don't need help from anybody, either. Not even Kimihiko... I won't count on him anymore. I'll do it on my own; I'll show them.

Silence fell for a second time, and then Doberman spoke.

"I'll send your orders later."

So that was the compromise, huh?

Any further discussion would be pointless. I left the embassy.

I spent the next hour or so riding my motorcycle home. I'd used my Tuner qualifications to rent a condo in an upscale residential district.

I might be living in a swanky place, but nobody was waiting there for me. No one had welcomed me home in over a decade. Nobody looked at me. That was fine by me, though. I'd never minded before.

Parking my bike in its designated spot, I removed my helmet...and then I sensed a presence. I took my staff off my back and held it at the ready.

"Who's there?"

He was sitting on the roof of the bicycle parking lot, hands clasped around one raised knee, the darkness folded around him.

"—Scarlet."

The white demon looked down at me, his lips turning up slightly. "There's no need to be so wary. We're both Tuners, aren't we?"

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you. If you hadn't shown up, Gluttony would have been...!"

Just a little more. I'd almost killed him. I bit my lip, feeling my hands clench around my staff.

"I have reasons of my own, you see. I had to let him escape temporarily."

"—! What reasons could you have? Why is the Vampire helping a supernatural?"

Scarlet was supposed to be one of the protectors of the world, so why?

"Just so you are aware, I haven't allied myself with that supernatural."

"...So you're not in league? Then why the hell...?"

"As a matter of fact, I believe Gluttony's survival has benefited you as well."

What was he talking about? All I wanted was to kill Gluttony. I couldn't possibly gain anything by letting him live.

"That is why I'm here—to explain it to you."

Scarlet leaped down from the roof.

For a moment, I thought Gluttony might be lurking nearby, but he didn't seem to be here. Was Scarlet hiding him somewhere?

"Why did you spare Gluttony's life? How is that supposed to help me?"

"It will take a few days' time to prepare, but I wanted to propose something to you. First, a question."

The Vampire smiled.

"Magical Girl, are there any humans you'd like to bring back to life?"





# **Chapter 3**

## **◆** A doll with no choices

It had been seven days since then.

In other words, one week had passed since Scarlet and Gluttony disappeared. Reloaded and even Ookami had taken off in pursuit of the enemy, leaving us behind. I hadn't planned for a dull routine, but here I was.

I wasn't going on Pandemonium patrols with Rill anymore. I went to school in the mornings, sat through test-prep lectures, and gave a little thought to my future. After class, as usual, I visited Siesta in the hospital and groused to her a little.

I told her we still didn't know where Scarlet and the rest were, and that Rill was ignoring all my calls. I complained that we hadn't managed to find her colleague Stephen. I even asked Siesta for advice: "If you were the detective, what would you have done?" I knew she wouldn't respond.

Of course, in the meantime, I was also talking things over with Natsunagi and connecting with Mia. Since Mia was the Oracle, I'd secretly asked her if there was anything about the Seven Deadly Sins in the sacred text, but I didn't learn anything Ookami hadn't told me already.

According to Mia, the seven supernaturals had appeared several years ago and begun committing atrocities all over the world. Before too long, the Phantom Thief had killed three of them, and the rest had vanished.

"For some reason, I wasn't able to predict Gluttony's recent return," Mia had said on a recent video call, biting her lip.

Even she didn't seem to understand why the Oracle's powers hadn't worked on him. As a result, our leads on the enemy—the supernatural and Scarlet—were few, and we had no way to contact Rill and Stephen. The days slipped by, unchanging.

However, today, in the midst of that stagnant routine, I was headed somewhere different. It was a reception room in a certain building, deserted except for me, and I spoke to a screen on the wall.

"Do you have any developments for me—Ice Doll?"

The screen showed a masked elderly woman.

The Mizoev Federation embassy was located in the metro area. At night, a car driven by a Man in Black had stopped by my apartment and brought me here. Natsunagi would have been one thing, but what did the government top brass want with me?

"A lot is going on around you these days."

Ice Doll was a high-level bureaucrat. We didn't have the sort of relationship that would have let me joke about tests kicking my ass or whatever.

"Natsunagi's not with me. Is that okay?"

"Yes. There was something I wanted to tell you today."

Oh, I see. That could be an honor, and it could also be proof that I'd waded too far in to turn back. It gave me a weird, uneasy feeling.

"If possible, I would have preferred you to stay ignorant."

Under her mask, Ice Doll's expression seemed to twist. What on earth was she planning to talk about? I braced myself, waiting to see where this was going.

"However, it's no longer possible to hide everything. Little by little, the world has begun to turn around you. You've connected with the Ace Detective, the Assassin, the Magical Girl, and now the Vampire, correct?"

"Come to think of it, the Tuners seem to be gathering in Japan, huh."

I'd also been making pretty regular contact with Mia, actually.

"That is all because you are the Singularity."

...Oh, was that what this was about? It was the first time I'd heard someone from the Federation Government use that word, though.

"Various global crises will continue to occur with you at their center. As they do, no doubt you'll become involved with yet more Tuners."

"If that's true, I'm way too popular." Although in Scarlet's case, I was rejecting any affection now, thank you.

"As long as you live as the Singularity, the world's chaos will be concentrated on one point."

"That's not something I've ever wanted."

"That doesn't matter. Just the result of it," Ice Doll declared in a voice as cold as her name.

"As a matter of fact, based on that understanding, some among us thought it would be better to destroy you."

What she'd said seemed so divorced from reality that I didn't know who she was talking about for a second. A few moments later, I finally realized what she'd meant by "destroy."

"That sounds...bad. Incidentally, which side of that are you on?" I asked as calmly as I could.

"Against, of course. I believe that the safety and peace of each individual life is connected to the stability of the world."

"So the Federation Government isn't a perfect monolith, either?" Not that I actually knew what sort of organization they were or even how many members they had.

"An organization with no dissenting opinions wouldn't be healthy, would it?"

"...So what's the point here? Specifically, what did you want to tell me?"

"As I mentioned, within the Federation Government, there is a movement to destroy you. That being the case, I would like to give you a word of advice."

On the screen, Ice Doll gazed at me from beneath her mask.

"It's all right to go back to the way you were."

I hadn't been expecting that one.

"There was a time before you knew the words Tuner or Singularity. You traveled with the white-haired girl you thought was simply a detective. Even before that—there was a time when you bore no heavy burdens. A time when both your hands were free. When you were free. You have the right to go back."

Her words seemed to offer release from a massive spell. Her proposal would free me from the restraint of the Singularity, which forced me to be involved with the world.

"Even you don't want to get dragged into the war over the Akashic records, do you?"

"...Yeah, I'm not interested. Being able to live in peace is more important to me."

It was a well-known fact that a great intercontinental war had flared up over the Akashic records long ago. It was said that only a handful of VIPs in each country knew what those all-important records actually were, though.

"In that case, you really shouldn't live as the world's Singularity," Ice Doll pressed.

I never asked to be the Singularity. It was a heavy burden.

Forgetting everything and going back to a time when I knew nothing did seem a lot easier.

However...

"Is this a threat? Quit involving yourself with the world, or else?" I asked as I pieced together what Ice Doll really meant. I already knew the Federation Government wasn't an organization that would help citizens out of the goodness of its heart.

After a moment's silence, Ice Doll began again. "The Singularity may be beneficial on occasion. For example, your greatest wish is for Daydream to return to life, and that wish has been partially granted. However, wishes that fly in the face of natural law will inevitably produce a distortion."

As before, Ice Doll spoke of the Singularity's advantages and disadvantages—and its danger.

"I'm prepared to accept the price."

"Such statements are reserved for those who can take full responsibility. Resolve alone isn't enough," Ice Doll said. "Can you truly say you have paid?"

"[..."

The words wouldn't come. A distortion created by resurrecting the dead—I didn't know what it was, specifically.

In early autumn last year, Siesta had awakened temporarily because Natsunagi had offered up her own heart. In other words, the price of resurrecting Siesta had been the life of Natsunagi, another Ace Detective. However, Natsunagi had also miraculously awakened again, and now she was alive and working as my partner.

In that case, if my wish had warped the world, had that price not actually been paid yet? At the very least, I hadn't sacrificed anything as the one who'd made the wish.

"Similar situations will continue to occur around you. You will become involved with the Ace Detective, the Magical Girl, the Oracle, and many other Tuners, continuously changing the world. And every time, you will generate a distortion. Those inconsistencies may manifest in ways you are unable to take responsibility for."

"...And you're saying the Federation Government is going to destroy me before that happens?"

"I am suggesting that, before it happens, it would be wise to consider your own future."

And so the conversation circled back to Ice Doll's earlier proposal.

Wouldn't it be best if I *forgot all about the Singularity concept*? If I chose to live without getting involved with the Tuners, global crises, and the Akashic records?

"Do you want to make me stop being the detective's assistant?"

"I believe someone has been sent as an alternative. If that day comes, preparations have been made."

...Ookami, huh? My backup, the proxy assistant. If he was supposed to be my spare, he was a definite upgrade. Well, he already seemed to be prioritizing his private grudge and acting without permission right this minute, but...

"Choose any way you like. No one among us is capable of issuing orders to the Singularity."

The choice Ice Doll had presented me with was a new path—one where I didn't have to choose.

Should I help the Ace Detective or the Magical Girl? Should I defeat the vampires or the Seven Deadly Sins? Whose hand should I take? Whose wish should I grant? The Federation Government's option would let me escape the tale that held those choices. They hadn't been able to just stand by and watch this wreck of a Singularity. My hands were both full already; I couldn't even take responsibility by myself.

"No matter what you choose, know that we are always watching you," Ice Doll warned me when I still couldn't give her an answer.

"What, you have the Men in Black keeping an eye on me or something?"

"No. There's someone closer to you than that."

Only one Tuner was closer to me than the Men in Black. Natsunagi.

"Technically, her power is insufficient for a Tuner. However, she is the one and only person who can rein you in."

"...That's why you made her the Ace Detective?"

They had calculated all of it. Oddly enough, that meant the suspicion Natsunagi had mentioned last year had been correct. She'd said the Federation Government must have given her the Ace Detective's position for reasons of their own. In that case, though...

"It's not gonna go the way you want."

Natsunagi had picked up on the Federation Government's plot, but she'd still held on to her pride and her wishes, and she was living as the detective who'd inherited Siesta's will. And so...

"Don't underestimate Natsunagi."

Without waiting to hear her response, I walked away.

### ◆ A story that exists for you

The next day, as usual, I went to school in the morning. Since attendance wasn't mandatory, the classroom was pretty empty. Natsunagi was in a different class, but she probably hadn't shown up, either. I still hadn't settled on my future course, and I kept staring at the book on my desk: a collection of past entrance-exam problems from the university I planned to apply to.

I'd narrowed things down to private liberal arts schools, so I only needed three subjects. English had never been a problem for me, and my short-term memory could get me through social studies. The biggest troublemaker was Japanese.

"You can't field literary-analysis questions by memorizing stuff, right?"

I wanted to go find Natsunagi and ask her to explain it to me.

The lunch bell rang, and I grabbed my sweet roll and coffee and headed for the roof. This had been routine for me lately, but then what Ice Doll had said last night surfaced in my mind. Maybe my days were this monotonous because I'd unknowingly chosen not to make a choice.

"...It's cold."

There was nobody on the roof. The January wind was frigid, and I briefly considered going back inside, but the sight of the endlessly clear blue sky convinced me to find a random spot and sit down. Reloaded had liked this sort of sky, too.

Munching on my convenience-store roll, I got out my smartphone. I'd sent Rill a ton of texts, asking if she was all right. The only thing the app showed was a long row of my sent messages. She hadn't responded to a single one.

Still, I sent her another text today; I believed that not responding and not seeing them at all were different things. —Just then, my phone rang. The name on the display wasn't one I'd been expecting.

"Charlie? This is rare. What's up?" I took a swallow of coffee, getting my mouth and throat warmed up.

"...What do you mean, 'what'? You sent me a long text the other day, remember?"

Come to think of it, Rill had been so thorough about not responding that I'd gone to Charlie for advice regarding the stuff that had been happening lately. Apparently, she was calling me back about it.

"Why me? We don't ask each other for advice."

"Well, yeah, that's why I thought you might have a novel idea or two."

"What about Yui? Try her."

"We make small talk sometimes, but Saikawa's busy being an idol. I can't load her down with heavy conversations."

"So what makes it okay to load me down, huh?" On the other end of the line, Charlie heaved a deliberate sigh. "And? What exactly are you worrying about?"

"I like the way you gripe but go along with the conversation anyway. You should lean into that."

"I'm about to hang up on you."

Charlie and I had always fought like cats and dogs, and the fact that we were able to have a conversation like this now was progress. Or I wanted to think it was anyway.

"Well, it's like I wrote in that text: I've got lots of worries."

"Okay, then which one is worrying you the most? The fact that Scarlet is the Ace Detective's enemy and you can't find him? Or are you concerned about the Magical Girl, who was chasing Gluttony and then dropped out of touch?"

I would have been hard-pressed to say which of those things worried me more.

In the end, though, that lack of focus was probably a bad habit I needed to fix. It was the same thing Noches had bluntly pointed out to me.

"I'm not your friend, so I'm going to be the one to say it."

"I've been hearing that from a lot of people lately." Maybe I had no actual friends.

"Maybe they're both important. What's wrong with that?" I wasn't expecting that. "Nothing says everyone's only allowed to have one worry. There's no rule that you can only have just one precious thing, either. People's top priorities and most precious things change from moment to moment; it's a spectrum."

Charlie's perspective seemed to validate the situation I was in.

"For example, if a mother has two children, don't you think it's dumb to ask which one she loves more?"

"...Yeah. But does that spectrum of yours even apply to that situation?" If you had two kids you'd gone through labor for, was there ever a moment when your feelings for one were stronger than the other?

"Yes. At times like that, you worry about the child who's farthest from you."

Charlie spoke as if she were a mom who'd been through this herself. Not that she could've been.

"It's like that for you, too, isn't it, Kimizuka? Sometimes, Ma'am is the one you love most, and sometimes, you miss Nagisa more."

"Whoops, can't hear you, you're breaking up." I almost slammed my phone into the roof, but I managed to control myself at the last second.

"Did I say something weird?"

"...Never say it again," I gritted out.

Charlie laughed out loud. "Okay, okay," she told me. "Still, it can't be bad to hesitate like that and think several things are precious." Then she drew a new conclusion. "That said, the more things you love, the more important choices you'll be faced with, and if you want to protect all those things, you have to be strong enough to do it. Basically, this is really about what we should do when we sense we're reaching our own limits."

Charlie had to have developed that mindset in the process of traveling all over the world as an agent. She encountered rains of bullets and passed through the fires of war on a regular basis, and with that came choices. What should she protect, and what should she discard? What would she have to do to protect everything? It wasn't that hesitating between two choices or picking up more precious things was bad in and of itself. It was just that if you wanted your wishes to come true, you weren't allowed to hang on to the status quo. I was probably going to have to hunt for a solution to that.

"Sorry I can't help you."

"No, that was a good hint." Just then, I heard the sound of a distant plane from the phone. Was she at an airport? "You're going to another country again?"

"Yes. That's how I live."

She'd said as much at Saikawa's birthday party, too. We all wanted to wake Siesta up, of course, and as long as we had that wish in common, our group would remain intact. But Charlie had her duties, and she had left to fight across the world as a globe-trotting agent. It was a journey taken to protect people.

"Come home."

She caught her breath.

"Of course. Ma'am is waiting for me. The others, too," she added. "Oh— Wait a second. Did you actually text because you were worried about me? Was wanting advice just an excuse?"

Impossible. No way would that ever happen.

"Well, Siesta told us to get along."

"Oh, that's right. We were supposed to have gotten closer, weren't we?"

We both laughed a little. Then I said, "See you later," and hung up.

I realized I'd gotten a social media notification. Yui Saikawa had started a live stream on a simple video-upload site.

"...Damn, it's been going for fifteen minutes already."

Shuddering at my mistake, I hastily clicked the link.

Yui Saikawa appeared on the screen, dressed casually. She seemed to be reading comments that fans were sending to her in real time and chatting. I was about to write a comment myself when I realized Saikawa was looking my way,

a serious expression on her face.

"Among the people watching this live stream, I'm sure some of you have a lot to worry about."

Apparently, I'd jumped in during some sort of serious advice session.

"But I suspect that's proof that what's causing your worries is truly precious to you."

Naturally, Saikawa wasn't actually looking at me, just the camera. But she was speaking to the crowd of fans beyond it.

"And that's the reason you feel so unsure. I'd say that's something you can be proud of. ... As a matter of fact, I've lived through some of that myself."

Saikawa gave a shy smile.

She was probably talking about what Natsunagi and I had watched her go through last year. Now Saikawa was standing in front of a mic, counseling fans who felt similarly conflicted.

"Come to think of it, she said that to me, too."

She'd said she'd help me someday. She didn't know whether she could be my right arm, but she'd at least be my left eye.

Had her sapphire eye really seen everything? That was just after my right hand had been taken.

*"……"* 

Something occurred to me then.

It was just a thought experiment. It had no substance, and it wasn't even a concrete plan of action. It wasn't a direct solution to any of the problems that were worrying me.

Realizations were how everything began, though. From there, we formed theories, gathered evidence, improved our deduction, and reached a conclusion. That was how we'd always done it. The detective and her assistant had worked that way before, and we still worked that way now.

"What do you think? Did that lighten your load a bit? You know, I'm always so

impressed by people who have a lot to care about! And so—"

Smiling like a flower in bloom, Saikawa gazed at the camera. At us.

"—I'm going to keep on singing, just for you!"

That wasn't directed at me; I was being overly self-conscious...right?

"Nah, that's fine."

Just now, she'd definitely looked at me. Exclusively at me. Or so I thought.

And if she could make me think that, Yui Saikawa was an idol in the truest sense of the word.

"Kimizuka!"

Just then, a voice called my name for sure.

Natsunagi had stepped through the door to the roof. She was out of breath, but she started talking as soon as she spotted me.

"The hospital just called. Siesta's—!"

### ◆ The particulars of a case with no client

After that, we climbed into the black car that came to the school to pick us up.

A Man in Black was at the wheel, and needless to say, our destination was the hospital where Siesta was.

After a little time in the back seat of the car, I turned to Natsunagi. "I figured you wouldn't be at school. Attendance is optional, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I did want to spend a little time in school."

As someone who knew Natsunagi's thoughts on school and how she'd come to think that way, I really knew how she felt.

"That uniform's nice, too," I said.

Natsunagi was in the winter version of the sailor uniform. It was mostly black with a blue ribbon, and it looked incredible on her.

"You're saying that now? Why, exactly?"

"It's still pretty novel to me, you know."

"That's because you don't come to school much, Kimizuka. You've squandered your classic high school days," Natsunagi informed me primly.

"Yeah, I never got anywhere close to an after-school date or anything."

"Somehow, hearing the word 'date' come out of your mouth sends a chill down my spine."

Not fair. I shot Natsunagi a look.

"Actually, why would you bring that up now of all times?" Natsunagi was smiling with chagrin.

...Sorry. But for me, this was exactly the time for this kind of conversation. I was shaken up, and I had to resort to small talk to calm myself down.

"So it's true that Siesta's EKG showed a change in activity?"

That was what Natsunagi had come to the roof to tell me.

"Yes, Noches called from the hospital. She didn't give me any details, though."

The seed in her heart couldn't have sprouted, could it? Or was it a sign that the problem had been resolved, and Siesta could safely wake up? We didn't even know whether that change in the EKG was good or bad.

...Still, after absolutely nothing over the past few months, something about Siesta's body had changed. The status quo wasn't allowed to last forever. As we got closer and closer to the hospital, I gazed through the window at the scenery.

"It's fine," Natsunagi whispered. "It's going to be fine."

She'd said it twice, without turning to look at me. A warm hand covered my right hand.

The moments we spent in the car before it reached the hospital were somehow brief and long at the same time.

Thirty minutes later, we arrived at our destination.

We took the elevator to the third floor, then went to Siesta's room at the end of the hall. Noches was standing outside the door. As soon as she saw us, she nodded wordlessly and motioned for us to go in. Steeling ourselves, Natsunagi and I opened the door and saw...

"...Stephen."

The Inventor was standing by Siesta's bed, wearing a white lab coat and noting something down on a tablet. It had been about four months since I'd last seen him.

Natsunagi and I exchanged looks, then approached the bed. Siesta was sleeping peacefully. To my amateur eyes, nothing seemed to have changed. Meanwhile, Natsunagi immediately asked for an expert opinion. "How's Siesta?"

"There are no problems. Right now, she's in the same state as yesterday," Stephen told her, still mostly focused on his tablet.

That probably meant the seed hadn't sprouted, but she also showed no sign of waking up. First, relief drained the tension out of my shoulders, and then disappointment came in to replace it. So Siesta wasn't going to wake up yet...

"But something definitely happened, didn't it?"

"Yes. This morning, for a limited period of time, her heart showed abnormal activity. That much is certain." Behind his glasses, Stephen's eyes narrowed. "However, the seed shows no sign of growth. That means her heartbeat may have grown irregular because she wished it to."

"Are you saying Siesta gave herself heart trouble on purpose? ... Why?"

I mean, Siesta had once tricked an enemy by stopping her own heart and putting herself in a state of suspended animation. She could do that stuff. Why would she do it now, though?

"I believe thinking about that is a job for the detective and her assistant."

...Good one, Stephen. However, everything had a cause and an effect. If we thought about those, we were bound to come up with some sort of theory.

"What made Siesta do that to her own heart?"

Especially after she'd been asleep all this time. Why?

"Why don't we try thinking about it the other way around?" Natsunagi suggested. "Let's look at the weirdness in Siesta's heart as the cause. What's happened as a result?"

".....? They spotted a temporary change, but that's it. Nothing else happened. Stephen just told us..."

Even as I said it, I realized something felt off. Come to think of it, Siesta had always acted with intention. She'd never done anything pointless.

...In that case, if Siesta had deliberately caused some change in her heart, and we took a broad view of what happened as a result...

"—Stephen Bluefield came here," I said. Natsunagi seemed to have developed the same theory; she nodded quietly.

That was the big picture. Siesta's heart had started acting weird, meaning Stephen needed to come examine her, even though he hadn't been here in a long time. That seemed perfectly natural to us, but it wasn't at all.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I put several jobs on hold so that I could come here today. Technically, monitoring patients' progress isn't my job. The idea that Daydream may have intentionally caused an issue in her heart in order to summon me isn't out of the question," Stephen agreed.

That left us with another question, though: Why had Siesta wanted to summon Stephen?

"To put us in contact with him," Natsunagi deduced.

"She did it for us? Why ...?"

It was true that I'd been hoping to find Stephen, for several reasons. I had a ton of things to ask him about—the vampires, Reloaded, Siesta herself. I'd even sat by Siesta's bedside and told her about them while she slept.

But that didn't mean... Oh. No, I see.

"Because Siesta is a detective who makes wishes come true."

Smiling, Natsunagi gazed at the sleeping beauty's face.

Even during that odd period when I'd been involved with the Magical Girl and her enemies, the detective had been at the foundation of our story. Was Siesta fulfilling requests from me and Natsunagi even while she was unconscious?

"Although Daydream is asleep, it isn't as if all her physiological functions have ceased," Stephen began. "For example, her auditory system is still functional. When you spoke to her, it's possible that she heard you and unconsciously responded."

Good grief. The detective's assistant had turned into her client.

...Still.

"I think you're working too much, Siesta."

She was right in the middle of one of those naps she loved. She should rest while she was asleep, at least. Gently, I brushed Siesta's bangs aside with a fingertip.

"Hm? Hang on a second." Struck by a thought, I stopped moving. "Does that mean she heard everything I said when I was in here talking to her?"

The times I'd been here alone, for example. I'd made plenty sure no one else was there, and then I'd said the sorts of things I could only say because Siesta was asleep. Had she heard those, too?

Sweat broke out on my forehead. The things I'd quietly let slip to Siesta circled around and around in my mind, and all of a sudden, I felt nauseous.

"Kimizuka, don't tell me you were whispering sweet nothings to her." Natsunagi gave me a chilly look.

"...Huh? Nnnno... Not at all."

Her deduction was 100 percent wrong. Shaking my head, I cleared my throat a few times—like a dozen—then got the conversation back on topic. "Stephen, I've got some questions for you."

If Siesta had really called the doctor here for me and Natsunagi, I had to make sure we got what we needed.

"Am I under any obligation to respond?" Stephen said brusquely. "My job is saving people, nothing more. I treat them, and I create tools to that end. I don't have time to spare for anything else."

Yeah, Stephen always had been that type of guy.

Now that he knew his patient Siesta was fine, his business here was done. Appeals to emotion wouldn't work on him. Unless I had a logical reason, Stephen wouldn't answer pointless questions.

"You're never interested in anything except the patient in front of you." Natsunagi moved to stand in front of Stephen. "But don't you think you could make progress by seeing what happened to the people you saved, or what the tools you created have done?"

That was exactly what I'd been planning to ask about: a person Stephen had saved, and the tools he'd created. This conversation would absolutely have value to him.

"If you want to use medicine and science to save more people, you should pay a little more attention to those things," Natsunagi told him bluntly. She didn't flinch.

In response, Stephen turned and headed for the door, lab coat flaring out behind him.

"I have a job waiting. We'll talk on the way."

# Secret operation

After we'd left Siesta's room in Noches's hands again...

I'd just assumed we'd be going somewhere by car, but Stephen led Natsunagi and me down to the hospital's basement. We took the elevator to B1, then took

the stairs down even farther.

At the very bottom of the stairwell, there was a door with what appeared to be a tunnel behind it. The gloomy underground passage was illuminated by dim lights set at regular intervals, and when I looked down, I saw rusty railroad tracks.

"Long ago, it was a subway line everyone used," Stephen told us over his shoulder.

We walked through that vaguely musty space until we reached a station of sorts. Stephen stopped there, so Natsunagi and I did, too. After we waited about three minutes, there was a loud rumble, and a two-car train pulled up to the platform. There was definitely a world we didn't know about just behind our own.

The doors opened, and we followed Stephen into a car.

Naturally, there were no other passengers. Natsunagi and I sat on a bench seat, and Stephen sat down across from us. And then...

"What are your questions?" he asked us, opening his notebook computer on his lap.

I made eye contact with Natsunagi, letting her know she could ask the first question.

"Is it true that vampires are an artificial race created by a past Inventor?"

That was what Rill had told us a week ago.

"Yes, I hear they engaged in that research for quite some time. The tale of Victor Frankenstein has been handed down as fiction, but it isn't actually far from historical fact."

So the Inventors really had spent a long time researching monster creation? What on earth for? Just a thirst for knowledge, or a spirit of inquiry? Ookami had said you couldn't always expect scientific investigation and research ambitions to have reasons behind them, but...

"The creation of vampires was initiated by a certain request made to the Inventor."

"...A request? From who?" I asked.

"The current Federation Government," Stephen told me, looking up. "Roughly two centuries ago, a series of vicious enemies attacked the world one after another. In terms of recent enemies, they were at or above the level of Seed."

From what Rill had said, Seed had been pretty high level as disasters went. A rapid succession of threats even worse than him would have been off the charts.

"Determining that the current Tuners wouldn't be enough to deal with the crises on their own, the government decided to procure powerful weapons."

"...And those were the vampires?" Natsunagi asked.

Stephen nodded.

"Then why are they making Scarlet kill his own kind?"

The Federation Government was the one that had decided to create vampires two hundred years back. Why were they trying to use Scarlet to erase them now?

But Stephen didn't answer that question.

Was it because he didn't know the answer, or was he intentionally withholding that information? Before long, the train stopped, and the doors opened. Stephen got off, and Natsunagi and I followed him.

Just a few steps away, there was a door. Stephen unlocked it, then turned the weathered doorknob, and we all went inside. I saw careless stacks of books and lab equipment, and a sharp chemical smell promptly smacked me in the nose. Natsunagi and I went deeper into the room, although we heeded Stephen's warning not to touch anything.

There was a big desk at the back of the room; a computer and several monitors sat on it, with a framed photo beside them. The photo showed...a small boy?

"Ask your next question." Stephen sat down at the desk, setting the photo frame face down.

Natsunagi made eye contact with me; it was my turn this time, and I stepped

forward. "What is the Magical Girl hiding from us?"

Stephen was the one who had seen potential in Reloaded and recruited her to the Tuners. As the person who was responsible for her weapons maintenance and her physical health, he had to know her secrets.

"What is she hiding?" Stephen glanced up from the documents he was examining. "What makes you think Lilia is hiding anything?"

...Lilia? Was that Rill's real name?

I'd just assumed *Rill* was a nickname for *Reloaded*. So *Reloaded* was a code name?

"The way Rill collapsed suddenly last week. On top of that, when she's in a fight...she has no fear at all in front of her enemies. All that seemed strange, so I assumed she was hiding something from us."

Of course, her past and her strong sense of mission probably influenced her combat style as well.

But even then, her tactics in battle had seemed abnormal to me. Last week, even as Gluttony tried to bite her right arm off, Rill had prioritized attacking. She hadn't so much as flinched.

"In that case, you've already found the answer," Stephen said unexpectedly. "She was born without the ability to feel fear."

"...So it's a personality thing?"

"I believe it's a disease." As he spoke about Rill's symptoms, his words stayed clinical and scientific. "A cancer of the heart, so to speak. Most people who suffer from it either become vicious, or they lose all their emotions and live as if they're dead. Rarely, though, there is a third type: someone who can live as an overabundant force of justice. Lilia is in that category."

...Oh, I see. So Rill didn't have fear, the one emotion you really couldn't afford to have when fighting enemies. Was that why Stephen had recruited her to be a Tuner? Had the Inventor's keen eyes seen Rill's illness and understood how it could be used?

"But even if she doesn't get scared, she still gets injured or sick, doesn't she?"

Natsunagi broke in. "If she's in pain during a fight, wouldn't she stop being able to move?"

"That is why I'm there: in order to draw out her extraordinary abilities to the maximum."

I had a bad feeling about this, and those bad feelings were never wrong.

"During combat, Lilia takes a medication that blocks her sense of pain."

Stephen had just revealed Reloaded's secret.

"It turns the Magical Girl into a fighting machine that feels no fear or pain."

Goosebumps spread across my skin.

Everything she had said and done up till now, her past, the inconsistencies—all of it converged on one point.

In order to defeat her mortal enemy, Rill had offered up her life and her body.

"Needless to say, the drug has a few side effects." As Stephen continued, he booted up the computer on the desk. The monitors showed complicated-looking formulas and charts. "That lack of pain means that the individual can't tell how much internal damage they've taken. She has an implanted chip that automatically detects this for her. When there's a real emergency, the system sends an alert."

Was that why that car had come to the stadium so promptly last week? The danger that her body would break on her had been a constant in Rill's life.

"Rill isn't just a war machine," I said.

"She wanted this," Stephen responded, without turning a hair. "She made a sacrifice in order to achieve her long-cherished ambition. Surely, you can understand those feelings."

Words failed me. I had once wished for the same thing, so I had no right to say I couldn't.

"Let's go, Kimizuka." Natsunagi had come up to stand beside me. "There are still things we need to talk about with her."

"...Yeah, you're right." In my pocket, my fingers squeezed my smartphone.

"It seems we've spoken a bit too long." Stephen stopped working and rose to his feet.

I still had questions for him. I wanted to ask about Siesta and how to wake her up.

But it soon became clear that now wasn't the time.

Behind us, the door to the room blew off its hinges, and a series of ominous metallic clanks told us someone was coming into the room.

"What is that...?" As Natsunagi looked at the intruder, her eyes widened.

An iron mask covered his face, and *black, shiny guns had sprouted all over his body.* Was it armor, or had he really been cyborged into a human weapon? Either way, we'd seen something very similar to this guy just the other day.

"It's the supernatural Greed," Stephen said. "Otherwise known as Mammon. I hear his avaricious temperament is quite brutal."

"...So he's another one of the Seven Deadly Sins, like Gluttony?"

Greed hadn't said a word, but every gun on his body was pointed at us.

"Have you covered yourself in weapons in imitation of Gluttony? What have you come here to steal, Greed?" Shoes clicking hollowly on the floor, Stephen stepped in front of us.

Just then, an alarm echoed in the room.

A window appeared on every monitor on the desk, displaying lines of English text. I mentally translated them into Japanese.

"The remaining four supernaturals have been redesignated 'enemies of the world."

"The mission of defeating them is assigned to Reloaded, the Magical Girl."

Natsunagi and I both gulped.

It didn't matter what we wanted or meant to do; everything had started to move all at once.

"There's a back door on the other side of those bookshelves." Still with his back to us, Stephen pointed to a row of bookshelves on the left. "Run straight down the passage behind it. Before long, you'll see a ladder; climb it, and you'll be aboveground."

"But, Stephen, you..."

"There's no need to worry. Also..." Stephen took something out of the pocket of his lab coat and tossed it to me without looking. "When the time comes, use that on Lilia."

"What's...?" Just as I started to ask, a metal armlike thing appeared from Stephen's right shoulder.

"This is my laboratory. My sanctuary. I will allow no one to get in my way."

Greed let out a mechanical-sounding howl.

Natsunagi and I exchanged nods, then headed for the back door, leaving Stephen to handle things. Just before we left the room, we heard his voice.

"Come, Greed. Let me examine you. What illness afflicts your heart?"

#### 

Winter in Japan wasn't colder than it was back home.

Even so, near sundown in January, the cold wind felt like a knife on my cheeks, and I started wanting to zip up my jacket. My usual medicine let me forget cold and heat, as well as pain, but the thought of the side effects I'd have to deal with later was enough to keep me from popping pills.

Besides, I didn't have to lean on that medicine. Japan had plenty of things that took the edge off the cold. Their twenty-four-hour convenience stores had piping hot *oden* and steamed meat buns, and I'd just bought a roasted sweet

potato from a food stall on the street. It was wrapped in aluminum foil; I broke it in half, and just one mouthful was enough to warm me up from the inside out.

"You want some, too, right?"

At dusk, in an alley, I spoke to the girl who followed a few steps behind me.

"Are you listening, Freya?"

The girl was just a little shorter than me. She was gazing at the sky, her face a perfect blank.

Her subdued red hair and the freckles on her cheeks were the same as they'd always been. The only thing she seemed to have lost somewhere was her smile, with its flash of white teeth.

Even so, Freya was definitely there, restored to life by the vampire's miracle.

"What foods did you like again?" I murmured, gazing at the two halves of the sweet potato.

I didn't have many memories of eating with Freya.

We hadn't been friends—nothing like it. We hadn't met up on our days off to go places for fun. Now that I thought about it, I really didn't know much about her.

"Talking to Rill is boring, hm? She suspected as much."

*"* 

Freya didn't answer. In the three days since Scarlet had brought her back to life, she hadn't spoken once.

I'd known it would be like this, though. Scarlet's "undead" came back with nothing but their strongest instinct from life. I knew Freya wasn't the same as she used to be. Even so...

"...Say something," I grumbled at her in spite of myself.

She was still staring at the sky in a daze.

For three days, she'd stayed in my apartment, but she never spoke, ate, or even slept. All she did was gaze out a window at the sky from time to time. I'd tried taking her out for a walk, but it hadn't changed much.

"Isn't there anything else you want to do?"

The one thing I knew Freya had liked was Japanese anime, particularly the magical-girl genre. I'd bought some figures two days ago, and we'd watched a DVD together the previous day. It hadn't gotten any promising reactions from her, though.

"But you liked it so much."

This wasn't really a conversation, but I kept rambling anyway.

"You always talked about which scenes in which episodes blew you away. You talked so much, it was annoying. ... What's the point if Rill knows more about it than you?"

Had she lost interest in anime? Didn't she care about magical girls anymore? Was this conversation boring for her? —Hadn't she wanted to come back to life?

"Tell me if this is just causing you more trouble."

I knew she wouldn't. Even then, I was afraid to see her face, so I turned my back.

"Are you scared?" I asked myself.

That couldn't be. I'd never felt fear in the first place.

"——ah, ——ah..."

I thought I'd heard a voice.

"Freya?" I turned around.

The sun had almost set. Freya was standing behind me in the alley.

Way beyond her, I saw a large figure.

"It can't be... You're—"

Large figure was a simple enough description, but it wasn't built like a regular human, and it looked nothing like one. It was well over two meters tall with horns like a goat. It also had six arms, and one of those arms held an enormous spear.

"Pride."

I'd seen him in the resources I'd searched through when I first decided to defeat the Seven Deadly Sins. There was no mistake. This was definitely Pride.

Just then, my phone alerted me to a text. It was from the Men in Black, and it said that the Magical Girl had been ordered to kill the four supernaturals. They were probably relaying a message from Doberman, the Federation Government bureaucrat.

"That was Rill's plan all along."

I took my costume out of the bag I'd brought along. Changing into it didn't even take a few seconds. The Inventor had made this, and like a power suit, I could equip it almost instantly.

I gripped my magic staff.

I'd already been given a weapon optimized for killing supernaturals. I could kill them because I was the Magical Girl. I'd start by putting down the enemy in front of me. But first...

"Running was your forte, wasn't it? Run for it."

Freya didn't respond. She just stood there, expressionless, gazing at my face.

"—! At least get back."

Taking out a small capsule, I ground it between my molars. There was a light, gritty sound, and a familiar bitter taste filled my mouth. In this fight, I would feel no pain or suffering. That was all it took to create an invincible magical girl.

"And here you have six arms... You're sure you don't want to fight with more than a spear?"

If he thought one spear would be enough, this supernatural really was arrogant. Come to think of it, his other name was Lucifer, the name of the capital-*D* Devil.

"Rill can't go down in front of her, though."

Standing in front of Freya, I pointed my staff at Pride, who was slowly walking toward us.

"Magical girls have to keep winning all the way to the ending credits of the final episode."

#### **◆** Pandemonium

We'd parted ways with Stephen and gotten out of the underground passage, and now, once again, Natsunagi and I were in a car driven by a Man in Black.

The sun had already set, and the black luxury car sped down the wide, dark street. We knew exactly where we were going; the tablet in my hand indicated our destination with a red pointer.

"So she's here, then." Natsunagi leaned over from my left to see the screen.

"Yeah. We can use Rill's chip implant to pinpoint her location."

The chip was there to monitor her health, and Drachma was in charge of it. Since this data was a violation of patient privacy, he normally never would have shown it to us. However, Stephen was her original attending physician, and he'd given permission for Drachma to provide this.

If Rill found out, she'd probably lose it, but she'd done the same thing to me on Christmas. Now we were even.

"She's hardly moved for a while, though. And if she's on a street..."

"Yeah, she's almost definitely in a fight."

What worried me was that, as Natsunagi had pointed out, Rill hadn't really moved. I'd seen her fight, and she usually sprinted all over the battlefield. If she was steamrolling the enemy so thoroughly that she didn't have to do that, great, but if that wasn't the reason—if something was keeping her pinned down, I didn't see any cause for optimism here.

"-Whoa!"

Just then, we braked suddenly.

The car tilted hard to the right, and Natsunagi tumbled into me. I ended up catching her in my arms, and our cheeks connected. I caught the light scent of citrus.

"You okay?"

"Y-yeah. Sorry." Combing her hair with her fingers, Natsunagi shifted away from me. I could still feel her warmth on my left cheek, though, and my fingertips drifted to the spot.

"W-we didn't, right? Our cheeks just touched, that's all. Right?"

"Natsunagi, taking advantage of the confusion to do a thing like that isn't, uh..."

"Liar! We totally didn't! There was no ki... Nothing like that, I swear!"

"I know; quit worrying. I'll forget about that, and I won't tell anybody."

"Qu-quit acting so mature about it... It just couldn't happen, okay?! There's no way I'd kiss you, Kimizuka. Like, for all eternity!"

As I tried to calm the agitated Natsunagi down, I took another look around.

Why had the car stopped like that? I couldn't picture a Man in Black being a careless driver. When I looked out the windshield, I saw a crowd of several dozen people. They'd formed a line and were walking right down the middle of the street.

"Is this a Bon dance? Or some kind of festival?"

"But it's winter. And they don't look like they're having fun."

Natsunagi and I were both puzzled.

Was it some kind of protest, then? But nobody was saying a word.

"It can't be..."

As I looked at the faces of the people in the crowd, it hit me. I'd seen that before.

"They're Scarlet's undead."

Natsunagi's eyes went wide. Like me, she was focused on the lifeless army of undead. They seemed rather vacant; they were struggling forward, just barely staying in formation.

"...I think the group's getting bigger."

As Natsunagi said, the crowd was growing larger.

Their numbers had swelled from a few dozen to a hundred, then to a march of several hundred people.

It was almost like Pandemonium. A hundred demons, stalking the night.

Where was this horde of undead, the white demon's creations, marching to in the moonlight?

"The Diet Building's up there," Natsunagi pointed out, studying the map app.

"So maybe the protest idea wasn't entirely off base?"

In that case, what appeal were the undead trying to make? What question were they asking the nation?

What did the vampire want from this world—?

"Don't tell me... Is this the vampire rebellion?"

If it was, stopping it was the Ace Detective's mission. Natsunagi's job. We couldn't just detour around this and go to Rill. That was a rule the Tuners had to respect...or rather, as far as Natsunagi was concerned, her position didn't even matter. She couldn't just leave when this was happening.

"Kimizuka, look!"

Just then, the marching group's order was abruptly disturbed. As if Moses had parted the waves, a fissure appeared right down the group's middle. *There was someone at its center*.

"Natsunagi, we're getting out."

When we stepped out of the car, the figure was standing a few dozen meters

ahead.

I was too far away to make it out clearly, but it looked like a woman in a red dress. She wore a big tricorn hat, and... Was that long hair hanging underneath it?

"What's up with those snakes?" Natsunagi was holding a set of opera glasses.

The way she'd just pulled a handy item out of nowhere was exactly like a certain other detective. Borrowing those from her, I took a good look at the woman in the dress.

"...What is she, a snake charmer?"

What I'd thought was the woman's long hair was, incredibly, a whole mess of snakes. And something like drool was dribbling from their mouths and melting the asphalt with little puffs of smoke. Was it sulfuric acid or some unique poison? Either way, the worst part was...

"Um, doesn't it sort of...look like she's coming this way?"

"You see it, too, Natsunagi?"

She was still quite a distance from us, but the woman in the dress was walking away from the horde of undead—toward us—step-by-step, dripping that mystery liquid as she went. She wasn't an undead? Then what was she?

"The supernatural Envy."

Out of nowhere, somebody gave us the answer. I hadn't sensed him at all, but he was undeniably standing between Natsunagi and me, gazing at the slowly approaching enemy.

"Ookami!"

His longish hair was carefully styled, and his tall frame looked sharp in a suit. He was carrying that big sickle over his shoulder.

"Envy's other name is the devil Leviathan. It's a snake monster that governs the ocean."

"Thanks for the explanation, but...Ookami, where have you been? Weren't you supposed to be Natsunagi's proxy assistant?"

"I was tracking the supernaturals. However, of course, I was never more than a kilometer from the Ace Detective."

What was he, a stalker? This so-called proxy assistant had better not have done any peeping.

"Huh. I see we've got someone else who's afflicted by envy here."

"Who are you calling an envious assistant?!"

Did this Ookami guy have some illness that would kill him if he wasn't sarcastic with me at all times?

"All right, I've got a job for the detective's assistant. Kimihiko Kimizuka, take the Ace Detective and go where you need to go." Promptly switching gears, Ookami focused on Envy in the distance. Apparently, he planned to be the one who'd fight her.

"...Another adult just saved our butts a minute ago," I told him, thinking of Stephen. The Inventor had stayed in his lab to take on the supernatural Greed by himself.

"Ha!" Ookami snorted without looking back at us. "Well, saving kids is an adult's job."

My shoulders flinched.

He was probably imitating the way his old friend the Enforcer had lived. But to me, that way of life went back further—to Danny Bryant.

"No, he's not around anymore." I shook my head.

Still, it made me think of how many people were trying to follow in his footsteps.

"Ookami, are you sure it's okay to leave this to you?" Natsunagi asked. Was it all right to let him handle Envy?

"Yes. Defeating the supernaturals isn't your mission. Nobody will blame you for leaving to do your own job."

He was right; the Ace Detective's mission was shutting down the vampire rebellion. In that case, we needed to focus on finding the creator of this undead

army.

"The one you're looking for is probably up ahead," Ookami said, pointing at the horde of undead—or rather, at the Diet Building they were marching toward.

Scarlet had to be there, and we had to stop him.

"But, Kimizuka, you're..." Natsunagi gave me a concerned look. We'd originally been headed for Rill, and she was still probably busy with her own fight.

"I just checked, and Rill's started moving again."

The red pointer that marked her location was slowly advancing down the street. She'd probably won. On top of that, the alarm that was supposed to sound when she was wounded hadn't gone off. In other words, she was fine.

"Let's go, Natsunagi." I offered her my right hand. "We'll both go find Scarlet."

"You're sure?" Natsunagi's red eyes gazed straight into mine. She was asking if I was making the right choice. If it was okay for me not to go to Reloaded.

"Yeah, this is the best move right now."

"'Right now,' meaning...you're not giving up on her, either."

I nodded.

It was true that both my hands were full, since I'd taken Siesta's and Natsunagi's. My strength alone wouldn't have been enough to save Reloaded on top of that. Even so...

"Both my hands may be taken, but your left hand's still free." Natsunagi's eyes widened. "I'll save you anytime, so I want you to save Reloaded."

That had to be what kept the circle turning. Noches had scolded me, and I'd talked to Charlie, listened to Saikawa, and arrived at that answer.

Siesta had offered her hand to me once. Then I'd taken Natsunagi's and set off, and this time, Natsunagi would save someone else. The person she saved would give their free hand to someone new. That was the one way I could hold something big in both hands without giving up on anyone.

Of course, Natsunagi had already saved a lot of people. I was one of them; she'd saved me time and again. That meant this might be a selfish request. I was leaning on her. However—no, in exchange... "I won't leave you. From now on, I'll go with you; I don't care how unfair people are about me. No matter what enemies you make, I'll stay your ally. Until the day you say you don't need me, I'll always—"

"Aaaaaagh! Enough! I get it, so quit! Stop!" Natsunagi clapped both her hands over my mouth, shutting me up. It hurt.

"H-he's listening to this," she whispered in my ear.

When I glanced over, Ookami was staring at me.

"Maybe wait for a safer time to say that, okay?" she added.

"A safer time?"

"...You know. When I can actually be embarrassed and happy and stuff."

Oh. Sorry about that.

"Playtime's just about over." Ookami leveled his great sickle, narrowing his eyes.

Envy was close enough that we could see her clearly without the binoculars.

Leaving the situation to Ookami, Natsunagi and I got back into the car. We were bound for the Diet Building. The supernatural's poison had melted a path through the army of undead, so there was a clear road right down the middle of the group.

The black car made for the vampire's lair.

## ♦ The last remaining guidepost

"......Hff...hff..."

I might not feel pain or fatigue, but I couldn't trick my lungs.

After I walked a little ways from the battlefield, I leaned against the alley wall, then slid down it into a crouch. Rapid, ragged puffs of white breath escaped from my lips.

"Freya, are you okay?" I asked the girl who stood next to me, once my breathing had calmed down a little.

As usual, she said nothing. From what I could see, though, she wasn't hurt.

Pride had fallen without leaving a scratch on her.

Take that, I spat at him silently. He'd relaxed into the name of Lucifer, the Devil himself, and gotten careless. I'd destroyed that insolent pride of his.

"Why don't you sit down, too? You must be tired."

*"…"* 

Freya gazed at my eyes steadily, tilting her head very slightly.

Maybe she was listening to my voice? Even if she didn't have awareness or emotions, she might understand that I was talking to her.

...No, that idea was too self-serving. I was just trying to pick up on any change in her, the tiniest sliver of something. It was me being arrogant.

"I'm sorry for dragging you back here without asking."

I knew my apology wouldn't reach her, but I had to say it.

A week ago, when Scarlet had asked me if I wanted to bring her back to life, for some reason, I'd said yes without the slightest hesitation. Kimihiko had said he hadn't felt any hesitation about taking the Ace Detective back; I was the same.

I didn't know how Freya would feel about it; I didn't know what her family's wishes were. But I couldn't turn down the chance to see her again.

Even though we hadn't even been friends...

"You can live any way you want, you know."

Even as I said it, I hated myself for being so irresponsible.

I could tell her to live as she pleased, but where was she supposed to go? If I abandoned her, she'd...

As I sat there hugging my knees, Freya sat down beside me. She was sitting in the same position I was in, but she just gazed up wordlessly.

"You're looking at the sky again?"

This sky was full of stars; it wasn't the one we used to watch together.

That sky had been endlessly clear and blue.

That was the place where Freya and I had always fought. How had it turned into this? Why were my battlefields so—?

A notification came in on my smartwatch. It was from Kimihiko, and the message was just one brief phrase: "I'm on my way."

"He doesn't even know where Rill is."

Over the past week, I hadn't responded to a single one of his attempts to contact me, but he still...

He really was stubborn. I shouldn't have picked up a pet.

"What's his problem? He didn't even take Rill's hand."

Some nonphysical part of me was a little tired.

I buried my forehead between my knees.

What did I have now? Pole-vaulting had been my one redeeming skill, and I didn't do it anymore. I hadn't had any friends in the first place. I'd ditched my work partner myself. What did I have left?

I heard the sound of something being dragged.

I raised my head. ...Oh, that's right.

I did still have something.

I had him.

I have you.

I had the supernatural Gluttony.

"Killing you is the one guidepost I've got left."

Three meters ahead, the supernatural opened his maw and howled.

Blades jutted out of his body. I knew it; he'd recovered and come back stronger.

Leaving Freya where she was, I lunged into the air.

I couldn't waste time on this. I swung my staff, firing aqua-blue laser beams at the enemy.

"...No luck, huh?"

Even the lasers' heat couldn't damage Gluttony's armored body. He started drawing the blades and throwing them at me, but his aim wasn't great.

Dodging through the deadly storm, I charged at the enemy from midair. Gluttony drew something like a saw, locking it with my magic staff. In the meantime, other blades that had grown from his body grazed my arms and legs, but that was irrelevant now.

"Rill's killing you if it's the last thing she does. What happens after that doesn't matter."

After all, I had nothing else to wish for.

However, Gluttony shoved me off with his monstrous strength, and the tip of my staff snapped. I tumbled over the asphalt, hearing dull crunching noises from way too many places. Even then, nothing hurt. The drug that shut down my sense of pain was still working. But...

"I'm still not strong enough."

The capsule I ground between my molars then wasn't like the ones I always took.

Stephen had said not to use this kind much, but I didn't care what happened later. All I wanted was the strength to kill this supernatural right now.

As Gluttony charged in, I locked weapons with him again, and finally, I felt a response.

It really was a fast-acting wonder drug. I felt kind of dazed, but that feeling came with a well of new strength. This time around, the supernatural didn't overpower me; I snapped his weapons instead.

"It's Rill's turn."

For a moment, Gluttony shrank back. I landed a solid kick on the left side of his chest, shoving him away; a crack opened in his body, in the armor even lasers hadn't been able to scratch. At the same time, I heard a dull *crunch* from my own body.

I'd probably broken my right toes. It was fine, though; I couldn't feel it either way. Besides, I knew which bones I could break without them compromising me in combat. I could still run, and I could still jump.

"What color are supernaturals' hearts?"

The tip of my broken staff was nice and sharp. If I shoved that into his chest...

"....!"

But then Gluttony's sharp talon pierced my right wrist.

"Oh, good. It didn't tear off."

That was fine, then. As long as this attack landed, it didn't matter. I wasn't scared. A few weeks earlier, when I'd seen this guy in the Fair-Weather Doll's white cloth, I hadn't flinched. As blood spurted from my right hand, I thrust the staff into Gluttony's chest.

—It was hard. Like he was made of iron on the inside, too.

"So you've left your humanity behind, hm? Just like Rill."

I'd snapped too many muscle fibers. Even with the strength from the medicine, I couldn't summon up any more force. I yanked my staff out and leaped back.

"Freya, if you can't get away on your own, at least stay behind Rill. Whatever you do, keep out of his attack range..."

As I spoke to her, I realized that Freya was looking over her shoulder. A huge shadow crawled out of the blackness there—whatever it was wasn't a normal

human. The silhouette had six arms—Pride, the supernatural I thought I'd killed.

"You weren't dead?"

Gluttony was in front of us, Pride behind us. Being caught between them was going to be rough. It would have been one thing if I was alone, but I wasn't going to be able to protect Freya completely. Should I grab her and leap to safety? Would I be able to get there in the first place? I had a choice to make, and in that moment of deliberation— Pride's neck broke with a jolt.

Then as if it had been severed by an invisible wire, the supernatural's head rolled onto the asphalt. A red figure stood on top of the alley's outer wall.

"Fuubi Kase."

That lightning-fast attack had been the work of the Assassin.

"We haven't met since that Federal Council last year, huh." As Fuubi spoke, she was winding the wire she'd used to dispatch Pride back onto its reel. "I couldn't resist cutting in. Should I have kept my nose out of the Magical Girl's job?" She grinned at me.

I see. Apparently, this was payback for what had happened at that council.

"No, those rules should probably be changed after all," I said, thanking her in a way that wasn't actually thanking her. "But why are you here?"

"I had a personal concern about these supernaturals." Alighting on the ground, Fuubi gazed at Gluttony. So there was a reason the Assassin had gone out of her way to get involved with the Seven Deadly Sins?

Either way, though...

"That's Rill's prey."

I wasn't going to give her time for a conversation. Without waiting for Fuubi's response, I lunged at my enemy.

"**■**, **■**gi——a**■**ou!!"

With a dissonant, staticky cry, Gluttony charged me like a wild beast.

In a battle of strength, I wouldn't lose now. I leveled my staff, prepared to lock weapons for a third time—but the enemy went right past me.

On reflex, Fuubi shielded Freya.

However, the supernatural wasn't after them, either. Gluttony grabbed Pride's head off the ground behind them, then bit into it. He devoured its flesh and blood, swallowed it down, and howled.

"He just ate...the supreme devil."

I didn't even have to think about what that meant now.

A great bulge surged through Gluttony like a wave, and then the blades began dropping out of him. It was as if he was shedding his skin, and the next instant, something like insect wings sprouted from his back. Six of them. He'd absorbed Pride's power.

The supernatural was being reborn as a monstrous insect.

However, the second the enemy seemed to notice us again, he turned and lunged away. Did he assume he wouldn't be able to beat us even now? In that case...

"Fuubi, take care of that girl." Leaving Freya to her, I started to run.

"Wait!" Fuubi shouted, but I was out of earshot almost immediately.

I wouldn't let that thing get away. There was no way.

If I didn't kill him today, he would hide for ages and ages again, then come back even stronger. I wasn't about to give him the tiniest advantage.

Run. Run. —Run.

How long had I been running, completely absorbed in the chase, when it happened?

Something stabbed deep into my side.

My sensations were numbed, so I didn't really know. I couldn't feel pain, cold, or heat, but when I looked down...I saw that something had impaled me through the stomach.

"-----oh."

It was a single spear. Blood dripped onto the asphalt.

Sensing a presence, I looked up. Gluttony was on the roof of a nearby building, laughing with his tongue out. He'd thrown one of those new weapons.

Once he saw me fall to my knees, the enemy left.

Apparently, he didn't intend to eat me. There must be better prey nearby. In the end, my strength was a product of science. I didn't have the outstanding genes Gluttony wanted.

*"…"* 

I couldn't speak anymore. It wasn't just my voice; my vision was going black.

I can't lose. Magical girls must not lose...but...

I collapsed onto the hard asphalt.

As I fell, I reached out with my left hand, seeking help from an invisible hero.

#### ◆ A two-century black box

Once our car dropped us off, Natsunagi and I walked through the Diet Building together.

Only the bare minimum of lights were on in the corridors, and there were no people. We opened a few doors, checking the rooms behind them, and finally found a lone man in one of the main chambers.

I wasn't sure if *man* was the right word for him, though. The figure seated at the desk in the heart of the vast chamber belonged to a demon, not a human.

"It's been a long time, human—no, Kimihiko Kimizuka."

Should I call him the true leader of Pandemonium? As the Vampire Scarlet looked at us, his golden eyes narrowed in a smile. Natsunagi and I hung back by the entrance, keeping our distance.

"I've met the woman once before as well, haven't I?" As Scarlet gazed at Natsunagi, the corners of his lips rose in an alluring way. "I see. You've come to take Daydream's place as my bride, then?"

"Bride? What are you talking about?" Natsunagi looked dubious. Scarlet had called Siesta his bride candidate or something before, but Natsunagi probably

hadn't heard about it. Still...

"You know no one could 'take the place' of your bride. The reason brides are the prettiest thing in the world is because they get to join their lives with someone they truly love," Natsunagi said, flatly rejecting Scarlet's suggestion.

"Ha-ha. Now there's a thought that hadn't occurred to me." Scarlet seemed to have been caught off guard; he smiled slightly.

"Never mind that, Scarlet. How did you get in here?" I said.

"Hm? The same way the detective did, I believe."

"You've got a pass, too, huh?"

In other words, he'd used his Tuner qualifications. Those gave the heroes unlimited access to most public institutions.

"That seems weird, though. Why haven't they pulled your Tuner qualifications now that you've done all this?"

"Ha! What are you saying?" Scarlet dismissed my question. "You speak as if I have become an enemy of the world."

"Didn't you make that undead army?" Natsunagi pressed him. If Scarlet had caused this situation, it had to be enough to cost him his Tuner qualifications.

"I merely attempted to restore the world to its proper shape." Scarlet shook his head. "After all..."

"...those undead are Gluttony's victims."

Natsunagi and I both gulped.

"When Gluttony devoured them, he absorbed all their DNA. Therefore, I was able to resurrect them as undead by using his blood."

...Was that why Scarlet had come to Gluttony a week ago, when the monster had been near death? Not to save him, but to raise a crowd of undead from his body?

"In a way, this is an act of charity." Scarlet spread his arms wide in a theatrical gesture. "I've used my vampiric abilities to save innocent unfortunates who ran afoul of the supernatural's jaws. What cause would anyone have to strip me of my Tuner qualifications?"

I didn't have a ready answer for that.

I wasn't allowed to find fault with the act of resurrecting the dead. Not when it was something I'd wished for myself.

"But even if you followed your conscience in bringing them back to life, why are you making them march on the Diet Building?" Natsunagi's criticism was reserved for what Scarlet had done afterward instead. She wanted to know why he was controlling them.

"Everyone who became undead had strong wills or wishes. That was the only type of person Gluttony killed and ate," Scarlet told her. "Therefore, while they are now undead, they should each have returned with their strongest instinct from life intact. However, they have forgotten those instincts and wishes, and they're acting as if their wills have been overwritten by another's. Souls, the consciousness of living creatures—what do you suppose they are?"

Scarlet fell silent and looked up at the ceiling. For some reason, his golden eyes seemed vaguely melancholy.

"So you're not running an experiment?" I asked him. Hadn't he raised the dead to see if they'd follow his orders?

Scarlet just kept gazing at the ceiling. *In that case...* I asked another question.

"Are you planning to start a rebellion?"

Scarlet's eyes returned to me. "Against whom would I rebel?"

"The Federation Government," Natsunagi answered. "Because they ordered you to wipe out the vampires."

"So you knew that much, did you?" The white demon smiled thinly.

What Stephen had told us had been true.

"Yes, I may have a motive for revenge. Two hundred years ago, the government ordered their Inventor to make vampires as biological weapons.

Then when they determined they were too much to handle, they promptly resorted to genocide."

That was why the vampires were being destroyed; even Stephen hadn't mentioned that. The reason was far too simple and stark: The Federation Government was afraid of them. The vampires were too strong.

"And that's why you've been working to kill your own kind on the government's orders for two centuries?"

"You seem to be operating under a misunderstanding. I was born a mere thirty years ago."

"...So you're actually only as old as you look? I just assumed vampires live forever."

I'd once seen Scarlet's severed arm promptly reattach to his body, the cells regenerating themselves. I'd always just assumed his kind were immortal, but...

"Regenerative abilities and immortality are different things. No living creatures on this earth have transcended their natural lifespans. Vampires are at the mercy of their limited lives, just like everything else. There is no immortal king." The corners of Scarlet's lips curved in self-mockery.

"Wait a second, though. If you were born thirty years ago, does that mean the Inventor is still making vampires? That seems like it would go against the Federation Government's code of conduct...," Natsunagi said.

"No, the vampires the Inventor made two centuries ago were the last," Scarlet told her.

But if Scarlet hadn't been made by the Inventor, where had he come from...?

"It is true that the Inventor still provides me with technology, but my body is not the product of science. Did you perhaps assume that vampires do not reproduce?"

That word hit me hard. I'd unconsciously assumed that vampires were a completely different species, that they weren't human. ...I'd been led to think that way.

The vampires—even Scarlet—had family.

"It is true that vampires were initially an artificial race created by the Inventor. However, they subsequently obeyed their survival instincts as living creatures and have continued to reproduce voluntarily."

Survival instincts. That term triggered a memory from the past.

"Once they began to flourish independently, the Federation Government feared them. Gradually, it began to work toward their annihilation. For more than a century, various Tuners have been charged with that mission, and for over a decade, it has been mine."

"Why?" Natsunagi asked, taking a step forward. "How do you justify it to yourself? What circumstances would make you kill your companions?"

Companions.

The moment Natsunagi said that word, Scarlet's eyes changed ever so slightly.

"Why do you think?" the vampire asked her.

His golden eyes widened, and his blood-drinking lips posed a question:

"Why do you suppose I would curry favor with the government, betray my few remaining brethren, and continue to soil my hands with their blood? Can you solve that mystery, Ace Detective?"

The demon's voice echoed in the vast chamber. Then for nearly a minute, silence fell.

That meant we'd lost.

What was the vampire really fighting with? What did he wish for, and what had he spent his life seeking? The detective and her assistant still didn't know.

"Have no fear, humans." His expression suddenly softening, Scarlet rose to his feet. "No doubt it will not be long now, but I will not truly make my move tonight."

As he started to leave, I realized I'd heard that line before.

".....! Wait! Stop that undead army. You can do it, can't you?"

Natsunagi ran after Scarlet. That was why we'd originally come here. We couldn't let Scarlet leave yet.

"As I said, have no fear. There's no need for that. They're already..."

An image was projected into the hall.

It looked like drone footage of the spot where Natsunagi and I had been just a little while ago. In other words, it was showing the undead army, and *they were under attack*.

But what was attacking them?

"Gluttony," Natsunagi murmured, her voice trembling.

He looked completely different than he had when we'd seen him last week.

He was huge, over seven meters tall. An armored shell covered his whole body. His six enormous wings stirred up a wind, and his protruding red eyes rotated 360 degrees, searching for prey.

Sometimes running on two legs, sometimes on four, he grabbed any undead within reach, crushing them with his powerful jaws and swallowing them down. The monster truly was the Lord of the Flies.

For a moment, it reminded me of my old enemy Betelgeuse, but I was far more afraid of this than I'd ever been of that monster. At least Betelgeuse had never smiled like that while eating people.

"Kimizuka, look!" Natsunagi pointed to a corner of the image.

There was Ookami, charging at Gluttony with his great sickle. Had he defeated Envy already? But then Gluttony had appeared. Ookami's greatest enemy.

Still, in that case...

"Rill's definitely going to show up."

She would be just like Ookami, or maybe even more intense.

The Magical Girl was bound to appear and kill her sworn enemy.

"Let's go, Kimizuka."

Natsunagi held her right hand out to me.

She wasn't shaking now.

"Let's go pick up our companion."

With no hesitation, I took her hand.

Even a hundred years from now, I doubted I'd regret that choice.

## The tale of a certain magical girl

"Lill."

Someone was calling my name.

Not many people called me by my nickname. Who was this?

"Hey, Lill. Or won't you wake up unless I call you Lilia? Heeey."

Now they were shaking me. Seriously, what? I was sleeping and everything.

...Sleeping?

When had that happened? Slowly, I opened my eyes, and light lanced into the darkness.

Someone was waving their hand in front of my face.

"You're finally awake! Geez, that was mean. I was talking to you the whole time, and then you nodded off all of a sudden."

"Freya?"

Subdued red hair, freckled cheeks. She was sitting on my left, dressed in her school uniform.

"Where are we?"

The shaking hadn't stopped. That had seemed weird, but it turned out we were on a bus. I realized I was wearing my uniform, too.

"What's the matter, Lill?" Freya cocked her head, puzzled.

"...Why are you here?"

"'Why'? Are you still asleep?"

Maybe. I rubbed my temples, but I couldn't seem to remember.

"We're on our way back from a meet. Did you forget?"

Now that she'd said it, it sounded plausible.

That's right; we'd gone to a regional competition today.

"Oh, of course. Did Ri— Did I win?"

"I won today!" Freya corrected me vehemently. ...Really?

"Never mind that; why are you on this bus? This is my school's bus, isn't it?"

"Cause why not? I may not go to your school, but mine's close."

That logic made no sense. Still, Freya had always been sort of unpredictable.



"Besides, it's more fun if I'm here, isn't it? You're always by yourself, and you look bored."

"Not really. Even I have friends to talk to."

"Huh? I've never seen you chatting with anybody."

"...You never pull your punches, do you?"

Well, I'm the type who says what she thinks, too.

Despite our similarities, for some reason, this girl has a lot of friends, while I... No, it's nothing. It's not like I even care.

"So what were we talking about again?"

Apparently, I'd been so tired, I'd dozed off. Freya puffed out her cheeks, sulking. "Don't you remember?" She held out a tablet to me. "Come on, this right here!"

The horizontal screen was showing a Japanese cartoon. It was a magical-girl anime that Freya especially liked.

"I swear, episode 13... You'd never think this girl was the mastermind, right?! But they'd already dropped hints way back in episode 2!" Freya was all worked up. Over and over, she replayed the bit she was talking about. "And they even made us think she'd died early on, so it's a total shock. Isn't it?"

"Not really."

"Why not?!"

"Because this is the seventh time you've told me about this."

"What, really?" Freya played dumb.

To be honest, though, I was kind of jealous she had something she could get that absorbed in.

"Isn't there anything you like, Lill?" Freya was watching me closely.

"Something I like?"

What would it be? Had I ever had anything like that? My personality had always been this way. I was always unenthusiastic, and I never stuck with

anything for long. I just didn't care about the things that made other people happy, angry, sad, excited, or anything.

My parents had been relatively uninvolved, and I'd started at boarding school pretty early. I went out for track because it was an individual sport. I could focus on myself; nothing else mattered. Did that mean I was fond of track? No, not really. Being good at something wasn't the same as liking it.

I'd chosen to focus on pole-vaulting just because it was a good event for someone who didn't feel fear. That meant, in terms of things I genuinely liked, I had...

"Oh, but I did have fun today."

I suddenly remembered the sights I'd forgotten.

"It was just like always. You and I were the only ones left. We both broke our records bit by bit; little by little, we got closer to the sky. That was fun. ...It's the only thing that's fun."

Launching myself off the ground, tensing my arms and abs, soaring into the air.

Five centimeters, ten centimeters. Growing step by tiny step thrilled me. Like I was getting closer and closer to that high blue sky. It made me happy. I liked vaulting.

......There was no response. *Huh?* I glanced at Freya. She was staring at me, eyebrows raised.

"I never thought I'd hear you say a thing like that, Lill."

"Oh, no, that was..."

I caught sight of my reflection in the bus window; I was fiddling with my hair. I turned back the other way. Freya was beaming. "Me too! I have the most fun when I'm vaulting with you, too!"

My heart gave a little leap.

What was the word for this feeling?

What did regular people call it? Was it in the dictionary? Had we learned about it in morals or ethics classes? I didn't know. I had no idea, but...

"So what was this?" I asked. That anime was still playing on the screen. I pointed at the magical girl, who was just confronting the villain. "Tell me her name again."

I knew, actually. I remembered.

After all, I'd heard about this dozens and dozens of times, not just seven.

It made Freya happy, though. When we talked about this, she smiled like she was having the best time ever.

"Honestly! Remember it already, wouldja?"

And with one of those smiles, Freya said the hero's name.

"She's Reloaded the Magical Girl!"

Oh, that's right. I remembered.

That was why I, Lilia Lindgren, had made that my goal.

I'd borrowed the name of the magical girl on the screen and had decided to become a hero.

I woke up.

I was swaying. Rocking very slightly.

".....! .....ah—"

I couldn't speak. I had no strength left, either.

My head felt slow and fuzzy. I'd lost too much blood.

Oh, right. He got me back there. I'd lost to Gluttony.

But what happened after that?

".....Who's...there...?" I finally managed. My voice was hoarse.

That swaying feeling was real.

This wasn't a bus. Someone was carrying me on their back.

We were headed somewhere, one step at a time.

"Ki...mi...hiko?"

The name of the partner I'd left.

No, it wasn't him. His back was a little broader.

Then who was this?

Just then, my misty eyes made out a certain structure.

Oh, right. That's what it was.

"Let's...go...to...gether."

Then we could make good on our promise.

### ◆ A word-soul sent to hell

After leaving the Diet Building in a car driven by a Man in Black, Natsunagi and I made for an alley not far from Gluttony's rampage. As we got out, the awful sight that met us left us speechless.

"What...is this?"

There was blood all over the asphalt. And—

"Those are Rill's clothes."

Shreds of the Magical Girl's costume were soaking in it, along with orange hairs and fragments of flesh. Nausea welled up inside me.

We'd come straight here; when we'd checked the tablet in the car, the red point that marked Rill's location had abruptly vanished nearby. Combining that fact with what I was seeing, the deduction I reached was— "Kimizuka, wait." Natsunagi had gone ahead a few steps, and she crouched down, beckoning me over. "There's a trail of tiny bloodstains, just drops, that starts here. She went somewhere."

Rill was still alive, and she'd simply gone somewhere else.

"After a disaster like this? Besides, the trace..."

"There was definitely a big battle here, but maybe Rill got badly hurt, and the chip was destroyed. We can't just assume the worst." Natsunagi stood up, staring me right in the face. "Pull yourself together, Kimizuka." I was still stunned and numb, and she scolded me rather harshly. "Our goal is saving Rill. If we assume that's not possible right away, we're shooting ourselves in the foot. Am I wrong?"

...No, you're not. You're absolutely right.

When I nodded weakly, Natsunagi shook me slightly. "We can't just rely on gut instinct like that. We can't make decisions based on the very first theory we think of." She tilted her head back, looking up at the cloudy night sky. "I bet Siesta had the ability to reach the truth instinctively. You and I don't, though. It's just like when we didn't have the answer to the mystery Scarlet gave us back there."

She wasn't running herself down; I could see it on her face.

"That's why we need to stumble our way through, considering all the possibilities, all the time. Let's become a detective and assistant who consider all the options, then pick out the brightest one."

"...Yeah. That sounds like us."

This was no time for smiles. But we were facing in the same direction now, so we exchanged nods.

For now, we'd assume Rill was still alive. Where would she be?

"I didn't see her in that footage, but I think she may have gone to Gluttony."

"Yeah. If she has, though, what should we do?"

As we'd seen, Gluttony was on a rampage and stronger than ever. Ookami might be keeping him pinned down for now, but Natsunagi and I weren't going to be any help in that fight. On the battlefield, any reckless courage we showed would only hold him back. If Rill were there, she'd probably give me the boot.

—But.

"She never blocked me."

In the week since Rill had left me, I'd tried to contact her over and over. She'd never responded, but she'd read my messages. I could see it on my app.

Rill was watching. She probably thought I was being a stubborn familiar, and I bet she was still sulking since I'd refused to take her hand, but she'd seen the words I'd sent.

"Let's go."

I faced forward, hoping my master was waiting for her pet to come home.

Our car arrived at the next site.

If the last battlefield had been a disaster, this one was hell.

Now an enormous monster, Gluttony was still storming around, trying to devour Scarlet's undead. Even worse, the nearby street was lined with office buildings. I could see the workers who hadn't fled in time.

Still, there was a reason the damage wasn't spreading: Someone was blocking Gluttony's attacks. Ookami, the avenger who'd inherited the Enforcer's will, was parrying the enemy's charges with his huge sickle. And...

"Ms. Fuubi!"

The redheaded Assassin launched an enormous needle and wire from something that looked like a handheld reel. The needle stuck into buildings, and the wire neatly tripped Gluttony.

These two were just managing to keep the supernatural's violence in check.

"Kimizuka, is Rill...?" Natsunagi asked.

I scanned the area, but I didn't see the Magical Girl.

Had she just not come here, or...? Another awful thought crossed my mind, but I shook my head. Thinking of worst-case scenarios was pointless; we were trying to prevent all that.

"Hey, civvy. Get the lead out and run already, wouldja?" Skidding backward,

Ms. Fuubi was there with us before I could blink.

Her suit was dirty, and she'd gotten a few cuts.

"Do you have a strategy?" Natsunagi, a noncivilian, asked her. She wanted to know if they had a way to defeat Gluttony.

"I think firing a big-ass missile into him might do the trick, but there's too many risks right now."

She wasn't wrong. Even if we called in the army, we couldn't use that strategy without evacuating the regular citizens first.

"If we could at least lead Gluttony somewhere deserted, then maybe."

Sure, but where could we conveniently lock up a monster like—?

"The stadium."

An image entered my mind.

The sports field Rill had taken me to a week ago—we could temporarily trap and isolate the enormous supernatural there. It also wasn't too far from here.

"Decent idea, but how do we go about that?"

...Good question. The next issue was how to get that monster several kilometers to our desired location. We couldn't just say *Hey, let's take this elsewhere* to an enemy like this.

"I'll do it." Natsunagi stepped forward. "I've got stronger DNA than anyone here. Gluttony's bound to take the bait."

"...Oh yeah. Seed's blood."

The medical trials Natsunagi had gone through at the SPES laboratory had given her Seed's genes. As far as Gluttony was concerned, she might be the best, most valuable food around.

Still, that didn't mean I could let her be the decoy. Just as I was about to say as much, though, I saw her eyes and realized it would be foolish to protest. Nagisa Natsunagi's blazing red eyes were already fixed on the distant Lord of the Flies.

"Gluttony. Look over here."

Natsunagi's lips released a word-soul that made the air shiver.

In the next moment, Gluttony's bulbous eyes looked our way.

The Lord of the Flies laughed, flicking that long tongue.

The enemy had just noticed Natsunagi, the perfect bait.

"Get on, Detective!"

Grabbing a motorcycle that was lying in the street, Ms. Fuubi tossed Natsunagi a helmet.

The battlefield never waits for people to be ready. The bike sped off toward the stadium with the two of them, luring Gluttony away.

"Kimihiko Kimizuka. We're going after them."

As I was standing there, left in the dust, someone threw me a lifeline. Ookami was straddling another motorcycle and motioning for me to get on behind him. His suit was torn, and he was wounded. His back looked exactly like a hero's back should. *That's something I'm missing*, I thought as I got on behind him, and we set off in pursuit of the others.

"Sorry. I guess we're interfering in your revenge now, too," I said to Ookami's back.

"Go right ahead. Unlike the Magical Girl, I'm fine as long as the evil's ultimately destroyed."

Apparently, all Ookami wanted was for someone to take Gluttony down. That meant our objectives and plans to execute them were in accord.

"Still, why are you getting involved in this? Walk me through your reasons." Ookami wanted to know why we were heading for the battlefield when defeating Gluttony wasn't the Ace Detective's mission. "Is it because your

companion just happened to be involved?" He didn't sound like he was blaming me, but he'd caught me off guard. "Save what you can see. Help the people you can reach, at least. Sure, it sounds good, but this world is overflowing with unlimited evil."

He was right. There's always fighting going on in the shadows of the world. Even now, new crimes and evil were hurting people. We couldn't save everyone.

"The fact that the Seven Deadly Sins exist is proof that this world's bursting with evil. As I said before, they symbolize human malice."

As the night wind blustered around us, Ookami spoke to me without looking back.

"Hatred, grudges, curses, sinful emotions that become diseases—cancers of the heart. It's a tragedy, but humans can never run from their wickedness. As long as mankind exists, war, poverty, and destruction will, too. The chain of evil won't be broken."

And yet I'd save only my friends, only in the places I could reach. That was hypocrisy.

I didn't need Ookami to tell me that. I was well aware of it already.

I couldn't pretend I'd solved a problem like this with semantics: *Hypocritical* good that's done is better than actual good that isn't done. Not as long as I was standing next to a Tuner, someone who called herself a hero.

"Someday, you'll run into that contradiction. What will you do then?"

Ookami's question was abstract, but I understood exactly what he was asking me.

"A little while back, there was someone who would probably have had a ready answer for you." That someone was currently in the middle of a very long nap. "But I have a partner who thinks about this stuff with me now. The two of us will keep on worrying and suffering, and someday, we'll look for the answer to that question."

Ookami was silent for a while. "I see," he finally murmured. "In that case, I'll

look forward to the day when I get to hear that answer."

He spoke over his shoulder as if he was guiding the kid behind him.

Before long, we reached our destination.

We weren't the first ones there.

Gluttony was in the center of the large, oval sports field, monstrous and roaring. Natsunagi and Ms. Fuubi were right in front of him.

Now all we had to do was hold out just a little longer until an army helicopter got there and blew the monster away. As relief started to set in, I spotted her.

A figure was standing in the second-floor audience seating on the east side, with another small body lying beside it. —I knew right away. I'd seen that costume plenty of times when I'd fought beside her.

Gluttony howled, and the final battle began.

I ran across the battlefield, sprinting up through the audience seating, and then— "Reloaded!"

—I called my proud master's name.

#### The promised ending credits

A call. Someone was calling me.

In the depths of the pitch-black dream, the voice I'd begun to hear was growing louder and louder.

That was weird. Someone else had shaken me, woken me up, and called my name a minute ago. What was I, popular or something?

In that case, I didn't have much choice. Slowly, I opened my eyes. That had to be part of a hero's job.

"What's the matter? You keep barking like you're desperate."

I managed to speak. I put my hand out, too.

The boy who'd pulled my head onto his lap looked at me, startled.

"Did you miss Rill that much?"

When my outstretched fingers brushed his cheek, the boy—Kimihiko—looked relieved.

My body was light.

Not feeling pain was the norm for me, but from what I could see, my wounds had closed up quite a bit. "Did you do something?" I asked him.

"...I gave you some medicine I got from Stephen. He said to give it to you only in a genuine emergency."

Oh, so that was it. No wonder I felt hot to my core. In a good way, of course.

With Kimihiko's help, I slowly sat up, then looked around. "Would you explain this situation to Rill in three lines?"

Apparently, this place was still a battlefield. The fight with Gluttony was happening some distance away; he looked like an enormous fly-monster.

"Gluttony ate Scarlet's undead. To mitigate the damage, Natsunagi baited the enemy here ten minutes ago. Now we're waiting for an army helicopter; Ookami and Ms. Fuubi are hanging in there until it arrives."

From what I could see, Ookami was out in front, while the Assassin was providing support from the rear and protecting the Ace Detective at the same time.

"Thanks for the explanation. And? When will that army helicopter be here?"

"...Well, the army's control systems seem to be having trouble."

"So there's no ETA. That's an unfortunate coincidence."

That was all I could say. Even if it wasn't actually a coincidence, there was no time to moan about it now. This was just how my luck usually went.

As I tried to get to my feet, Kimizuka caught my arm. His eyes conveyed what was on his mind more eloquently than his lips could.

"Even you must have known this was how it would go."

Stephen had given that medicine to him, and I'd taken it. It had awakened me and provided me with the strength to get back on my feet. So what I had to do next was a foregone conclusion.

"Please let me end this by carrying out my job as a hero."

Kimihiko looked as if he might shout— No. As if he might cry. I smiled at him.

"Besides, Rill and her friend had plans here all along." I turned back.

"Isn't that right, Freya?"

She was standing there, her expression the same as always.

Since she'd carried me here on her back, her clothes were bloody.

...Well, I had no room to talk. We both looked awful.

"What are you going to do?" Kimihiko was gazing at us.

Quietly, I went over to him and rose on my tiptoes. "Lean down." Then I whispered our final strategy in his ear.

"And that's really what you want?" Kimihiko hesitated a little. I gave two small nods. "Okay. I'll be right back."

Kimihiko turned to go. Before he took a step, though, he glanced back. Reaching out with his right hand, he dropped it lightly onto my head. "I just remembered you're supposed to do this for girls who are working hard." Clumsily, he patted my head.

"...You're pretty insolent for a pet."

"Sorry about that."

I smiled, though, and so did he. Then he turned on his heel, running down the stairs and out of the stadium. How long had it been since anyone acknowledged me like that?

"How stupid."

We both were, Kimihiko and I.

My head was still warm where his hand had been. There was one other place, somewhere inside, where a glowing spark of heat had appeared. No one could see it; it was in my diseased heart.

"Freya, wait until I'm ready, okay?" I said, turning back just for a moment.

We were headed into the final episode, the time when magical girls shone brightest.

When I descended to the battlefield, Nagisa Natsunagi was nearby, and she noticed me. I'd ended up causing all sorts of trouble for her, too.

"Rill's sorry about, um, everything."

"No, this is par for the course for Ace Detectives."

It was a position exclusively for busybodies, basically... We exchanged a brief look, then giggled. Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd seen her smile.

"He'll return to you soon."

"I bet he'll get distracted by some other girl right away."

The way she sulked was rather touching. As long as she had that profile, I doubted that boy would ever let her go in the truest sense of the word. Would I have a relationship like that with somebody someday? ...Kidding. Thoughts like that could wait for the sequel.

"Okay. You stay back." From here on, this was a job for the Magical Girl.

After all, the Ace Detective probably had another big mission lined up.

"Rill!" For the first time, she called my name. "Gluttony hasn't stolen a thing from you! He hasn't destroyed anything! That means you won't lose! Magical girls don't lose to evil monsters, ever!"

With her passionate words at my back, I walked onto the battlefield.

"I know how heroic you are! I'll always remember!"

The small spark that had bloomed in my heart earlier blazed up, big and bright.

Did the magical girls in anime get strength from someone else's voice this way?

How strange. It was more effective than any drug, in my opinion.

Maybe that's too simplistic. Sorry. Final episodes are mostly like this, aren't they?

Gluttony howled with hunger.

The vibrations from that roar nearly made my body go numb. Then the enemy lunged at Ookami and Fuubi, mouth gaping. They blocked with their weapons, but he still sent them flying back.

Fuubi came my way, but she didn't tumble awkwardly on the ground. Dropping into a sharp crouch, shoes sliding, the redheaded Assassin skidded to a stop on her feet.

"Well? Does it look like you won't be able to beat the Magical Girl's enemy after all?"

"Huh. Here I thought you were finally being genuine, but you're still talking shit." Fuubi glared up at me.

It was the best option, so I grinned back at her.

"What, you think you can win this?"

"Rill couldn't do it alone."

"Oh-ho. So you're declaring your loss?"

Perish the thought. I'd just realized something.

"What Rill wanted to do isn't something that could be done by one person."

The preparations for it were already underway, though.

They'd been there; I just hadn't noticed.

It had been right there with me, at my side, from the very start.

"Say, Fuubi. You're the combat expert; tell Rill. Where is his weak point?"

"Not his heart or his head. You'd need to hit him with a missile to get through

the shell over those."

That's what I thought. The spot I'd smashed through earlier had apparently come back stronger after he shed his skin. The exposed area around his jaw was covered with tough armor now.

"The enemy may be a monster," Fuubi said, "but he's still a living creature. His joints and muscles need to move, and there are slight gaps in the armor to let him do that. For example..."

"His neck?"

Fuubi nodded.

I couldn't see any gaps below the armored jaw from this vantage point, but there was a good chance...

"Thanks, Fuubi."

Fuubi didn't seem to have been expecting an honest thank-you; she looked dubious. "Are we getting a hurricane tomorrow?"

"Nope. There won't be a cloud in the sky."

After all, I'd prayed to that big Fair-Weather Doll the other day.

"Fuubi, one more request. Work with Ookami and keep the enemy distracted, especially his eyes. Don't let him attack Nagisa, either."

By the time I finished the sentence, the Assassin was already gone. She knew what she needed to do, and she'd returned to the battlefield like the wind.

The supernatural howled, turning his head as if he wasn't sure where to look.

Fuubi went left and Ookami went right, making Gluttony pause for a second.

"Being too good at her job is kind of a problem, too."

I only had a split-second chance. That brief moment would determine whether I won or lost. I didn't have time to think up a solid strategy. I had to move right now.

"It's okay, though."

Yes, it was fine. I was the only one of us who'd been late.

That girl had planned to do this all along. That was why she'd stayed with me.

"If you don't mind, remember that we were both here."

In the next moment, a wind blew through. A single gust went right past me.

That's right. That was what I'd wanted to see.

Killing Gluttony hadn't been my wish.

My wish had been something more fundamental.

For the past two years, ever since the day we hadn't been able to go where we'd promised to go together...

...I'd wanted to see that girl's back as she ran faster and vaulted more beautifully than anyone.

"Fly, Freya!"

Her five-meter pole jabbed into the turf, sending her higher and higher. Kimihiko had gotten that pole from the Men in Black outside the stadium and given it to her.

Unlike those earlier skies, this one wasn't blue.

Even so, Freya soared into that now-cloudless night sky, toward the stars, higher than anyone.

"That was the instinct you held on to. The wish that stayed with you."

She seemed to float in midair forever. That leap captivated everyone—not just Kimihiko and Nagisa, but the supernatural, too. Her jump had taken her over his enormous body, and Gluttony stretched his neck, looking up at her warily. Beneath his huge jaw, the shell parted ever so slightly.

"Sorry I'm late."

Now we'd pick up where we'd left off two years ago.

As if Freya was passing me the baton, her pole slowly toppled back toward me.

I caught it and ran a few steps. I wasn't able to take a decent run-up the way she had, so I used the power of my magic shoes to cheat just a little.

What? That's against the rules? You sure are picky, Freya.

"To make up for it, I'll perform an extremely pretty jump."

By the time the pole was upright, I was already airborne.

I didn't even think about which muscles to tense or how to do it.

I just let my body rotate naturally, until the upside-down sky was all I could see.

Hey, Freya? This is the last thing Lill's going to see during a vault.

"It's beautiful."

Huh. Vaulting at night wasn't bad, either.

Clicking an invisible camera shutter, I reversed my body again. The dark sky vanished, and Gluttony took its place.

On his neck, there was just one unprotected spot.

"Reloaded!" I heard Kimihiko shout. "Catch!"

As I screamed, something burst inside me—the cancer cells that had been devouring my heart.

Just now, the flames of passion had devoured that disease in turn.

No matter what malice the Seven Deadly Sins had brought into the world, they couldn't defile this instinct.

Human wishes would always vault over the vortex of humanity's darkness.

"Freyaaaaaaaaaaa!"

I'd kept the promise we'd made that day, and now I shoved the tip of my staff into Gluttony's thick neck with all my strength. The weapon's bright blue light engulfed the stadium.

Almost immediately, I heard the supernatural's death scream. Was it a funeral salute mourning its own end, or was it the last starter pistol I'd ever hear?

...Either way, that was the final episode of the tale of Reloaded the Magical Girl.



# **Epilogue**

Ten days later...

I set out pretty early in the morning for the hospital where Siesta slept, as usual.

Nothing about her condition or her heart had changed. I didn't know whether I should be relieved about that or regret the lack of change. However, she seemed to be sleeping so comfortably that looking at her face made me smile, just like always.

...Although, Noches seemed to find it weird. She wasn't the only one who was hard on me, either.

"Kimizuka? All this is wrong."

Natsunagi looked from me to my practice problems and back, despair clear in her face. She was holding a red pen. "You completely wiped out on the literary-analysis questions. What is this? Do you just not have a human heart or something?"

"I'm not psychic. I don't know these characters. How am I supposed to know what they're feeling?" In the hospital's small waiting room, I tossed my mechanical pencil aside.

"Haaah. Maybe we'll have to do some dialoguing again." Natsunagi spun her pen in her fingers, a little exasperated.

When she said "dialoguing," I assumed she meant what we'd done last Christmas. She was probably saying I needed to practice communicating, since I was so bad at reading emotions.

"I know what you're feeling now, though, Natsunagi."

"Oh yes? Take a guess, then."

"You want me to compliment your manicure."

The pen Natsunagi had been spinning stopped dead. Cautiously, she withdrew her hand. "...How come you answer all other questions correctly?"

That would be because I'd spent a lot longer around Natsunagi than I had around some characters I'd only just read about for the first time.

"Actually, why do we have to study even when we're at the hospital?"

"What, you think this has nothing to do with you? There aren't many days left until the exams, you know." Natsunagi glared at me. "Do you understand that?"

The college entrance exams were only about two weeks away at this point. I'd been dragged into one global crisis after another lately, and I hadn't had time to study. ... That was part of it. Ten days ago, though, we'd finally destroyed Gluttony and the other three remaining supernaturals, taking that threat off the table.

"Still, I never thought you'd aim for the university I got into, Kimizuka." Natsunagi giggled.

I was applying to several departments, but one of them was the Department of Literature, the same as Natsunagi.

"Did you not want me around or something?" I asked.

"...Read between the lines."

I'd mostly known the answer to that one. "Well, if I flunk out, work your Tuner magic and save me."

"Yikes, you straight up said that you're planning to cheat..."

"I'm kidding, okay? Just joking."

Natsunagi could have done the exact same thing if she'd felt like it, but she'd never cheat. The previous Ace Detective wouldn't have done it, either. Siesta hadn't used her Tuner qualifications to make easy money, for example. We'd paid for all our food and shelter ourselves back then. Maybe Siesta had enjoyed living like that...

"It shouldn't be long now." Natsunagi glanced at her watch and started putting our textbooks away. I had plans to meet someone else here today.

"Aren't you going to see her, too?"

"I think it's better if I'm not there, don't you?"

No, I didn't. But I trusted Natsunagi's instincts a lot more than my own with regard to these kinds of subtleties, so I decided to let her make that call.

"Okay. See you later, then." She waved and left.

The person I was waiting for showed up just a minute later.

"Oh, there you are."

At the sound of her voice, I turned, and she started toward me.

"Hmm. This is pretty tricky." She was having some trouble navigating a small level difference in the floor. "We're in a hospital. Why are there steps here? Stephen had better brace for a complaint."

"It's a relief to see you as prickly as ever," I told her.

Reloaded smiled up at me from her wheelchair. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess. Ten days."

It felt longer than that since I'd last seen her. We gazed at each other for a while, but we couldn't think of anything to say and ended up finding something else to look at.

"...Rill's a bit thirsty. At least we're in Japan. There are vending machines everywhere." She maneuvered her chair over to the nearest machine to buy a drink. "Do you want something, too? Is milk okay?"

"I'll take a free drink, but don't treat me like your pet dog." I asked for a cola instead, and she agreed. I waited awhile, but she didn't come back, so I turned around again.

Rill was still sitting in her wheelchair in front of the machine.

"Maybe I'll file a complaint with Stephen, too," I said.

I pressed a button in the vending machine's top row, then handed the cola to her.

"Rill can't handle fizzy drinks."

"...Is milk okay?"

After that, as we sipped our drinks, we started to talk about what had

happened ten days ago.

By the time I'd reached the stadium that night, Rill had been mortally wounded. No ordinary person would have been able to survive those injuries, but the medicine I'd gotten from Stephen had temporarily repaired her damaged organs.

"That's why Rill managed that last jump with Freya."

"Yeah. That must have been her wish, too."

"... That was the promise we'd made."

But after the promise had been fulfilled, the undead Freya had dropped in her tracks, falling asleep for the last time. Once the fight was over, Rill's medicine had worn off and left her unable to move. She'd been taken straight to a hospital, Stephen had gone into surgery with her, and now here we were.

"So Rill has a lot to be grateful for," she murmured, as if she was reminding herself.

She was right; she'd recovered far enough to be able to chat like this.

She'd paid a heavy price for her wish, though.

"He said Rill won't ever walk again."

Rill smiled as she said it. Or tried to anyway.

"Even Rill thinks it was dumb of her, but when she first heard the diagnosis, she asked Stephen if that meant she wouldn't be able to pole-vault anymore, either. Isn't it funny?" She laughed at herself. "Rill can't walk, so there's no way she could run or jump, but..."

I remembered the vault I'd seen her make ten days ago. That beautiful leap into the night sky... I'd never get to see that again.

"Frankly, though, Rill did luck out. She just assumed she was going to die. She'd prepared herself for it. She can't walk, but she's lucky to be alive...and so

on..."

There was a trace of a smile on Rill's lips, but when she saw my face, she quickly looked away. How awful had my expression been?

"Isn't there anything they can do?" I managed. "Stephen Bluefield's constantly defying common sense. He's the Inventor. He's saved my partners, who've meant so much to me, from death again and again. He even made an android."

That had to mean there was nothing he couldn't fix...

"He made Rill a proposal instead. He said he could make her prosthetic legs that looked and worked exactly the same as her own."

"Prosthetics... Then—" Was Rill going to amputate her legs and have them replaced? Would that be...?

"But they'd only be 'exactly the same' as her real ones. That isn't 'real.' They wouldn't be Rill's legs," she declared. "Rill remembers everything. She ran, jumped, and competed with Freya on these legs. Rill takes pride in that. It means more to her than her life. Losing her legs isn't an option."

...Oh, right. Prosthetic legs might let her walk again, but to Reloaded, she wouldn't be herself anymore.

Noches looked exactly the same as Siesta, but even if she'd been equipped with all her memories and her personality, she wouldn't have *been* Siesta. Noches was Noches, and Siesta was Siesta. No one could take anyone else's place.

"That means this is fine. I prefer it this way." Rill gently stroked her legs. "I'm going to live with these legs."

I couldn't comment on her decision. There was no need.

"Oh, that's right. Rill needed to say one more thing."

She looked up at me.

<sup>&</sup>quot;You're still fired."

I recognized those eyes from when we first met. As if she didn't trust anyone.

She was wearing the same expression she'd worn back when she was picking fights with everyone.

"We spent a little while as partners, but you defied Rill, didn't listen, and made her mad again and again. She's firing you for violating your contract." Rill averted her face in a huff. "Rill doesn't need a familiar who won't listen to his master. Even talking like this is... Well, today will be the last time. We're only meeting now because Rill wanted to tell you that."

She didn't wait for me to respond. She said what she'd decided to say, almost without pausing for breath, and she'd stopped making eye contact.

She kept on complaining about me and saying we'd probably never see each other again, over and over. I waited through it, waited, and waited some more, until finally, Rill asked in a small voice, "Do you have any objections?"

I didn't totally understand what she was feeling. We'd only really met a bit over a month ago. I hadn't known her long enough to understand what she actually wanted to say, and unlike a literary-analysis question, I couldn't just pick a random answer. And so— "Huh?" Rill asked, bewildered.

—I knelt in front of her.

"No objections. But..."

Since I didn't know her true feelings, the least I could do was make sure she knew mine.

"...the example the Magical Girl set was outstanding. When you vaulted, you were the most beautiful thing in the world. I'm proud that I got to work with you, Reloaded."

I took her hand, and although I didn't kiss it, I was honest about what I felt.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rill laughed, but it wasn't long before her expression dissolved into tears.

"I did it...all. It's over." Big tears fell from her jewellike eyes. "I can't...run...or...

vault...ever again...! Freya's gone... Our enemy's gone, too. There's...nothing... left... It's all gone...!"

Once the dam had crumbled, that was it. Her tears wouldn't stop.

Reloaded had been so strong, but now she was crying, helpless in the face of her emotions.

Of course she was. After all the fighting was over, the Magical Girl was just a girl.

What could I say to her? Was it okay for me to say anything? I hesitated a little, but then I dried her tears.

"Rill. If you don't have anything else lined up, would you help me?"

For just a moment, she stopped sobbing.

"The thing is, I've got a ton of problems to field. The world's still full of enemies; Natsunagi and I have to fight vampires and the Phantom Thief... Plus, there's a wish I need to make come true."

Both my hands were already full, though. So were Natsunagi's. But Rill had just finished her mission, and one of her hands was free. So...

"I won't call you Lilia yet. I'll keep calling you Reloaded. Would you work with us? As a hero?"

Rill's eyes went wide. Then she bit her lip, looking down.

I waited for her to speak. To look up. I didn't count how many seconds passed, how many minutes. I just kept waiting for her decision, and then— "If Rill must." Breaking the silence, Rill wiped her tears away. "She'll be your partner a little while longer."

"...Thanks. I appreciate it."

Silence fell again, but this time, it was a rather comfortable sort.

"Rill does feel a little bad for your ex-girlfriend, though," she joked; she was smiling again.

"Don't let her hear you say that; I'll never hear the end of it." I smiled a little just as I heard the patter of approaching footsteps.

"Wha—? Uh, excuse me?"

Yeesh. Should've seen that coming, huh? Natsunagi, who'd apparently heard that exchange loud and clear, stepped into the waiting room.

"Goodness. Eavesdropping. That's not a nice habit," Rill told her.

"—! I only came by because I thought it would be all right for me to join you two soon!" Natsunagi looked away awkwardly. "And listen, we haven't broken up!"

"We aren't even going out."

"I—I know that, okay?!"

Rill laughed at us. "You two really are dumb."

I was sure her smile was for more than this moment. That smile included everything she'd experienced and all the things she'd seen.

Of course, that didn't mean she'd accepted everything, or that she had her future totally planned out. Even so, she was smiling now, and she'd live with pride.

This was her story.

The tale of the Magical Girl, which was nowhere near over.





# An epilogue from the future

"That's the story of the time I spent as Reloaded's partner two years ago."

In the Shirogane Detective Agency, after I'd finished telling that old story to Nagisa, Siesta, and Noel, I took a break for some tea. I'd taken a few breaks in the middle of my story as well, and this was my third cup.

Remembering that time always made my heart ache a bit, but it wasn't all unpleasant. Even now, the month I'd spent with Rill was a precious memory.

"Kimihiko, you always wear that expression when you talk about that." Nagisa was watching me with a slightly troubled smile. What expression did she mean? I couldn't tell.

"By the way, Siesta. Sorry about that," I apologized casually.

Siesta tilted her head slightly, as if she didn't know what I meant.

"Remember? Back when we attended that Federal Council together and Rill tried to recruit me as her partner, you got mad."

What had she said again? That we'd made a lifetime employment contract, so I wasn't allowed to be anyone else's partner. I'd ended up breaking that contract.

"I'm not really upset. Actually, the way you put that makes it sound as if I used to be obsessed with you."

"Oh, sorry. I got that wrong. It wasn't just back then, huh?"

"Ah right, I'm still obs— Are you stupid, Kimi? Don't make me use myself as the punch line."

Siesta seemed pretty unhappy that I'd made her break character.

"You know, I think Siesta could do really well as the butt of our jokes, too," said Nagisa.

"Hey, now there's an idea," I replied. "I like it. Siesta, you polish that skill and I'll cheer you on."

"This is my detective agency, you know..."

Siesta's employees had begun to pick on her, and Noel giggled, holding the tea snacks out to us. There was no telling what this tableau meant.

"...And what did you think of being the Magical Girl's partner, Assistant?" Siesta asked.

"Frankly, there wasn't much I could give her, and it's not like Rill taught me everything, either. There was a lot about the way she did things that I wasn't happy with."

Until the very end, Rill and I had had different approaches to problem-solving. We also hadn't found a point of compromise and developed mutual understanding. We'd tried working on our communication once, and it hadn't gone well. That was probably why we'd never become partners in the truest sense of the word. ...Still.

"Still, I'll never forget watching her as she fought for her wish."

That was the one thing I was sure of.

Nagisa must have been watching Rill's back just the way I had. She nodded, remembering.

"Miss Reloaded attended the Ritual of Sacred Return, didn't she?" Noel said, thinking back to last month.

"Yeah. She stayed involved with the world as a Tuner after the incident I just told you about. She's helped us, too."

That was why I still hadn't called her "Lilia." She really should have been able to leave her *Reloaded* code name behind after the ceremony last month, but Bruno's unexpected rebellion had postponed that as well.

"...To me, that was an unfamiliar story. More than that, it aroused my deepest sympathies. I and the other members of the Federation Government know far too little about the situation in the field." Noel hung her head in frustration for a moment, then promptly looked up again. "I will testify as well. I'll bear witness to the story that Miss Reloaded lived as the Magical Girl."

Yeah. I wanted as many people as possible to remember how she'd lived, too.

"But, Kimihiko, I think that was also your story." Nagisa glanced up at me from

the seat next to mine. "It was the same way with the Ritual of Sacred Return as well. You always follow the path you chose for yourself."

Hearing Nagisa put it into words made me think. Maybe the start really was two years ago. Maybe that was when my series of choices had truly begun.

"—Well. Let's move on to the main topic, shall we?"

The mood in the room changed slightly as Siesta put her fingertips together. "I had one reason for having our assistant relate that old story: I wanted to examine the discrepancies in our memories and the world's records."

The story that revolved around Reloaded had revolved around one more large axis. I'd realized as much as I was telling it, and the others hadn't missed it, either.

"Several terms and quotes in your story caught my attention."

Siesta showed us a piece of paper. It held notes she'd taken with a fountain pen as she listened to my story: a list of remarks made by three different people.

"The government isn't currently attempting to declare the Phantom Thief an enemy of the world."

"As the Singularity, that's your mission, you know."

"Even you don't want to get dragged into the war over the Akashic records, do you?"

Those lines had been spoken by Mia, Rill, and Ice Doll. They'd all come up in the story I'd just told.

### However—

"It isn't just 'the Akashic records.' I had absolutely no memory of the Phantom Thief, who was supposedly one of the Tuners, or of your identity as the Singularity." Siesta seemed to be mulling this over. Noel nodded in sympathy. On top of that...

"I didn't, either. In your story, though, I probably knew those things as a matter of course," Nagisa said. She seemed a little confused by the mismatch between that and her own perceptions. "But it's weird. Even after hearing your story, Kimihiko, nothing feels wildly inconsistent. Like, I was familiar with words and concepts like 'the Akashic records' and 'the Singularity' long ago, but I can't really remember what they mean or explain them."

"I'm the same as Nagisa. 'The Akashic records,' 'the Singularity,' the 'Phantom Thief'... They sound unfamiliar now, but the story you told doesn't seem crazy, either. Something isn't adding up, but it feels like it does. *As if someone's forced me to find it convincing.*"

Siesta looked up at the ceiling. It was as if she was searching for some invisible enemy, for whoever had made her this way.

"Mr. Kimihiko, did you remember all that?" Noel asked me. It was a perfectly natural question to ask the narrator.

However...

"No, I think I'd forgotten the whole time, too. It's just that touching this thing made me remember."

I pointed at an object. The other three looked at it, and their eyes widened. It was the object Noel had shown us as a memento of Bruno. The thing that looked like a ritual implement.

"When I touched that, I saw the past."

I couldn't explain the logic, but it was similar to the way I'd seen potential futures when I'd touched the sacred text last month. Whatever this enigmatic bronze-colored pyramid was made of had pulled back those missing memories for me.

"Then do you know what the Akashic records are, Kimihiko?"

"No, not yet. All I remember is what was in the story I just told you."

In other words, I hadn't recalled everything about the true nature of "the

Singularity," the identity of the enemy known as "the Phantom Thief," or "the Akashic records," which were supposed to be the secret of the world.

"There's still a ton I don't remember."

To be more accurate, forgetting wasn't quite the right word. It didn't feel the way forgetting the truth of Siesta's death had. My memory of the terms "the Singularity," "the Phantom Thief," and "the Akashic records" was fuzzy at best, as were the events surrounding them, but for some reason, my memories all seemed to be in place. Something was making me feel this was natural.

It was just as Siesta had said: It felt like the inconsistencies, the warped places, were being forcibly compensated for.

"But why were you the only one who remembered something when you touched that? Was it thanks to that Singularity trait?" Nagisa asked.

"I think you could rephrase that as the fault of that Singularity trait, but maybe?" I shrugged. Apparently, the past me hadn't fully understood his Singularity nature, either. Now, two years later, it was yanking me around again.

"Still, if touching this mystery object made our assistant recall memories from a certain time period, there may be other things that would have a similar effect out there," said Siesta.

"Oh, that's right," Nagisa said. "The White Tengu said something like that, too."

They had both noticed the hint at almost the same time.

In the story I'd told, the White Tengu—the leader of Pandemonium—had said that this world held several devices for recording its past and future. Maybe our forgotten memories and the world's lost records were stored in places like this object.

"Look at this." Siesta picked up the pyramid. "There are square hollows on the underside. Doesn't it look like a three-dimensional puzzle?"

"...Yeah. Meaning there are more parts out there somewhere."

Siesta nodded.

Finding those missing pieces and putting them together would probably restore the world's lost memories. Bruno had left the first step in that direction behind as our inheritance.

"Grandfather..." Noel accepted the object from Siesta and hugged it to her chest.

"As things stand, we can't count on our memories. We won't be able to use the things we've fought with up till now: our brains and our experience. On top of that, we don't even know who we're fighting," Nagisa said, summing up the situation.

In that case, what should we—the detectives and their assistant—do next?

"Our course is set, then."

Siesta, president of the Shirogane Detective Agency, rose to her feet.

She walked over to the window, then turned back to face us.

"Let's go on a journey to unlock the world's secrets."

She was smiling. The hand she held out to us had always shown us the way.

"Yeah, you know, I was just starting to get bored with our ordinary routine," I said.

Nagisa Natsunagi got up. She seemed resigned, but maybe enjoying herself a bit as well. "I guess I've got no choice! This is a detective's job, too, isn't it?"

What would be waiting for us? Would it be pseudohumans, aliens, vampires, or some enemy we'd never seen before?

The genre of this incident was undeclared.

That was nothing new; the detectives had always tackled mysteries that were a crazy mix of things.

But in the end, I was sure the ultimate mystery would be the puzzle hidden in the world itself.



# **Afterword**

I'm writing this afterword at just about the same time of year as it is in the story. It sure is cold, huh? This is nigozyu. I don't meet people much, so I've forgotten how to greet them properly.

First, thank you very much for picking up Volume 8! As those of you who've read it know, this volume is Reloaded's story. Having a Magical Girl be one of the many Tuner positions was something I decided early on, but I wasn't sure how much of her story I'd be able to include in the actual series.

However, when Reloaded first appeared back in Volume 5, I asked Umibouzu to draw up a character design for her, and...when I saw that flawless visual, I thought, I have to write her properly, no matter what. Finally, in Volume 8, I was able to tell her story.

Light novels really are a peculiar medium; they're novels, but text alone isn't enough to make them workable. I could never claim that this series is mine alone. The illustrator, the designer, and lots of other people bring their skills and ideas to the table, and only then does the book come together. ...To me, it's the most fascinating thing in the world.

And of course, media franchises are formed by many creators working together. *The Detective Is Already Dead* has been lucky enough to have multiple manga series based on it, and it's had a TV anime as well. They've decided to make a second season of the anime, and I can really feel how everyone's efforts are expanding the story. There are many occasions where I've been influenced by the manga series and the anime and have imported background info or certain production effects back into the novels.

In that sense, it feels like a whole lot of people have helped this series grow,

and more than anything, the fact that it's gone on for this many volumes is thanks to the readers. ...I'm completely relying on others, aren't I? I'm sorry. As the recipient of all this support, the least I can do is work hard to write even more entertaining stories from here on out.

It's a dark world. Both here in Japan and internationally, the news is brimming over with sad events and negative things. Some days, even breathing feels hard. As I write light novels, I spend my days wondering what role entertainment can play in the midst of all that.

Unlike food, clothing, and shelter, entertainment isn't something people need to survive. However, since people still want it, there must be a reason it doesn't go away. My apologies for getting so serious on you. Let's talk about fun stuff on Twitter!

In closing: At last, the next volume will be his story.

# The Detective is Already Dead

Short story and reversible cover art



Sunny followed by cat, cranky in scattered areas

"Thanks for waiting, Kimihiko."

When Reloaded turned up at the meeting spot for our regular Pandemonium patrol, she was wearing a headband with cat ears.

"I had no idea you were into that, Rill."

"Just so you know, this isn't cosplay." Rill gazed at me steadily. "These cat ears are an enemy-detecting radar."

If that was true, the Inventor had been having way too much fun.

"Enough chitchat—let's begin the patrol."

"So even in cat ears, our usual master-servant dynamic is still in play?"

"What? Are you insinuating that Rill is the pet today?"

That wouldn't hurt once in a while, would it? Picking up a twig, I started waggling it like a cat-fisher toy.

Rill's eyes darted around in a feline way, and then— "Chomp!"

"Don't bite my arm!"

# The Detective is Already Dead Ob



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