





# A CERTAIN DETECTIVE'S MEMOIRS

XX/XX/20XX

The king of the vampires appeared to me for the first time in a long while today. As usual, he asked if I would become . When I told him, disgusted, "You're as into little:girls as ever," he laughed.

"To vampires, every human is an infant." It was predictable banter, an exchange we always have. How does he really feel when he says those words, though?

I know vampires aren't creatures of legend.

They are created two centuries ago by and they certainly don't have consolerable. Even so, this masked king laughs frequently, talks volubly, and deceives. He tricks people, the world, and even himself.

If I am Daydream, he is Nightmare: We two will never mingle. That means, if there's ever a day when we must oppose him, I can't be the one to do it. It will have to be, perhaps, who's my exact opposite, or...that boy, who resembles the king just a little.

# Det Ective Is Already Dead

9

nigozyu

Illustration by Umibouzu



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#### The Detective Is Already Dead, Vol. 9

nigozyu

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Umibouzu

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# A prologue from the future

"This is the Sacred Relic I found."

In the room at the top of the clock tower, Mia Whitlock, the Oracle, pointed to a reddish-brown ritual implement on the desk. Siesta, Nagisa, and I all took a good, hard look at it.

"It looks just like the one Noel gave us."

There was another item on the desk: the bronze-colored ritual implement Noel de Lupwise had brought to our agency the other day. Both items were pyramid-shaped; the only difference was their color.

"You saw where this was in a prophetic dream, Mia?"

"That's right. I went on a journey to find the 'Doomsday Clock' that appeared in my dreams, and this Sacred Relic was buried at its foot."

A prophetic dream. Ordinarily I would have dismissed something like that as a dumb idea, but if the Oracle had seen it, that made a big difference.

"Would you mind if I went over what we know so far?"

Olivia—the Oracle's personal assistant, who was currently dressed as a waitress—brought in black tea for four.

"In short, the object Master Kimizuka brought and the one Madam Mia found are both ritual implements known as 'Sacred Relics,' which may house memories the world has lost. Is that correct?" she asked.

"Yes, based on what we experienced three days ago," Nagisa told her.

"It certainly seems that way," Siesta confirmed.

We'd first realized that either the world had lost certain memories or that humanity's collective memory had been rewritten during the Ritual of Sacred Return three weeks ago.

Bruno Belmondo, the Information Broker, was the only person who'd realized

something was wrong with the world. He'd sounded the alarm, alerting those of us who were basking obliviously in apparent peace, and had left us a legacy: a note on which was written the words "the Akashic records," and this old, bronze-colored ritual implement.

When I touched that object, I'd recovered fragments of those lost memories, including the keywords "Singularity" and "the Akashic records." Siesta and Nagisa had also regained some memories, and the three of us had resolved to unlock the world's hidden mysteries.

Then, three days ago, whether it was coincidence or fate, Mia Whitlock had gotten in contact with us. Like us, she'd obtained an artifact that held some of the world's lost memories. Siesta, Nagisa, and I had departed for London, which was where we were now.

"I couldn't do anything about it on my own. I'm glad you and the others are here, Boss."

Mia gave a relieved sigh, and Siesta smiled. The Oracle couldn't foretell global crises the way she used to, but she still worried about the world.

"We didn't even know these things were called 'Sacred Relics,' though." I glanced at the two objects on the desk.

"I'm only calling them by the name that feels right to me. Still, Kimihiko, can you really see lost records of the past just by touching these?"

"Yeah. It feels a bit like it did when the origin text showed me possible futures."

"Is that because you're the Singularity?"

"Uh... Maybe? I don't really know."

Apparently, I was something known as the Singularity. The Singularity was the power to distort the world, or the turning point of history—something like that. The last Sacred Relic I'd touched had told me that I'd once been burdened with that sort of role.

Why had we forgotten that? And why did our memories still seem to add up, even though we'd lost some of them? It was as if there was someone forcing

everything to make sense.

"But you still remembered everything besides the term 'the Akashic records,' right, Kimihiko? The things that happened with Rill, for example," Natsunagi said.

"Yeah."

The brief but vivid and extraordinary days I'd spent with the Magical Girl. No matter what else I forgot, I'd never forget those.

"Come to think of it, Mia and Rill grew closer right around then."

"...What are you talking about? We're not close at all," Mia said, averting her gaze.

"Hmm? But when I invite you to play games with me online, sometimes you say you can't because you're on the phone with a friend. Isn't that the Magical Girl?" Siesta asked.

"Y-you're wrong! Rill's not my friend! I just said it that way because it was easier!" Mia hastily waved her hands in denial. She and Rill had gotten along poorly way back when, and apparently she was embarrassed to admit that their relationship had improved. What was she, a child?

"It makes me happy that my precious junior has a new friend, you know. Although I guess it does also make me feel a bit lonely."

"...Hmm? You're jealous over me, Boss? That's actually a little exciting."

"Madam Mia, your nose is bleeding." Olivia held out a tissue, and Mia hastily pressed it to her nose.

It was about time we got back on topic.

"Naturally, I'm curious about this new Sacred Relic, but what's this Doomsday Clock you saw, Mia?"

"Originally, it was a concept created to demonstrate how things like war and climate change affect the earth's lifespan. However, what I saw was nothing that tame."

Mia brought out some photos she'd taken at the site. The place was a sea of

vegetation, a jungle where civilization seemed to have died out completely. In the midst of it, an enormous clock monument loomed. This was the physical Doomsday Clock, and its hands were almost at midnight.

"I can tell it's signaling that the world is going to end."

"I see. This might be what the White Tengu was talking about." Natsunagi began quoting the leader of Pandemonium, a past enemy of ours. "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.' Mia's Doomsday Clock really is alerting us to a global crisis."

She was right. The White Tengu had been trying to deliver some sort of warning about mankind. It had attempted to convey its message through Natsunagi, since she could use word-soul, but Gluttony the Supernatural had killed it before it could finish.

"A Sacred Relic that was buried below the clock seems like it might give us some sort of hint, at least."



"It does. It looks almost the same as the one Noel left with us." Siesta picked up Mia's Sacred Relic, examining it. Just like the other one, it had an indentation in its base.

"They aren't made to fit together, though. They're both indented."

"True. But if you touch it, Kimi, something might happen anyway."

"What's this—proof that you trust me?"

"More like a memory of the unpleasant experiences I keep getting dragged into by that predisposition of yours."

"Hey, you're the one who dragged *me* into this," I retorted. I started to reach out for the new Sacred Relic, but hesitated. Last time I'd been caught by surprise, so I hadn't had the option of mentally preparing myself. This time, though, we were assuming something was going to happen. I needed to steel myself a bit.

"Still, even if something *does* happen again, we don't know what sort of memory you'll get back, or when it will be from, do we?" Nagisa asked.

Taking a moment to settle myself, I drank the tea Olivia had poured for me. "Right. I might end up remembering what you and I did that one day, Nagisa."

"What's that supposed to mean?! And from the way you're talking, you already remember it, Kimihiko! I'm the only one who forgot!"

"Well, we'd both been drinking. I wouldn't worry about it too much."

"You're totally lying! Siesta was the one you did stuff with after you'd been drinking."

"Nagisa, the next time you mention that, you're fired," Siesta shot back without turning a hair.

"Say, Olivia, have these three actually grown up?" asked Mia. "It feels like their relationship—or rather, their love triangle—has been deadlocked for ages."

"It's entirely possible that becoming equals has made it harder for them to move forward, and they'll simply repeat the same cycle for the rest of their lives."

After that exchange, I'd finally managed to steel myself for what I had to do. I faced the Sacred Relic Mia had found. "Okay. I'm touching it."

My fingertip connected with the cold surface of the reddish-brown object.

Something that felt like a painless electrical current ran through me. When people talk about your life flashing before your eyes as you die, I bet this is what they mean. Sound and light washed over me, as vivid as reality.

*"…"* 

Things I'd seen with my own eyes but hadn't been able to take to the future with me, and even things I hadn't been able to see on that last day. I journeyed to the past to reclaim those memories, then returned to the real world.

It felt like a few months, but it was actually only thirty seconds or so. The next thing I knew, the women were all gazing at me with concern. Mia held out a handkerchief, and I used it to wipe my sweaty face.

"What did you see?"

"What came right after the last incident. The Vampire's story, after the Magical Girl situation settled down."

"...I thought so. The world started to go strange right about then."

Mia and the two detectives' faces clouded slightly.

Olivia brought us more tea, and I took a swallow of mine. "I never knew that guy's whole story. I bet he wouldn't have wanted to tell me, either. But..."

Even so, some twist of fate had just landed me in the role of narrator.

I had a duty to relate everything, even the things we hadn't known. Even the things that maybe we were never supposed to know.

And so, with a silent apology to the man in question, I began. "I'd like you to listen to this. Some of it you already know, and some of it you don't. It's the story of a man who lived and fought day after day."

I was sure he'd be laughing this off in hell.



# **Chapter 1**

## **♦** Farewell, youth

If there were a graduation essay collection focused on the memories of our three years in high school, what would I write about?

It was early March. Out in the chilly wind on the roof of the school, a can of coffee in one hand, I thought.

"I only really attended school for two years or so."

I hadn't been in a club, and I hadn't really studied. I didn't remember participating in any cultural festivals or sports meets. When had the school trip even been? Two years ago, my travels around the world with the Ace Detective had ended and I'd gotten the ordinary days I'd craved, but I'd quickly realized they weren't what I really wanted.

The high school cultural festival? It could never have topped the excitement of that one festival in middle school, where Siesta and I had done a wedding cosplay and defeated the Miss Hanakos of the Toilet.

My daily classes? Once, on a certain job in a foreign country, Siesta and I had infiltrated an academy for the children of the elite. That had left a much deeper impression on me.

The school trip had been a four-day ski camp? Don't be ridiculous; I'd been around the world three times in three years with Siesta. The memories of this little trip were a drop in the bucket.

And so, in other words...

"That detective sure is a nuisance."

How dare she reach in from the past and overwrite my memories?

She'd made it hard for me to top the fun memories I already had.

"Man, it's not fair."

When I looked down over the edge of the roof, I could see students walking around carrying their diplomas in tubes.

Today was my school's graduation ceremony.

Just an hour ago, I'd been in the gym. I'd hummed a school song I felt no connection to, listened to an address from a principal I didn't really know, and semipermanently parted with classmates I'd barely interacted with. I wouldn't be going to the reunion, either; I was headed to Singapore.

"Hey, I spy somebody basking in nihilism," a teasing voice called from behind me.

I turned around. Natsunagi was standing there wearing her sailor uniform.

"What are you doing, Kimizuka? Waxing nostalgic about your school?"

"Of course not. I hardly even know its name."

"It's your high school. At least remember what it's called." Natsunagi gazed at me with a smile that seemed a bit strained. "You at least remember which university you got into, right?" she asked. I'd just received my letter of acceptance a few days earlier.

"I don't remember the exact name, but—"

"So you don't remember it..."

"—I do know I get to go there with you."

That remark made her blink a few times, then smile very slightly.

"And what about you? Is it okay for you to be here, Natsunagi? What happened to your friends?"

"We just took a ton of photos together. Besides, we've got that party tonight."

"A party?"

"Huh? Yes. The one all the seniors are going to. They were contacting everybody about it a little while back..." Natsunagi seemed to realize something, and she averted her eyes. "I mean, um... Maybe it's not the type of party where *everybody's* going..."

"... Even if they invited me, I wouldn't go. There's no problem."

Yeah, who cares about the name of this lousy school?!

"So why are you here? Did you come to feel sorry for me?"

"Yikes, you're acting all sulky now. No, that's not why." Natsunagi smiled wryly. "Want to walk around the school a bit?" She held out her right hand to me.

Leaving the roof, we went back inside and walked the familiar halls. Not that I had any lasting memories of this place—this wasn't where I'd spent my days.

Meanwhile, in contrast, Natsunagi smiled nostalgically. "Oh, the home ec room! Baking those cakes for our practical lesson was fun, wasn't it?"

"Practical lessons? I don't remember doing those once during senior year."

"The science room! I remember when I mixed all these different liquids together, and the chemistry teacher came sprinting over, looking really pale."

"Don't just casually bring up such scary memories! You should at least have that much common sense..."

"Do you think they'd let us into the gym, or is it too late for that? The sports meet and the band performance from the cultural festival are both such great memories."

"Did you somehow enjoy school life to the fullest without me realizing it? Are you actually starring in your own spin-off series?" I interjected, and Natsunagi laughed cheerfully.

That smile was definitely because of her memories here.

Natsunagi had lived in the midst of the extraordinary, but she'd also genuinely enjoyed her time at school. It had been a long-held wish of hers, and a certain Ace Detective had put her life on the line to grant that request.

"But I bet you've got a few memories here, too, Kimizuka." Natsunagi had stopped outside my classroom. "Since we're here, let's go in," she prompted, so we went in and I sat down at a random desk.

I hadn't done it on purpose. But without realizing it, I'd taken a seat at the very desk where I'd met Natsunagi that day.

"It all started here, didn't it?"

When Natsunagi came to stand in front of me, she overlapped with my memory of her previous self on that day after class.

"You're the ace detective?"

I'd been sleeping, and she'd abruptly roused me to ask that question. My story had stalled, but on that day, it'd started moving again.

"You even shoved your fingers into my mouth."

"L-like I said before, the heart made me do that. I don't normally go that far!"

"Oh yeah? I guess you're more the type who wants that kinda stuff done to you, huh?"

"Right, and you'd flip to this extreme sadist type out of nowhere and jump m—Look, don't make me be both halves of a comedy duo at the same time. I didn't mean that, all right? Promise."

Natsunagi puffed out her cheeks as if she was mad, then broke into a grin. It was contagious; I smiled, too.

"A lot's happened since then, hasn't it?"

Yeah. A lot. So much that simple words couldn't describe it all.

Yet here we were, side by side, still in the relationship we'd formed all those years ago.

"I'm glad you spoke to me back then." I'd been soaking in a lukewarm life, and her passion had opened my eyes. And so... "I look forward to our continued partnership."

This time, I was the one who said it to her.

"Same. After all, we're nowhere near getting our wish yet."

She was referring to our wish to wake Siesta up one day. Besides, there were still a ton of local cases that were waiting for a detective to solve them.

"I hear this area hasn't been safe lately. Things may get busy again."

"You mean that urban legend that's been going round?"

A witch was rumored to be haunting the area.

The "Parasol Witch," people called her. Apparently, if you met her, she'd show you a photo of a landscape and ask you how to get there. If you couldn't tell her, she'd sing a cursed song that would kill you.

It had only been a few weeks since we'd dealt with Pandemonium, and this sort of bizarre story was already circulating again. It probably wasn't a global crisis, but could it have been my trouble-magnet nature doing its thing?

Either way, one thing was certain: There were still lots of mysteries swirling around us...so even if we'd graduated from high school and become adults, the tale of the detective and her assistant would continue. On top of that, the Ace Detective was currently on a mission to shut down the vampire rebellion.

"Kimizuka?"

I realized Natsunagi was gazing at me curiously. What sort of expression had I been wearing? "It's nothing," I said, getting to my feet. "I thought I didn't have any memories of this place. That this place hadn't given me anything in particular...but I was wrong: You were here. This is the place where I met you. That, in and of itself, means that there was a point in my coming here."

Natsunagi's eyes widened, and then she smiled. "I feel the same way!"

"Well, should we head out?" I asked. There was a place I needed to visit today, no matter what.

"Hey, Kimizuka." Natsunagi caught the cuff of my sleeve gently from behind, pinching it between her fingers. "I'll take one," she whispered.

I turned halfway back.

Natsunagi was looking at the floor. She seemed to have trouble getting the words out, but as she spoke, she waggled the sleeve of my uniform. "If you've got an extra button, I'll take it off your hands."

She was talking to a guy who hadn't even been invited to the graduation party. First, second, third, whatever: Nobody wanted any of my buttons as a

memento. I pulled the second button off my uniform and handed it to Natsunagi, who took it shyly.

"Still, that takes me back."

"Huh? What does?"

"I was on a job with Siesta once where we infiltrated an academy. When we left, I gave her my second button, just like this."

Weirdly, for close to an hour after that, Natsunagi wouldn't speak to me at all.

#### **◆** The scales of life

An hour later, still in our school uniforms, Natsunagi and I were visiting a certain hospital.

"Congratulations on your high school graduation."

In a room at the very back of the third floor, Noches met us with a bouquet in each hand.

"We brought some of those, too."

We exchanged flowers, and Noches switched out the contents of the vase in the hospital room. The flowers we'd brought were for the patient.

"What sort of dreams did you have today, Siesta?" I asked the white-haired detective sleeping in the bed. Of course, she didn't respond. Regardless, I talked to her peaceful sleeping form practically every day.

"I bet it was a dream about spanking your butt, Kimizuka," Natsunagi joked, coming up to stand by Siesta's pillow.

"Nah, Siesta and I were never into spanking. We were more into... Uh, never mind."

"What the heck did you two get up to?"

"I'm kidding. It was a joke. Don't actually recoil, Natsunagi."

"I have visual recordings of Mistress Siesta and Kimihiko disporting themselves. Would you like to view them?"

"Don't just make up random stuff, Noches!"

After we'd had that ridiculous conversation in front of the sleeping Siesta, Natsunagi spoke to her directly. "We graduated from high school today." Seating herself in a chair by the head of the bed, she squeezed Siesta's hand under the covers. "You gave me those ordinary, happy days as a teenager. Thank you."

Once, when she'd still been wearing Alicia's form in London, Natsunagi had told us she wanted to go to school, and the detective had made it happen.

"By the way, Noches, where is he?" she then asked the white-haired maid. The person she was asking about was the second reason for our visit today.

"Do you mean my creator? He should be here any—"

Before Noches could finish her sentence, the door behind her opened.

"Thanks for waiting." A man walked in, pushing his round glasses up with a fingertip, white lab coat flaring out behind him.

The Inventor, Stephen Bluefield.

He was the scientist who'd created Noches, and Siesta's current attending physician.

"You're three minutes late," I told him, stepping aside to give the doctor room. Stephen checked Siesta's vitals, then made some notes in her electronic chart. "You really helped us out the other day, though. I had no idea you could fight."

A little over a month ago, Stephen had protected Natsunagi and me by fighting Greed, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. This was the first time we'd seen him since.

"That was merely part of a medical exam. The Inventor is a support position; the ones who truly fight the enemy are the Magical Girl, the Assassin, and the Ace Detective." As Stephen spoke, his eyes were on Siesta, who was breathing peacefully.

"So? Why'd you ask us to come?"

Unusually, Stephen had been the one to summon us today. He'd even

specified the time down to the minute... All this, when he vanished whenever we were looking for him. The doctor seemed to do whatever suited him in the moment.

"I thought I'd answer your questions. You have concerns about my treatment methods for the Daydream, don't you?"

I hadn't been expecting that, and it delayed my response for a second.

"That is what my colleague told me."

"...Drachma, huh?"

A little while ago, we'd happened to meet that back-alley doctor, and I'd asked him about ways to save Siesta. It was true that, in the process, I'd developed doubts about Stephen's treatment methods.

"You're not a normal doctor. You can use superior science to save people...

Drachma told us that the Inventor can make artificial organs that are genetically perfect copies. Wouldn't it be possible to save Siesta by transplanting one of those into her body?"

If we weren't able to remove the seed that had lodged itself in Siesta's heart, then couldn't we just get her a new heart, one her body wouldn't reject?

"Yes. It would take time, but it is possible to create a heart. If we used that, we could save her life. In fact, after observing her for more than three months, I once considered doing just that."

"Then-!"

"The test subject I created stopped me." Stephen pointed at Noches, who hung her head.

"Noches? Why ...?"

"Because even if the surgery were successful, Mistress Siesta wouldn't be the person you and Nagisa knew when she woke up." Noches's expression was rigid.

Just as I was about to ask what that was supposed to mean, Natsunagi let out a murmured "I see," as if something had occurred to her. "Even now, Siesta's always there, isn't she?" Her eyes were fixed on the left side of Siesta's chest.

"Her consciousness probably still lives on inside her heart. Her memories, her will—she's entrusted everything to it."

"...I see. Siesta did say her heart was special, way back when."

In fact, she'd used the power of Seed's seed to lock her consciousness inside her heart, and to take control of another body that heart was transplanted into. However, that also meant Siesta's heart and consciousness were directly linked. In other words...

"Transplanting her heart won't save Mistress Siesta's mind," Noches murmured, echoing the conclusion I'd also come to. "I explained as much to my creator two months ago."

"B-but you could have told us then...," I started to say—then it hit me. *Two months ago*. That was when Noches had scolded me, right here in this very hospital room. I'd been too preoccupied with how to handle the Magical Girl, Pandemonium, the Vampire, and the Phantom Thief, and she'd gently chided me, saying that if I tried to hold everything at once, something precious might slip through my fingers someday.

"I'm sorry. I ended up putting everything on you, huh?"

Noches shook her head, smiling faintly. "No."

"That is how things stand. As such, let me ask you: Will you let me transplant the Daydream's heart?" Stephen's calm, levelheaded gaze was fixed on us. "When she wakes up after the surgery, she may have lost her memories. Her personality and disposition will change drastically, and the person you knew will no longer exist."

"That's not..."

"But she will live."

I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

"What is it that you want to recover? The Ace Detective's life, or your memories with her? I am a doctor, and as such, I will prioritize saving her life. I won't tell you to make your choice immediately. However, I recommend you reconsider your answer with the understanding that time is limited. What

exactly are you trying to save?"

With that, Stephen turned his back on us.

My wish to save Siesta had seemed so normal that I'd taken it for granted.

He'd just shaken its foundations.

We were going to have to decide what Siesta's life would be like.

# ◆ Urban legends don't end

After leaving the hospital, Natsunagi and I headed for the station.

It was twilight, and we walked along slowly, side by side, feeling the chill in the air.

"What did you think about that, Kimizuka?" Natsunagi asked suddenly. "If Stephen's right, we may be able to save her life. But..."

"But when Siesta wakes up, she may not be the person we know."

She'd have no memories of the thoughts she'd had or the emotions she'd felt—nothing. When she revived, she'd probably even have lost the code name "Siesta," and who would she be then? Who could call that "coming back to life"?

"I'm sorry," Natsunagi apologized quickly. "It's a question I can't answer, so I went and asked you instead."

Right: There was no easy answer here. That said, we wouldn't be allowed to leave things like this, either. At some point in the future, we'd have to make a decision.

"Listen, Kimizuka, what do you want to study at university?"

"Wow, that came out of nowhere."

Natsunagi had suddenly changed the subject. I gave it some thought, but I didn't have a ready answer for that one, either. "All I did was study for the entrance exam, so I don't have much of a concept of what *real* learning is like."

"That's an incredibly calm, cutting self-evaluation... Universities are more about research than education, all right?"

"Yeah, I know that. You want to study psychology, don't you?"

I thought I remembered Natsunagi telling me that before. She had probably decided what she wanted to do, then chosen a university accordingly.

"Yeah. I want to study the human mind more systematically, instead of just relying on emotional arguments," Natsunagi said, walking a step ahead of me. "Then I'll try observing my own heart logically, from all sorts of angles, since I don't really understand it. That sounds kind of fun, don't you think?"

...So that was her plan, huh? Natsunagi must have been thinking about our current situation when she'd said that.

The white-haired detective I knew so well had once used banter and humming to banish her worries. The current detective was the same way. Natsunagi's back looked reliable, but it didn't feel okay to just tag along behind her, so I sped up until I was by her side.

"-Miss Detective?"

Just then, a clear, musical voice called out from behind us.

If angels existed, they might have had voices like this—that was how beautiful and shocking it was. I couldn't move. It wasn't fear that froze me in place. It was awe.

"I said, 'Miss Detective.' You can hear me, can't you?"

The tone of the voice changed a bit, taking on a graceful lilt.

Natsunagi and I turned around.

A woman was standing there.

She wore white high heels and a white dress, with lithe limbs as pale as snow. There was one other color that drew our eyes, though: black, the color of the parasol in her hands.

"May I ask a question?" Holding the parasol so that it hid most of her face, the woman showed us a photo. "Are you familiar with the location in this photograph?"

I grabbed Natsunagi's hand and booked it. Natsunagi didn't even seem

surprised; she must have been thinking the same thing.

"Natsunagi, that's—"

"...The Parasol Witch."

It was the urban legend we'd been talking about at school. The woman who would show you a photo of a landscape, and if you couldn't tell her where it was, she'd curse you to death. I hadn't taken the story seriously, of course. But before I knew it, my legs had bailed and taken the rest of me with them.

"Did you get a look at the photo?" I asked Natsunagi as we ran.

"Just a glimpse. I don't think it was a photo of a place, though; it looked more like a photo of a watercolor painting."

"Yeah, that's what it looked like to me, too. Either way, you didn't recognize the landscape, did you?"

Natsunagi shook her head. That meant we couldn't answer the witch's question, either.

"So she kills people with a cursed song...?"

Was that really true, though? How? Still, beings that defied common sense really did exist—like all of Pandemonium, for example. Whether or not it was true, we needed to buy time to calm down and think this through...

"Why do you run from me?"

I thought my heart might stop. She'd gotten ahead of us somehow; when we turned the corner, the witch was right there.

Her question sounded more like an assertion that she wasn't about to let us get away, and we froze up again.

"...What are you?"

Was she human, a witch, a monster, an alien...or something else?

Just then, a car pulled up right next to us. The rear door burst open, and a familiar voice said, "Kimizuka! Nagisa! Get in, please!"

"Yui?!" Natsunagi said, startled. Saikawa was in the back seat, dressed in casual clothes.

There was no time to hesitate. Natsunagi and I scrambled into the car, which promptly sped off. The Saikawa family's chauffeur was at the wheel.

"Thanks, you saved our butts. What are you doing here, Saikawa?"

"I just stopped by the hospital. I thought I'd visit Siesta, and hoped I might get to see you two as well. Congratulations on your graduation."

She'd come all the way here just to tell us that? Saikawa enjoyed pestering me for fun, but deep down, she really was a devoted junior.

"By the way, Kimizuka, you seem to be missing the second button of your uniform."

"You noticed that, huh? Well, even I've got a fan or two, you know."

"I was only surprised that such an old-fashioned custom still existed. The girl in question must have been an exceptionally quaint, starry-eyed character."

"Okay, Saikawa. Let's not talk about this anymore."

In the seat next to me, Natsunagi's expression had gone stiff, and she was staring at her lap.

"By the way, Kimizuka, who on earth was that back there? It seemed like a bit of an emergency, so I called out to you on impulse, but..."

"We don't actually know, either. We think she's an urban legend that's been going around this area: the Parasol Witch—"

Just then, the car braked suddenly, and we all pitched forward. I looked out the windshield, wondering what was going on, but no one was there. Instead, the door to the passenger seat opened.

"The 'Parasol Witch.' A rather unpleasant name, don't you think? I'm not fond of it myself," the woman in the white dress said as she got into the car. She sounded as if she were talking about someone else. She'd replaced her parasol with a large hat, but I still couldn't see her face. There obviously wasn't any point in trying to run.

"What do you want?" I asked, speaking for all of us.

The witch gave a small sigh. "I already told you. I wanted to know if you

recognized the landscape in that photograph, but you just ran off. How mean," she said petulantly.

I could see her lips in the rearview mirror. She seemed to be around thirty.

"Or is that it? The detective can't listen to what the witch has to say?" She was talking to Natsunagi now. "Are you the type to judge a person based on their title?"

"Of course not!" Natsunagi protested on reflex. Then she asked, "Do you have business with me? ... With the detective?"

She was asking if the woman needed her, specifically. Whether no one else would do.

It was true that the witch had singled out Natsunagi, calling her "Miss Detective."

"Yes. I came to meet you not as a witch, but as a client." In the rearview mirror, the woman tilted up the brim of her hat and smiled. "Say, Miss Detective. Would you find my lost hometown for me?"

## ◆ The witch comes and sings

Thirty minutes later...

"What a lovely aroma. Is it Kilimanjaro?"

The Parasol Witch raised the cup to her nose, savoring the fragrance of the coffee, then gently took a sip.

The way she carried herself was sheer elegance, not to be overshadowed even by the dining room of the magnificent Saikawa residence. Natsunagi, Saikawa, and I all watched her in our periphery.

"You'll make me feel self-conscious, gazing at me like that. Why don't you relax a little?" The woman giggled, then set her cup back on its saucer. "Granted, it is odd for the guest to be the one to say that."

We'd ended up going to Saikawa's place to get the details on the witch's request to find her "lost hometown."

The witch had put her parasol away and removed her hat, so we were finally

able to see her face. Her features were as delicate as those of an exquisitely modeled doll, while her skin was as fair as Siesta's. Her eyes were red, like Natsunagi's.

"Kimizuka, you're staring," Natsunagi said, elbowing me in the side.

"Hey, observation is important. Especially for the detective and her assistant."

"A likely story. You've got a soft spot for beautiful women, Kimizuka."

Would she forgive me if I said I'd only been looking because the woman reminded me of her?

"Wait just a moment! You've got a thing for younger women, Kimizuka, so you shouldn't betray the neighborhood's expectations like that! Have pride in your identity as a fancier of underage girls!"

"You make me sound like a pedo, Saikawa!"

"This is you we're talking about here, Kimizuka. No doubt you'll have a new, younger heroine two years from now."

"You're completely out to get me, aren't you?"

Getting back on topic... I sipped my coffee, regaining my composure, and turned to face the witch.

"So, Parasol Witch, you're—"

"Marie," the woman interrupted. "I introduced myself on the way here, did I not?"

"...Excuse me. Marie, who are you?"

It was a vague question, and the witch—uh, "Marie"—smiled faintly. "Explaining my request may be the fastest way to answer that." She held out a photo. It was the one we'd caught a glimpse of when we'd met her on the street.

"So it is a painting of a landscape?"

The watercolor picture showed a view of a small, distant village. It seemed like a rural town, with a dense cluster of old, white buildings.

"I wonder what country that village is in..." I'd seen quite a bit of the world,

but this scenery didn't ring any bells for me. "Marie, what is this place?"

She'd said she wanted us to find her lost hometown. Was that the place the picture she was showing us depicted?

"Ideally, I would have been able to explain that to you, but..."

...But? That must have meant...

"I honestly have no idea where it is!" Marie gave a carefree smile that showed her white teeth. It was an abrupt change from the mysterious atmosphere she'd been cultivating up until now.

"I'm losing track of what sort of character you're supposed to be." I smiled wryly and exchanged a look with Saikawa, who was probably thinking the same thing.



However, there was one person here who'd picked up on what the woman meant.

"Don't tell me... You have amnesia?" Natsunagi asked.

Still wearing that same lighthearted smile, Marie nodded. "Indeed. More than a decade ago, I was traveling overseas by myself and had a run-in with a thug, which seemingly cost me my memories. My wallet, phone, and passport were all stolen, and I lost track of my identity. The one thing I remembered was my name."

"Then you still have no memories of your life from before the incident?"

"That's right. My luck couldn't get much worse, could it?" Marie's situation was grave, but she spoke about it with surprising nonchalance, crossing her legs boldly in her slit skirt. That mystical atmosphere from before seemed to have been purely superficial; this was her actual personality. "I've lived alone all this time, with no idea who I am, dreaming of the day when I'd be reunited with my family, or a lover, or friends."

"And that's why you came to see us? To find your lost hometown?"

"Yes. I'd heard there was a detective of outstanding brilliance in Japan. However, before I found you, I went around asking people in the area, which seems to have made me oddly famous," she said, poking fun at the fact that she'd become a bit of an urban legend.

Until just the other day, this whole area had been possessed by an enemy—or a phenomenon—called Pandemonium. The Magical Girl had told me that those evil spirits had tried to make their presence known in an attempt to put down roots here.

The influence of Pandemonium might have been more persistent than we'd thought. Had it made this an area where urban legends spread particularly fast? That would explain the peculiar way the "Parasol Witch" rumor had spread, and it might at least wrap up that story neatly.

"But Marie, how did you find Natsunagi?"

Nagisa Natsunagi might have been famous as a detective, but only in the

underworld. Could Marie know about the Tuners?

"I have been traveling, trying various methods and talking with all sorts of people in order to uncover my roots. In the process, I've learned a little about the underbelly of this world, which is where I heard about your group. It really was just a rumor, though," she added. Apparently she hadn't contacted us with ulterior motives or ill intentions. In any case, doubting her wouldn't move the story along.

"By the way, Marie. Where did you get this picture—or rather, this photo?" Natsunagi asked.

"It must've been around three years ago now. In the course of my travels, I saw that painting at a museum, and it felt as if a jolt of electricity had gone through me. 'Oh,' I thought, 'that's it. That's my hometown. I'm sure of it.' So I got permission to take this photo."

"Then if you find the painter and ask them...," Natsunagi started to say, but Marie shook her head.

"It wasn't painted by anyone famous. It was hanging in what you'd call a 'civic art gallery.' Strangely, even the staff didn't know who had painted it, or when, or how it had come to be hanging there at all."

That sounded like a new urban legend: a mysterious painting, artist unknown. Yet Marie had definitely felt the presence of her lost hometown in it.

"As for other clues regarding my home—there's a song."

At that, Marie began to sing. Her voice was a clear soprano, and she sang a cheerful folk melody. It couldn't possibly have been the cursed song from the urban legend. We listened, entranced, for about half a minute.

"That's how it goes. I only remember part of it, though."

"Amazing! You have such a lovely voice!" Saikawa clapped enthusiastically. "How can you sing like that?! Where did you learn?! That voice— How...? No, you must have been born with it. Ooooh, I'm so jealous!"

"Heh-heh! Thank you. As a matter of fact, I've been working as a wandering singer in my travels around the world."

"Oh, that explains it! I wish you'd coach me!" Saikawa was already a universally popular idol, but she was always eager to learn.

"So, Marie, what was that song?"

"I have the vague feeling I sang it as a child. It's less a memory than a feeling my body and lips remember."

I see. That said, it wasn't a folk song I'd ever heard. I didn't even recognize the language it was in. As things stood, it probably wouldn't help us find her hometown—but...

"All right. We'll take the case," Natsunagi said, accepting the photo.

We already had things we had to do: We needed to wake Siesta up safely, as well as carry out the Ace Detective's mission to shut down the vampire rebellion.

Natsunagi had just taken on a request that had nothing to do with either of those things. Why had she done that?

"I used to be the same as you."

Natsunagi had once chased memories that were invisible to her eyes. Without realizing what she was doing, she'd looked for the person her heart had wanted to find. Because of that, she probably saw herself in Marie, who was trying to rediscover her own identity.

Marie didn't know about Natsunagi's circumstances, and she seemed a little mystified. Regardless, she said, "Thank you," and held out her hand to shake on it. Then she passed Natsunagi a very thick envelope. "This is a retainer. I'll pay you a proper reward when you succeed."

"Kimizuka. I may never actually have to find a job."

"Not all detective work pays this well, you know."

Someday, though... Maybe we really would start up an agency, and I'd get to work there as a detective's assistant. That future didn't sound half bad.

#### **◆ The star arrives late**

Once we'd accepted the Parasol Witch's—Marie's—request, we exchanged

contact information with her, then went our separate ways for the evening.

Natsunagi was headed for the party most of the graduates would apparently be attending, so I thought I'd stay at Saikawa's mansion and have a fun sleepover or something. However, Saikawa gave me a perfectly blank "Huh?" look in response to that idea, so I meekly headed home through the dark streets by myself.

"Maybe I'll get Rill to pay attention to me." Looking up at the beautiful starry sky had reminded me of her, so I got out my phone and sent her a text.

Reloaded, the Magical Girl.

Two months ago, Rill had taken a lot of damage in her fight against Gluttony, and she'd been undergoing treatment in Japan ever since. As we'd assumed, she was going to be using a wheelchair from here on out. Aside from that, though, her wounds had almost healed up, and she was scheduled to go back to her home country soon.

I texted her a brief report on recent events, including the Parasol Witch's Pandemonium-fueled urban legend, and the fact that we'd agreed to take her case.

Just then, I sensed a presence. Someone was watching me, staying around thirty meters or so behind me. If it had been someone who'd found themselves feeling sorry for the poor social outcast and come to hang out, I'd have been totally on board, but I really doubted that was the case. Not that I had a friend like that anyway.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I know what this is."

I hadn't spent eighteen years dealing with my trouble-magnet predisposition with nothing to show for it. Turning around, I called out to the shape in the shadows. "Did you need me for something, Man in Black?"

He had a dark suit and sunglasses. There was a frightening lack of individuality about him, and he watched me with a face as expressionless as a robot's. After a few seconds, he turned and started walking away; I was probably supposed to follow him. Before long, we reached a car that was parked on the shoulder of the road, and he motioned for me to get in.

We didn't speak during the drive. The Man in Black steered the shiny black car through the dark streets at full speed, while I used that free time to think. This guy had clearly been following me personally, after I'd split up with Nagisa Natsunagi, the Ace Detective. But why?

"I guess I'll just have to ask them directly."

...Whoever it was behind this Man in Black.

An hour later, the car came to a stop as we reached our destination. We were in front of a tall building. At the direction of the Man in Black, we climbed up and up until we reached the roof, which turned out to have a heliport on it. A helicopter was already sitting there, as if it had been waiting for me.

A different Man in Black sat in the pilot's seat. Sighing, I climbed in. I'd at least wanted the day of my high school graduation to end peacefully. Ignoring my grumbling, the helicopter's rotor began to spin, lifting us into the sky.

About five minutes after takeoff, I finally found out who'd summoned me.

"What's the matter, human? You're very docile today."

A voice spoke from the empty seat opposite me. The next moment, a man appeared, as if he had crawled out of the darkness. He wore a pure white suit and a tie as red as blood. Narrowing his golden eyes, he smiled, mocking me. "Entertain me more. Or, what, are you afraid of the sky? Afraid of demons?"

The Vampire, Scarlet.

We'd last met two months ago at the Diet Building, the night that was shattered by the fight with Gluttony and the horde of undead.

"Tuners do the craziest stuff... How much does it cost to charter a helicopter?"

"Ha! Every time you open your mouths, you paupers speak of money. At least enjoy the dazzling view of the night sky from the aircraft."

"Hey, that's not very nice. I could get Saikawa to take me for a ride in a helicopter if I groveled and begged."

"That's a name that takes me back. Is the girl doing well?"

Scarlet and Saikawa had met before. When had it been—last summer? On the roof of a TV studio, Scarlet had asked Saikawa if she wanted him to resurrect her parents, and she'd refused. What had he thought of her back then?

"That aside, human. You'd already realized that I was the one who summoned you, hadn't you?"

"I had a feeling. I was really hoping it'd be some gorgeous woman I'd never met, though." There was no point in looking at beautiful city lights from a helicopter with another dude. "But Scarlet, you're right that we need to have a good, long talk."

Frankly, dealing with Gluttony had been the top priority last time, so my discussion with Scarlet had ended prematurely. If he'd contacted me today, did that mean we'd get to continue our conversation from that night?

Scarlet didn't answer. Instead, he abruptly opened the helicopter's hatch, letting in a blast of wind.

"—What are you trying to pull?" Shielding my face from the wind with my arm, I watched to see what he'd do.

The vampire bit his left thumb, then thrust that hand out of the hatch. Blood flowed from the wound and, caught by the wind, was scattered over the city.

"Ha! Ha-ha! It's a feast of blood. Rejoice, mankind."

"... I bet all of today's weather reports ended up being wrong."

The vampire's blood rain fell toward the lights of the town. Smiling, Scarlet let it flow for thirty seconds or so, then closed the hatch and returned to his seat.

"Why would you do that? Do you have some sort of grudge against humans?"

"A grudge? What a simplistic idea." Haughtily resting his chin on his hand, Scarlet gave me a mocking smile. "On the contrary, I'm protecting them. By letting my blood fall from the sky, I'm showing them that I am here."

"Showing who that you're here?"

"Let's see. If I were to put it simply, so that even a foolish human could

understand it..."

"Do you always have to be an ass?"

"Enemy vampires, shall we say. At present, they would harm mankind as well."

"...So you vampires are fighting each other?"

Was Scarlet implying that these enemy vampires were the ones who were threatening to bring about the vampire rebellion? Was he trying to stop them?

"But before, you made and commanded a whole horde of undead yourself. You said you were doing it to help people, but it caused plenty of chaos."

"Ha! You've developed quite a mouth, human." Scarlet crossed his legs, and a small smile formed on his face. "I needed to grasp the extent to which I could control my own abilities, in preparation for what is to come. If you wish to condemn that as human experimentation, do as you please."

I had no response for that. I didn't have the power to question a Tuner's idea of justice.

"Is that why you summoned me today? To talk about that? Do you want us to help you avert the vampire rebellion? In that case, Natsunagi's the one who'll need to—"

"No, quite the opposite," Scarlet interrupted firmly. "Don't meddle in my job."

"...What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Putting a stop to the vampire rebellion is my task. I won't let the detective interfere."

"Why are you telling me this when Natsunagi's not around?"

"You are most likely to be able to persuade that woman. She's a difficult one to manage," Scarlet said with a snort. Had he picked up on something about Natsunagi during the incident at the Diet Building?

"But the Federation Government said preventing the vampire rebellion was the Ace Detective's mission."

"Perish the thought. Do you genuinely think they meant that?"

His question reminded me of the conversation I'd had with Ice Doll two months ago.

Ice Doll had said Natsunagi didn't have enough power to be a Tuner, and that she'd only been given the position of Ace Detective because she was able to control me, the Singularity.

"...So they gave her that mission in name only?"

They'd known Nagisa Natsunagi wouldn't be able to shut down the vampire rebellion.

"It's not as if I think she's completely useless. Unlike those at the top," Scarlet said, causing me to look up at him. "However, as the Vampire, this mission is one I should undertake. Conversely, no doubt there is a mission that only the Ace Detective can carry out. Am I wrong?"

"The detective's...mission. Protecting the interests of her clients."

Extending a helping hand to her neighbors and granting their wishes. Maybe Scarlet was trying to say the detective's job should involve helping the people around her.

"You don't appear convinced." It felt as if he'd read my mind, and a chill ran through me. "No matter." At some point, Scarlet had acquired a wine glass, and he swirled its contents around. "You've been warned. The rest is up to you."

"That's one nasty threat."

What would happen if we ignored his warning? What became of people who defied the vampire king?

At that moment, even I didn't have the courage to come right out and ask him.

# **◆** An extraordinary graduation trip

A week after that, I was on a plane. In first class, actually—a privilege I barely ever got. Just before takeoff, having gotten permission from a *familiar flight* attendant, I called Natsunagi. "So, Natsunagi, I'm headed over to Scandinavia

for a bit."

It was spring vacation, and I told her I was taking advantage of the time before our university classes started to travel. Of course, this wasn't for fun, but for a certain job.

"Why are you leaving me behind like that's normal?"

The voice coming through the phone sounded resentful. I'd only decided to take this trip a few days earlier, and I hadn't had time to talk it over with her before now.

"You're in India right now yourself, remember? On some 'graduation trip' with your friends."

That's right: Natsunagi was overseas now as well. It sounded like her trip had been in the works for quite a while... I was genuinely jealous of the fact that she had friends she could go on graduation trips with.

"Kimizuka, if you were going by yourself, it wouldn't have bothered me, but..."

"But what?"

"That girl's right next to you, isn't she?"

Hearing that, the girl in question leaned over toward me and joined the conversation. "Hello. Just leave your ex-boyfriend to Rill."

Reloaded sounded as if she was teasing Natsunagi. Her hair was done up in space buns, and she was wearing regular street clothes.

"—How did this even happen...?"

"Kimizuka insisted on coming along when Rill went back home, so what choice did she have?"

Right now, we were headed back to Rill's hometown in northern Europe. I didn't recall pitching a fit and demanding to escort her home, but it was true that it was just the two of us on this trip. Besides, as her former familiar, maybe acting as my master's legs was a mission to be proud of.

"Going back home with Rill isn't the only reason for this trip anyway. I might find Marie's hometown."

As part of the report I'd made to Rill last week, I'd told her a little about our latest request. Incredibly, Rill told me she'd seen a village similar to the one in the picture a long time ago. That village wasn't too far from her hometown, so part of the reason I was going with her was so I could take a look at it.

"Let's meet up in a few days when we're both back." We were just about to take off, so I said good-bye to Natsunagi.

"Mm, okay. It looks like I'll make some progress on that one matter as well; I'll fill you in on it later."

"Sure, thanks."

Natsunagi wasn't just having fun overseas, either. She was also taking on an important mission there. Detectives and their assistants needed to split up the work sometimes.

"I'm sorry for complaining. Thanks for taking care of things on that end."

"Yeah. I know you've got stuff that needs doing, but don't forget to enjoy the graduation trip."

Even Siesta had wanted Natsunagi to enjoy high school right up until the end.

"... Thanks!" Natsunagi told me she'd bring back souvenirs, then hung up.

It sounded as if my place was going to acquire some more weird knickknacks from around the world.

"Aha." Rill struck a "thinking" pose once I ended the call. "She was jealous at first, but in the end, that girl demonstrated how understanding she is. She really is picking up the sense of moderation required of a principal wife."

"Wouldn't it be better if I hadn't heard that analysis?"

We both smiled faintly at one another, then sank into silence. It wasn't actively uncomfortable, but I didn't know what to talk about. Whatever the two of us were, it wasn't friends.

Two months ago, when Rill defeated Gluttony, it had left her unable to walk. Between then and now, we'd met at the hospital a few times to talk about her condition and current affairs, but it had been a while since we'd met in a personal capacity like this.

"Say something." Unable to endure the silence any longer, Rill tugged lightly at my sleeve. "You're a pet. That means you should be able to 'talk' when I ask you to, right?"

"Even if I'm a pet, I thought I was a dog, not a parakeet."

"You did it. Good job." Rill smiled and patted my head. That had been a fiendishly clever trap. Since I'd fallen for it, I had no choice: I let her pet me a little while longer.

"It's thanks to you, you know," Rill said, averting her gaze slightly. "Rill thought she wanted to start over in a number of ways. She doesn't know what she'll do with the rest of her life, or what her goals should be. She's going back home to give those questions some good, solid thought, and you are the one who gave her the push she needed."

Rill had left home years ago to become a track-and-field athlete, and she said she hadn't contacted her family once since becoming a Tuner. I was the one who'd suggested taking this trip home. And as the one who'd brought it up, it was only natural that I would decide to accompany her.

"I think we're probably all just getting started."

Rill removed her hand from my head, and we gazed at each other, smiling a little.

Before I knew it, the plane was in the air, and our journey through the sky had begun.

"—Huh? What are you making me watch?" said a voice from out of nowhere. As I was looking around, I heard it again, right in front of me. "Over here." The monitor on the back of the seat displayed the blue-haired Oracle, Mia Whitlock.

"Why are you here, Mia?"

"Olivia just sent me a URL, and when I clicked on it, it brought me here."

So this was Olivia's doing, huh? We'd spoken a little right after we'd boarded. Who'd have guessed she'd been plotting something like this...?

"Perfect timing, though. I had something I wanted to tell you."

"Confessing your love?"

"Don't be dumb."

She'd developed quite the mouth.

Mia cleared her throat with a cute little cough, then said:

"Beware the undead mummies."

Mia was in her Oracle uniform, and her face was deadly serious. Apparently, this was an official prophecy.

"It's a future I just saw. Undead mummies are going to be dragged into it."

"So it's mummies this time, huh? It's been nothing but horror movie tropes since Pandemonium."

"No. They may all be monsters, but this prophecy is connected to the vampire rebellion, not Pandemonium. The image of them came to me in fragments."

...So it had to do with that instead? True, the words "undead mummy" could easily be associated with vampires.

"I only have a vague prophecy this time. Just be careful."

"All right. I'll relay it to Natsunagi later."

We nodded to each other through the screen. Then Mia started darting glances at the seat next to me. She was looking at Reloaded. Come to think of it, those two got along like cats and dogs, didn't they?

"Mia Whitlock." Rill made the first move; she looked straight at the screen. "Do you remember our fight at last year's Federal Council? At the time, Rill rejected your opinion outright, but now that she thinks about it, she was wrong."

The sight of Rill apologizing seemed to startle Mia; her eyes went wide.

"When you encounter a crisis or come up against a problem, it's okay to rely on other people. Everyone has the right to reach out and ask for help. That's something Rill learned just recently," Rill said, her expression softening. It had happened at the Federal Council in New York last summer: Mia and Siesta had cooperated to combat a global crisis, and Rill had been fiercely against it. She'd been influenced by her past and her own circumstances, but she'd changed her mind since then.

"O-oh. I mean, I didn't particularly..." Mia was bewildered by this unexpected development, and her gaze wandered. "...I understand, though. Thank you for telling me," she finally murmured, a little bashfully.

A rather awkward silence fell again, and Mia coughed. "S-still, I never thought you'd make such a modest apology. Well, I guess as Tuners go, I do have seniority here. I'll continue setting a good example for you, as your senior."

Mia had pushed her chair back, but now she brought it forward again, and for some reason—seriously, why?—she puffed her chest out with pride. She'd tensed up, then relaxed again, and the conversation had taken so many unexpected turns that Mia had ended up getting carried away. The experience of having a meek junior for the first time in her life might have made her a little giddy.

"Huh? Um, Rill wasn't apologizing."

As Mia sat there looking satisfied, Rill arched an eyebrow at her.

"Huh? But you just said you were wrong..."

"All Rill did was admit that summarily rejecting your idea was a mistake. She never said her way of thinking was wrong. You were right, and so was Rill. That's all."

"Wha—! Y-you could've just genuinely apologized, you know."

"Huh? What are you muttering about? Rill can't hear you."

"Olivia! How do I turn this thing off?!"

On the other side of the screen, Mia was panicking. "Olivia's here with us," I told her, but she didn't hear me. Why did this sort of thing always happen whenever she got anxious? She did a lot of online gaming, so there was no way she was bad with technology.

"You haven't changed a bit." I smiled wryly, then I heard a little burst of

laughter from the seat next to me.

Mia hadn't noticed, but Rill definitely sounded like she was enjoying herself.

"What a weird girl."

Rill had lost a close friend—or rather, her one and only rival. Would she make another friend she could open up to someday? Could this cowardly, pessimistic, stubborn, and impossible-to-abandon Oracle be that person? Or was that a future that could never happen?

## ◆ Interlude of a pet and his owner

After a ten-hour flight, we reached our inbound airport. There hadn't been any direct flights to Rill's country, so this was just a layover; we'd have to switch planes here.

On top of that, due to the time of our arrival, we had to spend the night in a hotel near the airport. Considering Rill's condition, though, taking a break here was probably a good idea anyway.

"This turned into an unexpectedly luxurious trip," I said. We'd just checked in, and I was taking a breather looking around the opulent room we'd booked.

We had used Rill's Tuner privileges to stay in a high-class hotel. I'd never stayed anywhere near this fancy during my broke travels with Siesta. Of course, if Siesta had disclosed the fact that she was the Ace Detective, we could have stayed in places like this, too.

"Sorry for the trouble," Rill told me. I'd pushed her wheelchair on the trip from the airport to the hotel. We'd had a lot of help in both places, but I'd done as much as I could manage by myself.

"Well, I am your familiar, after all."

"You really do have a talent for being used by other people, don't you?"

I was pretty sure that wasn't a compliment.

"Still, wouldn't it have been easier for you to rely on the Men in Black in the first place?"

"It would be more convenient, but this time it's just the two of us traveling

together. I'd rather not let anybody else in on this."

"...Um, what?" I asked. Rill had sounded a little exasperated, but she also seemed to be enjoying herself.

Putting one arm around Rill's back and the other under her knees, I lifted her out of the wheelchair and headed for the soft sofa.

"You know the Men in Black are monitoring us anyway."

"I guess I can't try anything funny, then, huh?"

"If the Men in Black weren't watching, would you make a move on Rill?"

"I would need to get permission from the detective, the idol, the agent, the oracle, and a crowd of other people first."

"Being completely surrounded by girls isn't all good, is it?"

With a wry grin, I lowered Rill to the bed.

"Weren't you going to put Rill on the sofa?"

"My mistake. Well, don't worry about it."

I sat down next to her on the huge bed. Then Rill patted the spot in front of her. Was she telling me to come closer?

"Rill's hands work just fine. She'll rub your shoulders for you."

Apparently, I was getting a precious treat from my master. Settling into the spot in front of Rill, I turned my back toward her.

"You must be tired. You basically carried Rill this whole time."

"Nah, not really. You could stand to put on a little weight, even."

Rill's hands were small, but she skillfully worked the knots out of my shoulders. How long had it been since I got a massage? It was surprisingly nice.

"Wasn't that embarrassing, though? Carrying Rill in public like that."

"Nah, I'm used to carrying girls in public." All of a sudden, the pressure on my shoulders got about five times stronger. Was she mad about something? "Are you the type who worries about being embarrassed, Rill?"

"Rill didn't think she was. But..." Her tone grew subdued, and the pressure of

her hands eased up. "When she reverted to being a normal civilian, she may have gone too far. Fighting as the Magical Girl, Rill never cared how she looked to others... Now, though, she's started to worry about how people see her and whether they think she's weak."

The eyes of others, and how people objectively saw her. She'd never needed those things before, but now Rill found herself caring about them. In the aftermath of that big fight, she was trying to change the way she lived. In a way, this might have been a rite of passage for her.

"But yeah. Rill doesn't intend to retire from being a hero yet, so she'll try to fix that a little."

"Don't push yourself. I did ask you to help us out earlier, but you're free to live your life any way you want."

"—I know." This trip was at least partly to help Rill make up her mind about that. "Anyway, it's been far too long since Rill saw her family, and she has no idea what to talk about," she joked, resuming the massage.

She'd apparently made an appointment to see her parents, but still...

"You said it's been five years or so since you saw them?"

"Yes. Even as a child, though, Rill doesn't remember her parents spoiling her much or taking her anywhere. This won't be one of those touching reunions."

"I see. In that case, it shouldn't matter if it's pretty casual, right? There's a lot you can't tell them about the underworld, but they're still your family." I didn't know if it would help, but I gave her my general opinion on the matter. "At the very least, they let you do track and field, and fed you, and raised you until you were grown. Even if that's all they did, it's still—"

I suddenly realized I'd been talking too much. When I glanced back, Rill's eyes were wide. I'd startled her slightly.

"Sorry. I shouldn't be talking about someone else's family."

"It's okay. Come to think of it, you... No, never mind," she said, shaking her head. Did Rill know about my personal history? If she'd run a background check on me—including my being the Singularity—she might have learned a few other

things. That was probably why she'd opted not to get into it now. "Well, Rill will just handle things with her fists, like she normally does. They should be easier to fight than the enemies of the world."

"No doubt. I'll be praying for your victory in combat."

Rill and I bumped fists lightly.

"In that case, for today, let's hurry and have dinner, shower, and go to bed."

"Yeah. I'll order room service, so you go ahead and take your bath first..." But even as I said that, it dawned on me.

Rill grinned. "You'll help Rill bathe, too, won't you, Kimihiko?"

.....Just to be safe, I thought I'd better call Natsunagi and check on that.

# **♦** The village of the end

The next day, we headed back to the airport and caught another flight which took us to Rill's hometown in a little under an hour.

Her family lived fairly deep in the countryside, so we had to take a few trains as well. With no time to do any proper sightseeing, we quickly boarded our first train.

"It sure is cold, huh?"

Although the heat in the train was on, it was below freezing outside. It was spring in Japan, but it might as well have been the dead of winter in Scandinavia.

"Don't be such a wuss." Rill, who was sitting in the seat opposite mine, took off her coat and laid it on her lap as if she were used to weather like this. "After all, we warmed up in the bath together yesterday."

"...I forgot whatever it is you're talking about."

What happened after our conversation the previous day was over and done with, so I wasn't going to get into it.

"Let's go over this now: While Rill's visiting her family, you'll go to that village, right?"

"Yeah. I'm planning to have a Man in Black go with me—not that that should be a surprise."

We were planning to split up after this. I'd head over to investigate the village for Marie, fulfilling my second objective for this trip. Rill had said it was about an hour's drive from her parents' house.

"Be really careful. Rill was only a child when she went there, so it's an old memory, but she remembers the adults kept telling her to stay away from that village. They never really said why."

She'd given me the same warning several times already on this trip. What exactly was waiting in that village?

"It'll be fine. On the off chance that something does happen, I'll have the Men in Black deal with it."

"Rill bets the Men in Black won't do anything but drive you there."

...She might have been right about that. I suddenly started feeling uneasy. Should I take a weapon along, just in case?

"Well, it may be okay anyway," Rill said, gazing at me. She smiled.

"That's reassuring to hear, but do you have any grounds for saying it?"

"Yes. After all, you are the familiar of the great Reloaded, the ultimate magical girl."

After that, we took two more trains to the last station on the line, where Rill and I parted ways. We each got into cars driven by Men in Black: Rill's would take her home, while mine set off for the village.

The car traveled over mountain roads. We'd set out from a fairly rural town, but the further we drove, the fewer buildings and people we saw. The sun was beginning to set.

"Calling the Men in Black was the right move."

It had rained heavily here the day before. The ground was muddy, and the footing was really bad. A normal taxi probably would have had a hard time on

these roads.

An hour and a half after setting off from the station, the car came to a stop, which presumably meant we'd made it to the village. I got out of the car and walked a short distance, but when I took a look around at the landscape, my brain was flooded with question marks.

"What is this place?"

Wherever I looked, in every direction around me, all I saw was a vast plain. The white buildings from the picture of Marie's hometown were nowhere to be seen. What I was looking at wasn't a village, in any sense of the word.

The place did have something instead of houses, though: graves. They weren't in the usual shape of crosses, but they were clearly grave markers, and there were tons of them. They seemed to cover the plain.

"Did Rill get the place wrong?"

She'd said she'd seen the village when she was a small child. It was possible that her memories of it were hazy, and what she'd actually seen wasn't anything like what she'd described.

"What do you think?" Although I knew I wouldn't get an actual answer, I turned, hoping for at least some sort of reaction—but the Man in Black who'd brought me here had vanished.

"How am I supposed to get back? He'd better come right away if I call him," I grumbled. Just then—

"What's this now? We don't often get visitors around these parts."

I turned around to see an old gentleman standing there. He was a little shorter than me, and he was dressed in a suit and leaning on a cane. He smiled at me.

"...Who are you?" I asked, backing up a couple of steps.

The old gentleman gave a troubled smile. "There's only one reason anyone would come here." He gestured to the countless graves; apparently, he'd come to visit one of them. "Or perhaps you have another reason?"

"Oh, uh, I'm—" What should I tell him? I would've been lying if I said I was

visiting a grave, but answering honestly might only have made me seem suspicious. He had to know I wasn't from around here just based on my appearance. It wouldn't do me any good to make him needlessly wary of me.

...No. Maybe that wasn't worth worrying about right now. I needed to stay focused on my objective. Reloaded always took the shortest possible route to achieve her goals.

"Actually, I'm looking for this village." I showed the man the photo Marie had given me and told him I'd heard of a place near here that looked similar.

"Ah, you're in the right place." The old gentleman's face creased sadly. "This wasn't the same village as the one in that picture, but a people who share the same roots inhabited this area right up until just six months ago."

"What happened six months ago?"

After a short pause, the old man continued. "The village was burned down... by a vampire."

I hadn't been expecting that, and it suddenly felt hard to breathe.

A vampire. Who'd have thought I'd hear that word here?

"I imagine that's hard to believe. It's true, though. Vampires are a cursed race that consumes human flesh and blood in an effort to extend their own short lifespans. A vampire appeared in this village half a year ago and killed everyone, even the women and children." The man's eyes appeared hollow. "That was no mere demon—but a devil. I was away on business the day it happened, but all of my relatives were here. My children and grandchildren should have lived long into the future, but every one of them died."

The entire village had been burned, and all these people had been killed. A horrific incident like this would have been on the news in Japan, no matter what country it was in, yet I'd never even heard of it. Was it because vampires were involved? Maybe that was why it hadn't been covered by the general media.

Six months ago, Reloaded had been overseas fighting all sorts of enemies of the world, so it wasn't surprising that she hadn't heard about this, even though it had happened so close to her hometown. "You lost your children and grandkids?"

"Yes. And my wife, my siblings... All my blood relations."

The old gentlemen shook his head sorrowfully. He looked so miserable that any attempt at encouragement seemed meaningless. But one thing stuck out to me.

"You didn't bring flowers?"

Normally, that wouldn't have seemed odd enough to mention. Cultural and religious traditions varied between countries, and different people had different habits and ways of thinking as well. It wasn't my place to say anything if this gentleman wasn't offering flowers at his family members' graves. Only—

"Do I look that strange?" the man said with a wry smile.

I knew how people behaved in situations like this, when they'd lost someone important to them. Saikawa, Rill, Natsunagi...and me as well, maybe. In any case, I just couldn't picture this old gentleman as someone who was visiting his family's graves after having lost them in a tragedy. I couldn't really put it into words, but his face was just *wrong* somehow. There was no other way to describe it.

"How did you get here?" I asked him. "I didn't hear a car."

Had he walked along the mountain road, leaning on that cane, all by himself? The ground was a mess after the rain from the day before, yet there was no mud on his slacks or shoes.

No human could've done that.

"I see. That explains it." In other words... "You're a vampire, aren't you?"

"Well, well. Imagine that: prey that talks."

## ◆ Hellfire and a demon's curse

Putting some distance between us, I drew my gun. Good thing I'd borrowed a weapon from the Man in Black, at least. I owed Rill for that warning.

"I dunno whether this will work on a vampire, though."

I took aim at the man's leg. Had guns worked on Scarlet? ... No, Charlie had cut off his arm that one time, and he'd stuck it right back on. If this old gentleman—this old vampire—had the same ability, my gun might not help me much.

"You humans are always in such a hurry to die." The old vampire smiled, staying several meters away. He looked so calm—did that mean bullets really wouldn't work on him?

"What are you? What are you doing here?"

I'd known there was a race of vampires, and that Scarlet wasn't the only one. If this old man really was a vampire, what had he been about to do in a place filled with corpses like this one?

"Don't tell me you were planning to raise the dead."

During our nocturnal helicopter ride last week, Scarlet had told me there were enemy vampires who held a grudge against humans. Was this man one of them?

"Why would I want to raise the dead?" The old vampire tilted his head, looking perplexed. He didn't seem to be playing dumb, either. "Corpses will do fine if I'm just feeding."

In which case...

"Right. Then have some lead."

I fired at the vampire's right leg and shoulder. The bullets hit him squarely, and he fell to one knee.

Almost as if it'd been waiting for that moment, a black car pulled up. A Man in Black was behind the wheel, and I dived into the passenger seat. "Get us out of here!"

The Man in Black stepped on the gas, though his face remained expressionless.

I'd attacked the enemy, but I had no chance of winning. If I got myself killed here without accomplishing anything, it would've been like going to steal a mummy and ending up as one myself. Even if that hadn't been what Mia's prophecy was about, right now running was my only option.

As the car headed down the road, questions raced through my mind. Who on earth was that old vampire? Why was he eating corpses?

"I guess Scarlet said he needed blood, too."

That was how we'd first met: Last summer, Scarlet had taken my blood without asking, claiming he was on the brink of starvation.

If human flesh and blood were a vampire's source of energy, then a graveyard, with a mountain of corpses buried beneath all those tombstones, would be the perfect feeding grounds. Had that old vampire stumbled across it by accident?

"... No. Was he the one who massacred all the villagers in the first place?"

Maybe he'd buried the corpses he hadn't been able to eat right away, turning the place into his own personal pantry. If so...

"He's an enemy of the world," I muttered. Without a doubt, such a being was an evil we had to defeat.

"From our point of view, you humans are the enemies."

The voice seemed to whisper directly into my ear.

A loud impact followed immediately after; a long blade had pierced through the roof of the car, running right between the passenger and driver's seats. The Man in Black slammed on the brakes, and the car spun, then stopped.

When I scrambled out of the passenger side door, the old vampire was kneeling on the roof of the car. The blade piercing the roof had come from his walking stick—or rather, his sword cane.

There were visible bullet wounds in his leg and shoulder, but they weren't bleeding. His vampiric regeneration wasn't as fast as Scarlet's, but his abilities were still healing him.

"You created vampires for your own convenience, and as soon as you were done with us, you decided to exterminate our entire race. Don't you think it's unreasonable to expect us to go along with that quietly?" the vampire asked, pulling his sword cane out of the roof. I could sense how concentrated his bloodlust was, but it didn't feel like he was planning to attack right away.

"And that's why you vampires are taking revenge on humans?"

"I did consider it," he said in a low voice. Did that mean he wasn't anymore? "All I'm trying to do is live and die respectably."

"Live respectably? Even if it means massacring that entire village?"

"You humans also sacrifice the lives of others so you can live," he shot back. I didn't have a ready response to that.

I'd heard something similar from another enemy I'd gone up against before: Seed. It wasn't really a point I could refute, either, considering I was alive right now.

"Not to mention, this is a restriction that you humans forced on us in the first place. You cursed us with short lifespans, and now you ridicule us as we desperately cling to life?"

"...Vampires have short lifespans?"

Scarlet had once told me that vampires weren't an immortal race by any means, but what was this talk about them being cursed with short lives?

"Thirty years." The old vampire's golden eyes widened. "That is the natural lifespan we were given."

"...No way."

Vampires didn't live even half as long as humans? Their race had been created by an Inventor two centuries ago. Why had their creator intentionally made vampires' lives so short?

A little thought gave me the answer, but I couldn't bring myself to say it to the old vampire.

"Because we were made to be used and discarded," the vampire said, as if he was trying to get his point across to the human race. As if I were mankind's representative. Was that why he wasn't attacking me?

"We vampires were biological weapons with a set expiration date, created solely to defeat the enemies of the world. Our creator must have assumed that functioning for thirty years would be enough. Just the thought of it makes my blood boil."

I'd guessed right: The Inventor, or perhaps the Federation Government, had completely failed to take vampires' feelings into account. They'd never dreamed that aging vampires would feel fear, terror, anger, and sadness at the approaching end of their natural lives.

"So I ate. I ate humans. I even ate my comrades. And their flesh and blood really did extend my life. See?" The vampire rose to his feet on the roof of the car. "I've been alive for eighty years! I've eaten the flesh of all manner of living things, and I will live on! I'll never let you humans have your way with me!"

He spread his arms wide, veins bulging at his temples, his eyes bloodshot.

There was no doubt about it: He was definitely going to eat me this time.

"Well, I don't intend to let you have your way with me, either."

I leveled my gun at the enemy's head. I had no time to be careless or show mercy.

"Have you forgotten what I told you? Do not meddle with the king's job, human."

Just then, a familiar voice spoke.

I couldn't see him, but I didn't need to to know who it was.

"Ah, ah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

Someone screamed. It was the old vampire, shouting in pain.

"What is this?"

On the roof of the car, steam started to rise from the old vampire's body—and then his skin burst into flames.

It was as if all his blood had instantly boiled.

Smoke and flames quickly enveloped the man, setting his body ablaze in the blink of an eye.

"Aaaaaaaaah! Wha, what did you— The corpses... What did you put in my

prey...?!"

The Man in Black was no longer in the driver's seat. It seemed he'd made his escape while no one was looking.

That was fine; what I really needed to be thinking about right now was—

"There's no cover out here."

Any second now, the gasoline would catch fire, which would cause one heck of an explosion.

Turning my back on the car, I bolted across the plain.

Behind me, a fiery vortex enveloped the old vampire as I heard his dying scream.

"Damn you! You're not even going to show yourself? Judas!"

## **♦** The Magical Girl's other epilogue

How many hours had it been? I was mentally and physically drained, so I wasn't really sure, but I'd escaped the worst-case scenario. Once I'd left that graveyard and was somewhere safe indoors, I called Natsunagi and told her about the incident.

"Who'd have thought a thing like that would happen...? That must have been seriously rough."

"Yeah. I never figured I'd run into a vampire way out here."

Mia's prophecy had made me kind of uneasy, but I hadn't been expecting anywhere near that much trouble.

"That predisposition of yours sure is something, Kimizuka," Natsunagi said with a resigned chuckle. Was she talking about my knack for getting myself into trouble, or my nature as the Singularity? Either way, I wished I'd had the chance to turn it down.

"In the end, the village that was burned down wasn't Marie's hometown, right?"

"Not according to the old vampire. Still, he did say people from the same tribe as those from the village in the picture lived there until six months ago."

It all depended on how much of his story we could believe, but at least I'd found a clue. That probably meant Rill's childhood memory had been accurate. If the village had still been there, I would have been able to ask its residents about the picture, but that clearly wasn't possible now.

"There weren't any other people near where the village used to be?"

"I asked around a bit at a town just down the mountain, but everyone I talked to said they didn't know much about the place."

Their reactions had seemed a little odd, though—as if they did know, but were pretending not to. Had the incident been so ugly that they didn't want to talk about it?

Rill had also said she'd been told to stay away from that village when she was

a child, long before the incident. Just what sort of people had lived in that village?

"So we still have a long way to go to find Marie's hometown."

"Yeah. We may have to start giving the vampire rebellion some serious thought as well."

"...Right. But Scarlet vanished, didn't he?"

Scarlet was definitely the one who'd saved me, but he'd made himself scarce right after killing that old vampire. "Judas," the guy had called him. How had they known each other?

At any rate, Scarlet had most likely come here just to kill that vampire. It was almost as if he was reiterating that putting a stop to the vampire rebellion was his job.

"I guess I should really be the one to do that." I could tell Natsunagi was biting her lip on the other end of the line. As far as she was concerned, this was technically the Ace Detective's mission. I'd already told her about the conversation I'd had with Scarlet in the helicopter, although I hadn't been sure whether I should.

"Oh, one more thing. Sorry," Natsunagi apologized, lowering her voice slightly. "I didn't end up getting to see the Information Broker. I did split up with my friends and go around on my own for a little while..."

Meeting the Information Broker, Bruno Belmondo, had been Natsunagi's mission on her graduation trip.

"I used information from the Men in Black to narrow down his location, but I got there a bit too late. I think he realized I was trying to make contact, and moved."

"I see. Well, he doesn't seem like the easiest person to meet."

I'd only met him once, last summer, when Siesta had taken me to the Federal Council. He didn't meet with other Tuners very often outside of official occasions like that.

Natsunagi and I were trying to meet up with him anyway: We wanted to find

out if he knew how to wake Siesta up safely. The other day, Stephen had given us an ultimatum regarding how we wanted to go about trying to save her. It was said that the Information Broker knew practically everything, so we desperately wanted to make sure there really was no other way.

That said, it seemed it wouldn't be so easy to make meeting him a reality. Bruno Belmondo's philosophy was to never share information for personal reasons that were unrelated to his mission as a Tuner.

"I'm not giving up, of course," Natsunagi said optimistically. "If we can't rely on the Men in Black, I'll find him myself. Even if I have to turn stalker!"

"Don't go stalking him. Well, let's hash out the details after we're both back home."

"Sure. I'll be heading back tomorrow as well."

There was still a little bit of spring vacation left. We'd probably have quite a bit to talk about the next time we saw one another.

"By the way, Kimizuka, are you staying at a hotel right now?"

"Uh, actually..."

She'd asked me point-blank a question I'd been doing my best to avoid.

Just then...

"Kimihiko, you can take your bath next." Rill wheeled herself into the room. She'd already dried her hair, but I still caught the faint fragrance of her shampoo.

"...So you're sharing a room with her," Natsunagi muttered.

Hearing Natsunagi's comment, Rill got closer to the telephone. "He isn't just rooming with Rill. This is her house."

"Your house?!" Natsunagi echoed, sounding as if she'd been caught off-balance.

After the incident with the old vampire, I had a Man in Black drive me to Rill's house. I'd been planning to stay at a hotel, but Rill had sent me a text saying, "Since you're here, just come over." I'd assumed she'd have quite a bit to talk

about with her family, and I hadn't wanted to interrupt, but in fact...

"Yes. Rill, her dad, her mom, and Kimihiko all sat around the dinner table together. He's practically part of her family now."

"What?! Even couples have a tough time with hurdles like that! How come you just sailed over it?!"

"Rill's dad, in particular, seems to have really taken a shine to Kimihiko. He wants them to bathe together after this."

"So your dad's basically adopted him as a son-in-law?! Why does he like him so much?!"

I didn't get it, either. They hadn't come off as bright, cheery parents, and when I'd first arrived, they'd seemed bewildered as to why I was there. However, when all was said and done, they seemed to recognize that I was the person who'd brought their daughter home for the first time in five years, and for some reason, we'd sort of ended up becoming friends.

"So Rill's going to borrow your ex-boyfriend for a little while longer."

"What? Just a—"

Without waiting for Natsunagi to finish, Rill hung up...even though it was my smartphone.

"Taking a bath with your dad would be extremely awkward."

"Rill was kidding. She only wanted to tease that girl a little."

Thank goodness for that. I'd been desperately trying to think of things to make small talk about.

"It's true that Rill's parents like you, though."

"That's good. But are you sure I'm not interrupting your family time?"

"It was actually really helpful that you came. Things were a little awkward before."

By the time I'd showed up, they seemed to have already gotten all the important subjects out of the way.

"Did everything end up going well?"

"Rill had told them about her legs in advance. As for the past five years, she told them she wasn't able to get the results she wanted in track, so she quit school and has been working ever since. They didn't get mad or cry, but they were a little frustrated. As you'd expect."

Rill had said that her parents didn't care much about her, but when she'd fallen out of contact for so long, they'd actually gone to the police... Though it wasn't as if relying on a public institution had gotten them anywhere near Rill, since she was a Tuner.

"Still, it's going to take more than one conversation to resolve everything. There are other things she'll need to discuss with them later on."

"Yeah... I'll bet."

Five years. That was an awful lot of time apart to make up for. Still, if both parties were willing, there had to be a way for them to work together to fix things.

"And so, while Rill doesn't intend to retire from being a hero, she thinks she'll stay here a little longer." Rill gave a very small smile.

I was in no position to tell her what to do. Rill had lost everything once, and as someone who'd been her partner—even if it had just been temporary—more than anything, her attempt to find a new path made me feel proud and happy.

"Although if the higher-ups dismiss her, she'll just have to accept it."

"Yeah, Tuner positions do get switched out, don't they?"

Like the Diviner, for example, or the Enforcer—though I heard that position had been frozen after the man who'd held it had fallen in the line of duty. The Magical Girl position could be replaced by something else someday. With injuries like hers, Rill wouldn't be able to be as active as she had before. Even so, they hadn't dismissed her from the Tuners yet. Did they have some sort of reason for that?

The government dignitary, Ice Doll, had once told me that one of the reasons Natsunagi had been appointed as the Ace Detective was the influence she had over the Singularity. Were they treating Reloaded in a similar way, or was I just overthinking things?

"Still, if even one person remembers Rill, that's enough." Rill looked up, and she did seem satisfied.

Was I her "one person"? If so... "I'm definitely not the only one. Natsunagi and Ms. Fuubi, even Mia—they all remember the example you set."

I knelt, putting my eyes level with Rill's. I wouldn't let anyone forget her. I'd keep passing on the tale of the Magical Girl. That was a familiar's duty.

"Say, Kimihiko?"

"Hmm?"

"We'll be apart for a while, so this is Rill's final order for now." She looked down, averting her eyes. "Pat her head, just for a little while."

"As much as you want," I told her, reaching out to comply.



# Sixteen years ago, Scarlet

Humans eat meat.

To those at the top of the food chain, it is an entirely natural act.

However, they sometimes eat oxen, or pigs, or fowl, or deer, or boars to slake a desire for something akin to pleasure, rather than for simple nourishment.

I believe it to be a sign of their complacency. The absolute confidence that they will never drop out of the struggle to survive here, on Earth. That is why they distinguish between the flesh of oxen, pigs, fowl, deer, and boars, and savor it. They do the same with fish.

Meat and fish—humans tend to treat them as separate categories, but if one thinks of them merely as sources of food, fish must also be considered meat. Once dead, creatures don't become bones in a body, but bones and meat. Mere hunks of flesh. Therefore:

"To me, humans are also meat."

Beside the crumbling outer wall, I finished my meal, wiped the blood from my lips, and gazed up at the cloudy sky.

The rainy season had begun, meaning there were fewer days when the sun truly shone—convenient for both myself and the tribe that inhabited this town. Sunlight did not instantly incinerate us, unlike the vampires of legend, but long-term observation had shown that it definitely shortened our lives.

"Even so, a mere thirty years..."

Didn't that mean we could live under the sun as we pleased without

significantly changing the end result? The odds that we would survive the full thirty years weren't good in any case. Especially in light of the fact that my tribe had a mortal enemy who tried to steal even those short lives from us.

"You snuck out of town again."



I heard footsteps on gravel, and a voice spoke behind me.

She was reproaching me for having broken the rules, but I sensed resignation in her tone as well. In truth, I hardly ever did as she asked of me.

"Jeanne?"

The girl sat down on a nearby cement-block wall in her linen dress. She stared at me from beneath her broad-brimmed hat, a strained smile on her face. "Where did you steal the food you just ate?"

"From the usual town, across the river. It was on display in a stall."

Had it been ox? Maybe pig or fowl? It almost certainly hadn't been human...

"If you so brazenly ignore the rules, the messiah will yell at you again."

The "messiah" she spoke of was the leader of the town in which we lived—an elder who had already lived nearly seventy years. He single-handedly determined the laws for the town, and as a rule, those who lived here were not allowed to leave.

"Just being old doesn't make him important. I can't imagine all the rules he lays down are right."

"But when you consider how long we live on average, he must be someone special."

He had styled himself our leader for that very reason, but who knew what the truth really was. I'd never sensed any impressive abilities or attributes in that aged body.

"And he even looks after us, since our parents died. You mustn't forget your debt to him, Judas."

That was what the old one had named me. He said that everyone who lived in this town was family, so he'd given me a name. He called himself the messiah, and he brought in food from outside the town at regular intervals and doled it out to us. Not that there was ever truly enough.

"You're very sensitive, aren't you, Jeanne?" I gave her a sarcastic smile. I was really asking if she was the messiah's puppet.

"What, are you telling me I'm boring?" She looked visibly annoyed. "I'm only pretending to be earnest." She pointed to some nearby rubble. A large barrel was hidden in the shadows there.

"Ha! The messiah's wine? For shame; you always warn me not to steal it."

"No; I said if you were going to steal it, you should be clever about it. You always get caught, you know," she said. I hadn't expected her to use logic like that to scold me. "Deceit is the trick to living well."

"I bet that will rattle the messiah. You're his favorite."

"Yes. He says we're all family, but he put his hand on my behind again the other day."

"I'm impressed you managed to endure that in silence."

"I snuck in and broke his little toe while he slept."

"Is that why the old one was walking with a cane for a while?"

There was no telling what sort of trick he'd used to live so long, but his powers of regeneration were no match for mine. The poor messiah. He never would have dreamed the culprit was the girl he favored.

"Should I call you resilient, or stubborn? You've changed, Jeanne."

"But that's the only way we can live, don't you think?" Humming, Jeanne leaped nimbly onto the crumbling wall. "We were born as vampires. That means we have no choice but to live in a way befitting of demons, not humans."

A way of life befitting of demons... Just what exactly did that mean? Living quietly in the shadows? Clinging to life while deceiving others?

We only had half our lives left. How would we live from this point on, and how would we die?

"Either way, this world doesn't value vampires."

The fact that our mortal enemy existed was proof enough of that. They had been given the mission of exterminating all the vampires in the world, and apparently even had a special title, but I didn't know much more than that. The only thing I'd heard was that the person tasked with carrying out that mission

was known as an ally of justice. A hero.

In other words, the vampires judged by that justice were evil. As far as the world was concerned, we'd been its enemies since the moment we were born.

"That doesn't necessarily mean that everyone on the planet is our enemy, though." Jeanne jumped down from the wall and landed neatly. "You don't think they are, either, Judas. That's why you're here again, isn't it?"

She was gazing at a mural painted on the wall. It was what one might have called street art; an anonymous artist had traveled around the world, leaving these pictures in towns and villages. This one showed a young girl praying for peace.

"No," I spat out. "The one who drew this is a hypocrite."

You couldn't stop war with art or literature or music. If things like that could get rid of poverty, erase discrimination, and stop creatures from fighting each other, we would have had world peace for a thousand years already.

"That's why I came to sneer at it."

At the artist and their self-satisfaction. A poseur who'd managed to feel they'd prayed for world peace by painting this.

"You're twisted, Judas."

"What demon isn't?"

We exchanged looks, then broke into smiles.

"You don't think this picture is a lie, Jeanne?"

"It's not a matter of whether it's true or false. That picture is a wish." I frowned, and she went on. "Art, literature, music—they're all wishes. Wishes become intentions, and intentions gather, changing into group action. Before long, the things groups do shape the world. That means wishes aren't pointless."

"That's just an empty theory."

"Reality always begins with castles in the air, you know."

We were only a year apart. Even so, she smiled at me as if she were my

teacher. "You mustn't be so twisted once you're grown, Judas."

"By that age, my life will be pretty close to over, Jeanne."

At that, a hint of loneliness crept into her smile.

"That's true. I guess I am just a little jealous of humans."

I tried to come up with a response to that, but I couldn't find anything decent to say.

I didn't think I'd ever managed to say anything that truly made her feel more at peace with that. The literature I read to kill time was of no use whatsoever.

"You're kind, Judas." Jeanne was watching me and smiling. "You were trying to think of something that would make me feel better."

"Don't just say random things."

"I can tell by looking at your face. Honestly, how many years do you think we've spent together?" Jeanne laughed.

If that was the case, how well did I understand her? Did I really know her? What was it that made me want to?

I wasn't human, so I'd never know.



# **Chapter 2**

### **♦ Super idol Saikawa's distress**

"Mm, this is delicious!"

We were at a fairly expensive restaurant in Tokyo, where I was watching Natsunagi cheerfully eat a forkful of roast duck.

Thinking back, Siesta had been the one to savor and thoroughly enjoy her food, but Natsunagi used her expressions, gestures, and voice to broadcast that feeling. I never got tired of watching her eat.

"You must've had curry over there, right?"

"It was a little different from what we think of as 'curry' here, but yes. It was so good! It tasted, you know, like the actual place."

It had been two days since Natsunagi got back from India and I'd left Rill in her home country. We'd met up at this restaurant to swap travel stories and talk about what to do next.

"You may not be very interested in food, Kimizuka, but you're not a picky eater."

"I did a lot of traveling overseas. I can eat anything and enjoy it, up to a point."

Ordinarily, when you went abroad, you even had to be careful about drinking the water. I had a weird tolerance for things like that, though, so I'd never had to worry about what I ate.

"Even though this trip was pretty hectic, I still managed to try some tasty food."

"Oh? You mean like the meals at Rill's house?"

"The salmon soup was superb." That answer got me a cold look from Natsunagi. Had I put my foot in my mouth? "Never mind; for now, let's just enjoy what's happening over there," I said, changing the subject. I was looking

at a piano, a little distance from our table. A woman was playing it softly, accompanying herself as she sang.

"Marie's an amazing singer, isn't she?" Natsunagi sighed, impressed. Our client was sitting at the piano, wearing a magnificent gown. The days when she'd been considered an urban legend seemed like a dream. She'd captivated most of the diners in the restaurant with her voice.

Once she finished her song, Marie stood up and bowed deeply. Warm applause rang out, and she accepted it with a smile, looking far more like a saint than a witch. However, Natsunagi and I knew she was only the opener for this event.

"Good evening, everyone. Sorry for interrupting your dinner. I'm Yui Saikawa!"

All of a sudden, an idol stepped up onto the platform, and every eye in the restaurant widened.

Marie welcomed Saikawa, and the two of them stood side by side. This wasn't like some sort of appearance arranged by a TV station; she was a genuine surprise guest.

"You see, my friend Marie has invited me to sing a song! Oh, I'll be passing a hat around the room for tips later!"

That got a little laugh. Saikawa got a better grip on the mic, then made eye contact with Marie, who took a seat at the piano again. The elegant dinner wouldn't be over for quite a while longer.

"Cheers!" Natsunagi said, and four glasses clinked together. After Saikawa and Marie's mini recital, the four of us had relocated to a table in a private room.

"Thank you for coming today!" Marie tipped her glass back and drained it blissfully, then smiled at us.

"It was no problem...but is wine meant to be chugged like that?" Her actions had all seemed so natural that I was late with my comeback.

Marie cheerfully sloshed more wine into her empty glass; she'd ordered a whole bottle. "It's fine; it's a privilege adults enjoy. Would you like some?" Smiling, she offered me some wine. Personally, I didn't dislike women who were bad at adulting.

"Hey, cut that out! Don't get carried away!" Natsunagi, who seemed to have joined the discipline committee, whisked the glass out of my reach. It wasn't like I'd actually been planning to drink or anything.

"Oh? So you two are in that sort of relationship, are you?" Marie teased.

"Wh-what's that supposed to mean?" Natsunagi said, acting twitchy.

"She's probably somehow gotten the idea that you and I are a couple."

"I—I know that! How can you say something like that as if it's nothing, Kimizuka?! Any normal person would feel awkward and try to change the subject!"

I see. Thanks for the lesson in communication.

"Marie, these two score poorly when it comes to romance, although they fail in different areas. Please don't make them talk about things like that."

I had a feeling Saikawa had covered for us in a way that made us sound pathetic, but Natsunagi was still scolding me, so I didn't really catch it.

"Yui, thanks for your performance earlier. That duet was so much fun!"

"I learned an awful lot, too! Your voice really is terrific, Marie." Saikawa's eyes were sparkling. She had been incredibly impressed by Marie's voice when they'd first met and had asked the other woman to coach her, but I'd had no idea she'd idolize Marie this much. Marie seemed to respect Saikawa as well.

"Well, should we get down to business?" I asked.

Marie's face grew serious again, and she nodded.

Our main reason for meeting today was to give Marie a report regarding our search for her hometown. I shared what we'd managed to learn with her.

First, I told her there had been a place similar to the village in the picture—the one Marie had guessed was her hometown—in a rural area of Scandinavia. I

followed this up by saying that someone had attacked and burned down the village about half a year ago, and all the residents had died.

The one thing I couldn't tell Marie was that the culprit might have been a vampire. She did seem to know a bit about the world's darker side, but telling her everything would have been too great a risk.

For now, I promised her that we'd try to find out more about the previous year's incident, and that we were investigating whether there were other, similar villages elsewhere across the world.

"Thank you. Please let me say once again how grateful I am to you." Marie bowed to us from across the table. "I'm sure that learning about the past and recovering even a few of my memories will further change the tone of my songs. I suspect I'll end up getting much, much better than I am now. Is that too simpleminded of me?" She smiled, but her expression was earnest.

"Amazing. Just amazing...," Saikawa murmured. She sounded a little dazed. "I want to know that, too. How to sing so that your song captures your listeners' hearts and won't let go. And make them hope it never does."

"You're already plenty amazing as an idol, Saikawa."

Did she really need to worry like that? Her work seemed to be going extremely well.

"It's true that I'm acknowledged as the ultimate, cutest idol, both by myself and others..."

"Yeah, you sound just fine."

"...But it's not enough. Look at this," Saikawa said, holding out a flyer.

It was an advertisement for a certain musical. The scriptwriter and director were so famous that even I'd heard of them, and more than anything, one of the cast members—no, the star—was...

"Wow, Yui, it's you." Natsunagi's eyes widened.

I skimmed the plot summary. Saikawa was going to play a nun who dreamed of becoming a singer.

"Rehearsals started quite a while ago, but...I'm completely out of my depth."

Saikawa gave a troubled smile. "I knew I wouldn't be able to act on the same level as professionals, and I'm sure the staff never expected me to. But even when it comes to singing, I'm hopeless. When you're performing in musicals, singing like an idol just doesn't cut it."

"They're different specialties. You've spent years developing certain habits to project your voice and breathe in a certain way, so learning a new method of singing won't be easy," Marie said, summarizing Saikawa's problem.

"Yes, that's what everyone else seems to think, too." Saikawa held out her smartphone. The screen showed an article about her playing the lead in the musical. The comments were filled with harsh questions about whether Saikawa, who was just an idol, could actually handle it.

"Don't take stuff like this too seriously."

"Thank you, Kimizuka. Unfortunately, though, they're right this time." Despite what she'd said, Saikawa's expression was by no means downcast. I was sure she was more conscious of her lack of skill than anyone else, and that she was searching desperately for an answer.

"I'm going to take vocal lessons designed specifically for musicals, but you see, I'm also scheduled to release a new song each month for the next six months. Things are going to get really busy, and once spring vacation ends, I'll be starting high school as well."

Just as Natsunagi and I were going on to university, Saikawa would be moving up to high school this spring. The fight against Seed had ended and she was finally able to focus on being an idol, but now she'd come up against this new issue. Maybe having a job that was too fulfilling was its own sort of problem.

"I want to do it all, though. I want to perfectly pull off what people ask of me. I want to play the part of an ideal idol. I want to keep seeing pretty dreams forever... I'm sorry for going on about myself like this," Saikawa said bashfully. "If I manage to complete these two big jobs—the musical and the back-to-back song releases—I'm positive I'll be able to reach new heights. And so..." She bowed her head to Marie. "Please, let me ask you one more time: Would you be my vocal coach?"

Saikawa believed Marie's sublime voice was what she needed right now to

help her grow.

After a few seconds of silence, Marie nodded. "All right. I'm like you, after all. I believe in the power of music."

Seeing the two of them take each other's hands, Natsunagi and I exchanged nods.

A hand reaching out would join with someone else's, just like this.

That was definitely what the previous detective had been working toward.

## **♦** The world's strongest alliance

Our dinner party ended, and the group split up. Marie got into a taxi, while Natsunagi and I decided to walk to the nearest train station. However...

"Saikawa, why are you coming with us?"

"There you go, trying to shut me out. Are you planning to get frisky with Nagisa on the dark streets?"

Saikawa inserted herself between me and Natsunagi as we walked to the station.

"Don't turn into a pain-in-the-butt junior out of nowhere. Forget that—why not call your car? It's a bad idea for idols to take the train."

"Oh! There's a park! Let's play for a bit." Saikawa hastily ran over. She wasn't even listening to me.

"I guess she's not as discouraged as I thought."

"Yeah. I do think she could afford to be a little more vulnerable in front of other people, though."

Exchanging looks, Natsunagi and I followed Saikawa into the park.

"It's been forever since I last went on a swing."

Saikawa cheerfully pumped her legs, building momentum. I took the swing next to her and lightly kicked off the ground. The smell of the dirt and rusted iron would've made anybody feel like a kid again.

"Want me to give you a push?" Natsunagi planted her palms on my back and

pushed softly.

Who'd have thought we'd end up playing in a park after graduating from high school?

"I apologize for earlier," Saikawa said after a little while, still swinging gently. "We met up to discuss Marie's request, but I ended up just talking about myself."

"Was that it? Don't worry about something like that." I pumped hard, kicking my legs out, feeling the night wind rush past my face. "We told her we'd continue our investigation, and as far as I'm concerned, you're a client, too, Saikawa."

Ever since she'd asked Natsunagi and me for help last year.

"That means you can bring your problems to the detective and her assistant anytime. As for the fee, how about...yeah, that priceless smile of yours is enough."

"Kimizuka..." Saikawa gazed at me, her pupils trembling.

...Or maybe I was the one who was shaking unsteadily.

Saikawa had been swinging pretty high for a while now...

"Kimizuka, are you all right? You look like you might fly off!"

"Natsunagi, you're pushing too hard!"

The swing I was on seemed liable to go all the way over the top of the swing set. I waited for gravity to stop me, then felt a little sick. Choking back my nausea, I lifted my head. Natsunagi was already having a nice chat with Saikawa.

"...Not fair," I groaned, and just then, my smartphone alerted me to an incoming call. The name on the screen said *Fuubi Kase*. It felt as if we talked on the phone once a week or so. I picked up.

"Answer my calls on the first ring."

"What are you, my controlling girlfriend? ... So? What do you need?"

"We're dealing with a weird incident. I'm sharing the intel with you, just in

case." On the other end of the line, Ms. Fuubi gave an exhausted sigh. "We've been finding unidentified bodies all over the place lately. Though that part's pretty normal."

"It's seriously messed up we live in a world where it's normal to find unidentified bodies all over the place."

"The victims are all dried up. They're basically mummified."

She'd caught me off guard, but then the pieces started falling into place. *Oh, there it is.* This must have been what Mia's prophesy earlier was about. She'd said I was about to get involved with undead mummies.

"The corpses are all damaged pretty badly, and someone's clearly drained all their blood."

"Well, that's terrifying. I wonder what sort of monster is behind it."

"I'm sending you a photo of one of the specimens."

"No need, I'm good."

"What's up?" Ms. Fuubi asked, sounding mystified.

"There's one near me right now."

I hung up for now. In the distance, a shadow had moved.

It was shaped like a person, but the figure clearly didn't belong to a normal human.

"Kimizuka, that's..." Natsunagi was staring at it; she'd obviously noticed it, too. The thing was about ten meters away. A skinny mummy with long, disheveled white hair stood there, wriggling and writhing uncannily.

"I could really do without any more horror movie tropes, thanks."

The Magical Girl wasn't with me anymore, and I wasn't carrying a weapon. I held an arm out in front of Natsunagi, keeping a wary eye on the creature.

"But it's human." A blue light flared in the darkness. It was Saikawa's left eye; she'd removed her eye patch.

That blue eye of hers could see an enemy's true form. Seed had reclaimed the seed it had held, so her eye couldn't see as much as before, but it still had the

primordial seed's power.

"Oh, apparently it died, then came back to life as a mummy."

The mummy slowly approached, its body undulating. It stretched a thin hand out toward us. Was it preparing to attack, or asking for help? I couldn't tell.

"Ha! A hollow marionette," rumbled a low voice.

The next instant, something slashed the mummy's upper body in two, and it disintegrated into ash.

"You again, Scarlet?"

The mummy had been purged by the king of the vampires. Scarlet had done his work in under a second, and the next thing I knew, he was sitting at the top of the slide, one knee raised.

"Oh, Mr. Vampire." Blinking rapidly, Saikawa went over to Scarlet.

The two of them hadn't met in more than six months. They weren't particularly close, or at least I hadn't thought they were...

"It's been a long time, girl. Nothing has changed, I trust."

"I've gotten cuter!"

"Then indeed, nothing has changed." Scarlet nodded soberly a few times. The world was vast, but this had to be the only place you could see banter between an idol and a vampire.

"Scarlet, what was that thing?"

"An undead mummy—or so I would like to tell you. However, if you ask me, it is merely a shoddy failure." Waxing poetic about his superiority as usual, Scarlet noiselessly flew down to us. "It is the work of the enemy vampires I mentioned before. Their ability to reanimate corpses is weaker than mine. After they've killed a human, the best they can do must be to turn them into cheap imitations."

"So there are a lot of these enemy vampires across the world?" Were there other enemies besides the old vampire I'd run into in Scandinavia? There had to be, or mummies like the one we'd just seen wouldn't exist. In which case...

"What do they want?"

"Deduce that much on your own, if you claim to be a detective's assistant," Scarlet said with a mocking smile.

"...At the very least, you confronted that old vampire because he was eating human flesh and blood in an attempt to prolong his life. Does that mean all enemy vampires are trying to use humans as food? Is that the 'vampire rebellion'?"

If so, their motives were somewhat similar to Seed's. Their survival instincts were forcing them to try and drastically upset the current order of the food chain.

"Is that why you agreed to hunt your own kind?" asked Natsunagi. "To defeat the vampires who are trying to harm humans?"

Scarlet narrowed his eyes, which seemed to wordlessly confirm her assumption. "An enemy is closing in on this country as well. I sowed the land with my blood earlier, but they seem undaunted, and are still bent on wreaking havor here."

Was he talking about what he'd done on that helicopter ride two weeks back? Apparently, Scarlet's threat hadn't worked on our current opponent. Did that mean they were particularly dangerous?

"How much do you know about this enemy vampire?" Natsunagi took a step forward. She was asking about the identity of the vampire who was planning this assault on Japan.

"—Elizabeth." Scarlet looked up at the moon as he said her name. "If I am the king of the vampires, then she should be called their queen."

"An old friend of yours?" The way Scarlet spoke made it seem likely.

"She once had a heart for justice. She was noble and powerful, and took pride in the fact that she was a vampire. However, as the end of her life drew near, she changed. She began attacking one human after another, eating more than she required. Before long, the means and the end had changed places, and she'd started to kill for pleasure."

"...So she's killing every human she can get her hands on, and turning their corpses into mummies." Natsunagi's expression stiffened, and she hugged herself tightly.

"She hates humans. She eats their flesh and blood to extend her life, then turns their corpses into her minions and toys with them. The Necromancer Elizabeth. She is the enemy I most need to kill."

"You're not going to tell us that this Elizabeth is the one who torched the village near Reloaded's hometown, too, are you?" Had the old vampire only been eating her leftovers?

"The possibility can't be ruled out."

At that point, I understood why Scarlet was revealing so much. He was telling us that stopping Elizabeth was his mission, and he didn't want us interfering.

"But as the Ace Detective, stopping her is my job, isn't it?" Natsunagi broke in. Naturally, her expression wasn't exactly bursting with confidence. Even so, she'd gotten this job from the Federation Government, through Mia, and she didn't intend to abandon it that easily.

"This was not what we discussed, human." Scarlet glared at me. He was reproaching me for having failed to talk Natsunagi around. That was what the whole helicopter ride had been about.

"The situation's changed a bit, see. We took a request the other day that seems to involve vampires; that thing with that old vampire was part of it. So we may end up tangling with them whether we want to or not."

Of course, the fact that the two incidents overlapped might just have been coincidence. However, could we really write it off as chance, or blame it on my knack for getting dragged into stuff? Was there some other entirely different reason behind it? It seemed too early to say one way or the other.

"You humans are a troublesome lot."

My cold stare-down with Scarlet stretched on for a while, until finally the idol singer broke the silence. "I just had a brilliant idea. Let's form an alliance!"

Saikawa had been standing at the top of the slide, and now she slid down it

energetically, nailing her landing like a gymnast.

"An alliance? Between the Ace Detective and the Vampire?"

"Yeah! We're fighting the same enemy, right? Why shouldn't we team up? That was what the three of us did," Saikawa said with a smile.

"Come to think of it, that was how that happened, huh?" Natsunagi and I had gotten to know Saikawa in a similar way. SPES had been targeting Saikawa's left eye, and Natsunagi and I had also had business with them, so we'd teamed up. Since then, that alliance had transformed, leaving us as comrades with an unbreakable bond.

"You'd be okay with that, too, wouldn't you, Mr. Scarlet?" Saikawa ran up to him on light feet. "Right?" She peeked up at the vampire with her blue eye.

"It always ends like this when this girl gets involved." Scarlet cracked his neck. Unusually for the vampire king, he wore a look of resignation. Thinking back, when Scarlet had appeared with Bat and the undead Chameleon and offered to resurrect Saikawa's parents, her innocence had seemed to leave him dumbfounded.

"—Well, if I consider this to be another piece of guidance from the Singularity, then perhaps..." Scarlet glanced at me, then started toward Natsunagi.

In other words...

"Just don't hold me back, human."

"O-of course I won't!"

Their sharp glares clashed, but almost immediately, both their expressions softened.

And just like that, the Ace Detective and the Vampire formed a temporary alliance.

#### **♦** What this heart seeks

For the next few days, nothing particularly odd happened. We weren't confronted by the Necromancer Elizabeth that Scarlet had told us about, nor by

any of her minions, so we spent our spring vacation investigating Marie's request. Before I knew it, it was the first day of university.

It was April 1, the one day of the year when lying didn't come with the usual consequences. I dressed in a formal outfit that looked unbelievably bad on me (all because of the way Natsunagi insisted on styling my hair) and attended the entrance ceremony. I'd never imagined I'd be going to college.

Just two years ago, I'd been following Siesta on our rambling journey around the world. But those days had come to an abrupt end, I'd been admitted to high school, and now here I was, a university student. It was an incredibly strange feeling. How did my situation look to the girl who was still asleep in a hospital bed? Even if it was just a word or two, I wished she'd tell me.

"It's all thanks to her," Natsunagi said with a smile, after the entrance ceremony had ended.

However, it was the tears in her eyes that hit me the hardest, and all I could say was "Yeah."

Our first day of university passed, and then it was April 2. We'd had orientations from the different departments and registered for our required courses. Having finished, I was waiting for Natsunagi in a corner of the campus.

We might have been in the same department, but we'd been automatically sorted into different classes by our last names. That said, college students could decide which of the lectures to attend, so the classes we were in apparently wouldn't have much significance.

"It sure is noisy."

I sighed as I scanned the campus. I was watching upperclassmen recruit new students for their clubs. They held up signs, spoke through megaphones, and passed out flyers to the freshmen as they left the auditorium. It reminded me of a school festival.

Just then, I caught a glimpse of Natsunagi's face in the crowd. She was surrounded by upperclassmen and was forcing a smile, a ton of flyers in her

arms. Yeesh. Guess I'd better go help. I stepped into the middle of the circle.

"Sorry, she's with me."

Taking the startled Natsunagi's hand, I slipped out of the crowd and pulled her into the lecture building.

"Not, 'She's my girl'?" Natsunagi teased, once she'd relaxed a little.

"They weren't trying to pick you up."

"Ah-ha-ha. Still, college students sure are intense, aren't they? I got a million flyers."

"Yeah, they practically jumped you. Are you going to any of the clubs' new student events?"

"Not today, at least. After all, it's her birthday." Natsunagi smiled. It sounded as if the two of us would be heading to the hospital again tonight.

"We're stopping here first, though, right?"

I opened the door to the huge lecture hall. At a glance, the room looked as if it could hold four hundred students, and it was already at capacity. Past it, actually: A lot of students were standing. Everyone's eyes were fixed on a spot on the platform.

A professor from the Department of Psychology. What had his name been? Moriya?

He was still in his late thirties, but his white lab coat really made him look like a scholar. The topic written on the blackboard was *Human Consciousness*. Natsunagi and I joined the standing students to listen in on the lecture.

"He sure is popular. I can't believe he got these sorts of numbers for a preliminary lecture."

"Me either. I hear the lottery to get into his class is on a whole other level."

All university lectures were limited to a certain number of students. Whether you got to take the lectures you wanted was determined by a lottery system, and attending a preliminary lecture like this boosted your chances of being selected.

"Sorry for making you sit in on this with me, Kimizuka."

"Nah, I was interested, too. I wonder what a college professor who uses *hypnosis* is like."

Just a few days ago, Natsunagi had told me about a hypnotist who'd been all the rage in the media lately. What's more, she'd said he was a young professor working at the university we'd be attending. I'd wanted to get out of as much of the routine student stuff as I could, but for this my curiosity had gotten the better of me.

"Do you think hypnosis is real, Kimizuka?"

"I can't deny that it exists. But whether or not he can use it is another story."

As a matter of fact, Natsunagi's word-soul ability was something similar. Hypnosis, brainwashing, controlling someone—at the very least, we had to admit that special powers like those existed.

"It looks like he's about to give a demonstration."

The handsome Professor Moriya called a female student up onto the platform to be hypnotized. This was what everyone came to his lectures to see.

"Now look deep into my eyes."

Professor Moriya's low, honeyed voice echoed around the lecture hall. "Relax. That's right, give yourself fully over to me."

The professor touched the girl's forehead lightly with a finger, and she crumpled as if all her strength had deserted her. A stir ran through the students. Voices filled with curiosity and surprise erupted around the lecture hall.

After that, the professor's words went unchallenged. The girl opened her eyes, at which point he told her, "You are unable to move from that spot," and it was as if her feet had turned to stone. When he said, "You will now burst out laughing," she laughed so hard there were tears in her eyes.

"What do you think, Kimizuka?"

"It's possible she could be a plant."

Then, as if to refute our suspicions, Professor Moriya singled out a male

student and called him up to the platform. He put the man under hypnosis, just as before, then said, "Vinegar will seem like water to you," and made the guy drink an entire bottle of vinegar he'd just opened. It should have been physically impossible to tough that out...but the guy guzzled it down as if it didn't bother him one bit.

"There, you see?" After the demonstration was over, the professor spoke to the students, mic in hand. "Human consciousness and the five senses can all be easily swayed. The words of others can quite simply divert our actions and intentions. What do you think? Isn't it fascinating?"

Applause rang out. Frankly, it had been the sort of performance you could catch on TV all the time, but seeing it done live just hit differently. Or, well, it seemed to have hit everyone differently *but* me.

"I see there's a student among you who still doesn't believe."

Out of nowhere, our eyes met. I was standing way in the back of the lecture hall, but Professor Moriya's gaze was clearly focused on me.

"What do you say? It isn't every day you get an opportunity like this. Would you like to experience it for yourself?"

Did he mean hypnosis? Unfortunately, standing in front of crowds wasn't my thing.

"Thanks for agreeing. In that case, could you and the young lady come to the front?"

"...Hmm?"

I'd raised my right hand. For a second, I wondered if he'd somehow hypnotized me already, but it turned out Natsunagi had forced my hand into the air. Not fair.

"Oh, come on. It's a good opportunity, okay?"

"You're waaaay too interested in hypnosis."

What would happen if this got added to Natsunagi's list of weird habits? ... That was a pretty scary thought.

"Now, which of you would you like to be hypnotized—you or your

boyfriend?"

"We're not a couple, as you can see," Natsunagi said with a wry smile, glancing at my cranky expression.

"That won't be a problem. Human hearts change easily."

Then Professor Moriya fixed his brown eyes on me. "Besides, you really do care for her."

Those words seemed to soak into me.

I felt sleepy for just a moment, before his next words melted into my drowsy mind, spreading all the way through it. "When I clap my hands, those feelings will grow with every passing second."

He gave a sharp clap, and my eyes opened.

...My eyes opened? I didn't think I'd fallen asleep...

"Kimizuka?"

At the sound of my name, I turned. Natsunagi was standing there. Nagisa Natsunagi, college freshman. Her figure was even better than it had been when we first met, and the way she'd done her makeup made her look grown-up. Her personality was still a little sharp around the edges, as always, but I didn't hate that. The fact that she scolded me was probably proof she trusted me, and besides, she leaned on me sometimes, too. The disconnect between those two things, the way they balanced one another out...

"Kimizuka, are you okay? Your face looks a bit red."

Natsunagi tilted her head slightly. The way she looked up at me through her lashes was charming, and in spite of myself, I closed the distance between us; it was as if her eyes were drawing me in. For some reason, I had the urge to put my arms around her slim body.

...Was it okay to do that? How could it not be? After all, Natsunagi was just so cute.

"As you can see, if his subconscious is given even the smallest push, even a young man who seems cool and aloof will embrace his girlfriend without caring what others think."

I heard cheers.

At that point, I finally came to my senses. Natsunagi was in my arms, and her face was as red as an apple.

"...I'm double-killing you later."



Feeling her struggle half-heartedly, I hastily let Natsunagi go.

"...Sorry. I was being controlled."

Left with no other option, I had to accept that hypnotism was real. It was better than disgracing myself in public.

Professor Moriya gripped the mic, smiling in a way that girls probably loved. "If today's lecture caught your interest, I hope you'll sign up for my seminar, where we'll study this in greater depth. Together, we'll explore and experiment on human consciousness and hearts."

Thunderous applause echoed around the hall. The professor had ended up using *us* to recruit students for his seminar. With a strained laugh, Natsunagi stepped down from the platform.

I was about to follow her when my ears caught Professor Moriya's whisper.

"You're currently hesitating, confronted with a big question."

I abruptly stopped in my tracks.

"Have a talk with your consciousness. What is it your heart desires?"

The image of the white-haired detective, whose birthday it was that day, rose to mind.

What decision would I make in order to wake that sleeping beauty?

I remembered Stephen's question:

"What is it that you want to recover? The Ace Detective's life, or your memories with her?"

What exactly was I trying to save?

I couldn't believe it had taken me this long, but those words from the hypnotist had made me acutely aware of something: In the end, the only answer to that question was inside me.

## **♦ The mummy's call**

After the lecture, Natsunagi and I left the university. We stopped by a European-style sweets shop and bought a cake, then made for the hospital

where Siesta slept. Naturally, we were going to celebrate her birthday.

Joined by Noches, we ate the cake, and talked about old times and laughed together...but I didn't think these days would go on forever. None of us there thought they should, either. This wasn't the happy ending we were looking for.

After leaving the hospital, I'd split up with Natsunagi and was walking home by myself when I got a text. It was from Saikawa.

"Could you come to my house now?"

Something about her message made me feel uneasy, so I promptly caught a taxi and headed over. After half an hour or so, I reached the house, and Saikawa let me in.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it today. It was Siesta's birthday, but work was just too busy..."

"I figured. I just got a message from Charlie that said pretty much the same thing."

Charlotte Arisaka Anderson traveled all over the world as an agent. Even now, she was probably fighting around the clock in some unfamiliar place for the sake of justice.

"I want to see her, too. How long has it been now since she left Japan?"

"Well, that's the life she lives. In a sense, you're the same way, Saikawa."

Both Charlotte and Saikawa were following paths they believed in. I was sure Siesta was happy about that as well.

We'd been walking down the hall as we talked, and now Saikawa beckoned me into the living room.

"So what did you need?"

In response to my question, Saikawa set a large paulownia-wood box on the table. "Someone sent this to my house today." As she spoke, she lifted the lid of the box—to reveal a *mummy's right hand*.

"What the heck is that?"

Frankly, even the idea of taking it out of the box was awful. It was a withered

hand, severed at the wrist. It looked a lot like the hand of the undead mummy I'd seen at the park the other night.

"I don't know who sent it, but it was shipped to me personally."

"It must be from a vampire."

Right now, Elizabeth seemed like the most likely candidate. Why would she have chosen this way to get in touch with Saikawa, though?

"What do you think, Mr. Scarlet?" Saikawa said unexpectedly.

I looked around in a panic, and then—

"You have good instincts, sapphire girl."

A man in a white suit sat in an expensive-looking rocking chair in a corner of the room, sipping from a wine glass. The way he seemed to appear and disappear out of nowhere was a product of the wings the Inventor had given him that erased his presence.

"However, I do not think my transparency is so flimsy that your sapphire eye can see through it."

"Oh, it has nothing to do with this eye. I center myself and look with the eye in my heart—my mind's eye!" Saikawa said, sounding like a martial arts teacher.

"Anyway, Scarlet, what are you doing here?"

"It was you who formed this alliance," Scarlet said with an irritated look. That must have meant he was planning to help us. "The mummy's hand was no doubt the Necromancer's doing. Do you have any ideas as to why she would send it to you, sapphire girl?"

"...Actually, there is something that's been bothering me a little." Saikawa's expression turned serious. "A little while ago, during a project for a TV show, I met a girl who said she was my fan. She had a serious illness and was constantly bedridden. She reminded me of my former self, so I gave her a ring. As you'd expect, the jewel wasn't real, but it was a pretty ring set with a sapphire-colored stone, and..." Saikawa's eyes fell to the mummy's hand.

The fourth finger of the hand wore a rusted ring with a blue stone.

"Saikawa, don't tell me this mummy's hand belongs to..."

"I don't know. The ring may just look similar."

"In the first place, did that girl pass away?"

"I don't know that, either. I've asked some people who might, and I'm trying to get in touch with her."

...I see. Either way, the enemy had definitely sent this to Saikawa with malicious intent.

"Saikawa, are you okay? Um, emotionally, I mean."

"Yes. I made a promise to that girl. I told her that as long as she supported me, I'd keep singing and dancing and shining. I'd shine brighter than the stars, brighter than the sun, and I'd clear all her melancholy away. That means I'll never turn gloomy," Saikawa said, still smiling.

"...Right. Scarlet, what do you plan to do next?" I asked our new ally. The situation was still murky, but it was likely that Saikawa would be targeted. What was our next move going to be?

Scarlet gazed steadily at the wine glass in his hand, seemingly deep in thought. "Hmm? Oh, I was just wondering what vintage this wine was."

"Give me back the time I just spent waiting," I groused.

Scarlet ignored me and drank his wine, looking satisfied. His face, though... I'm not sure how to put it, and this may sound confusing, but he looked like an ordinary human.

"Shall I sing a song? Listening to music while you drink makes liquor taste even better."

"Saikawa, is that something a high school girl should be saying?" I forced a smile.

"No need," Scarlet said, without turning a hair. "I stopped listening to music quite some time ago."

"I...see." Saikawa backed down, sounding a bit defeated.

"Well, no matter. For the moment, you guard the sapphire girl tomorrow,"

Scarlet ordered, getting the conversation back on topic.

"Me? Just so you know, if we end up fighting vampires, I won't be much help."

"Do not speak so boldly of your own incompetence. Have you no shame?"

That really was a good reason to scold somebody; I couldn't even complain he was being unfair.

"Sorry, Saikawa, but I guess that's how it is. Starting today, I'll be staying here so I can guard you. Your bed's gonna be kind of cramped, but just tough it out."

"Kimizuka, were you even listening? Nobody said anything like that."

They hadn't? If I was going to be guarding her around the clock, I thought we'd have to share a bed, but if Saikawa was against it, then that was that.

"It's been a while, but I guess we'll do that again."

Saikawa looked puzzled.

"I'll be Yui-nya the idol's producer."

# **◆** Twenty-four hours with an idol

Even though it was the weekend, I went into town the next morning and found myself, rather uncharacteristically, sitting in a trendy café eating a breakfast meal set. It was nice to get a healthy breakfast for what was basically the price of a cup of coffee.

I hadn't developed a new, college-student habit of checking out local cafés just because I'd started a new phase in my life, though; I was waiting for someone, and I sipped my coffee, making it last.

"Guess whooo?!"

Fifteen minutes later, two small hands reached around me and covered my eyes from behind.

"I'd know your smell anywhere, Saikawa."

"...Couldn't you maybe go from my voice instead?" Looking a little weirded out, Saikawa sat down across from me.

"Did you finish your interview already?"

"Yes, and I talked plenty about the musical."

The interviewer had been sitting at a table in the back until just a few minutes ago, but they were gone now. Saikawa had had an interview here, which was why I'd found myself waiting in a café bright and early in the morning.

"An early-morning job on a day when you don't have to go to school? That's rough."

"Yeah, my work schedule is packed basically all the way up until tonight."

So she was as busy as ever, huh? It probably just went to show how much the world loved Saikawa right now. Still...

"I feel about bad about this, but thanks for being my producer for the whole day!"

"Sure. Though I dunno what I'll actually be able to do."

After the incident the previous day, we'd decided that I would accompany Saikawa at work. That said, I was more of a manager than a producer, and more gofer-slash-attendant than bodyguard.

"By the way, does Nagisa know about this?"

"Yeah, I told her. She asked me to keep a close eye on you."

In the meantime, Natsunagi would continue working on Marie's request.

"That means it's okay for me to have you all to myself today! Eh-heh-heh!" Saikawa chuckled, flashing me a peace sign. Even if that was just her acting like an idol, she was so cunning and cute that I didn't mind being fooled.

"All right, should we head out?"

I picked up the receipt, holding out my free hand to Saikawa.

"Oh, for a handshake, I hope you'll buy one of my CDs!"

"You've gotta be kidding..."

After that early interview, we headed to a radio station.

Saikawa was appearing live for just five minutes as a guest on a radio show.

She went into it with barely any time to check the script, but she told a few personal stories, and managed to plug the musical and her upcoming new releases.

"Hey, Saikawa. You just got a few laughs with that story about how you messed up trying to cook, but isn't cooking one of your fortes?"

"Well, yes. But a story about me failing is cuter for my fans, don't you think? It's important to make them want to watch over and protect me."

"The way you brand yourself is kind of amazing... Then that wasn't a lie, but an act?"

"Uh-huh. Some people might call it an act, but I call it a dream!"

As we talked, we were already on the way to our next destination: a TV station.

Saikawa was appearing on a music program, and she sang some new songs and talked with the emcee and other guests, adding her personal touch to twelve minutes of the half-hour show. When an equipment malfunction stopped one of her songs partway through, she told the studio, "I can sing acapella, too!" easing the tension and showing off just how much of a pro she really was. No wonder the staff loved her so much.

By the time the program ended, it was after lunch, and we ate in the car on the way to her recording session.

This would be her fifth song in six months of consecutive releases. While Saikawa was in the recording booth, they gave her all sorts of instructions and stopped her multiple times for retakes—but even then she never stopped smiling, saying "Sure thing! Let's go one more time!" I knew Marie was coaching her, and I hoped that Saikawa was seeing results.

When the recording session was over, we got back in the car, and Saikawa started live streaming to her fans right then and there. Smartphone in hand, she chatted and riffed off comments. One of these streams of hers had helped me out just the other day, and Saikawa never failed to provide this sort of fan service.

"All right, see you later! Tomorrow's live stream should start around nine

PM!"

Thirty minutes later, after having talked basically the whole time, Saikawa ended the live stream and put her phone away.

Immediately, she started coughing a little.

"You okay? Here, water...and a cough drop."

"Thank you. Heh-heh. I guess I tired out my throat a bit."

Giving me an embarrassed smile, Saikawa drank the water, then popped the cough drop into her mouth.

She'd been on the move since early that morning. It was evening now, but she still wasn't done for the day; apparently, she had a musical rehearsal starting at nine o'clock that night.

"The opening ceremony for the international expo is coming up, too. I need to get myself fired up for that."

From what I'd heard, one of Saikawa's new releases had been adopted as the theme song for an event, and she'd be performing it there. She wasn't just an idol who represented Japan now; she was spreading her wings on a global stage.

"Don't push yourself too hard."

"It makes me happy to be able to push myself."

Yeesh. Responding with a comment and a smile like that was cheating.

"So, Saikawa. About your schedule: What's going on here?"

It was after five o'clock now. There was still quite a while until the musical rehearsal, but her schedule had emptied out.

"Oh, actually, one of my jobs got canceled, so I quickly found something else to fill the slot."

"You substituted one job with *another* job?" Feeling a little exasperated, I glanced absentmindedly out the car window, then my breath caught in my throat. I'd seen something.

"Kimizuka? What's the matter?"

"No, it's nothing. I just recognize the scenery."

Not even five minutes later, the car stopped. I got out of the car after Saikawa, who pointed to a particular building. "This is it."

"What will you be doing here?"

"Volunteering. They asked if I'd sing one of my songs."

"You accept requests like that, too? That's really generous of you."

"Hardly! I do it because my ambition is to dominate the entire population of the world with my smile!" Saikawa threw back her shoulders and gave a deep, villainous laugh, like the world's kindest demon king.

"Oh, sorry. I haven't told you what kind of place this is yet. I guess you'd call it a..." But instead of explaining, she hesitated and gave me a puzzled look; I'd started into the building without waiting.

I'd known what this place was all along.

"It's a children's home, right?"

"That's...right. But...how did you know?"

How did I know about this facility? What sort of place was it to me?

In a sentence, well...

"Because this is where I grew up."

## **♦** The ocean, jewels, and pretty dresses

After Saikawa's volunteer performance at the facility, we drove to an aquarium a short distance away.

It was seven-thirty, just before closing time, and there weren't many people inside. The lights were dim, so if we disguised Saikawa a little with a hat and a face mask, nobody would recognize her.

"Wooow! A ray, it's a ray! It's huge!"

Saikawa plastered herself against a big tank, eyes sparkling.

She had an hour of downtime. We'd stopped here at Saikawa's request to let

her recharge a bit before the rehearsal.

"You like aquariums that much?"

"Yes, because they're overflowing with the same color as my eye! Oh, there are clown fish, too!" Saikawa said, pointing. I went over to stand beside her.

"After clown fish eggs hatch, the babies head out into the ocean immediately," I told her.

"You know a lot about them. Is that something you heard from Siesta, long ago?"

I wasn't actually sure. Siesta had showered me with her encyclopedic knowledge basically every day, though.

"It must be lonely having to leave your parents before you grow up." Saikawa gazed at the clown fish as if she were seeing herself in them.

"Well, clown fish do form symbiotic relationships with sea anemones, so they're not entirely alone."

"...That's true. Heh-heh. Does that mean you're an anemone, Kimizuka?"

If she was going to put it that way, then wouldn't her fans have been the anemones? The thought crossed my mind, but Saikawa moved on to the next tank without waiting for my comeback. It was full of soft, drifting jellyfish.

"They're so pretty."

The lights made the numerous jellyfish all shine blue. Saikawa stared at them, fascinated.

"Huh? Kimizuka, aren't you supposed to tell me 'You're prettier'?"

"What, you were waiting for me to say that?"

Come to think of it, a certain detective had said the same thing to me last Christmas.

"Heh-heh. I was joking." Saikawa gave a little giggle, then smiled softly. "I really do love pretty things, though."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. Aquariums, summer skies, sapphires, dresses the color of the ocean... I dress up in pretty costumes and turn words that sound too pretty to be true into songs. That's my job."

"You did say something like that earlier, didn't you?"

"Yeah. It's something my parents taught me." Saikawa touched the jellyfish tank gently. "I want to always stay pretty... But that's why things didn't go to plan earlier."

She probably meant what had happened at the children's home.

There had been twenty kids at the facility.

Yui Saikawa was a nationally popular idol who'd dropped in for a surprise visit, and most of the kids had been ecstatic. They'd jumped for joy, enjoying Saikawa's songs and her interactions with them with all their hearts.

A few of them hadn't been like that, though.

The kids who lived at the facility had all kinds of different circumstances. Some were orphaned, others had parents who'd abandoned them, and those boys and girls hadn't all been able to accept Saikawa's overflowing innocence... her sparkle. They'd stayed in a corner while she sang, listening as if they were bored.

"I'm sorry," Saikawa said, turning and bowing to me. "And thank you."

"I don't think you have any reason to say either of those things to me."

"It was all thanks to you. You were the one those children opened up to."

While most of the children gathered around Saikawa, I'd gone over to talk to the ones in the corner. In general, I wasn't great with kids, and even that group had been wary of me at first as well.

I had a secret weapon, though. The very first thing I said made their eyes widen. It was just one sentence, but that was all it took.

"I grew up in this facility, just like you."

That had caught their interest a little. Then I'd talked about what it was like back then and told them some stories they could relate to, and in the end, I'd

gotten them to smile.

I was happy telling them anything about my past and what I'd been through if I thought it would help them. I told the kids they could play dirty, act recklessly, and live brazenly at times. That they had the choice to do all of those things.

I'd done what Danny Bryant had done for me, way back when.

"But you could have talked about that stuff too if you'd wanted to, right, Saikawa?"

Saikawa also had a few things in common with the kids at that facility. Her life certainly hadn't always been pretty. Even if I'd done nothing, I was sure she would've been able to establish a rapport with those kids.

"Actually, I did consider trying at first... But I couldn't do it."

Saikawa started walking, and I followed her.

Before long, we came to another big tank. All sorts of fish were flitting through the water, graceful and beautiful. This was the aquarium's biggest tank.

"No matter how busy I am, I never want my fans to see me tired. No matter how painful my past may have been, I can't talk about it in detail. The sort of idol I'm trying to become can't afford to do that."

"Is that why you stayed cheerful from start to finish back there?"

Saikawa nodded. "It's also what I promised my parents. I have to keep shining as an idol. I have to wear pretty dresses and live by pretty words."

The day before, Saikawa had said something similar talking about that fan of hers. She'd said she'd shine brighter than all the stars and the sun. That she'd keep darkness and shadows hidden inside herself and only show her fans her brilliance. That was the sort of idol Yui Saikawa wanted to become. Her ideal.

"I don't feel obligated to do that; it's what I want to do. My dream."

She wasn't filled with grim resolve. Her expression wasn't full of sorrow. Standing in front of that enormous blue tank, Yui Saikawa made a passionate appeal.

I listened to her quietly. Hearing about the way she lived and her choices was

probably the most important job I'd done all day.

"That's why... That's why I'll—!" Saikawa had raised her voice slightly, but just then, reflected in the tank, I saw her eyes widen.

Behind her, an eerie shape swayed.

I hurriedly turned around—but in that moment, the shape had vanished.

"...It's all right." Saikawa quietly closed her eyes, as if she were calming herself down. She didn't mention what had just happened.

However, in the next second she'd removed her eye patch, her expression filled with determination.

"I'll sing. As long as my voice lasts, I'll keep singing just for you!"

At first, she'd spoken as if she were quietly savoring the words, but by the end of the sentence, Saikawa was shouting in a voice that had fire in it.

The empty aquarium was still.

In the dark building, a blue light illuminated her, almost like a spotlight.

After a little while, I called out, "Saikawa," and she slowly turned to me.

"How was actress Yui Saikawa's utterly convincing performance?"

She was wearing a smile. Apparently, she'd been rehearsing her lines from the musical.

I couldn't see them as just a lie, though. It hadn't felt like she was acting.

Reality and ideals. The surface and what was hidden beneath.

Right now, those things were mingling together. Yui Saikawa, the person, was on the verge of becoming an idol, a literal object of worship.

"All right. Time to go to work."

Still smiling, Saikawa set off ahead of me.

It wasn't something that should have made me feel lonely.

And yet I got the feeling that her back was pulling further and further away, and I walked just a little bit faster.

#### **◆ Red and black**

Leaving the aquarium, we took a taxi to the musical's rehearsal site. I dropped Saikawa off at the venue, then went to a nearby café to kill time until she was done.

It was a nice, old-fashioned place. A bell tinkled as I opened the door, and the proprietor showed me to a table on the second floor. I was the only customer there. I took a seat by the window, ordered the house blend, and put my feet up a bit. I probably should have avoided caffeine this late in the evening, but I really doubted I'd be able to sleep that night anyway.

After a short wait, my coffee arrived. I didn't add any sugar. Enjoying the aroma of the gently swirling steam, I took a few tiny sips.

"A mere human, summoning me. That is a capital offense."

The seat across from me had been empty a second ago, but a figure occupied it now: Scarlet, the white-suited vampire. Although he grumbled, he appeared satisfied with his coffee.

"Ethiopian, hmm? It has quite a nice aroma."

"So you're a fan of coffee, too."

"Even vampires have their indulgences."

Was that what the wine from the day before had been? It sounded like the human blood he occasionally drank from a glass was just for nourishment.

"I assume you cleared the area."

"Yeah. This café was picked out by the Men in Black, so you can rest easy."

"You use the Men in Black when you aren't a Tuner? Another capital offense."

"Quit executing people at the drop of a hat. I do my best, all right?"

I wished he'd give me a bit more credit for surviving this long despite my knack for getting dragged into things.

"...So, Scarlet. That thing at the aquarium was an undead mummy, right?"

Saikawa had also noticed that flickering shadow I'd glimpsed. It had almost definitely been one of Elizabeth's minions, and I was just as sure that Scarlet had dealt with it immediately.

"It was the girl's big moment; any interruption would have spoiled it," Scarlet said with a faint smile. Even though he'd left guarding Saikawa to me, apparently he'd been watching over her from the shadows.

"What is the enemy trying to accomplish here?"

"Who can say? If I knew that, I certainly wouldn't be sitting here enjoying a cup of coffee right now."

...I guess not. It might not have made a whole lot of sense, but he did have a point. I changed tack. "Say, Scarlet, why did you become a Tuner?"

Silence. The only sound was the *clink* of the vampire returning his cup to its saucer.

Scarlet had already told us why he was hunting his own race: There were evil vampires in the world, and it was his mission to stop them.

Why, though? I'd never heard how he'd first become a Tuner. Siesta had decided to become a hero in order to defeat Seed, and Reloaded, to kill the Seven Deadly Sins. What about the Vampire, then?

"Am I under any obligation to answer that question?" Scarlet asked, crossing his legs arrogantly.

"You formed an alliance with the detective, remember?" That had to mean he didn't mind cooperating a little.

"That is true, but you are not the detective."

"Detectives and assistants are a package deal, so don't worry about that. Any information we gather is shared; Natsunagi and I always bare everything with one another."

"I'm impressed you managed to say that with a straight face." Scarlet looked mildly appalled. "You humans always seek the answer to the story immediately. You want to know the truth. It's an abysmal habit. The boundaries between

matters aren't so cut-and-dried that you can separate them into red and black."

"Don't you mean black and white?"

Or was it "red" for blood? And "black" was the color of night. Thus "red and black."

"No. It's Stendhal."

"Oh, you mean The Red and the Black...?"

Who'd have thought vampires would be fond of French literature?

"Well, no matter. Ask your question once more. Such is the duty of an ally," he said.

From past experience, I knew very well that Scarlet was particularly sensitive to alliances and contracts. That was why I used them to back up my question when I asked it again: How had he come to be a Tuner?

"I was born thirty years ago in a slum of sorts where vampires lived, which is where I was raised," Scarlet said, beginning his story. "By the time I was old enough to be aware of the world, my parents were gone. They may have abandoned me in that town soon after my birth, or they may have died young. Since vampires only live around thirty years, the latter possibility is quite likely. Regardless, by the time I had begun to develop an idea of who I was, my life was already lacking in most things, including food."

Scarlet gave a self-deprecating smile. He wasn't criticizing himself, though, nor was it the expression of a tragic hero. It was an expression of dignity.

"I certainly wasn't unhappy. Had I been human, no doubt I would have been unable to avoid malnutrition, but fortunately, I was a vampire. While we are not immortal, for the duration of our short lives, we are more resilient than any other living creature. The occasional morsel of human blood was enough to allow me to survive. I was fortunate." This time, Scarlet gave a genuine smile.

"Not having family or friends doesn't necessarily mean you're unhappy. I'm with you on that," I told him. I was speaking from my own experience.

Being completely on my own, not having a family. A long time ago, I'd had someone in my life who'd told me I didn't even have to tack those things onto

the end of my profile.

"Well, I simply had no blood relations. I did have an old friend."

"No way. You're selling me out?"

Seriously, how did a guy like this manage to have friends?

...Come to think of it, hadn't he said he'd known our common enemy Elizabeth for a long time? Was she the "old friend" he was talking about?

"There were many things about life in that town that were illogical, but it wasn't necessarily dull. This world built by humans has pleasant food, literature, and music. Even for vampires, those things sometimes become a source of hope."

As he spoke, Scarlet's gaze grew rather distant.

His mention of music tugged at me a little; Scarlet had told Saikawa that he'd stopped listening to it. He still seemed to enjoy reading, though, so why had he started distancing himself from music?

"However, one day, a vampire burned my town to the ground."

The air instantly grew colder, and I couldn't say a word.

"The flames that swallowed the streets consumed all buildings, and all life. Naturally, that included myself and my kin. Unfortunately, we have exceptional regenerative abilities; every time the flames destroyed our cells, they would regrow, only to be burned and reborn again and again. That hell went on for days—until every vampire but myself was dead."

Scarlet gazed out the window at the moon.

There was nothing frightening about him in that moment. His profile was full of deep sorrow.

"It appears that even among vampires, my powers of regeneration are particularly strong. When the flames at last died down, I stood alone amidst a sea of blackened corpses, and laughed. 'I have these amazing regenerative powers, yet I have only fifteen years left to live?'"

Scarlet was thirty now. What he was telling me about must have happened

fifteen years ago.

"That was when the authorities arrived at the scorched wasteland that had once been our town."

"Federation Government officials?"

"That's right. They asked me if I would become a Tuner. If I would help them defeat evil vampires."

...I see. In the other cases I'd heard about, Mia had been recruited into the Tuners by Siesta, and Stephen had recruited Rill. However, the Federation Government had made contact with Scarlet directly.

"But aren't vampires and the Federation Government on bad terms? After all, the ones who gave the order to create your race in the first place were—"

"Only fools let nearsighted personal grudges and fleeting emotions obscure their goals," Scarlet said, cutting me off. "I considered how best to use my remaining fifteen years, and I made my decision: I would use my strength to destroy all the evil vampires. That was what I was born to do."

Scarlet drained the last of his coffee, as if he'd said all he had to say.

He still hadn't told me the most important piece of information, though.

"Who was the vampire who burned your town?"

Who was Scarlet's true enemy?

Was he saying it had been Elizabeth?

"Foolish human." Scarlet gave a contemptuous snort. "As I said: Matters cannot always be delineated in terms of red and black."



"...You mean there's no need for you to know who actually did it?" I asked. Scarlet's gaze returned to the moon in the night sky.

"I will simply carry out my mission until all vampire blood is extinct."



## Side Yui

The moment I finished my vocal training at the studio, I sank weakly to the floor. The fatigue was more mental than physical; I'd never put so much thought into singing before.

"Wonderful work, Yui. It's hard trying something new, isn't it?"

The kind voice belonged to Marie, who'd agreed to coach me. I'd been stressing out about techniques and mindsets for singing in a musical instead of as an idol, and she'd taken me on as her student.

"Drink this if you'd like."

"Thank you!" Marie had handed me a water bottle, and I gulped down its contents. "What brand of mineral water is this? My body feels all hot now!"

"It's hot water with honey and ginger. I didn't expect you to drink it all in one go like that."

Ah, that explained why I suddenly felt like I was boiling.

"I have plenty of throat drops, too. Would you like some?"

"Yes, please. Ten of them! Oh, but I don't like mint!"

Marie filled my cupped palm with strawberry candy. I love people who spoil me! ...Though she'd been pretty strict during the lesson.

"It's vital to look after your throat. Granted, I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that."

"...Sorry. I haven't had the time or energy to pay attention to it lately." I knew there was no point in making excuses, but I did anyway.

"Well, I only carry around this sort of thing because I need it myself."

"Um, are you also taking care of your throat because you're a singer, Marie?"

"That's part of it, but I seem to be physically frail by nature. Even the weather tends to affect my condition."

Ah, that made sense. I often got migraines if it rained or when the pressure dropped.

"What do you do at times like that, Marie? When your body just refuses to cooperate or your throat is acting up."

"There's nothing to do but wait for a day when I'm able to sing again, of course."

...I knew it. I'd thought that was probably how it went, but even so, a strange sense of unease was spreading somewhere in my heart. It was directed at myself, not at Marie.

"Is something wrong?" Marie asked gently, sitting down beside me.

"It's just, even if I'm not in the best shape, my schedule won't wait for me."

My musical rehearsals. My new song releases. There was a big event just around the corner as well, and every second of my spare time was filled with singing and dance lessons. Right now, I didn't have any time to stand around.

That had been my ideal and my goal for years now, though. I'd wanted to become a shiny-clean, pretty idol who was always sparkling. I was sure I wasn't there yet.

"Why are you an idol, Yui?"

Marie's question almost made me flinch.

Why was I an idol? What had made me want to become one? Telling her that would mean talking about my slightly dark past. Still, trying to gloss that over with Marie seemed pretty pointless, so I told her.

I said that I'd been sick as a child, which had made me quiet and withdrawn. That a beautiful false sapphire eye had given me courage. That I'd started to work as an idol because I wanted to broaden my horizons... That my mom and

dad had died, and that I kept working hard as an idol because I wanted them to look down from heaven and see me doing my very best.

As I told her all that, Marie listened kindly and nodded.

"Is that still why you do it?" she asked. She wanted to know if I was still singing for my parents' sakes.

"Mm... I'm not sure. In all honesty, I think I used to be dependent on them. That isn't true now, though. Wanting to sparkle and shine has turned into my own way of life."

Right. That's how I stay so positive! I flashed a mental peace sign; there was no time for brooding.

"In that case, who do you sing for now, Yui?"

"Huh? Well, for my fans, of course."

"Who do you mean when you say 'fans'?"

Hmm. Was this a riddle? Marie looked dead serious, though.

"When you say 'my fans,' do you think of specific faces?"

"Well..."

There were regular events, of course; meeting fans and shaking their hands, that sort of thing. I also interacted with people during my daily live streams, so I remembered a lot of names and faces... That was true of the sick little girl the mummified hand had reminded me of, as well. Still, when I said "my fans" in that general sort of way, whose face came to mind? I couldn't answer that question right away.

"I'm a traveling singer. The stages I sing on are always far smaller than the ones where you perform as an idol, but that means I'm able to look out across my whole audience. I'm more aware of the individuals I'm singing to."

"... I see. So that's what you mean when you ask who I sing for?"

"Yes. Just staying conscious of that may change the way you sing onstage."

Being an idol was the peak of entertainment, and it was only natural to try to make sure that everyone in the venue enjoyed themselves. But thinking about singing a song for a specific person? Maybe that was the issue I needed to tackle next, now that I wasn't doing it for my parents anymore. Why was I singing? Who was I singing for?

"Is there someone you want to sing for, Marie?"

She'd said she was able to see her audiences' faces because she was a wandering singer, but if she sang right here, this very minute, who would she sing for? I didn't know myself well enough, so I asked her instead.

"I think I've probably always loved songs." Marie still couldn't remember her past, but she gazed up at the ceiling, a distant look in her eyes. "I must have sung the songs I loved for someone. So I think I must still sing for that person."



# **Chapter 3**

#### **◆ The world's worst criminal**

Two weeks had passed since the incident at the aquarium. During that time, we'd managed to find out what had happened to the sick fan Saikawa had been concerned about: She'd recently had surgery in America and was still in the hospital over there. In other words, the mummified hand had nothing to do with her.

That meant we still didn't know what the enemy was after. Even so, Saikawa was delighted that her fan was safe, and she began pushing herself even harder at work. It was probably because she'd reaffirmed how she wanted to live, as her ideal idol.

She never let her fans see her looking gloomy, never complained, and never stopped smiling. She wore pretty dresses and kept on singing with her pretty voice...even when people said it was all just a pretty lie.

One day, Natsunagi and I visited the Metropolitan Police Department... Not because I'd committed a crime or something. We had business with someone in the building.

"It's always such a big help that people recognize me," I said.

We were sitting on the sofa in the room we'd been shown to, waiting for the person we were there to see.

"In a bad way, maybe. All the station personnel looked disgusted when they saw you, Kimizuka."

"That's because I've been coming here for ages. Mostly on false charges."

Unless this trouble-magnet predisposition of mine got fixed, I'd probably be imposing on the police, prosecutors, and lawyers for the rest of my life. I guess you could add detectives to that list, too.

After we'd waited a while, the person we were waiting for yanked the door

open and stalked in. "Dammit. Why are you people here?"

It was a certain disgruntled, red-haired police officer—Ms. Fuubi.

However, she was followed by an unexpected guest.

"Huh? Ookami?" Natsunagi's eyes widened.

Ookami was the detective's former proxy assistant, a member of the Security Police, and several other things—but all else aside, he was *Ookami*. The last time we'd seen him had been when we defeated Gluttony. Who'd have thought we'd run into him again like this?

"Ookami, what are you doing here? Natsunagi's got all the assistants she needs."

"I'm here on other business today. In fact, Kimihiko Kimizuka, I'm more surprised to see you here."

After brushing me off, Ookami politely greeted Natsunagi. "It's been a long time, Ace Detective."

Natsunagi waved back. "Long time no see!"

These two get along really well, huh?

"So you and Ookami know each other, Ms. Fuubi?"

Natsunagi looked from one to the other. Both of them had public positions with the police, and they each had undercover jobs as well. They seemed to have a similar sort of status.

"Are you about the same age, too?"

"I'm younger," Ms. Fuubi snapped, shooting me a glare. Apparently, she was pretty sensitive about that.

"You make a pretty good-looking couple, though," Natsunagi said with a grin.

Ms. Fuubi looked disgusted, while Ookami replied, "Unfortunately, I'm not even on her radar. She's still—"

"Enough, Ookami," Ms. Fuubi said, shutting him down. Even if she was younger, Ms. Fuubi still had seniority when it came to their private jobs.

"Forgive me," Ookami apologized. But what had he been about to say?

"So what do you two need? Is this about the mummy incident?" We hadn't spoken with Ms. Fuubi about that, ever since she'd first called to share what she knew with me.

"I see you're already in the thick of it. The mummies are vampire-related, right?"

"Yes, well. That means they should have been the Ace Detective's job, but..."

I explained about Natsunagi and Scarlet's alliance and gave them a brief rundown of Elizabeth's story.

After I'd finished, Ms. Fuubi smiled sympathetically. "Sounds like it's turned into a pain in the butt. It's all yours, though," she said, fluttering a hand at us. "I'm busy with my own thing."

"Except you might have been pulled into this already." Natsunagi kept her eyes on Ms. Fuubi, and the corners of her lips rose slightly. "After all, I brought him here."

She pinched my sleeve between her fingertips.

Picking up on what she meant, Ms. Fuubi grimaced a little.

"I bet the previous detective did that all the time, too," Natsunagi continued. "She took him to incident sites, put him in contact with lots of people, and used the 'Singularity' as a wedge to pry open connections. She hoped they'd pay off one day."

The Singularity—my knack for getting dragged into trouble. Incidents tended to gravitate toward me, which conversely meant that if I was around, those incidents were bound to be solved at some point.

Naturally, I needed somebody to be the Holmes to my Watson. It wasn't just the detective, though—everyone who was involved with me became an important figure. A character in the story. That was my predisposition, my fundamental nature.

"...Tch! At the very least, I don't plan to actively involve myself in this incident."

"Yes, that's fine. If not this time, though, I'm sure you'll get involved in some other incident someday, and save us. Or maybe it'll be the other way around... Just kidding."

I really didn't think Ms. Fuubi would ever seriously ask us for help, but this seemed like a good time to trust the detective's instincts and keep my mouth shut.

"Well, you've said your piece, so go home. I've got something to discuss with Ookami here." Lighting a cigarette, Ms. Fuubi tried to run us off.

Geez. It didn't feel nice being given the cold shoulder. "Ookami, say something to her, wouldja?"

"Don't involve me in this. Why should I take your side?" Ookami gave me a disgusted—or rather, mocking—look.

"Ookami, please," Natsunagi chimed in.

"If it's a request from the Ace Detective, then I have no choice."

"Hey, Ookami. That was a pretty drastic personality change you just pulled."

Yeah, it was official: I was never gonna get along with this guy.

"If we're talking about *that* incident, the Ace Detective is probably connected to it, in any case. Would you mind...?" Ookami politely asked Ms. Fuubi. In terms of their private jobs, apparently she did outrank him.

Ms. Fuubi sighed, thought for a few moments, then got down to business. "It's about the Seven Deadly Sins."

I hadn't been expecting to hear her say that, and it showed on my face.

The Seven Deadly Sins were the Magical Girl's former enemies. But I'd thought their story was already over.

"What were those things anyway?" Ms. Fuubi asked Ookami. "You're the expert, so I wanted to get your take on it."

Ookami had investigated the supernaturals independently to avenge the death of his old friend, the former Enforcer.

"I believe there's another, more qualified expert..."

"I'm planning to ask the Magical Girl, too, once things have calmed down and she's healed up a bit more." In her own way, Ms. Fuubi was being considerate of Reloaded, who'd just stepped off the front lines. "Ookami. What do you think of them? And don't give me the general lines like, 'They're enemies of the world that represent human malice.' Any idea what they actually are?"

There were all sorts of theories: People who'd had weapons transplanted all over their bodies. Human-devil chimera. Still, Ookami had once told me that the origins of the Seven Deadly Sins were still unclear.

"My views on that haven't changed: I don't know. Even the Oracle couldn't see what they really were. I'm not even a Tuner. But..." Ookami narrowed his eyes. "If you'll settle for a theory instead of hard facts, I have one of those."

"That's fine. Lay it on me." Ms. Fuubi sounded as if she had some solid suspicions of her own.

"I suspect Arsene, the Phantom Thief, is involved."

Natsunagi and I exchanged a look. That name belonged to an enemy I'd faced just once, last summer, with Siesta.

"The Phantom Thief was imprisoned for the crime of stealing the sacred text. However, he somehow killed three of the Seven Deadly Sins from jail, and he was pardoned in recognition of that achievement. It all seems far too neat." Ookami took out a cigarette and lit it. "I don't know exactly how he did it, but my theory is that Arsene made the supernaturals."

I raised my hand. "Then...you're saying it was all orchestrated by the Phantom Thief?"

"Right. That's how he managed to make it look as if he'd killed the supernaturals from prison... Granted, he may have actually done it," Ookami added. "So? Thoughts?" He turned the conversation back to Ms. Fuubi.

"That's pretty much what I thought, too," Ms. Fuubi said, lighting a second cigarette. "Something kept nagging at me about that incident, and when I checked into it, I ended up drawing the same conclusion. Phantom Thief Arsene was and still is our enemy—there's no doubt about that. But his tendrils may reach deeper than I first thought."

"...So that's why you helped us during the incident with Rill: You thought there was something odd about the supernaturals all along, and you guessed that Arsene was involved." Natsunagi nodded as if everything made sense to her now.

In general, Tuners weren't allowed to get involved in the jobs of other Tuners. Yet despite this, Ms. Fuubi had used excuses like controlling traffic and clearing the area to stay in the fight against the supernatural, right up until the end. Apparently, she'd had her reasons for doing so.

"Anyway, Kimizuka."

"Ms. Fuubi, for some weird reason, hearing you say my name makes my heart skip a beat."

"Anyway, you damn brat." Did she really have to rephrase it like that? "You've heard the name 'Abel' before, right?"

The question had come out of nowhere, and my reaction was delayed for a moment.

I did know the guy, though.

"Who?" Natsunagi asked.

After a pause, I gave her the man's full name. "Abel A. Schoenberg. He's a shadowy criminal who's rumored to be behind all sorts of unsolved incidents worldwide."

It was said that he'd secretly been pulling the strings behind a whole spate of serious crimes. Yet no one had been able to uncover his real identity, and he was currently being pursued by the police and various other justice organizations across the world.

In fact, during my travels with Siesta, I'd gotten us dragged into an incident involving Abel. We hadn't managed to catch him back then, either, and Siesta had postponed the matter because she'd been pursuing SPES.

"...I didn't know about that. It's hard to believe such a dangerous criminal hasn't been caught yet," said Natsunagi.

"For a time, destroying Abel was the Enforcer's mission, but Amon was killed

by the Seven Deadly Sins before he could carry it out," explained Ookami. He and Douglas Amon, the former Enforcer, had been old friends.

As I'd thought, Abel had been designated an enemy of the world. So who was in charge of taking him out now? Our attention naturally converged on one person.

"That's right. It's my job." Ms. Fuubi stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray. "Getting rid of Abel is the Assassin's current mission. I don't even need proof of his crimes. They told me to ignore the presumption of innocence and kill him as soon as I find him."

Fuubi Kase told us that killing people for the sake of justice was the Assassin's mission, even if they hadn't actually committed a crime.

"But why bring up Abel at a time like this?"

"They say he always makes total strangers carry out his crimes, although no one knows how he does it. He manipulates them so he never gets his own hands dirty. It's not exactly the same, but does that remind you of anyone else?"

Ms. Fuubi's question dredged up several possibilities from my memories—and I told her the theory I least wanted to be true. "Arsene the Phantom Thief can steal people's hearts and manipulate them."

It had happened last summer, right after we defeated Seed. While in New York for a Federal Council, Siesta and I had gotten dragged into a minor incident. Men with guns had demanded the release of a certain prisoner and tried to barricade themselves in the cafeteria.

Since Siesta had been there, the incident had quickly been resolved. However, strangely enough, the criminals had never even met the prisoner in question. They'd idolized him and perpetrated the incident for his benefit.

That prisoner had been Phantom Thief Arsene. Siesta and I had also run into him a little while later, but we hadn't been able to catch him.

"It can't be, though. You're saying Abel's true identity is Arsene?"

"It's just a hypothesis I came up with while researching a few different things.

However, if it's true—it'll turn the world upside down," Ms. Fuubi said, staring at the white ceiling.

"I'll be the one to catch him."

That remark brought Ms. Fuubi's eyes back down, and both Ookami and I looked at the speaker: Natsunagi.

"Catching the Phantom Thief is my job. The previous detective told me so." Her unwavering eyes gazed out into the distance, and the force of her soul was behind those fervent words.

The detective sensed the presence of a great, unfathomable evil, yet she still walked toward the future.

"Haaaah, I swear. Are you people idiots?" Ms. Fuubi suddenly smiled, as if all the fight had gone out of her.

"Keep your paws off my case."

#### ◆ Witch and ancestor

After we left the police station, Natsunagi and I went straight to see Marie, the erstwhile Parasol Witch.

Vampires weren't the only problem we had. For the past several weeks, Natsunagi and I had been investigating the village Marie had asked us to find. We'd finally come up with a hypothesis, so today, for the first time in a little while, we'd made contact with our client.

"I'm sorry I can't offer much in the way of hospitality," Marie apologized playfully with a wink.

"Oh, no! The coffee's really good." Natsunagi smiled and picked up her cup.

Marie had invited us to her apartment, and Natsunagi and I were sitting on the sofa.

"You don't have much furniture, do you?"

There was no TV, or even any knickknacks. There wasn't much of anything, really; it was like those minimalist apartments I sometimes saw in magazines.

"A necessity, sadly, as I've been traveling from place to place in search of my hometown."

"Right. Well, I get how you feel; I used to live like that, too."

Marie was probably only staying in Japan temporarily.

"I've thought this for a while now, Kimizuka, but you almost never speak politely, even to people older than you," Natsunagi pointed out, having heard my back-and-forth with Marie.

"Nah. I even talk to Ms. Fuubi like an equal about half the time. Half-assed politeness and being solicitous just create psychological distance."

"Is currying favor with older women your strong suit or something?"

"Yeah, I'm waiting for an older heroine to show up."

"Well, I wouldn't let someone like that in."

"Exactly what kind of authority does the detective have, huh?"

We joked around as we savored our coffee, but then Natsunagi set her cup on its saucer, signaling that it was time for us to get down to business. "About your request..." She took several documents out of her bag and showed them to Marie.

"...! The village in these photos..."

Marie's eyes widened when she saw the pictures printed on the documents.

The photos showed a rural landscape and buildings with characteristic white walls. They looked exactly like the painting of the village Marie had shown us when we'd first met her.

"The village in these photos is inhabited by a certain ethnic minority. It isn't the only one, either; it seems little villages and towns like this exist all over the world." Natsunagi went on, explaining their similarities. "All the people who live there have very fair skin, and the women have red eyes. Just like you, Marie."

At that, Marie looked down at her body.

Red eyes and pale skin. At first, I'd noticed that it was a combination of Natsunagi's and Siesta's distinguishing traits, but apparently, that was how

Marie's people typically looked.

"I'd like you to take a look at this." I held out another old photograph. It was a little blurry, but it showed a young woman. She also had red eyes and fair skin, and she looked a lot like Marie. The photo had been taken a long time ago in secret by a scholar researching ethnology.

"Is she my ancestor...?" Marie murmured, her eyes on the photo. "But how did you find this place?"

Natsunagi and I looked at each other, then nodded. As the detective, Natsunagi explained. "Our first approach was to look at it from the angle of racial discrimination."

Marie's shoulders flinched slightly.

Last month, we'd found that burned-down village in Scandinavia. I'd asked around the area, but for some reason, none of the locals would talk about it. They'd said they knew nothing about that village.

At first, I'd thought they were reluctant to talk because the incident had been so horrific, but then another possibility had occurred to me: Maybe the people who'd lived in that village had been persecuted by their neighbors all along.

In other words, that was the real reason why the adults had told Rill not to go near that village when she was a child. Racial discrimination remained a problem all over the world.

If these villages were scattered around the globe, there had to be scholars who were researching them. Natsunagi and I had painstakingly translated and read ethnology and cultural anthropology papers from a wide range of different countries. The results of that were these documents and this hypothesis.

"There are still a lot of unknowns about this tribe, such as where they originally came from and how many of them exist now...and we still don't know which country your village is in yet."

"We've found several possibilities, though: islands in the North Atlantic, northern Alaska, and the mountains of central Germany. You should be able to check them one by one. If you need us to, we can help..." But just as I started to make my offer, Marie doubled over coughing.

Natsunagi ran to her and rubbed her back. The coughing fit went on for a while, and when it finally stopped, the handkerchief Marie had been holding to her mouth was spotted with blood.

"Marie!"

Natsunagi already had her phone out, but Marie shook her head, stopping her. It took a minute, but her breathing eventually calmed down, and her expression softened. "I'm sorry to worry you. It's been like this all the time lately. I can't even drink alcohol, which I adore. It's awful," she said with a tight smile.

"—But didn't you sing at another restaurant just the other day?"

"Yes, it started a few days after that. I've hardly been able to keep my promise to Yui...even though she has the musical to prepare for, and the opening ceremony for the international expo is coming up fast."

"I'm sure Saikawa understands. Never mind that now—have you been to the hospital?"

"I have, and they prescribed some medicine. My condition comes and goes, though. It's just a little worse than normal right now."

Natsunagi urged her to rest, and Marie thanked her with a smile. "Still, I really am glad that I came to you with my request. Do you think you could keep working on it a little longer?"

She probably meant she wanted us to investigate all the villages that could be her hometown, as I'd been about to offer.

"Are you sure?" I blurted out. If the truth about her hometown was what we suspected it might be, did she still want to know? She didn't remember it now, but she might have been discriminated against her whole life. Would being aware of that really be a good thing?

"Yes, of course." Marie nodded firmly. "Even if I turn out to be a real witch who's been persecuted, I brought this request to the detective because I want to know the truth."

Natsunagi swallowed slightly, then turned to look at me.

After hesitating for a moment, I nodded. "All right. I promise we'll find the truth for you."

Sometimes detectives really do have to lay things out in red and black, I thought, reminded by the color of Marie's eyes.

#### **◆** To the dreamed-of future

Three days later, it was the opening day of the international expo.

The weather was cloudy, and Natsunagi and I were sitting in official guest seats inside the dome where Saikawa would be performing. The opening ceremony—for which Saikawa would be singing the theme song—would begin at five that evening, so Natsunagi and I were relaxing, waiting for it to start.

"You're kind of restless," Natsunagi said, noticing me tapping my feet.

"I didn't get in with a regular ticket, so do you think I'm still qualified to call myself a Yui-nya fan?"

"Wow, I could not care less... And why, every once in a while, do you go fullon otaku? You see Yui all the time."

Because Yui-nya the idol was something special.

"Besides, we're here for work today."

"Yeah, I know. We can't do much except watch over her from a distance, though."

We were concerned about that mummy incident. If Elizabeth or some other enemy was still trying to make contact with Saikawa, they might target a big show like this. Men in Black had been stationed all around the venue, and Natsunagi and I were here to keep an eye out as well.

"Say, Kimizuka, how's that other thing going?" Natsunagi asked. We still had five minutes left before the performance began.

What did she mean by "that other thing," though? The vampire rebellion? Marie's request? Or was it what we'd discussed with Ms. Fuubi and Ookami—that business with the Phantom Thief? As usual, I had too much on my plate, and I didn't immediately understand what she wanted to talk about.

But then I saw the look in her eyes, and I knew.

"Siesta, huh?"

According to Stephen, a heart transplant might allow Siesta to wake up, but she could lose who she was and all of her memories as a result. If that was a possibility, should we wake her up, or not?

"I've been thinking about it ever since that day."

...And I still didn't have an answer.

Would it help if we looked to the people around us? Our ally Scarlet had chosen not to seek answers to any of his problems, saying that the boundaries between matters weren't necessarily clearly defined. That didn't mean he wasn't taking action, though; Scarlet stayed focused on his mission, and he was constantly working to accomplish it.

On the other hand, our client Marie was different. She was searching for the one and only answer to her problem, and would decide what to do once she knew the truth.

The two of them had nothing to do with one another, but their policies just happened to diverge. It probably wasn't that one was right, and the other wrong. The only thing I knew for sure was that I couldn't pretend not to see the problem in front of me—just like Professor Moriya, the hypnotist, had implied.

"We'll have to be the ones to make that decision."

I'd been Siesta's assistant all this time. All I needed to do was help the detective.

Ever since she'd first fallen asleep, I'd decided to wake her up. That meant anything that came after that would also be my responsibility.

"Listen...," Natsunagi began. "The thing is, I'm selfish. I'm greedy. I still think the old Siesta is best. I want her to wake up as the person she was before."

...Yeah. So did I, of course.

"If someday there's really no choice, though... If she has to have that transplant, and she loses her memories... If it means she'll survive, I'll accept it. I'll grit my teeth and bear it. In the end, that's the only option," she said. "You

know that, too, don't you, Kimizuka?"

She wasn't just being callous—this was a reality we needed to get our heads around. We'd do all we could, and if that wasn't enough, we'd take the best remaining option.

Of course we would. We wanted Siesta to live, no matter what state she was in, whether she kept her memories or not. *As long as she's alive.* That was how we thought. What we wished for.

"But is that what Siesta wants?"

Would she want the same thing I wished for?

"There's no way to know, is there? When all's said and done, I think we'll have to base our decision on what we want. We'll just have to be selfish and force things to turn out the way we want them to."

While the crowd was psyching itself up for the opening ceremony, Natsunagi and I were lost in our own closed-off little world.

"Still, if Siesta really does lose her memories... If she wakes up and she's forgotten about us and her life before this, can we really say she's even Siesta?"

"If that happens, let's start all over again," Natsunagi responded immediately, catching me by surprise. "We can do it. I know we can. You and I met each other for the first time twice, didn't we, Kimizuka?"

"...Yeah, the first time was in London. Back then, you looked like Alicia."

At the time, Natsunagi had temporarily reclaimed the role of "main personality" from Hel, and her memories had been fuzzy. Our second "first" meeting had happened a year later, in that classroom after school. She'd lost all her memories, even the ones tied to her emotions, but Siesta's red ribbon had kept the link between us alive, and we'd managed to meet again. If we'd done it before, we should be able to do it one more time, with Siesta—

"It's starting."

Fireworks went up, loud music began to play—and Yui Saikawa, the idol, made her entrance. On the far side of the stage, she beamed, waving her arms wide.

The music was the international expo's theme song, *Dreaming Future*.

Cheers went up, and the arena crackled with electricity. An ocean of pink light sticks swayed. At least for now, Natsunagi and I smiled.

The intro ended, Saikawa raised her mic, and—nothing happened. We couldn't hear her voice. On the stage, Saikawa stared at the mic in her hand, looking perplexed.

"An equipment malfunction?"

That was my first thought, but when I saw Saikawa's reaction, I knew that wasn't it. There was a look of panic on her face, and she was moving her lips, but no sound was coming out. Actually, if I strained my ears, I could hear something very faintly: Saikawa's hoarse voice.

"...Now, of all times?"

There had been faint signs that this might happen.

Saikawa's throat had started acting up every so often. Had her packed schedule made her push herself too hard?

"Saikawa...!"

The arena started to buzz. Staff members were hurrying around. Were they going to stop the music? That might make things even more awkward, though. The song had almost reached the chorus.

"-A miracle

to make the footsteps of the future

break into a run."

I could hear the lyrics clearly. They were coming from right beside me.

It was Natsunagi, singing *Dreaming Future*.

She wasn't using a mic, though. Her voice didn't echo across the arena.

...At least, it shouldn't have.

".....?!"

On the distant stage, Saikawa scanned the crowd in surprise.

By the time the chorus ended and the second verse had begun, everyone in the arena was singing. They held their pink light sticks high and sang *Dreaming Future* in Saikawa's place. It looked just like one of Yui-nya's regular idol shows.

When Natsunagi saw the rest of the crowd singing, she let out a relieved sigh, as if she felt the audience had it covered now.

"Did you use your word-soul power?"

Natsunagi must have infused the song, her words, with her soul and transmitted them through the arena. Her voice still held some of Hel's ability.

But she shook her head. "No. It's because everyone here loves Yui. They want to support her."

Ah, right. As answers go, that one's prettier.

#### Lost treasure

When Saikawa's performance ended, Natsunagi and I headed straight for her dressing room.

Saikawa was sitting in a chair, looking dazed. The moment she saw us, her face crumpled with sadness.

"It's all right." Natsunagi ran up to her and pulled her into a hug.

"...! Nagi...sa..." Saikawa buried her face in Natsunagi's arms. She wasn't crying, but her voice was so hoarse it was hard to imagine her as the same person I knew.

How long had she been like this? If her voice had been this way before her performance, I really doubted she would have walked out onto the stage as boldly as she had.

In the end, the fans' chorus and other performers had managed to hold the opening ceremony together. That hadn't fixed everything, though—it was clear

something was wrong with Saikawa.

"Let's make a trip to the hospital."

Natsunagi and I escorted Saikawa out of her dressing room. We also had to figure out how to deal with the media. We really didn't want them snooping around and gleefully reporting on this like it was some kind of joke.

In case they tried to follow us, we had Saikawa's chauffeur prepare a dummy car and drive it around as a decoy, while we took one of the Men in Black's cars to a familiar hospital.

"Please be there, Stephen."

We were headed to see the best doctor I knew.

About half an hour later, we reached the hospital where Siesta was.

Unfortunately, Stephen wasn't there. It wasn't all bad luck, though, as another doctor examined Saikawa for us. He was someone with close ties to Stephen, someone we'd met before.

"And? What do you make of Saikawa's condition, Drachma?" I asked. He and I were alone in the consultation room together.

Drachma was a back-alley doctor who'd once been in charge of the SPES laboratory, which meant he had some serious history with Natsunagi and Siesta. Ever since SPES had broken up, he'd been working as a doctor for the world's hidden side. At Stephen's directive, he'd also helped with Reloaded's treatment.

"It's most likely aphonia," Drachma said, jotting notes down in a chart on the desk. "Simply put, it's a phenomenon where stress or other psychological trauma makes speaking difficult. There are no particular problems with the throat or vocal cords, but the voice abruptly grows hoarse or is lost entirely."

Stress-induced psychological trauma. Was it because she'd been working herself so hard? Or was it...

"It's not the yips, is it? Like when an athlete finds themself unable to move as

they normally do. I've heard the term used when singers suddenly stop being able to sing."

"If it were the yips, it would be an involuntary motion that occurs only when the affected person tries to do a specific action. A hairdresser becoming unable to hold scissors, for example, or a drummer who can't use their drumsticks. However, the patient can't speak at all, not just when she tries to sing. This isn't the yips."

"Then if Saikawa's got aphonia, as you said, will it get better?"

"I can't guarantee that it will correct itself if she rests up," he said, summarily puncturing my hopes. "For example, the yips—or 'focal dystonia,' if you'd prefer—is clearly a neurological condition, which means it has an established scientific method of treatment. The main cause of aphonia, on the other hand, is psychological, for which there is no proven treatment method."

"You mean Saikawa's developed a psychological disorder?"

"Dr. Stephen might call it a 'cancer of the heart,' but yes... At the very least, she needs to rest for a month," Drachma said. "Everything else comes after that."

Just then, the door behind us opened.

"Pl...ease...w-wait...," said a voice so raspy I couldn't help but feel sorry for its owner.

I turned around. Saikawa was standing there, attended by Natsunagi, and she looked ready to burst into tears. She pleaded desperately with Drachma, saying that she couldn't take time off, couldn't put her serial song releases on hold, and that the musical rehearsals were still ongoing. She argued passionately, in a voice that was barely audible, that she didn't have time to rest right now.

"I've heard of patients who pushed themselves that way and ended up losing their voices permanently," Drachma told her coolly, and Saikawa gulped. She knew better than anyone what it meant for an idol to lose her voice for good.

"Saikawa, if you explain the situation, I'm sure both your fans and the project staff will understand."

Saikawa shook her head. "...I-idols, have, to, be...ev...ery...body's...i-ideal, so..." Her voice was gravelly, and caught on certain words, but Saikawa spoke as if she were wringing white-hot emotion from the depths of her throat. "So...I, have, to...stay, pr-pretty...as...an i...idol..." She couldn't get the rest out, and bowed her head instead.

"Yui..." Natsunagi rubbed her back gently, trying to get her to raise her head.

I searched for the right words. I wanted to say something that would return twofold the energy Saikawa always gave me, along with my gratitude...but the world didn't give me that kind of time.

Boom.

An explosion roared somewhere above us, and the whole building rocked. Natsunagi and Saikawa stared in shock, while Drachma narrowed his eyes as if something had occurred to him.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Drachma was already starting to make a phone call as he replied.

"Be careful. An enemy of the world has arrived."

### **♦ King and Queen**

Leaving Saikawa in Drachma's care, Natsunagi and I headed for the roof of the hospital to see what had exploded. Once we'd taken the elevator to the fourth floor, we took the stairs the rest of the way to the roof.

"Let's go, Natsunagi."

I opened the door to see the dark roof of the hospital spread out before us. The sun had already set. Come to think of it, I'd met Reloaded the Magical Girl up here last Christmas. The current situation was completely different, though; pale-blue flames, the remnants of the explosion we'd just heard, flickered across the roof. In their midst was the enemy.

The woman was wearing a blue dress. She was kneeling, her hands clasped tightly and her eyes closed, as if she were praying. Her long, pale-silver hair fanned out over the concrete.

She was the Necromancer, Elizabeth. She hadn't introduced herself, but I instinctively knew who she was.

She didn't match Scarlet's "red and black" image of vampires. Elizabeth was blue and white, and the flames that covered her looked almost like ice.

"What is your goal here, Elizabeth?" I asked, keeping my distance.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. They were a blazing red.

"—Never mind your questions. Let me eat you."

Elizabeth's rouged lips parted.

The murderous intent that assaulted me seemed to make the air vibrate. Elizabeth got to her feet, and it was only then that I noticed her right leg was missing. Had she lost it in a fight somewhere? Did she no longer have the ability to recover it?

Even so, Elizabeth rose to stand on her one remaining leg. She leaned sharply forward, gazing at me with eyes that seemed locked onto her prey. It was obvious what she planned to do next, but I had no illusions that knowing about it in advance would let me avoid it.

"—You can't move one step from that spot."

Words rang out sharply, and red eyes flared. But the voice wasn't Elizabeth's —it belonged to the girl next to me.

".....!" The vampire froze up, her expression anguished.

Natsunagi had used her word-soul ability.

"—! Lowly human. Come out, all of you!"

But Elizabeth promptly regrouped, issuing orders to someone.

"...Oh, huh. It's you guys."

The being that seemed to crawl out of the pale fire was the same sort of emaciated mummy we'd encountered at the park the other night. Others came crawling up the walls of the hospital, reaching the roof one after another. All of them had hair as long and white as Elizabeth's, though theirs was disheveled.

"I heard undead come back to life with their base instincts intact."

These mummies all seemed to be obeying Elizabeth's orders, with no thought or will of their own.

"Ha! Typically, yes. However, I devour those instincts down to the marrow before I revive mine. Minions that won't take orders from their master aren't suited to being soldiers."

Even though the word-soul still held Elizabeth in place, she gave a cold, bewitching smile.

"...Is that why these mummies are so thin?"

Ms. Fuubi had said they'd been finding a lot of mummified corpses around the area. They must have belonged to people who'd died when Elizabeth had drained too much of their strength.

"Elizabeth, have you killed people in this neighborhood and made mummies out of them?"

"I don't remember where I make them. Once I've turned them into puppets, they follow me wherever I go, even across the ocean. Come, you lot, dance for me!"

The next thing I knew, Natsunagi and I were surrounded by a dozen mummies. Natsunagi glared at them with her red eyes, ordering them to stay back with word-soul, but the mummy soldiers kept moving.

"Ha-ha! As if human speech would work on them," Elizabeth said with a mocking smile. Apparently, the mummies would only obey their creator.

"You know, I really don't think I want things to end like this," Natsunagi murmured, edging closer to me.

"Same here." Drawing the gun I'd borrowed from Drachma, I fired at one of the mummies as it crept closer—but even though I hit it in the leg, it didn't stop.

"Listen, Kimizuka. Why don't we at least make some memories?"

"Right—if this was a foreign drama, we'd kiss right about now."

Natsunagi and I exchanged looks, smiling at each other a little. However...

"That's gonna make things awkward if we manage to live through this, so let's skip it for now."

The mummies stopped in their tracks. Both Natsunagi and Elizabeth looked startled. I knew something they didn't, though: A hero had left a certain something on the roof of this hospital.

"You just saved our butts, Reloaded."

A faint agua-blue light shone from the top of the water tower.

There was a wooden spell tablet up here that banished all sorts of bizarre phenomena. Last Christmas, when I'd almost been possessed by Parasite, one of the hundred demons of Pandemonium, Rill had left it here as a countermeasure. That blue light was a barrier that stopped evil spirits from running wild.

"You've held out well, humans."

And there was another hero who could help us out of the situation we were in.

The wind blew, sending the heads of several mummies flying.

"You're late, Scarlet."

Our ally, the king of vampires, had finally arrived. I'd directed my complaint at his back...but then I noticed his white suit was dyed red with blood.

"I didn't mean to let my guard down; however, I was delayed longer than anticipated."

"Did the mummies attack you on your way here?"

"No, the opponent I encountered was far more troublesome. The enemy seems to have resorted to petty tricks," Scarlet said, glancing at Elizabeth.

She glared back at him coldly. "Judas, the traitor."

They were past the point of exchanging pleasantries.

Their eyes spoke of the long history between them more eloquently than words ever could.

"That's quite a serious wound, Elizabeth."

"Take a look at yourself before you say that, Scarlet."

The injured vampire king and queen faced off across the distance.

"So it was a lie that you could only create those pitiful imitation mummies, hmm?" Spitting out blood, Scarlet glared at Elizabeth. "Their numbers may have been significant, but even so, no ordinary beings should have been able to wound me this gravely. What was the mob that attempted to detain me on my way here?"

"Death row prisoners from around the world," Elizabeth snapped in response. "Or I should say, *former* prisoners."

"Right. So their instincts in life lent themselves to murder. No wonder they kept trying to bite through my neck, even when I tore off their arms and put holes in their bellies." Scarlet gave a wan smile, as if it all made sense to him now. The wounds on his neck hadn't fully healed yet. "It seems you came quite well prepared. It was also you who tried to contact the sapphire girl indirectly, was it not?"

"Ha! You seemed quite taken with the child. I put my minions in contact with her to see how you'd react, but this only attracted some entirely unrelated people," Elizabeth spat, glancing toward me.

Had Scarlet known that all along? That explained why he'd left guarding Saikawa to me and the Men in Black, and had shown himself as little as possible...

"And you intentionally chose this hospital as our final battleground because a number of people connected to me are gathered here?"

"Yes. I'm not leaving any room for error. I'll make sure to put you down here."

Elizabeth leaned forward as she began to break through the restraints of Natsunagi's word-soul.

"I see. Then it appears I was wrong about the sort of woman you are," Scarlet

murmured. He took a few steps forward.

Elizabeth frowned. "Why are you smiling, Scarlet?"

The white demon had his back to me. I couldn't see his expression.

He was smiling, though? This guy?

"Ha! It's only natural I would be smiling. Elizabeth—you're afraid of me, aren't you?"

Elizabeth's red eyes widened.

"Why did you go to the trouble of using the sapphire girl as bait to lure me out? Because you weren't confident that you could defeat me without a hostage. Why did you have your powerful undead soldiers ambush me? Because you had no hope of defeating me on your own, and wanted to damage me as much as possible beforehand." One black wing appeared from Scarlet's left shoulder. "You made plans to target me indirectly, sent enslaved soldiers to me in your place, and came to meet me on a battlefield where you would have many hostages—all while neglecting to polish the most vital thing: your own skills." Scarlet laughed, as if to say he had nothing to fear from a woman like that. "You could never be the queen of the vampires."

"Enough talk. Let me eat you!"

Elizabeth sprang at him on her one remaining leg, and Scarlet moved to meet her, a single wing unfurled behind him.

The fight between the world's last and strongest vampires had begun.

#### ♦ Messianic dramaturgy

The vampires only fought for a few minutes, but to a regular human like me, it felt like forever. Lives were most definitely on the line here.

The battle that unfolded in front of us was ferocious. Their arms, legs, and fangs scratched at each other, tearing pieces from each other's bodies, yet most of their wounds healed up in the blink of an eye. Neither Scarlet nor Elizabeth paid any heed to the blood they were shedding, or the pain. Of course, there was no way Natsunagi or I could intervene. All we could do was stand in a

corner and watch the monsters maul each other.

"Kimizuka? Doesn't it look as if Scarlet's only using his left wing?" Natsunagi murmured, as we took cover in the shadow of the water tower. It was true—he'd only unfurled one of the black wings the Inventor had given him.

"Maybe the other one was damaged in the fight on the way here?"

"Maybe. It's pretty obvious he's favoring his right side."

Natsunagi may not have had Saikawa's sapphire eye, but her own ruby-red eyes analyzed the flow of the battle. For a period of her life, she'd experienced combat as Hel, so she could still see more about some aspects of the situation than an ordinary person could.

"Ah, I see. I'll tear off your remaining wing as well, then."

Elizabeth had also noticed Scarlet's injury. Her eyes glowed eerily, and several of the mummies that had already been taken out got back up. The undying minions all rushed Scarlet at once, grabbing him by the arms and legs, creating a brief opening.

Elizabeth was already in the air by then. Her lost leg was regenerating, although the muscles were exposed. "The idea of colluding with that scientist, of all people! Gah, it makes me so mad." She aimed a devastating kick at Scarlet with her undamaged leg.

Scarlet guarded with his wing, but her kick went right through it. He flew backward, and black fragments scattered through the air. The wing the Inventor had given him had been brutally shattered.

"Our race has no allies. The government, scientists, humans—they're all our enemies!"

Elizabeth charged like the wind. She had no weapon, nor did she need one; her right arm was a spear that would run her prey through. Scarlet climbed unsteadily to his feet, and almost immediately, the two of them clashed.

We heard a brief sob. The battle was over. A figure had collapsed—*Elizabeth*.

Scarlet was holding a large, oddly shaped sword in his right hand. He definitely hadn't had that a moment ago; its red blade almost looked as if it was made of solidified blood.

"In battle, he who deceives wins."

Had Stephen invented that weapon, too? It might have used the same optical camouflage as Scarlet's wings; however, the vanquished didn't have the right to know these answers. Wounded by the blade, Elizabeth sank to her knees on the concrete, violently spitting up blood.

"Elizabeth, you can't defeat me." Scarlet gazed coldly down at his defeated opponent, his white suit dyed with blood. "We're merely on different levels. No matter how one struggles, the weak can't defeat the strong. You can't overturn destiny."

*"*\_\_\_\_\_!"

"Accept your fate. No—take pride in it. You've reached the end of your natural lifespan. Ascend to heaven." Scarlet was a breath away from destroying the last evil vampire, completing his mission as a Tuner.

"...I won't be going there. Hell will do." Spitting up blood, Elizabeth climbed shakily to her feet.

"You'll die if you don't focus on recovering your organs."

"You're the one who declared my life was over. At the end, I'll stand on my own two feet and fulfill my mission," Elizabeth said, glaring at Scarlet. "I'll take the traitor who keeps killing his *innocent kin* with me!"

For a moment, I didn't understand what she'd said.

Scarlet was killing innocent vampires?

That couldn't be right.

"Scarlet's only defeating evil vampires as a Tuner..."

But the white demon turned to look at me and Natsunagi—both of us visibly unsettled—and gave a brief, mocking smile.

When had it started?

How long had we had the wrong idea? How long had he been tricking us?

"Matters cannot always be delineated in terms of red and black."

That remark Scarlet had made. Had I already been taken in by his words back then? Had I unconsciously started to avoid pursuing answers and the truth?

"I vowed I'd stop you no matter what it took. That I would use what little remained of my life to protect my fellow vampires!" As Elizabeth spat out these words, her face was a mask of resentment.

They'd effectively swapped roles: Elizabeth was on the side of justice, and Scarlet was evil.

"Why? Scarlet, why would you go around killing vampires who haven't done anything?" What did he get out of it?

But Elizabeth was the one who answered. "It's simple. He did it so he could be the lone survivor. The old Federation Government ordered the destruction of the vampire race; however, in exchange for becoming a Tuner and accepting that mission, this man was *officially granted permission to survive!* That ridiculous position name, 'Vampire,' is proof that he is the only vampire in the world they recognize...!" she shrieked, tears of blood running down her cheeks.

Scarlet didn't respond. His face was blank. Now that the fight was over, all he had to do was wait for Elizabeth's life to run out.

"But Scarlet, I'll tell you this: The Federation Government will betray you." Getting her breathing under control, Elizabeth tried to start a conversation.

Scarlet's expression shifted very slightly; apparently, he was listening.

"Last year, I tortured a certain Tuner and got some information out of them. They were working in secret to eliminate the Vampire, on the orders of the Federation Government, and were supposed to do it after you'd destroyed all the vampires. The government has always considered you expendable."

"Oh? And who was that Tuner?" Scarlet's eyes narrowed.

He wanted to know who had been trying to eliminate him.

"Fritz Stewart, the Revolutionary."

I hadn't been expecting to hear that name, and my shoulders flinched.

"Who's that?" Natsunagi asked, and I gave her a brief rundown: That the Revolutionary was a man who'd been involved in politics in both the public and hidden spheres of the world. That, when Siesta and I had met him last summer, Fritz had actually been an impostor, having had his identity stolen by the Phantom Thief.

Exactly—Fritz Stewart, the Revolutionary, was already dead by then.

"I see. So it was you who killed him, Elizabeth?" Scarlet had ascertained the truth. When we'd met him, the Phantom Thief had told us that he hadn't been the one to kill Fritz. Who would've believed we'd find a connection to that case here?

"Now do you see?" Dragging her leg, Elizabeth took a step closer to Scarlet. "The Federation Government is our enemy. So are the Tuners. We were born as the children of demons, and our race has no allies. There's no place for us in this world. So let's leave it together." With a smile, Elizabeth gently spread her arms. "Scarlet, in the end, you were a disposable pawn of the government. However, we are kin. Members of a race that dies young. The same blood flows through both of us; we share the same pain, the same sins. We are one another's only comrades."

Elizabeth approached Scarlet, one step after another. Until finally... "Everyone's equal in hell. Let's find happiness in the next world."

I heard a dull impact.

Elizabeth's right arm had impaled Scarlet's stomach.

"Scarlet!" I yelled without thinking. I tried to run to him, but Natsunagi stopped me.

Once again, the one who'd collapsed was Elizabeth.

"Wh-why...?"

"You meant to devour me and be the sole survivor, didn't you?"

Elizabeth had fallen to her knees, and Scarlet's face was dark as he looked down at her. The arm she'd impaled him with had melted, almost as if it had evaporated.

"...Ha! Did you lace your own body with poison? Well done." Understanding her opponent's trick, Elizabeth laughed. It was a feat that would only have been possible for the king of vampires, with his extraordinary ability to regenerate.

She laughed loudly, blood trickling from the corners of her mouth. Then...

"Kill me, King."

With a flash of his blood sword, Scarlet cut off Elizabeth's head.

### **♦ Vampire rebellion**

In seconds, Elizabeth's corpse was unrecognizable.

Her fallen head and decapitated body burst into flames at the places they had been severed. Pale-blue fire rapidly enveloped her, then erased her entirely. Scarlet hadn't left so much as a scrap of his enemy's flesh behind—was this an expression of his cruelty, or the opposite? Had he incinerated the queen's corpse quickly so it wouldn't be needlessly exposed to prying eyes? There was no way to know.

Scarlet gazed steadily at the spot where Elizabeth had been burned away to nothing. No one spoke.

"—Kimizuka, Look,"

After a moment of silence, the situation took a sudden turn.

Natsunagi was pointing at several distant helicopters headed our way. They weren't ordinary machines, either, but military helicopters painted in dark camouflage, with machine guns aimed at—

"I seem to have been designated an enemy of the world," Scarlet said, gazing

up at the night sky. "So Elizabeth's warning was correct? Just as my former bride candidate once suspected."

...His former bride candidate? In other words... "Siesta knew about this? She knew you'd become the world's enemy?"

I was pretty sure Scarlet's name hadn't been mentioned in the sacred text when it prophesied the vampire rebellion. Even so, Siesta had been sure things would turn out this way years ago...?

"Kimizuka!" Natsunagi yanked my hand, and I remembered that now wasn't the time to get lost in thought.

The helicopters were almost on top of us, and their guns were definitely locked on Scarlet. If we didn't move fast, we'd get hit, too.

"...Stop joking around."

Natsunagi and I took cover behind the water tower and plugged our ears. A moment later, there was a fierce explosion, and the ground shook beneath our feet. The guns blazed from the sky for over half a minute, and even after they fell silent, the strength seemed to have drained out of me. It was several seconds before I could get to my feet.

"-Scarlet!"

Holding my nose against the stench of burned concrete, I scanned the roof. The smoke cleared, revealing blackened ground...and right where the guns had been firing, something that looked like a *three-meter-tall red cocoon*.

"It's blood," Natsunagi murmured.

A cocoon of blood, created by a vampire. Was it something Scarlet's vampire abilities had made, or a weapon given to him by Stephen? Either way, the cocoon had completely blocked that ferocious bombardment.

Then the combat situation changed once again. The blood cocoon developed cracks, then exploded, and shards of it flew toward a hovering helicopter. The fragments of the huge cocoon struck the rotor squarely, and the helicopter spun out of control and fell.

I reflexively squeezed my eyes shut and covered my ears, and almost

immediately, the explosion I'd anticipated roared over us. When I opened my eyes again, the king of vampires was standing right where the cocoon had been.

Scarlet stood there in the wind, completely aloof, his golden eyes looking up at the night sky.

"I see. So this is the stage you've prepared, is it?"

He covered his face with a hand, yet there was a smile on his lips.

"Very well. It's war, then!"

Like an actor on the stage, the white demon spread his arms wide and shouted.

He was issuing a proclamation to the Federation Government, which had to be watching him from somewhere beyond that dark sky. "Within the next seventy-two hours, I shall conquer the Mizoev Federation's territory in Alaska! The operation has already begun!"

The next moment, Natsunagi's smartphone rang. "...! Kimizuka, look at this!"

What she showed me was a new message from the Federation Government, forwarded through the Men in Black. When Natsunagi clicked on the URL in the text, it opened a video feed.

"...This is Mizoev Federation territory?"

The screen showed a town of blackened buildings, where flames were still spreading. It seemed to be aerial footage from a drone, and all we could see were endless ruined streets.

There were no people. In their place stood corpses.

The undead I'd seen Scarlet create on several occasions were marching, weapons at the ready. It was clear that they were the ones turning this place into a disaster zone.

"Scarlet, who are these undead? ...Don't tell me you've killed this many

innocent humans."

"Ha! Your concern is unnecessary." Scarlet laughed off my question. "They are all my kin I've killed as a Tuner. No doubt they could want for nothing more than to resurrect and fight as my minions!"

A chill went down my spine: I finally understood what a vampire rebellion really meant.

By killing all of his kin, then resurrecting them as his minions, Scarlet had created a silent army.

"It's an army I originally loaned the government to defend the Mizoev Federation's territory; however, at this point, war with the government's forces is inevitable. I'll hasten to join my people, as the king of vampires." With that final remark, Scarlet turned to go.

"Wait! Why?" Natsunagi took a step forward. "Is this your revenge on the Federation Government? Do you want to control the world in mankind's place? Why are you really headed for the battlefield?"

"All living creatures simply play the roles they are assigned, dancing on a confined stage. There is no meaning to it. No reason. The same is true for you, Ace Detective."

The door to the roof flew open, and a horde of footsteps rang out against the concrete.

They belonged to people in dark suits—the Men in Black.

As one, they leveled their guns, pointing them straight at Scarlet.

"Yes, this is how it should be. You also play a role as cogs in this world."

Scarlet unfurled a black wing—his right wing, the one he hadn't used at all during his fight with Elizabeth...and there was a girl inside it.

"-Siesta!"

Scarlet cradled the sleeping detective in his right arm.

Had he hidden her with that transparent wing and protected her throughout the fight?

"Wait! Scarlet!"

I reached out, and Natsunagi's red eyes flashed.

Yet we were a fraction of a second too late.

The vampire turned his golden eyes on Natsunagi, and she suddenly lost her voice and word-soul ability.

It probably wasn't some special vampiric talent, but simply that the difference in their ranks as living beings was just too vast.

"I will take my bride!"

With Siesta being a hostage, neither I nor the Men in Black could shoot him.

The vampire, stained red with blood, melted into the black night and disappeared.





# Fifteen years ago, Scarlet

"They burned the town to the west as well," Jeanne said, taking a sip of wine.

We were in a small, simply built shack on the outskirts of town, drinking in the afternoon. There was no longer anyone here who'd criticize us for it.

The messiah had disappeared three months ago. Had he died in a ditch somewhere, or had he abandoned the town? Either way, I cared not.

"People are saying they'll target the north next."

"Is that so? You're well-informed, Jeanne."

"You're just ignorant, Judas."

We exchanged faint smiles. There was probably no need for us to call each other by those names now that the old man wasn't around, but it had become a habit.

"Our town may be in danger soon, too."

Apparently, our people's numbers had been dwindling rapidly lately. Did that mean the allies of justice had gotten serious? The day when vampires died out completely might be drawing near.

"It seems like someone started a resistance group. Haven't you heard rumors of the warrior Elizabeth?"

"Ah, the young vampire revolutionary."

In some faraway land, a self-defense force had been formed to stand against the heroes who were killing us. Their young commander was a girl named Elizabeth. If she managed to bring about a true revolution, people would probably call her "Queen" someday.

"Aren't you going to fight, Judas?" Jeanne asked, rather vaguely.

Was she asking whether I intended to join Elizabeth's army?

"I know you're actually stronger than anybody."

"Do you want me to fight, Jeanne?"

"I don't want you to die."

That was a difficult request. Should I fight to survive, or fight and die? ...In the end, didn't our race bear that unchanging fate, two options that were really only one?

"Do you seriously think I could beat our enemy, Jeanne?"

"Mm, no. You couldn't."

I shot her a glare. Jeanne was smiling, her face flushed. It seemed like she was drunk.

"If you put your mind to it, I don't think you'd lose to any weapon, and no living creature could make you submit... But you're no match for the world itself."

She was right about that. The world had decided that vampires should be destroyed, so we couldn't win, no matter what we did. We were bound to lose, sooner or later.

"I know that, too, really. I understand it. That's why I'm drinking," she added with a smirk. Not too long ago, Jeanne had been saying that the entire world couldn't possibly be our enemy, yet now...

"You'll ruin your throat before your life runs out," I joked. Not that I was trying to evade anything, mind you.

"Alcohol in moderation is actually good for you."

"Would you call that 'moderate'?"

"For a vampire, probably."

If Jeanne was saying she couldn't handle this sober, then she sounded very

human indeed.

Humans got drunk on alcohol, on music, on literature, on art.

"Sometimes I get frustrated, though, and think, 'Can't we outfox this world somehow?'"

"Outfox it?"

"Right. Like, can't we deceive the world?" I silently motioned for her to go on. "We were born as vampires, and the world curses us and persecutes us. We were created in the image of humans, yet we die far sooner than they do. So this time we'll trick the world, and leave it completely speechless. What do you think? Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"A way to deceive the world... Nothing immediately comes to mind."

"Well, every day is dull. Thinking about it is a good way to kill time."

"Is that your dream, Jeanne? To trick the world, in the end?"

"A dream, huh? Heh-heh. I never thought I'd hear you talk about dreams, Judas."

"You're the one who brought it up."

I'd been reading a novel with a similar sort of story.

It was more about ambition than dreams, really. The tale was set in a time of a revolution, during which a king reigned. In it, a boy who'd originally aspired to become a soldier attempted to succeed as a member of the clergy instead, embarking on the gamble of a lifetime.

"I'd say my dream is to drink fine wine sitting outdoors at a café under the midday sun."

"You've got half of that dream right now." She'd already emptied a bottle, just from drinking today. The sun was too bright for us, though.

"With you, of course."

"You've got that as well." I felt her head come to rest on my shoulder. For a while, we simply sat like that in silence.

"I may have gotten most of my wishes already."

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"If so, you don't wish for much."

"Just one more thing, then."

"Oh? Go on."
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Jeanne leaned in close and whispered in my ear.

What she said was something completely unexpected, a wish that could only be granted in the distant future. I'd assumed Jeanne's dream would make use of that special talent of hers—or maybe "hobby" might have been a better word for it—but apparently I'd been too hasty.

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Once again, I found myself unable to say a thing.

I couldn't put my thoughts regarding that impossible dream of hers into words.

This was how it had always been. I was constantly searching for the right thing to say, but I never seemed to find it. Not once had I ever managed to find words I was certain were correct.

In which case...

"I'll help that dream of yours come true."

Jeanne stared at me, startled.

If I couldn't think of anything to say, I'd just have to use my hands and feet.

"Why would you go that far for me, Judas?"

Think. Why am I trying to grant her wish, to make her dream a reality?

Because I had no relatives, and she was the only person my age who'd been with me for as long as I could remember? Because she was so intelligent and sincere, so daring and noble that I wanted to leave her with something? Because I wanted these thirty years of my life as a vampire to have had some sort of meaning?

No.

"No reason. I just want to."

As always, I had no answer. There was no need for an answer.

Words were just a concept made up by humans anyway.

"That's just like you, Judas."

"Live your life in a way that's uniquely yours, Jeanne."

The girl gently buried her face in my chest.

I simply move, and keep moving, until my very last breath.



## **Chapter 4**

### ◆ The bride and the Nightless Castle

Ten days after Scarlet's challenge to the Federation Government, his undead army had conquered most of the Mizoev Federation's territory in Alaska and was retrofitting a palace to use as its stronghold.

They called it "the Nightless Castle."

Its master was Scarlet, King of the Vampires.

Typically, the undead revived with their instincts from their past life intact. The girl who had been Rill's rival during her track days, for example, had come back to life to pole vault one last time. However, the undead who guarded the Nightless Castle all acted on Scarlet's orders. Had he done the same thing as Elizabeth, or was he using some other special method?

Even then, the Mizoev Federation had sent only a small peacekeeping force to the area, which hadn't done anything drastic. Shutting down the vampire rebellion had been the Ace Detective's mission, but we received word that they'd canceled it on us.

According to the Oracle, this was "due to the sacred text's prophecy about the vampire rebellion not foreseeing the situation up to this point."

Mia had told us as much during a video chat about the incident the other day. Past Oracles had foretold certain parts of the vampire rebellion, but they hadn't given many specifics. Scarlet's intervention had raised the danger level significantly, and the Federation Government had changed their policy.

"Boss realized, though, didn't she? That the Vampire would cause a rebellion someday." Mia's eyes had narrowed, as if she were remembering the distant past. By "Boss," she meant Siesta. When we'd told Mia about how Scarlet had said his former bride candidate had suspected this, she'd initially been surprised, but it had gradually made a few things fall into place for her.

"I wish she'd at least left a hint, then," I'd joked with Mia. Of course, I hadn't

been griping about it seriously; at the time, Siesta had been preparing to go up against Seed, a powerful and much more imminent threat.

"Still, Boss always does things for a reason," Mia said with conviction. "There may be a reason behind why she did nothing about this. She may ultimately have been entrusting it to others."

"You think? Entrusting it to who, or what?"

"To the vampire king's choice. Either that, or to the results of his battle with the future detective. This isn't a prophecy; it's just a deduction." Mia smiled wryly. "Just don't get angry with me if I'm wrong. I'm an oracle, not a detective." Then she'd ended the chat, saying she'd talk to us again soon.

If Mia's theory was correct, what had Siesta seen and known about Scarlet that had made her decide to leave this to the future? No matter what it had been, we couldn't just stand by and watch. Even if the Federation Government told us not to interfere, we had to get Siesta back.

Since Scarlet had carried her off, she was probably being held captive in the Nightless Castle. Scarlet's undead army and the Federation Government's peacekeeping force were still locked in a standoff there, and intense fighting could break out at any moment. Under the circumstances, it wouldn't be easy for us to do anything without official permission.

Ten days into the incident, however, there was finally some progress, and Natsunagi and I went to visit the hospital where Siesta had been a patient. We'd been summoned by her attending physician.

When we opened the door to the room we'd been sent to, we found that one entire wall of the room was glass. It was an observation room where people could watch surgeries conducted in an OR on the floor below. An operation was currently in progress, observed by a doctor in a white lab coat standing in the room.

"My apologies, but I hope you don't mind if I continue observing while we talk," the doctor, Stephen Bluefield, said with his back to us. He always worked while we talked, so this wasn't anything new.

"Is Drachma the one performing the surgery?"

"Yes, I've left certain areas of research to him. Regardless of his past, the man's skills are solid."

"...Research, huh? So it's not a surgery."

I glanced briefly through the glass wall. All I could see of the figure on the operating table was the shape of its body under a sheet.

"He's investigating the supernaturals," Stephen said, his eyes still focused on the operating room below. "Since that one came to me, he's my patient. I need to investigate him in detail."

"Don't tell me—is that Greed?" Natsunagi asked.

Stephen nodded wordlessly.

Several months earlier, when we'd gotten pulled into the fight with the Seven Deadly Sins, Stephen had fought this supernatural to protect me and Natsunagi. I'd heard he'd defeated Greed, but apparently he'd turned him into a guinea pig instead.

"Anyway, let's get down to business," I said.

Natsunagi made eye contact with me, then turned to Stephen. "Is it true you have an update on Siesta's condition?"

"Yes. One of the Men in Black who work for me managed to infiltrate the Nightless Castle." As Stephen spoke, he kept his gaze fixed on the surgery below. "Of course, there is a limit to the duties of the Men in Black. They never actively resolve problems, for one, which is why he only surveyed the Nightless Castle. At the very least, though, the Ace Detective is alive. That much seems certain."

The tension drained from my shoulders in a rush. Siesta was okay.

The fact that Scarlet had gone out of his way to abduct Siesta indicated that he didn't intend to kill her. Still, not knowing Siesta's physical condition meant we hadn't been able to be optimistic, so Natsunagi and I had tried to find out whether she was safe as quickly as possible. Unexpectedly, the person who'd volunteered to help us had been Stephen.

"From my perspective, one of my patients has been kidnapped. As her doctor, I

have a duty to ascertain her safety."

And after hearing that from Stephen, Natsunagi and I had been told to wait. The site was a literal battlefield, and sentimentality would get you nowhere. I'd been reminded of something Ookami had said to me once: "Reckless courage is a sin." So we'd let Stephen scout out the battlefield.

Now our biggest concern had been resolved, but there were still several unanswered questions.

"Why did Scarlet kidnap Siesta?"

Of course, part of it had probably been about using her as a hostage. Up on the hospital roof, Scarlet had been surrounded by the Men in Black... But was that really the only reason?

"It sounded as if Scarlet knew Elizabeth was planning to start a fight here at the hospital." As Natsunagi spoke, she thought back to the battle ten days ago. "I think he chose to engage her here because this is a convenient battlefield for him as well. Not only that, I suspect carrying Siesta off in the confusion was his goal all along."

We'd come up with that theory before we got here.

"I still don't understand why, though. Why is Scarlet so fixated on Siesta? What is this 'bride' he keeps mentioning?"

We sunk into silence for a few moments, then Stephen began to speak. "He's probably trying to break the curse of their short lives."

"The curse of their short lives? You mean the vampires' lifespans?"

The old vampire I'd run into during spring break had said something similar. So had Elizabeth. Vampires had been created as disposable weapons, and they were cursed with brief lives.

Scarlet was thirty; he'd nearly reached the end of his natural life. Was he trying to draw it out, just like the other two had?

"It isn't something as simple as eating more human flesh and blood than he needs to survive. Scarlet is trying to break the curse on his entire race."

"...What do you mean? He wants to extend the lifespan of all vampires, not

just himself?"

Was Stephen saying that could be done? While I was still thinking, Natsunagi spoke. "If his goal is not just his own survival but the survival of his race, could he be trying to do something similar to what Seed did?"

Seed had acted in order to satisfy his survival instincts.

He'd attempted to secure a human vessel. Did that mean...

"His methods won't be the same, but his goal is similar," Stephen said, supporting Natsunagi's theory. Then he expanded on it, as the expert on the subject. "In order to change their genes, which is what causes their short lifespans, his only option is to dilute the vampires' blood. If humans and vampires mate repeatedly over the course of several generations, for example, the vampires' genes will be rewritten slightly. It's a plan on a massive scale, with no guarantees."

"—Then Scarlet has no intention of extending his own lifespan?"

"No. In order to carry out such a plan on a large scale, he'll eat enough of his comrades to prolong his life somewhat, during which time he'll make as many children as possible and begin thinning the vampires' blood. Considering the principles which have guided his actions up until now, that is the most appropriate theory."

"In that case, you're not saying—the partner he's chosen to help him leave descendants is..."

"Most likely the one he calls his 'bride."

He'd chosen Siesta for that? As the representative of the human race?

"...Right. Siesta is probably a much better candidate than ordinary people. Like me, she already has the foundations in place to accept other life-forms' DNA." Natsunagi pressed a hand to the left side of her chest. Long ago, she and Siesta had been experimented on to gradually transplant the primordial seed's DNA into their bodies.

"Then for the survival of his species, Scarlet took Siesta so he could mate—mate with..." As I tried to process that idea, my head blew a fuse. "No way, no,

just— No way in hell!"

"It's okay. I know what you just imagined, Kimizuka, so calm down," Natsunagi said, comforting me. Then she turned to Stephen again. "But Siesta's still sleeping, right? I doubt he'll be able to get her to go along with his plan that easily."

"You are correct, which is why I think this plan is still in the preparatory phase. Scarlet is probably giving the Daydream transfusions of vampire blood. In general, it wouldn't be possible to withstand something like that, but as you said, her physical makeup is special."

...I see. So Scarlet wouldn't be able to lay his hands on Siesta until he'd finished doing that. But...

"It's going to be a while before you can examine Siesta again. Is that okay? What about the seed in her heart?"

"It's actually possible that vampiric blood will act to keep the Daydream's heart fresh."

The heart would "stay fresh"? Was it not normally like that?

"The seed in the Daydream's heart has been forcibly rendered dormant. This has restricted her organ function, and her cardiac cells are gradually undergoing necrosis. Human cells constantly die and regenerate; however, in her particular case, that regeneration will continue to slow."

"-No!"

"As I told you, you will need to make a decision soon." Stephen turned around, his cold eyes staring at me from behind his glasses. "I'm sorry, but I had best be off. It's time for me to examine my next patient."

White coat flaring behind him, Stephen walked out of the room, leaving behind one final remark.

"Whether the vampire makes the Daydream his bride or determines she won't be useful and kills her, we still have time. However, be very conscious of the fact that that time is limited."

### **♦** The sparkle of a mud-stained dress

After we finished talking with Stephen, I temporarily split off from Natsunagi and headed for the hospital courtyard. After I'd spent ten minutes sitting on a bench, killing time drinking a can of coffee, a girl came along. I stood up, casually raising a hand.

"How are you doing, Saikawa?"

Yui Saikawa flashed me a peace sign, smiling just like always.

She didn't say anything, though. She'd lost that beautiful, lovable voice of hers.

It had been ten days since her aphonia diagnosis. Far from improving, she'd lost the ability to speak altogether, and she was currently on hiatus from all her jobs as an idol.

"What did Stephen say?"

Since her diagnosis, Stephen had been in charge of Saikawa's treatment. She was actually the patient he'd left us to go see earlier.

"Oh, uh... Sorry."

I'd noticed Saikawa was wearing a troubled smile. I'd asked my question without thinking, but she couldn't answer me.

Saikawa took a small sketchbook out of her bag. She wrote something quickly with a pen, then turned the sketchbook to face me. The page held the answer to my question.

No change.

There were some diseases even Stephen Bluefield, the Inventor, couldn't cure.

Science wasn't able to repair the psyche.

I haven't had this much time off in ages.

Saikawa's smile seemed a little lonely as she showed me the sketchbook.

The rehearsals she'd put so much effort into were also temporarily on hiatus. The musical was scheduled to open soon, though, so they'd started to discuss using her understudy.

I only had one new song to go, too.

Saikawa was talking about her six months of back-to-back releases. The day she should have recorded the last song had come and gone, so if nothing changed, the project would end abruptly in its final month.

"I'm sorry. It's our fault for causing you unnecessary worry." I bowed deeply.

Drachma had diagnosed that part of the reason Saikawa had ended up like this was due to chronic stress and fatigue. The vampire incident—and especially that mummy hand—wouldn't have helped one bit.

During that trouble, Saikawa had sworn to keep shining as an idol singer, but the intense pressure of her success had eaten away at her heart. In telling herself she had to stay a "shiny-clean, pretty idol who never showed weakness," she'd put a curse on herself.

That wasn't it. Saikawa shook her head firmly. It's because I'm weak.

That wasn't true. She was stronger than anyone. Saikawa always dazzled and sparkled, and she never let people see her vulnerable side... No, that image she'd created of herself was the problem here. Saikawa had tried to respond to the hopes of people around her. She worked hard to live up to that ideal.

And I was still trying to make her shoulder that heavy burden.

I'm a failure as an idol. Saikawa hugged her sketchbook. She was trying to smile, but she couldn't seem to manage it. Unable to take it anymore, I closed the distance between us, and she let her forehead fall against my chest with a little thump.

What could I say at a time like this? One of the issues she'd had to face recently was her new song releases being put on hold. As an idol, Saikawa had put particular effort into those, so it was really bothering her.

However, Stephen, the Inventor, had told me he had a solution: We could create a vocal track using a *synthesized* voice. It was possible to synthesize a song using a library of previous recordings of Saikawa's voice to make it sound as if she was actually singing. Songs like that were an established genre these days, to the point where even explaining them seemed like overkill.

According to Stephen, Saikawa would be able to use that vocal synthesizer with old recordings of her singing and talking to release a new song, even if she couldn't sing right now.

The proposal was very like that back-alley doctor, in both good and bad ways. It was similar to the way he'd immediately suggested Reloaded use prosthetics when she'd lost the use of her own legs.

And, like Reloaded, Saikawa's answer had been...

"So you're going to turn down Stephen's idea?" I asked.

Saikawa looked a little hesitant, but she gave a small nod. *There's just no way to add emotion to a synthesized voice.* 

Saikawa had always sung performances live as an idol, so her hesitation was completely natural. I wasn't about to criticize her choice. There was nothing I could say to help her.

"May I say something?"

Another voice spoke up instead. It belonged to a lady in a white dress and black hat: Marie, our client, and the woman once feared as the Parasol Witch.

Her circumstances were different to when we'd first met her, though.

At the moment, she was being pushed by Natsunagi in a wheelchair.

"Marie, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just lost a little muscle mass."

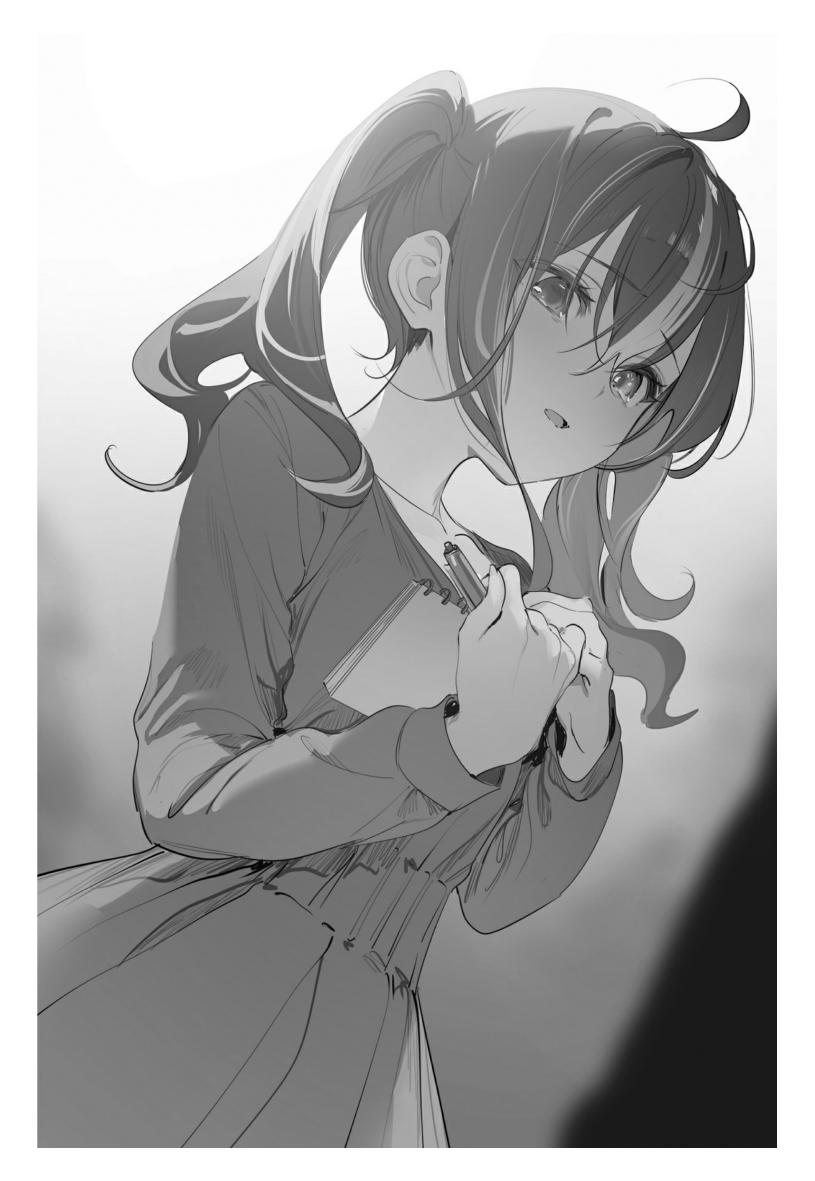
Marie looked thinner than when I'd last seen her, and even as she tried to smile, she couldn't completely stifle a cough. She'd said she had some health problems, but apparently they'd taken a sharp turn for the worse: Marie had also been hospitalized here for several days now.

"I haven't seen you in a little while," Marie said to Saikawa. The girl nodded, tearing up. "I respect your decision. Even if you did use an electronic voice for your song, though, it wouldn't entirely lack emotion. You've sung with sincerity up until now. The feelings you want to put into your song are all there, in that voice. Right?" Marie asked, before continuing. "Your singing voice holds everything you've done, everything you've believed in, all your love and

emotions. You'd be borrowing that voice to create your song. There's no way it would just be an electronic sound."

Saikawa looked up. Her eyes were wavering, but I was sure it was for a different reason than before.

"Music needs two people to exist: one to sing it, and the other to hear it. It's true that you can't sing right now, but there are many, many people who remember your voice. That connection hasn't been severed. The bond between you is something you've spent your whole career forging."



Natsunagi chimed in. "I used to have multiple selves." She had to be talking about the past both Saikawa and I already knew about. "There was a time when I didn't know who or what I was. Sometimes I thought I might not have an identity at all. But I didn't disappear," she said firmly. "Not a single thing I've had has vanished, after all that time. My heart was replaced, my personality was switched, I lost my memories. Looking back, though, there wasn't one thing I truly lost. The joy I felt so long ago, the sadness of saying good-bye—all that persisted. It was engraved in me, and it's still here inside me." Natsunagi pressed a hand to the left side of her chest. "Humans don't lose anything."

Even if something indescribable happened to a person, there was nothing any enemy, or any injustice, could take away from them. And so—

"The things you treasured haven't vanished, Yui. They're still right there. They've just been shut away." Natsunagi gently pressed her hand to the top of Saikawa's chest, just below her throat.

Instead of speaking, Saikawa nodded emphatically several times.

"So you're like me, Miss Detective." Marie looked a little lonely upon learning that she and Natsunagi had been through something similar. Turning to face Saikawa again, Marie gave her a soft smile. "I also lost my memories, but the one thing I remembered were my precious songs. I'm sure that's just how people are."

After hearing what the two had to say, Saikawa thought hard for a little while, then picked up her sketchbook. She wrote so much that at one point she had to turn the page to keep going, and when she finished writing, she showed it to us.

I still think I'll cancel the release of my new song.

She hadn't changed her mind. She turned the page.

For now, I'll keep my voice in reserve. I'm sure I'll be able to use what's been shut away again someday. Saikawa rubbed her eyes with a hand, wiping away a few tears. When that time comes, I'll sing my heart out so the people who need it can hear my voice. Right now, that's what I'm hoping for!

That was also a brave choice. Saikawa would focus on recovering physically and mentally for now, and stop trying to force herself to shine. Both Marie and

Natsunagi warmly accepted her decision, and I watched them all from a few steps away.

"I didn't even need to do anything here."

But then, out of nowhere, my eyes met Saikawa's.

She wrote something quickly in her sketchbook, then turned it to face me.

Getting muddy and recklessly attempting to chase your dream can also be called "shiny-clean and pretty," don't you think?

Yeah, absolutely. Any version of Yui Saikawa was bound to be.

### The midpoint between past and future

Three days after Kimizuka and I visited Stephen in the hospital, we were heading into Golden Week, and the two of us left on a little excursion of our own.

The weather was nice and sunny, and a cool breeze washed over us as we walked side by side. Next to Kimizuka like this, I could intuitively sense the difference in our heights and the lengths of our strides. Actually, it wasn't the length of his stride so much as how fast he walked. Hadn't Siesta ever warned him about that?

"Brr! It's a little chilly, huh?" The wind blew, and I shivered. I should have worn a jacket; I'd gotten careless because it was May.

"Well, we are in Japan's northernmost prefecture."

Kimizuka, who'd been smart and worn *his* jacket, glanced back at me from half a pace ahead.

All of this meant, of course, that we were currently in Hokkaido. We'd traveled overseas quite a bit lately, so to us this counted as a "little excursion."

"Isn't this the sort of situation where you'd loan a girl your jacket?"

"I'd love to, but we live in a gender-equal society."

"Wow, my affection levels just dropped to zero. Why am I traveling with a louse like you, Kimizuka?"

"You're the one who brought me out here. The way you asked was weird, too: 'Wanna go visit a ranch?'"

We glared at each other, then the two of us broke into grins.

It had been a long time since we'd bantered like this. Life had been littered with all sorts of sadness and pain lately, so none of us had been able to relax enough for that sort of thing. Still, the detective and her assistant couldn't be all doom and gloom. We had to be cheerful!

We needed to keep our eyes on our objective, but still have the time and energy to enjoy pie and tea while we were at it. At least, that was how the previous Ace Detective had done it.

"If you're that cold, wanna use my pockets?" Slowing down a little, Kimizuka offered to lend me a small part of his jacket. He was probably trying to tell me to put my hands in there, but...

"Where did you learn that move?"

"It was in a shoujo manga I borrowed from Noches."

"Must've been pretty old."

"Apparently it was one of Siesta's favorites."

As we enjoyed ourselves chatting, we turned down a road with very little traffic. But we knew where we were going, and we kept walking until a ramen shop came into view.

"Perfect. Let's get something hot to eat," Kimizuka said, and so we decided to grab a late lunch.

When we entered the shop, an employee greeted us with an energetic "Welcome in!" There were no other customers, and the meal ticket machine had photos of tasty-looking miso ramen on it.

"Natsunagi, they've got large and extra large. Which one do you want?"

"Why do you just automatically assume I'm a big eater? I'll have a large."

We sat down at the counter, waiting for our ramen as the delicious smell of soup drifted out of the kitchen and made us hungrier.

"Siesta can't even eat, can she?" Kimizuka murmured, for no particular reason. "She used to love eating pizza and drinking tea, but for over half a year, all she's done is sleep."

Right. The whole time she slept, the only nutrients she got came through an IV drip.

Neither Kimizuka nor I had clearly answered the question Stephen had asked us yet. At the very least, though, I wanted her to be able to eat hot food again really soon. I was sure we both shared that wish.

Not long after, bowls of miso ramen piled high with corn and bean sprouts arrived in front of us, and we ate without saying much. My body and emotions had both gotten a little chilly, and the hot soup gradually brought warmth back into them. Apparently, it's true that humans can't make decent decisions on empty stomachs.

"We can throw in some rice to round out the meal," the manager said with a smile. He was wearing a bandanna tied around his head.

Grateful for the offer, I told him, "In that case, make it curry rice."

There was a brief pause.

"How spicy?"

"A seven on that famous one-to-ten scale."

"Understood," the manager told me, wrapping up our brief exchange and withdrawing to the kitchen.

Every line in our conversation had been a code phrase.

"Okay, I think I'll go visit the ladies' room," I told Kimizuka, getting up. I left my bag on the seat.

"Leaving me out in the cold by myself, huh? Must be nice to be popular."

"Ah-ha-ha! I'm sorry, okay? I won't be long."

"Yeah, I'm just gonna kill some time. I'll leave it to you."

Hearing Kimizuka's words over my shoulder, I headed for the bathroom at the back of the shop. The sign on it said FOR EMPLOYEES ONLY, but I ignored it and

opened the door. There was no toilet, or sink, or anything of the sort inside—just a small open space with another door. Letting out a shallow breath, I took a step through that second door. The dim space beyond was lit very faintly with warm lighting. It looked nothing like the ramen shop; instead, it appeared for all intents and purposes to be a bar.

Someone I'd been wanting to meet for a long time was sitting at the very end of the counter.

"Are you Bruno?"

The white-whiskered old gentleman quietly set down the glass he'd been holding. "Could I trouble you to entrust any electronic devices to him?"

I noticed a man in a dark suit standing nearby, holding a sack. A Man in Black.

"I left my smartphone with my assistant."

"Ha-ha. You're well-prepared; that's a great help." Smiling, the old man pointed to the seat next to him, and I sat down with a small bow. "This is our first time meeting one another, new Ace Detective."

"Yes. I've been hoping to meet you for a long time, Information Broker."

We didn't shake hands, but we did clink the glasses that were sitting in front of us.

Kimizuka and I had come all the way to Hokkaido to see this man, Bruno Belmondo. As a fellow Tuner, I was the only one allowed to meet with him.

"I really have been looking everywhere for you. I even went to India, you know?"

"Ha-ha. My apologies. It wasn't like I was trying to avoid you." There was a mischievous spark in Bruno's smile. Personally, it had felt as if he *had* been running away from me...but I'd caught him now, so I'd call us square.

"Still, I'm impressed you knew I'd be here today. Was it the Men in Black?"

I showed Bruno a diary I'd made sure to bring in with me: the Ace Detective's memoirs.

Or, more accurately, a copy of it. Ice Doll, a high-level Federation Government

official, had given it to me when I became a Tuner. It was a record of the various missions Siesta, the previous Ace Detective, had completed—a reference to help me take over her duties.

"In here is a record of all of Siesta's jobs, including dates and all sorts of other details. Five years ago today, on May third, she came to Hokkaido."

All she'd written about, though, were mundane things: She'd eaten the local ice cream, visited a ranch for a hands-on experience milking cows, things like that.

"Doesn't that seem weird? Suddenly having nothing on her agenda except fun little stuff...?"

"Ha-ha! I'm sure she was also very busy around that time. Perhaps it was a break, to help her unwind," Bruno said offhandedly.

"No, that's not possible," I told him, shaking my head.

"There's no way she was doing nothing during Golden Week five years ago."

I had a general idea of what Siesta had been up to right about then. I knew what name she'd been using and what she'd done for Boy K., who was destined to become her assistant someday.

"Something definitely happened on May third that year. Something she couldn't keep a record of—for example, she may have had a secret meeting with the Information Broker, just like I'm doing right now."

Bruno smiled very slightly.

"I had the Men in Black find a list of your hideouts for me, and this place was on it. I think you meant for the other Tuners to be able to access at least that information in the first place, though."

"Yes. However, it wasn't a given that I'd be here today."

"That's...true. But here, today, was the only place I'd be able to reach you." My hints had been limited, and that was the only answer I'd been able to

extract. "I thought this might be a test: You wanted to see whether the new Ace Detective could find this place on the day Siesta had met you here, five years after she'd done it. Or at least, I was sure you'd give me that much of a chance. And just as I suspected, you were here."

Bruno grinned and downed his drink. "How strange. I was sure I'd locked that day."

"...Locked how?"

"'Locked' information is never leaked elsewhere, and it isn't carried over to the future. That's the rule. The detective's last wish pried open that lock of mine, though... I swear, you detectives, in every era..." Bruno gazed at me as if I intrigued him. "This time, I really need to make sure I lock it up securely. Tightly enough that no matter what sort of Sacred Relic is used, what happens here won't be left for the future."

"Uh, I don't understand what you're talking about..."

"Ha-ha. I mean so that even the future Singularity, for example, isn't able to interfere with this place or time. Let yourself be the only one to remember it," Bruno admonished me gently. "That is how things stand. Now, what did you want to ask me?"

We were finally getting down to business. He was saying he'd hear me out.

"I'd originally meant to get you to tell me a way to save Siesta, but asking about that is against the rules, isn't it? That was why you wouldn't meet with me two months ago."

The corners of Bruno's lips curved slightly, and he nodded.

Finding that out was our job. The Information Broker wasn't a convenience that would tell us whatever we needed to know. His job was to keep the scales of the world's knowledge balanced.

"Then what did you come to ask me? What goal are you working toward now?"

"We're trying to stop Scarlet. Even if it's just for the time being, right now, that will also help us save Siesta."

"How do you plan on stopping him?"

"There still seems to be some sort of secret relationship between the Vampire and the Federation Government. We're thinking we need to find out what it is."

Scarlet was trying to use Siesta, his bride, to lift the curse placed on the vampire race. Yet he'd accepted the Federation Government's mission and killed countless vampires. That wasn't consistent behavior for someone who sought the prosperity of his people.

However, up until now, we'd only really looked at the situation from Scarlet's side. We thought that any key to resolving this inconsistency was probably related to the Federation Government. What sort of secret relationship had actually existed between the Vampire and the government?

"I see. So you'd like me to tell you that?"

"No, I don't think you'd tell us that, either." Bruno chuckled as if I'd amused him. "So I'd like to ask them directly. Tell me where the Federation Government dignitaries are now."

In response, the world's wisdom said:

"Very well. I will form a link between you here. Let me intrude, for the sake of my future self."

With that, Bruno held out a map.

## **♦** This is the proper way to pick a fight

On our second day in Hokkaido, Natsunagi and I left the hotel early in the morning and headed further north.

It took us more than five hours by express train and car to reach our destination. We tried to kill time by chatting, but the trip was so long that the conversation trailed off naturally several times.

"You need to get better at small talk, Kimizuka," Natsunagi said critically. We were in the back seat of a car, finally just ten kilometers from our destination. "Someday, when you're at an amusement park with a girl, and you're standing in line for an attraction, you should have a way to keep her from getting bored."

For some reason, she was worried about a future date I hadn't even scheduled. I wanted to set her mind at ease on that front. "I've actually already been in a situation like that with a girl, ages back, but I just told her all about the attractions, the merch, and the parade, and she listened without saying a word."

"Yes, because she was fed up. Poor Siesta," Natsunagi murmured.

How weird. I hadn't said anything about it being Siesta.

Still, talking about that had taken the tension out of my shoulders.

"Seriously, though, the Federation Government officials better be here."

The day before, Natsunagi had made contact with the Information Broker, Bruno Belmondo, and had managed to get him to tell her where the government officials were. From what he'd said, several of them were currently at a house on a cape in northeastern Hokkaido for a conference, so we were planning to drop in on them.

"It's all thanks to you being proactive, Natsunagi. That was a huge help."

I could never have gotten here on my own. Today, we'd finally managed to take a big step toward getting Siesta back from Scarlet.

"I haven't been able to do much before now, either, so that's true for both of us."

I thought Natsunagi was selling herself short...but I guess detectives and their assistants have to share the stage equally.

"Still, who'd have figured government officials would just happen to be nearby right now?"

They weren't just in Japan; they were in the same prefecture. Talk about a windfall. It was almost as if they'd timed their conference to match our visit...

"What do you think, Kimizuka? Is it coincidence, or fate?"

"No idea. It could also be that predisposition of mine."

Still, the original reason we'd come here had been to see the Information Broker. We'd headed up north because that was where Bruno was, so in a way,

you could say we'd been guided by his movements and intentions.

Why had he chosen now to visit Japan? What had made him decide to meet Natsunagi? His actions couldn't have been guided by someone else, could they? And maybe that someone had also been—

"Kimizuka, I think we're here."

The car stopped. The cape seemed deserted, and when we got out of the car, I could hear the waves breaking fiercely against the rocks. A small brick house sat at the tip of the dreary peninsula.

"Natsunagi, how do we get in?"

"You cut straight to the 'improv' part of the show... Can't we just ring the doorbell like normal people?"

"What are you talking about? If we do that, they'll underestimate us."

"Why are you trying to compete with government officials?" Natsunagi gave me a disgusted look.

What choice did we have, though? After all, what we were about to do was...

"Because we're here to pick a fight," I said, and kicked in the door.

"Hey, that was actually kinda cool. It gave me tingles."

"I'm glad. My leg's all tingly now, too."

Inside the house, seven government officials were seated around a long table. Some were in suits, while others were dressed in kimonos, but all of them wore masks. As their eyes focused on us, I spotted a familiar figure.

"Haven't seen you in a while, Ice Doll."

I'd never seen her real face, but I thought she must be pretty old. Of this group, she was the one who'd interacted the most with the Ace Detective.

"This seems rather hostile," Ice Doll said. Yet her voice was calm, and she didn't rise from her chair. If we were coming to pick a fight, shouldn't we have brought guns or something?

"So the Federation Government meets up on the sly and has secret talks like this, all while you're pushing everything onto the Tuners?" "We don't feel we're pushing anything onto you. The Federation Government and the Tuners are independent organizations. We simply trust you to handle things."

They were contrived words, completely devoid of emotion.

"In that case, then who exactly is at war with one of the Tuners they 'trust'?" Natsunagi shot back.

The Vampire and the Federation Government were all-out enemies at this point.

"We didn't want to let the matter become this serious, you know. The Vampire was acting ominously well before we made the difficult decision to go to war. The fact that things turned out this way was unfortunate, if not inevitable."

"You make it sound as if it's got nothing to do with you. What caused the rift between the government and Scarlet in the first place?" As Elizabeth had said, the Federation Government might have been planning to wipe out Scarlet along with the rest of the vampires, but even then... "There's some other secret between you two, isn't there?"

Ice Doll didn't respond. Still, Natsunagi and I had come all this way to get an answer to that question.

"As I'm sure you people know, Siesta's been taken to the Nightless Castle. There's no way we can stay out of this."

"You're planning to get the former Ace Detective back?"

"It's not for myself, but for the world."

Losing Siesta would be a loss for all mankind, the whole world, the entire universe.

"Then what if her death became something that would benefit the world? What would you do then?"

For a moment, Ice Doll's question made me feel like I was suffocating.

If there was a scenario where Siesta's death would benefit the world...

If there came a day when I had to choose between the world and Siesta...

Was there even any point to a question like that? Could that even happen?

"As the world's one and only Singularity, there may come a time when you must make that choice." Ice Doll's masked face stared at me.

If the sort of thing she was talking about actually happened, and if I was the one in charge of making that decision, then I wouldn't just be the protagonist of some story. I'd be—

"That's enough obfuscation, all right?" Natsunagi stepped forward to take my place. "We don't have any time to waste. *So tell us:* What is the real nature of your relationship with Scarlet?"

I got the feeling that Natsunagi's red eyes had flashed.

Immediately, the other government officials all started to rise, but Ice Doll reined them in.

"Ice Doll, you just said yourself that the Federation Government and the Tuners are independent organizations. Don't think I'll always obey your orders. I'll decide my own actions."

Natsunagi's words were far more ferocious than kicking down a door.

"—Fifteen years ago, I appointed that man as the Vampire," one of the officials said. He hadn't removed his mask, but from his build and his deep voice, I could tell he was an older man. He introduced himself by the code name "Odin."

"Both then and now, Scarlet's only desire was the safety of a single girl."

Had Natsunagi's word-soul spurred him to talk, or did he have reasons of his own? Odin began to recount the past.

"That man came to me with a certain contract: He would accept the mission to destroy all the vampires, and in exchange, he wanted me to guarantee the life of that girl."

This was a little different from what Scarlet had told us a month ago. He hadn't mentioned a girl, only that he'd become a Tuner to defeat evil vampires like the one who'd destroyed his town.

"...I guess there's no way he would've been honest about everything." I'd thought Scarlet was being genuine, telling me about his past, but he'd only been deceiving me.

"Kimizuka, that girl whose life Scarlet wanted guaranteed...," Natsunagi whispered.

"Yeah. It's probably Siesta," I whispered back.

Considering Scarlet's recent actions, that seemed to be the logical conclusion. For ages now, he'd been calling Siesta his "bride candidate" and acting obsessed with her. Did that mean there was still some relationship between them that I didn't know about?

"Then are you saying Scarlet caused the vampire rebellion because that first contract he made with you was broken?" Natsunagi asked Odin.

"You may interpret it like that. Recently, that girl—although she's grown significantly now—has fallen into circumstances where it can't be claimed she's 'safe,' and Scarlet says we've breached the contract. However, her current situation was unintentional on our part. We're at a loss over it ourselves."

"...So that's what this conference is about? You're trying to come up with a plan?"

Either way, I was starting to get a picture of the situation.

Why had Scarlet chosen now to rebel against the Federation Government? Most likely because Siesta, the girl who was supposed to be his bride, had fallen into critical condition due to the effect of that seed. He was angry because the Federation Government had guaranteed her safety in their contract, but not followed through...

"No, wait."

I rejected the hypothesis I'd formulated.

That couldn't be it. It had to be something else.

After all, Siesta's condition wasn't recent. She'd fallen asleep in early autumn of last year. And the year before that, she'd actually died.

"In that case, why didn't Scarlet launch his rebellion then?"

That was weird. This shouldn't only be happening now. It meant Scarlet wasn't rebelling because Siesta was in danger.

"Are we still missing a piece of this puzzle?"

Were Ice Doll and Odin hiding something?

"I see. We had the wrong idea." Natsunagi's eyes widened. The detective had formed a new theory, one step ahead of me.

"Siesta isn't Scarlet's real bride."

#### **◆ When this battle ends**

"-I'm beat."

When we got back to our hotel, I collapsed onto one of the twin beds.

After our confrontation with the Federation Government, we'd worked from Natsunagi's theory and a few of the facts that Odin had told us to uncover something else about Scarlet's past.

Feeling as if the weight of it would crush us, we'd taken the car and train back to the hotel. I couldn't remember much about the trip at all, and I was just happy we'd managed to make it back. We hadn't even eaten properly, and it was close to midnight already.

"Your jacket's going to get wrinkled." We were staying in the same room, and Natsunagi brought over a hanger. "Let me have it."

"It's fine. I'll do it."

I went over to the rack by the door and hung up my jacket. When I got back, Natsunagi had collapsed face down on the bed.

"You too, huh?" Sounding a little surprised, I flopped onto the other bed.

With a groan, Natsunagi rolled onto her back. "Of course I'm tired."

Yeah, I'll bet. Both physically and mentally.

"Detectives have to deal with a lot of painful stuff, don't they?"

"The truth mostly isn't pretty," she said. Meanwhile, I grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge and handed one to Natsunagi. We sat there in silence for

a little while. I couldn't think of any good topics to make small talk about.

After a few minutes, Natsunagi took a swallow of water, then spoke. "I won't stop, though. No matter how much the truth hurts, I won't stop being a detective."

"Yeah, me either." After all, I'd been destined for a life of nonstop trouble ever since I was born. Even if I suddenly quit being an assistant, my path wouldn't be one without obstacles. In which case, I'd choose this life.

"Starting tomorrow, things are going to get busy again."

Now that we knew what we did, there was something we had to do. Golden Week would be over soon, but we might not even have time to go back to college.

"So in the end, it's just going to be like it was in high school?"

"Right: I'll be the detective, and you'll be my assistant," Natsunagi said with a smile.

That meant, without a doubt, we would once again...

"For tonight, let's get to bed."

I would have preferred to take a shower first, but in the end, drowsiness won out. We had to go back home on the first flight the next morning. Just as I was thinking I'd at least change into my pajamas before going to sleep, I heard a bang. It was far too cute for a gunshot. When I turned around, wondering what the noise had been, I saw Natsunagi holding a small party cracker.

"Happy birthday, Kimizuka."

I glanced at the clock. The date had changed to May 5: It was my birthday.

"...You came prepared." I didn't really know what kind of expression to wear at a time like this, and I muttered "thank you" so quietly she might not have even heard it.

"I don't have a present for you, so I thought I'd at least set off some party crackers."

"What, you didn't get me anything?"

"I mean, now's not exactly the time for that sort of thing, is it?" Natsunagi said sensibly, and popped a second cracker. "Let's celebrate properly once we've gotten this incident squared away!"

"That sounds a lot like a death flag."

"But pointing that out means it's not going to work." Natsunagi grinned. It was contagious; I smiled a little, too.

Just getting a year older didn't make me feel like an adult. Wishes, egos, pretty lies, and life choices... Life was still littered with things I didn't understand, but it was past the time when that made it okay to cling to how things were.

That was why I'd make a choice, even if I knew it might not be the right one. No matter what responsibility I had to shoulder as a result. After all, over these past few months, I'd seen lots of people make difficult choices. And so...

"Wait just a little longer," I murmured to the detective asleep in a distant country.



# **Side Scarlet**

My bride slept in the coffin, her face as beautiful as ever.

She was pale. So incredibly fair: her face, her limbs, everything.

It was an immaculately pure white, even more refined than it had been before I'd brought her to this castle.

Of course, that was merely how it seemed to me, from my perspective as a vampire.

Being suspended between life and death like this, however, was the condition for becoming a proper "bride."

"I knew this was your destiny all along, Daydream."

The girl who had rejected my marriage proposals again and again was now here, in a spotless white dress.

*"…"* 

I moved to touch her pale cheek, but my fingers hesitated. The canvas was unblemished. I didn't have the right to dye it red with my blood.

"I suppose it's too late for that. I've already poured the blood of vampires into you."

With that self-deprecating smile, I sat down right there, putting one knee up.

It had been a little less than a month since I'd cut my ties with the Federation Government and stolen the Daydream away. I hadn't taken a single step outside the castle since we'd arrived. I didn't need to.

I had to use my remaining life to lift the curse of the vampires' short lifespans by creating as many offspring as possible with a bride who could tolerate my blood. To that end, I could not allow the Daydream to die here. I had to delicately adjust the amount of blood I was sharing with her, which meant I could not leave her, even temporarily.

However, for the past month, there had been constant artillery fire outside the castle. My undead comrades were doing battle with the Federation Government forces. Neither side paid any heed to the small sacrifices they made.

"Regardless, they won't attack in earnest and overrun this castle."

As long as I had the Daydream as my hostage, the Federation Government couldn't do anything rash. If, by some error, she happened to die now, there was no knowing what the Singularity might do.

Naturally, some of their number were probably reformists. The Singularity would destabilize the world, they'd say, so why not kill him and be done with it? No doubt secret talks to that end were being held somewhere at this very moment, but no answer would present itself. That was the sort of organization they were.

"Soon. Very soon, it will all be over."

Fifteen years ago, my hometown had burned. I had nearly died countless times, but never completely. I'd gotten back up to live out the mere fifteen years that remained to me. I'd had no choice.

Then a masked bureaucrat had saddled me with the role of Tuner and told me to use my remaining life to destroy all vampires. He'd said that, in exchange, he would grant one request, no matter what it was.

So I had made that request. I'd asked his group to protect the life of the girl I'd thought of in that moment, no matter what it took. I'd told them to watch over her from afar in my place and let her live out her natural life. That had been my only wish.

They had accepted that contract, and I had spent fifteen years slaughtering my own kind. If it would make that wish come true, I didn't care what I

sacrificed. I engraved the resentful voices of those I killed into my body as punishment. As long as that girl was alive somewhere, I had no complaints.

However, those days were nearly over. These thirty years of mine, riddled with contradictions, would come to an end. I was about to accomplish my final task.

"It's very quiet."

All of a sudden, I realized that the artillery fire had stopped.

I couldn't hear anything outside the castle walls. The sun had already set, making this the time of day when the undead were usually most active, and ordinarily, the fighting should have grown fiercer.

"What are they doing?"

I got to my feet.

Just then, the door opened.



# **Chapter 5**

### **◆** The first wedding dress in five years

"I object to this marriage," I shouted, pushing open a large set of doors.

I'd finally reached the Vampire's fortress—the Nightless Castle.

The room in front of me looked like a church sanctuary, and I walked up the red carpet running down the aisle.

I never imagined I'd say something like that, but maybe all guys eventually end up in this sort of situation.

About twenty meters away, a lone man stood at the altar: the Vampire, Scarlet. He wore a white jacket that looked a little like a tuxedo. Beside him was a coffin, and even from a distance, I could tell Siesta was inside it, wearing a wedding dress.

A month after Scarlet had taken Siesta, and two weeks after Natsunagi and I had crashed the Federation Government's conference, we'd finally made it here.

"An extremely drab man has come to steal my bride, I see." The vampire groom's lips curved up at the corners.

"This sort of role is usually played by an unsophisticated sort of protagonist."

"Ha! A drama with a cheap script." Scarlet turned to the coffin and leaned down, getting closer to the sleeping Siesta. "You're merely doing what's convenient for you and forcing it onto her. You aren't giving any thought whatsoever to my bride's feelings."

"I know how Siesta feels." Scarlet had been reaching toward Siesta, but at that, his hand froze in midair. "She thinks being with you is boring."

Just seeing her face told me as much. She'd smiled a lot more than this when she'd worn a wedding dress standing beside me, five years ago.

Scarlet snorted, straightening up again. "How did you reach this place?"

We'd moved on from pleasantries. He wanted to know how I'd made it past the battlefield to the Nightless Castle. The Federation Government forces and the undead soldiers should have been fighting throughout the area.

"I negotiated with the government and got them to temporarily stop their attack. The artillery should be quiet for a while."

"I see. True; my forces have orders not to initiate any unnecessary attacks. If the enemy has withdrawn, a ceasefire would naturally occur. However..." Scarlet narrowed his gold eyes. "I can't imagine my comrades would simply allow you to enter the castle."

He had a point. If I'd shown up without a plan, the undead probably would have driven me away at the gate.

"What have you done with that detective girl? No—you didn't..."

"Good instincts. That's right: Natsunagi's keeping the undead in check using her skills of persuasion."

Thanks to that, I'd managed to get into the Nightless Castle.

"Impossible." Scarlet grimaced. "They are dead soldiers who merely keep fighting. They've forgotten their instincts from their past life. I made sure of that when I resurrected them. There will be no miracles like the one the Magical Girl received."

...He was right. We hadn't been able to appeal to the instincts of the undead soldiers, keeping them pinned down by granting their wishes. But there was another way.

"Undead who resurrect without their instincts have nothing to base their actions on. That's probably why they listened to you, their master. How long has it been since they were born, though?"

It had been a month since Scarlet had launched his resistance against the Federation Government, and he'd told us that he'd dispatched them here as soldiers even before that. In other words...

"Don't you think that's enough time for the undead to evolve a new sense of self?"

"Ridiculous. Are you saying they've begun to develop free will?"

"I don't think it's that strange."

Just as will turned into action, and action became habit, habit eventually created new will. The undead had begun to question their habit of constantly fighting and had developed wills of their own—a sense of self.

"You said so yourself once. That human instinct, or consciousness, must dwell in every fragment of their DNA. You told us that was why the undead came back with their instincts intact. The will of living things is just that tenacious. So tenacious that even death can't erase it."

Now that they'd retaken their wills, the undead had begun to think to themselves: Maybe there's no reason for us to fight.

"That's how our Ace Detective managed to talk them around. She's still at it."

Even the dead could understand Natsunagi's word-soul. Even a soft whisper would reach them across the battlefield.

And for the moment, the war had ceased.

"Give back Siesta."

So, right here and now, I'd carry out the job only I could do.

"Are you sure that's what you want? My blood has been protecting the Daydream's heart."

"If that was all you were doing. But I know you've got a plan beyond that."

There was no way I could accept what he intended to do.

Silence fell. The stillness in the sanctuary was so cold it felt like we were inside an enormous fridge.

"I cannot let her go of my own will," Scarlet said, finally. "As I told you in the beginning, the bride's will is what matters. Debating this between ourselves will solve nothing."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

But just then, the coffin moved.

"The minimal necessary preparations are already complete."

Siesta emerged from the coffin, wearing a veil.

Her eyes opened, and she stood on her own two feet, gazing at me from a short distance away.

"My blood has even restored the strength she's lost since falling asleep. Go on, express the depths of your gratitude to me: The detective you've longed to see has awakened."

With an ominous smile, Scarlet spread his arms.

"Siesta..."

I took one step toward her, then another, reaching out a hand.

Siesta didn't say a word. That wasn't all—she wasn't looking at anything.

We were making eye contact, but she wasn't really seeing me.

"Is she...?"

"She is not undead," Scarlet answered. "However, she is something very similar. One could call it a liminal state between human and vampire. In terms of percentages, she's still very much the former...however, the girl already had DNA from the primordial seed in her. It was already hard to say what she was with any certainty."

He was right. And yet...

"Siesta is Siesta."

To me, she was also my irreplaceable business partner. That's why...

"You're going to give her back."

Taking out a small gun, I pointed it at Scarlet.

"Don't make me repeat myself. It depends on the bride's will."

In that moment, a shadow disappeared.

But Scarlet was still there in front of me. That could only mean one thing...

"——!"

Sensing murderous intent, I lunged out of the way, not caring where I landed. Even so, something grazed my cheek, drawing blood.

Here it comes again. I pointed my gun at it.

Siesta was there in front of me, holding a knife. Had the vampire's blood gotten out of control?

"I never wanted to fight you again, you know."

Siesta backed away, putting a bit of distance between us. At some point, her eyes had begun to shine the same gold as Scarlet's.

"I'm not gonna be able to hold back."

The detective and her assistant were having a rematch for the first time in eight months.

#### ◆ I'll go meet you again

I'd gone and said a cool-guy line like I'm not gonna be able to hold back, but when I thought about it calmly, there was just no way I could beat Siesta. A few minutes ago, I'd had a faint hope that I might be able to manage it somehow, but now I felt like punching myself for thinking it.

"Actually, has borrowing that vampiric power made her even stronger...?"

I'd slipped out of the sanctuary, planning to take the fight elsewhere, and Siesta had chased after me hell-for-leather. She'd run along the wall of the castle corridor, leaped up all the way to the ceiling, and when she'd landed again, cracks had raced through the floor. Forget fighting defensively—all I could do was run.

I dodged and weaved, managing to fire shots every so often to hold her back. Ordinarily, this game of tag wouldn't even have lasted thirty seconds, but I managed to tough it out for a few minutes because Siesta's stamina hadn't significantly recovered yet.

Her explosive power was ferocious, but after running for fifteen seconds or so, she'd stop as if she was out of breath. Thanks to that, I was able to put some distance between us every now and then. I wasn't sure whether this was a

great way to fight somebody who was sick, but at this point, wearing Siesta down was the most effective way to survive this battle.

"Not that my strength is infinite, either, though."

Panting hard, I ran around the vampire's fortress.

The sanctuary we'd just left was on the second-highest floor of the Nightless Castle. I sprinted down a spiral staircase and kept descending deeper and deeper. Dashing out of the stairwell into a random corridor, I fled into a room at the very end. It turned out to be a bedroom with a large bed.

"I'd really love to just crash here, but..."

In order to reach this castle, I'd taken several flights, come all the way to a distant country, and cut through a war zone, barely resting at all. I'd had help from the Men in Black along the way, but frankly, I'd felt half dead by the time I got here. I still did.

In all honesty, I wished Ms. Fuubi or Ookami had come with me. This involved me personally, though, so for once, I had to settle things on my own.

Besides, in all likelihood, I'd only gotten Scarlet to talk to me because I'd come alone. And I wasn't done yet: There was still something else I had to confirm with him directly.

"I've gotta deal with this first, though."

The door was blown off its hinges. Siesta stood there, having just executed a magnificent roundhouse kick.

"Geez, you've got no manners— Whoa!"

I didn't even have time to moan about it. Siesta closed the distance between us in a heartbeat, brandishing the knife in her right hand. Her movements were as polished and efficient as always.

But that was exactly why I could predict her next attack.

"A right kick, huh?"

I twisted away, evading her high kick.

I knew a bit about how Siesta moved in close combat. For years, I'd made it

through battlefields by her side, and I'd had a closer view than anyone of how she fought. The fact that we'd aimed guns at each other for real last year also helped.

"Fighting like this really takes me back."

But it wasn't just the physical fighting—it was the bickering, too.

You being asleep all the time made life pretty boring.

"Stephen told me how to wake you up," I said, continuing to fight. "Transplanting a compatible heart into you should save you. If we do that, though, he said you might lose your memories and your personality."

Siesta's knife grazed my left shoulder, and I caught her arm, restraining her. "I've been thinking about what to do. I kept mulling over which was truly important to me—your life, or the memories we share... I really didn't want you to forget. I wanted you to remember me, and Natsunagi, and the rest of us."

I would have preferred a future where we all got to drink black tea and eat sweet pie together.

Siesta leaped backward. She was breathing heavily; I'd worn her down quite a bit.

"But one day, when I was talking with Natsunagi, it hit me. When it comes down to it, I want you to live. That's my greatest wish. More than anything else. I don't know whether that's what you want, too. But even if it's just our egos talking, we want you to live. That's all I want!"

Siesta leveled her knife again, preparing to charge. I fired my gun, sure she'd dodge it.

She evaded the bullet, but it knocked her off-balance just a little. I kicked her right arm hard, knocking the knife far out of her reach. This really wasn't the Ace Detective in her prime.

"If you live, if you keep on living, I'll meet you for the first time again!"

Siesta's intense golden eyes glared at me as if I was the enemy.

"Even if you've lost your memories and it feels like you've never met me before, I'll ask you to make me your assistant again. You'll get suspicious and ask who I am, and I'll say, 'Don't you remember?' I'll tell you about all our memories together, and you'll say you don't know what I'm talking about. Still, I'll keep stubbornly talking to you, and I'll annoy you...but even then, I won't give up!"

What? You say that's basically just being a stalker?

Well, you were that stubborn about recruiting me as your assistant.

That means at least three tries should be fine.

"...Should I make it five?"

I was clumsy, so I'd give myself some extra leeway.

"And then, Siesta, I'll become your partner again. I'll make you choose me again!"

I kept talking to her, believing that my voice would eventually reach her. According to Stephen, Siesta's auditory cells had continued to work the whole time she was asleep. That meant they had to be working now, too.

"It'll be fine. You'll be able to be a detective again someday."

She'd said so herself, way back when.

She'd said that being a detective was in her DNA.

In that case, even if she lost her memories and her personality, she wouldn't have to worry.

The future where you become a detective again is already set in stone.

"After that, I'll work hard. So—!"

A sharp pain ran through my neck: Siesta had bitten me. Her teeth felt slightly pointed. Was that due to the temporary vampirization?

I don't care. Drink your heart out. I'll give you as much of my blood as you want.

"Siesta, don't give up on living!"

I hugged her tightly.

She bit down harder.

About the only thing I could offer her right now was my pain.

"Come home. Come back to us."

Suddenly, the pressure on my neck eased.

Siesta began to collapse backward, and I hastily caught her in an embrace.

"I knew it. You really can hear me."

My own word-soul had reached the detective's instincts.



#### ◆ The bride's wish and the king's choice

Siesta had fainted, and I laid her down on the bed, then left the room. I walked through the Nightless Castle alone.

When I got back to the sanctuary, Scarlet wasn't there.

I went upstairs, looking for him, and arrived at the top floor. The sound of wind suddenly caught my ears.

Following the noise, I stepped out into an open space. Scarlet was there, standing on a balcony in the night wind and gazing up at the moon.

"Siesta's asleep again," I told him. Slowly, Scarlet turned around. "Sorry, but I win."

"Then why bother returning?" The corners of his lips curved mockingly. "You could have simply carried her on your back and escaped."

"I really wish I could have, but it's not like you'd let us go."

The fact that he'd been keeping watch from up here, at the very top of the castle, was proof of that.

"I see. However, the fact that you have returned of your own accord means you must also be prepared to die, correct?" Scarlet's one black wing unfurled. He wasn't giving me the slightest opening to attack him.

Not that I planned on fighting anyway. I'd only come back to talk to him.

"Scarlet. Your greatest wish isn't to make Siesta your bride, is it?"

The vampire's gaze sharpened, as if he were trying to gauge my true intentions. "Why did I abduct the Daydream, then? You already know what I was attempting to use her for, don't you?"

"Yeah. For the prosperity of the vampire race. That was just your secondary wish, though. You couldn't accomplish your primary goal anymore, so you moved onto the next one... No, that plan was your last resort."

Scarlet's original wish had been something else entirely.

"What do you claim I truly wanted?"

"To protect the person you treasured most in the world."

His eye twitched.

"In exchange for annihilating your kin, you asked the Federation Government to protect a certain girl. In other words, your greatest wish was her safety... But for some reason or another, that contract was broken, so you made your goal the prosperity of your race instead."

Then he'd resurrected the kin he'd personally killed as undead and put them to work, and kidnapped Siesta to make her his bride, which is where we were now.

"At first, I thought the girl you were trying to protect was Siesta. But it's someone else, isn't it?"

Scarlet and Siesta had probably met after they'd both become Tuners. Scarlet had learned about Siesta's unique origins and reasoned that he could use her as a future bride candidate. In other words, she'd only been insurance. Fifteen years ago, there had been another girl whom Scarlet had truly wanted to protect.

"Yes, you're right," Scarlet said calmly. "She was an old friend; we grew up in the same town. She was cleverer, nobler, and more beautiful than me. A girl so dazzling it was impossible to believe she was a demon."

An old friend. Scarlet had mentioned her in passing before.

That girl wasn't Siesta, though.

I was sure she wasn't Elizabeth, either.

"She died fifteen years ago. Someone set our town ablaze, and she revived three times, but not the fourth. Her powers of regeneration were average for a vampire. In her final moments, she reached toward heaven with a charred, blackened hand, then breathed her last. I had no time to despair, however. I was being consumed by the flames myself."

I already knew the rest of this story.

Scarlet had conquered the flames with his extraordinary regenerative powers, then met the government dignitary, Odin. That man had appointed him as the

Vampire and charged him with killing his own kind. As the price of the contract, Odin had promised that the government would protect a girl.

"Then the girl you asked them to protect was..."

"Yes. My old friend, whom I'd resurrected as an undead." Finally, Scarlet revealed the whole truth. "She came back to life just after I made that contract with the government; I'd brought her back with my powers as a vampire. However, upon awakening, she'd forgotten everything. Our tribe, me, even herself. Her instincts made it so."

Her only wish had been to come back as a human.

That was why, when she had resurrected, she'd lost all her memories of being a vampire.

"She was, indeed, reborn as a human," Scarlet said with a tender smile. "Yet she was still unable to escape the curse of the short lifespan of vampires. Very soon, my old friend will die. So in the end, I decided to make her other wish come true. Long ago, she told me her dream: that in the future, she wanted the world to be a place where our race, our children, could live just as long as humans. That is why, at the end, I will carry out her plan here in this castle."

Having finished his story, Scarlet turned to face me. "Do you find it strange that I would tell you everything in detail?"

"No. I thought it was one final mercy before you killed me." That probably wasn't all, though. "That, and I'm pretty sure you wanted somebody to hear your story."

Scarlet's eyes widened for a brief moment, before he spat out a sentence.

"Someone like you could never understand!"

The next second, he was gone. A heavy impact ran through my stomach.

".....! ......Hah...!"

My consciousness faded before the pain hit. I didn't realize Scarlet had kicked

me until after I'd crashed into the wall.

"You made a similar wish yourself once. You swore you would bring a girl back to life. That you would sacrifice anything to make it happen. Yet you were unable to shoulder that burden!"

As my mind dimmed, I remembered. I really had said those things when I'd decided to get Siesta back: That I'd pay any price. That I wouldn't hesitate.

But then Natsunagi had sacrificed herself to wake Siesta up, and I'd felt immeasurable regret. Even though I'd said I didn't care what I had to sacrifice, I'd clenched my fists, thinking it wasn't supposed to be like this. I had too many precious things—so many that, at some point, they'd begun to slip through my fingers.

"I loathe that human foolishness from the depths of my heart!"

Scarlet flew at me, shattering the floor beneath his feet. A floating sensation swept over me briefly, followed by a vicious impact. I'd fallen, landing hard on my back on the sanctuary floor... I couldn't breathe. Did I have broken bones? I could still move, just barely...though I really didn't think I'd managed to land right.

"You won't die. You have also been affected by a vampire." Scarlet looked down at me.

"...Because Siesta bit me?" Had that temporarily boosted my physical abilities? I'd had no idea that was how it worked. That said, it hadn't made the pain go away, and just trying to get back up made me break out in a cold sweat.

"You can't save the Daydream," Scarlet told me, as I got shakily to my feet. "If the world and the Daydream were hanging in the balance, there is zero possibility that you would choose the latter."

He wasn't exaggerating.

Ice Doll had said the same thing. That was why she'd warned me to forget all about my role as the Singularity and cut off my involvement with the world.

"I've got no response to that."

The world, or a girl. When forced to choose between the two, it was normal

for story protagonists to pick the second.

I couldn't do that, though. Nor would I make excuses like, "I'm sure Siesta wouldn't want that, either." It was that I, personally, couldn't make that choice.

"But, Scarlet, you did choose. You chose the girl over the world."

As long as Scarlet's old friend was alive, that was enough for him.

Even if he was shackled with the fate of continually killing his companions. Even if it meant being hated and cursed, not just by that old vampire and Elizabeth, but by all of his comrades, hearing their screams as they died. Even if the girl he was willing to go so far to protect didn't remember him. As long as she was living happily somewhere far away, he didn't need anything else.

That was why Scarlet was angry now: Because I was uncommitted. Because I couldn't choose to protect just one person who was special to me. He was trying to prove that *he* was in the right here. That was why he'd told me everything, and why he was accusing me now.

"Was I wrong?" Scarlet said with a smile.

It was the loneliest smile I'd ever seen.

I told the king of the vampires without hesitation, "No. I respect you for it."

I wasn't telling him what he wanted to hear just to try to get out of this alive: It was what I genuinely thought. I sincerely wanted to show I respected his choice.

"—I see." Scarlet smiled again.

He put a hand to his forehead, his face twisting into a laugh.

"I'm not the one to decide whether you made the right choice, though," I told him.

There was someone else better suited to that. Scarlet had told me so himself.

Which is why...

"Let's ask your real bride."

The door of the sanctuary opened, revealing a sight that made Scarlet's eyes widen.

"Sorry we're late, Kimizuka."

Natsunagi came in, out of breath, her cheeks and her clothes smeared with mud.

She was pushing a wheelchair.

A wheelchair that held the Parasol Witch.

"What are you doing here, Jeanne?"

Scarlet called to his bride.

#### **♦** Beyond the wish

Two weeks earlier, on the day that Natsunagi and I had crashed the Federation Government's conference, Odin had told us a story. It went like this: Fifteen years ago, someone had burned down the town where Scarlet lived. Scarlet had been the only survivor, and impressed by his strength, the Federation Government had scouted him for the Tuners. He would have only one mission: to kill all the vampires that had spread across the world.

Scarlet had agreed, on one condition. His old friend—who was also a vampire—had died when the town burned. Scarlet was going to revive her, and he wanted the government to make an exception to protect her. The Federation Government had consented, permitting only two vampires to live.

However, that was when a problem had arisen. Once revived as an undead, the girl's instincts from her past life—her wish to live as a human—had erased all her memories of her time as a vampire. Scarlet must have been more than a little surprised, but even so, he'd respected her wish and withdrawn to fulfill his mission of killing his kin as the Vampire, all alone.

Meanwhile, the girl had been reborn as a human, and the Federation Government couldn't afford to let her remember her time as a vampire. As such, they'd come up with this story: While traveling overseas by herself, the girl had been involved in an incident which left her with amnesia. The

government continued to protect her from a distance, and as long as Scarlet continued to carry out his mission, the contract remained valid.

However, the tale hadn't ended there. Although the girl had accepted her situation, she'd begun to search for her origins. She'd grown up, turned the singing she excelled at into a career, and traveled the world in search of her hometown. Time passed, and she'd found her way to a certain detective.

"She's our client, Marie."

Seated in the wheelchair pushed by Natsunagi was the former Parasol Witch, wearing a black dress.

Scarlet stared at her, startled, while Marie looked up at him with a lonely smile.

Odin hadn't told us the name of the girl Scarlet had brought back to life. Yet once we'd gathered that much information, the answer had presented itself. Marie's hometown, which we'd been trying to find for her, had been one of the villages where vampires lived, hiding from the world.

The dissertations and other public materials we'd researched had only said that they were an ethnic minority; nobody had known the truth. Most likely, that information had been concealed by one organization or another.

The burned-down village I'd visited in Scandinavia two months ago had been another former vampire town. The inhabitants had all been killed, though, and become food for that old vampire. When I'd thought about it, I'd realized they'd only been able to serve as preserved rations for him *because* they were vampires—there was no way regular human corpses would have lasted that long in the ground without rotting.

Based on all these facts, there was no doubt about it. Natsunagi and I had originally thought that Marie's request and the vampire rebellion were separate incidents, but they'd been connected all along.

"Scarlet. You realized we'd made contact with Marie, didn't you?"

Two months ago, Natsunagi and I had met Marie, and we'd heard her request at Saikawa's house. It was immediately after that that Scarlet had taken me on that helicopter ride in the night sky. Later, when we'd met Marie at the restaurant to report on our progress, Scarlet had appeared at the park on our way home. In other words, he'd been watching us the entire time.

Most of all, he'd told us not to meddle in his job. In retrospect, that had been weird: When we'd talked to Scarlet at the Diet Building, before meeting Marie, he'd asked us if we could solve the mystery of why he kept killing his kin. He'd practically handed us a letter of challenge.

His sudden change of attitude had been because the detective had gotten involved with Marie. Scarlet had worried that Marie would recover her old memories if we continued helping her. He'd probably shown up in our neighborhood and scattered his blood from the helicopter because he hadn't wanted Elizabeth or any other vampires coming in contact with her.

"Scarlet, your wish was to let Marie live her life over as a human. You wanted her to permanently forget you and her entire race. That's why you've always—"

"No." Scarlet cut me off. He was wearing his usual cold expression again. "I do know that woman, which is why I called out her name. However, she is no vampire. She's a human child who wandered into my hometown, long ago."

He was lying. I could tell right away.

Scarlet went on without making eye contact with any of us. "I only ever encountered her once. After that, the town was burned, and I was constantly on the move, so we never met again. That is all there was to our relationship."

"Scarlet, wait."

"Poor girl, losing her memory like that, though. She must not remember me, either."

"Scarlet!" My voice echoed around the room before being replaced by silence. "Look at Marie. Look at her face when you talk."

She wasn't crying.

Still, Scarlet must have been able to see something in that expression.

"...What, then? Assuming this delusion of yours is true, are you saying that woman remembers everything from when she was a vampire? Can she speak of it, here and now? No doubt that is why she hasn't said a single word so far:

because she has no such memories."

"Scarlet, no. That's not—"

Suddenly, a figure moved.

Marie had risen to her feet, leaning on Natsunagi's shoulder for support.

She said something, but...

*u*\_\_\_\_\_*n* 

There was no sound. Her lips were moving, but no words emerged.

Marie had lost her voice four days earlier.

Up until two weeks ago, although she'd had a cough, she'd still been able to converse normally. However, a few days after that, her voice had begun to get scratchy, and then it disappeared entirely.

At first, we'd thought it was because her chronic illness had worsened. Now that we'd heard the whole story, though, we knew better: It was the curse of being a vampire. Her short biological lifespan was nearly over.

"There, you see? She can't say anything." The corners of Scarlet's lips rose very slightly. "She hasn't regained her memories. Or rather, nothing of the sort existed in the first place. She isn't my old friend. She isn't even a vampire."

"You're wrong! Marie remembers everything!" If Marie couldn't tell him, I'd do it for her.

Scarlet, even you must realize the truth.

"She remembers the pictures and books you liked; all of it. She's been talking with us over the past two weeks, and it's all come back to her. Those days she spent with you in your hometown, fifteen years ago—"

"Not one more word!"

An incredible pressure closed around my neck, and I couldn't breathe.

"Kimizuka!"

Natsunagi's voice sounded far away as the back of my head slammed into the ground. Scarlet was choking me, his face a demonic mask. "You're wrong!

Everything you're saying is wrong! I have no memories with that woman! She isn't a vampire; she isn't a devil! She's human!"

The white demon was crying.

Even if he wasn't shedding tears, his heart was screaming.

"That girl is human! She's not like me. She doesn't have to kill anyone, or hurt them, or be unfairly persecuted. She isn't an enemy of the world. She's just a human...!"

Scarlet couldn't admit it.

He was the last person who would ever admit the fact that Marie was a vampire. After all, the moment he did, it would mean Marie's wish hadn't come true. He wouldn't be able to let her live and die as a human, when that was what he'd spent his whole life and betrayed all of his comrades to accomplish.

"Am I wrong?"

The hands that were choking me eased up.

There was nothing I could say.

The world, or a girl? I hadn't been able to choose in the way Scarlet had, so I had no right to talk. That wasn't territory I could intrude upon.

Was that it? Was that why the previous Ace Detective had known about the coming crisis, but hadn't mentioned it? Had she thought the choice should be left to the king of vampires and his true bride?

In that case, should we do the same?

"Scarlet, you told us something earlier. You said that all we could do was take the roles we were assigned and play them out onstage." The speaker was the girl who currently bore the title of Ace Detective.

After bringing Marie here, Nagisa Natsunagi had teared up and bitten her lip, but she'd only watched without speaking. Now she handed down her verdict.

"In that case, as the Ace Detective, my role is to protect my client's interests."

There was a moment of silence before a quiet song began to play in the sanctuary.

A girl's voice was coming from the smartphone in Natsunagi's hand.

"This is..." Scarlet's golden eyes widened.

That's right. You know this song.

After all, Marie had hummed it ever since she was a child.

"How? Who's singing...?" Even as he spoke, it hit him. "The sapphire girl?"

"Right. Saikawa got her voice back."

Not completely—not yet. A few weeks ago, after Saikawa had talked to the three of us and decided to live, even if it wasn't pretty, her voice had slowly begun to return. Maybe our conversation had taken the pressure off her. It wasn't perfect, and her vibrato wasn't back yet, but even so, Saikawa sang straight to the person she needed to reach.

It was only after Marie had lost her voice that she'd finally managed to sing a song all the way through. It was as if Marie had entrusted her own singing voice to Saikawa. Now Saikawa had reclaimed the voice that had been shut away, to sing the song of Marie's memories in her place.

*"……"* 

Scarlet listened to the song in a daze. After a little while, though, the melody changed, and Scarlet's expression changed along with it. The lyrics Saikawa was singing now weren't from the part of the song Marie had sung for us two months ago. Back then, she'd said she only remembered a fragment of it. But now— "You get it, don't you, Scarlet? Marie taught Saikawa this song. That's the greatest proof there is: Marie remembers what happened fifteen years ago. She remembers the days she spent with you. She remembers what she was..."

#### "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Scarlet screamed and fell to his knees, staring at the hands he'd used to slaughter so many comrades.

It was clear to him now. The fifteen years he'd offered up for her sake, the blood of the kin he'd slaughtered—it had all been for nothing.

"Marie!" Natsunagi shouted.

Marie was crawling on her hands and knees toward Scarlet.

"Why...?!" Scarlet yelled, slamming his fist into the floor. "We were so close...! Just a little longer, and you would have ended your life as a human, all your memories happy ones. So why...? Why?!"

Scarlet looked up, his face a mask of grief, but Marie just shook her head at him.

She was crying.

"I only wanted...only wanted you to...live out your life as a human...!"

Scarlet crumpled to the ground, and Marie hugged him tightly. Then, setting her hands on his shoulders, she silently mouthed two words:

I'm sorry.

Those words rejected every day of the last fifteen years of Scarlet's life, while also releasing him from their spell. Scarlet's face twisted, and another wordless scream echoed through the sanctuary. Marie just kept stroking his back.

"Aaaah, aaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah...! AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

There was nothing we could say. The least we could do was not look away. Nor would we plug our ears. Natsunagi and I would see the choice one man had made, and the results of it, through to the end. After all, we would have to pass this story on.

After a few minutes, silence returned to the sanctuary. Slowly, Scarlet raised his head and gazed at Marie. From his expression, he seemed to have come to his senses.

"—We last met fifteen years ago," he said. "It's been a long time, Jeanne."

His words acknowledged his own defeat, and his reunion with his true bride.

### ♦ The king's back

The vampire and his bride didn't exchange words—rather, they couldn't. Scarlet spoke to Marie, and Marie responded with gestures and expressions. It was their first conversation in fifteen years, held in a language only they could understand.

Natsunagi and I watched them from a little ways off. While we did, we checked to make sure we were both all right, though it seemed a bit late for that sort of thing.

"It's amazing you managed to bring Marie all the way here, Natsunagi."

The castle and its surroundings were a battlefield. The ground was probably seeded with explosives. Even with support from the Men in Black, pushing that wheelchair all the way here had to have been rough.

"I did get pretty dirty." Natsunagi looked down at her muddy clothes with a wry smile.

They were a badge of honor, though. No matter how dirty they both got, the detective and the idol stayed as clean and pretty as ever.

"So where's Siesta?"

"She's asleep downstairs. I don't think there's anything to worry about."

"Thank goodness," Natsunagi said, but her expression clouded over slightly. Her eyes were focused on Scarlet and Marie.

"I don't think this was the best outcome."

Natsunagi was probably talking about her choice to reveal the truth—a truth that nobody had hoped to hear. The detective had known it wasn't the sort of choice that would save everyone, but she'd still decided to tell them.

After all, Marie had always wanted to know the truth. The only thing she'd been looking for was an answer. Natsunagi had identified with her client, and had granted her wish. There was no point in wondering what Siesta would have chosen, way back when. This was the choice the current detective had made.

"Good work, Ace Detective."

That was all I could say, but it was what I felt I most wanted to convey.

Natsunagi's shoulders flinched slightly. She was still frustrated, but she swallowed her regrets and smiled. "Thanks."

"—Hmm?"

The floor had suddenly shaken beneath us. For a second, I thought, *Earthquake?* but the subsequent explosion immediately proved me wrong. The whole building rocked.

"Natsunagi!"

Natsunagi had lost her balance. I pulled her into my arms, and we both fell.

The shaking settled down almost immediately, but... *Don't tell me that was—* "The artillery? ...Why?" Natsunagi looked confused.

There was no mistaking it: This castle was under attack, and the cause was all too clear.

"We've been played by the Federation Government."

We'd asked the government to temporarily halt their attacks on the Nightless Castle and the surrounding war zone, promising that we'd use that time to incapacitate the undead and stop Scarlet. However, right now, they were...

"Ha! That sounds like the sort of thing they'd think of." Scarlet had apparently realized what was going on, and he slowly rose to his feet. "Wait a moment."

Then he vanished.

He'd flown toward the hole in the ceiling, the one that connected this room with the balcony. He returned thirty seconds later. "They have us surrounded." Apparently, he'd taken a look at the situation from the balcony. "Not completely at this point, but combat vehicles are advancing on us from the horizon, traveling in formation. No doubt that explosion was one of their ballistic missiles."

"...Dammit, this wasn't the deal." A thought flashed through my mind: *They betrayed us*. But then it hit me. We'd stopped the vampire rebellion. That was why the government had started attacking again—they were planning on wiping out Scarlet and all the remaining vampires.

"Scarlet, what do we do?"

"Ha! I may have other options, but the only thing you can do right now is flee. Or were you planning on challenging them all to hand-to-hand combat?"

I'd already realized that. The problem was how to make our escape.

"...Hang on. From the way you said that... Scarlet, do you...?"

"The higher-ups were only ever after the vampires. They don't seriously intend to let the Singularity or the Ace Detective die. Run, before you get caught up in this."

"We can't do that. Besides, Marie's also..." But as I started to say it, I realized Marie was looking at me. With a smile, she shook her head.

"Don't make me say it," Scarlet said.

Right: Marie was a vampire. The detective and I had just proved that ourselves. That meant she couldn't run now. The Federation Government was planning to eradicate all vampires here.

"——! Another one..."

The floor rocked again, more forcefully than before. That missile must have struck closer.

"Go," Scarlet ordered us. "Don't get me wrong: I have no intention of dying here. I'll engage the enemy."

"...Can you win?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Scarlet unfurled his one wing and smiled, golden eyes glittering dangerously. "I am the king of the vampires! I would never lose to mere humans!"

The king was more fearsome, more prideful and arrogant, and more utterly unyielding than I'd ever seen him.

"Let's go," I said to Natsunagi, who was still hesitating. I grabbed her hand. "We can't make him say it twice."

He'd told us to go.

It wasn't fear or awe that made me decide to leave. I did it to show my

respect.

"We need to stop downstairs first. I'll carry Siesta on my back."

Swallowing back tears, Natsunagi took one last look at Marie, then turned around.

So did I. I turned away from Scarlet's back and started toward the exit.

At this point, it was all I could do.

I'd lost to Scarlet, as I'd already admitted.

"Kimihiko Kimizuka," I heard him call out behind me.

"If you claim you are unable to choose between the world and a girl, then simply change the world itself. Rewrite the plot. Transcend your assigned role. The Singularity is what makes that possible."

Those were the last words I ever heard him say.

### 

The detective and her assistant departed, leaving Jeanne and I alone in the sanctuary.

"Now, what should we do?"

I took a second, dispassionate look at our current situation and what would follow.

A fleet of combat vehicles were moving to surround the castle at that very moment. They weren't just any vehicles, either, but autonomous walking combat vehicles equipped with machine guns—unmanned weapons that the Mizoev Federation had used in countless wars.

It was said that they had once used the Silent Rule to suppress an international conflict without any casualties, but in truth, it had been quite simple. Their weapons had been unmanned, and they'd used them to destroy

too many towns and villages to count. Ever since the great war, the Federation Government had bought up these weapons, and they'd deployed them during many global crises.

However, combat power of that caliber wasn't enough to defeat me. Vampires were biological weapons; we were created to defeat enemies that weapons like these were no match for, and I was the greatest masterpiece to inherit those genetics. Even if the end of my life was approaching and I had to protect the weakened Jeanne as I fought, I was confident I would be able to break through that crush of weapons.

"The one troublesome element is that man."

A figure stood among the horde of unmanned machines:

The Hero, Full-Face.

Among the current Tuners, that man was likely second-strongest in terms of sheer combat power, after myself. I had heard only recently that Full-Face had once defeated the World Beast, an enemy that had killed many Tuners in the line of duty. Apparently, the hero who had taken on the mission of hunting the last remaining vampires lived up to his title.

The man carried a silver attaché case with him wherever he went. Inside it was a button that would activate a special weapon stored in some unknown location, one which would surely do great damage even to me. The meaning was clear: It was a threat. There was no refuge for me anywhere in the world.

Once I'd wrapped my head around the situation, I bent down and spoke to the woman sitting on the floor. "What do you want to do, Jeanne?"

I had two options: Either carry Jeanne and retreat temporarily, or fight Full-Face here. If I chose the former, the safest option was to capture a Federation Government official somewhere and take them hostage. For the latter, I would simply go on a rampage.

"Which would you prefer?" I left the choice up to her.

Jeanne quietly shook her head.

"You mean we should stay here and do nothing?"

With a smile, she nodded.

"I see."

Whether we fled or fought, our fate was sealed.

Our natural lives would soon end.

There were other vampires around the castle. Eating them would get us through this crisis. We'd also be able to stay alive by continuously gorging ourselves on human flesh and blood.

However, neither Jeanne nor I wanted that. I had lost my original mission and wish, meaning there was no point in living any longer. It was too late. Whether we ran or fought, the eventual result would be the same. In that case...

"Shall we meet our end here?"

I sat down beside Jeanne.

We didn't converse, of course.

The only sounds were the rumbling of the approaching machines and the roar of the artillery.

"I wonder what I gained," I asked Jeanne—or, perhaps, myself.

I had been born a demon and shunned by the world. Although my appearance was no different from that of humans, my life wasn't blessed as theirs was, and it wasn't even half as long. Still, in order to give my life meaning, I'd mimicked their approach and enjoyed the things they did.

One day, however, my hometown had been burned. My kin, my old friend—everyone had been killed. I later heard that it had been the messiah, the town's former leader, who'd laid waste to the town. That he had done it to eat the corpses of his fellow vampires and live on all by himself. Had that really been true, though?

Could it not have been the work of the Federation Government, for example,

or a Tuner acting on their orders? Had they set all of it up? I'd fallen for their scheme, let them give me a thirst for revenge, and they had turned me into a Tuner and given me the mission of destroying my own kind.

It was also possible that the messiah had secretly been colluding with them. He could have abandoned the town and sold us out to the government in exchange for his safety. Either way, I'd ended up killing him myself, fifteen years later.

It could have been done by a human who loathed us. While they might not have known we were vampires, humans had shunned us as a race. We might have been burned by a human who'd been spurred to act by that unhinged sense of justice.

Truthfully, though, the identity of the culprit didn't matter. It made no difference whether it had been one of our own kind, a human, the government, or an agent of justice. In a sense, it had been the world. We were killed because the world hated us.

That was why I'd used all of my remaining life to make a stand against the world. My only wish had been to let Jeanne, whom I'd resurrected, die as a human. I didn't mind if she forgot me. It didn't matter if I could no longer stay by her side.

That had been the only way I could strike back at the world—letting a girl who'd been born as a rejected demon live as a human and walk boldly in the sunlight. It was what Jeanne herself had wanted as well.

In the end, I'd kept fighting for the sole purpose of deceiving the world.

"That's right. My thirty years were all just so I could fight."

Jeanne looked up at me.

I'd risen to my feet before realizing it.

You're going? Jeanne asked, silently mouthing the words.

Yes, and I'll be back.

"This place is still a bit too loud to die in."

The noise of the guns had been constant for the past several minutes.

The world would refuse to allow us to exist right up till the very end.

How utterly infuriating.

"I'm sorry, Jeanne."

It seemed I would have to remain a demon to the last.

I flew to the upper floor again, and this time I went past the balcony, soaring to the very top of the castle. At that height, nothing obstructed my view, and I could see the approaching army of walking combat vehicles. Their machine guns were all turned my way. A single attack was all it would have taken to obliterate any ordinary creature.

"However, you are different, are you not?" I asked my several hundred minions—no, my kin—who still stood quietly near the castle.

"Can you hear me?"

I refused to let them claim they could not. Not when they'd listened to the detective girl's word-soul.

"Obey me once more."

Lend me your aid.

"I speak as the king of vampires.

—Fight!

Fight against the unfairness of this world!"

An earth-shattering noise boomed.

It was a roar of voices.

My comrades had risen once more, with that shout signaling their counterstrike against the world.

"Come, the war is just beginning."

I looked at the distant enemy.

Among the autonomous vehicles, there was one heavy tank larger than the rest.

A human sat in the turret—the only human on the battlefield.

I'd found my opponent.

"Ha! It appears the players are all in place!"

On this final stage, the greatest wish a villain could hope for was to fight the Hero to the death.

"Full-Face!"

Spreading my one remaining wing, I took flight from the castle.

I hadn't chosen how I would die. This was how I'd lived.



## **Epilogue**

Two months had passed since the battle at the Nightless Castle.

...Not that those two months had been so uneventful that I could sum them up just like that.

Cleaning up after the vampire rebellion, discussing the course of Siesta's treatment, the incident at my university, that other incident on Natsunagi's birthday—there were all sorts of things worth mentioning, but the business I had today was just as important as any of them.

Even though there was no school, I got up early, showered, had my coffee, took the unusual step of styling my hair, and left my apartment in high spirits. But then...

"It's not fair."

For some reason, I'd found myself in an interrogation room at the police station.

"Who'd have figured you'd be implicated in a robbery?" said the red-haired police officer, lobbing a false accusation at me.

"That's a lousy way to put it. All I did was capture the robber by accident."

"Hmm, really? I've already put it on the record, though."

"What for? I haven't given you any kind of statement yet."

I said "yet," but it wasn't as if I had anything to confess.

I'd left my place in a good mood, but then I'd crashed into a robber fleeing the scene of a crime and landed here before I knew what was happening. It was almost as if my classic trouble-magnet predisposition had activated for the first time in a while.

"Well, I really wanted to talk to you about something else. I just needed to get you here."

"Arresting me on a separate charge, huh?" I retorted.

Ms. Fuubi gave a little smile and lit a cigarette. This room was definitely no smoking...

"It feels like you're always summoning me. Why don't you come to me every once in a while?"

"Where am I supposed to go, huh? That crummy apartment of yours?"

"Not what I meant. You could come visit Siesta."

"I doubt she particularly wants to see me."

I wasn't so sure about that. I thought Siesta trusted her, at the very least.

"How's she doing? The same?"

"Yeah. But preparations are underway."

"For the heart transplant?"

In the end, Natsunagi and I had talked it over with Noches and the rest of our group and made our decision. Stephen was making a perfect copy of Siesta's heart at that very moment.

As a matter of fact, Siesta had had an artificial organ transplanted into her body once before. It had put her in a near-death state, although it had ended up saving her life. That said, what Stephen was trying to create now was a heart that would be completely compatible with her body and make Siesta regain consciousness.

"I heard the detective might lose her memories and personality if you go down that route."

"If that happens, we'll meet her for the first time again."

After I'd fought Siesta at the Nightless Castle, I'd talked with her. She'd only been able to listen, but in the end, she'd approved of my choice. Someday, we'd start our story all over again, ten thousand meters in the sky.

It had been about ten months since Siesta had first fallen asleep. We were finally taking big steps forward with the promise I'd made to wake her up someday.

"So, Ms. Fuubi. What did you want to discuss?" Considering what was on my

schedule after this, I didn't have too much time to chat.

The policewoman exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke. "It's about Arsene, the Phantom Thief."

So that was it, huh? That name seemed to come up a lot whenever I saw Ms. Fuubi lately.

"We received some information, and I wanted to make sure you heard it."

"Have Natsunagi sit in on this, too, then. In fact, shouldn't you have gone to her in the first place?"

"Well, as a rule, Tuners aren't supposed to interfere with one another."

So that was why she was going through me, huh? And she wanted me to pass on what I heard to Natsunagi. I got the feeling I was being used for her own convenience, but maybe that was all just part of the job of being an assistant.

"We've received an analysis of one of the supernaturals, who are said to have been created by the Phantom Thief," Ms. Fuubi said. "The Inventor was the one researching it for us, and the report's made its way around to me."

"Come to think of it, he had Drachma looking into that, hadn't he?"

I'd seen it in progress at the hospital. Drachma had been in what had looked like a special operating room, studying the body of Greed the supernatural.

"And? What did it say?"

"They detected a substance in its body that can't possibly have come from the world as we know it. The report they sent me said some specialized stuff about unknown atomic nuclei, but it's all Greek to me."

...If we were talking about atoms that didn't exist in the known periodic table, there were similar rumors about Yggdrasil, the tree Seed had been sealed into.

"Are you telling me the Seven Deadly Sins also came from some distant galaxy?"

"No clue. It could just be that there's still lots of stuff humans haven't managed to observe with our current level of science and technology."

"I see. So it might just be something we don't recognize."

That reminded me of when Drachma had told Natsunagi that her word-soul ability was based in a previously unknown organ near her larynx. Were scientists and doctors like Stephen about to reach uncharted territory, beyond the bounds of mankind's understanding?

"So if the Phantom Thief made those unknown supernaturals, what on earth is he?"

According to Ms. Fuubi, Arsene might be the same person as the infamous criminal Abel A. Schoenberg. But who was he actually?

"Arsene uses a power that's beyond human knowledge to steal all sorts of things, and the people he steals from aren't even able to recognize the loss."

"...No way. Are you saying that everything, even the very idea of those particles that 'don't exist on Earth,' was originally stolen by the Phantom Thief?"

Did she mean Arsene had stolen knowledge and ideas from the world as well? If someone could do that, he'd be— "I really don't want to say he'd be 'a god."

Ms. Fuubi gave a cynical smile. "Sadly, I'm an atheist."

"...Yeah, I'm not religious myself."

There was no way gods existed. Not Arsene the Phantom Thief, and not some guy with an incomprehensible nature like the Singularity. The closest thing we had was a detective as beautiful as a goddess.

"But why share that information with me now?"

"Like I said, the Phantom Thief steals everything, so we don't even realize when something's gone. I'm sharing this intel with you so we at least have some sort of insurance."

Ah. So even if Ms. Fuubi forgot, I'd remember. Should I have considered that a tiny gesture of trust? Or was she just doing it out of her own self-interest?

"Kimihiko Kimizuka. I hate to admit it, but you're the one at the heart of the story. No matter what massive incident you get pulled into or how much danger you land in, you always make it back. Even after a trip to a vampire fortress."

Yeah—even I found that strange. Two months ago, the situation had been

hopeless, but I'd still managed to make it home safe and sound. Me, Natsunagi, Siesta—and no one else.

"We couldn't save everyone."

I still didn't know how that incident at the castle had really ended. I didn't have the right to know, either. Not after I'd turned my back on them.

"It's arrogant to try and save everyone," Ms. Fuubi said, giving me a sharp look.

Ookami had told me the same thing. This world was overflowing with evil, and there were countless people out there begging for help. As we were now, we couldn't save all of them.

"Nagisa Natsunagi won't give up on anyone, though. That's the sort of detective she wants to be."

As her assistant, that meant I couldn't give up, either. I had to keep working hard to stay with her, to walk by her side.

Renewing that resolution to myself, I stood up. Ms. Fuubi had told me everything she'd needed to.

"Okay, I'll head out, then."

"Sure. Tell the Ace Detective 'hi' from me." She raised her hand in a casual wave.

Bowing to Ms. Fuubi, I left the police station.

"Sorry for the wait."

I'd spotted the person I was meeting sitting in a seat on the first floor of a certain theater. After double-checking my ticket, I sat down beside her.

"Finally. I thought you'd stood me up again."

"I've never stood you up, period. I've just been late."

"That's no excuse," Natsunagi grumbled.

"Go easy on me today. I was hauled in by Ms. Fuubi."

"Huh? Then, what, you broke out of jail to come here? I'd better report that..."

"That's not what I meant!" I retorted, in as strong a whisper as I could manage. The curtain hadn't risen yet, but this wasn't the sort of place where you were allowed to be noisy.

"You bought a brochure, huh?"

"Yes! I've never been to a musical before, so I'm really looking forward to it." Natsunagi fidgeted restlessly, opening the brochure on her lap.

Today was, in fact, the opening performance of the musical starring Yui Saikawa.

"Have you seen any musicals before, Kimizuka?"

"Yeah, once with Siesta."

It had been in New York, on actual Broadway. That was an extravagant experience.

"...So this isn't your first time." For some reason, Natsunagi looked a little bummed. In any case...

"Saikawa's finally back," she said.

It had been three months since her aphonia diagnosis. After singing during the battle at the Nightless Castle, Saikawa had begun to recover, and she'd been able to resume rehearsals for the musical two weeks later. Today's performance marked her return to show business.

"I'm so glad." I couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

There were no surefire treatment methods for diseases with major psychological causes. That was why we hadn't been able to rely on Stephen this time: The Inventor didn't work miracles that couldn't be replicated.

But Saikawa had beaten it. She'd conquered her illness all on her own.

What exactly had set her on the path toward recovery? Was it taking her time and facing her own feelings? Or realizing she'd still be shiny-clean and pretty, even if she was all muddy?

"I bet it was because Yui wanted so badly to sing for someone else's sake," Natsunagi said with a smile.

Two months ago, we'd explained to Saikawa the truth about Marie and her situation. We'd told her what Marie actually was, and conveyed what it would mean if Saikawa sang the song she'd learned from her. Saikawa had understood, accepting the feelings and the voice that Marie had entrusted to her, and on that day, she'd managed to sing.

After it was all over, Saikawa's voice had still been a little hoarse, but she'd managed to tell us, "Feelings don't disappear. I'm going to prove it."

"To Scarlet?" I'd asked.

Unexpectedly, she said, "To Scarlet, and to Albert."

That was a name neither I nor Saikawa could ever forget; it was one we should never forget.

The detective wasn't the only one.

The idol had also inherited someone's dying wish, which she would carry with her into the future.

"It's starting," Natsunagi murmured, and a moment later, the lights went out.

A sound rang out, signaling the beginning of the performance, and the curtains opened. A girl in a nun's habit stood alone in the center of the stage. There wasn't a single sound in the quiet space. Clasping her hands in front of her as if she were praying, the girl began to sing.

"Say.

Right now...

Can you hear me?

Can you hear my voice?"



Softly, ever so softly, the diva freed the voice she'd locked away, her blue eyes twinkling.

I offered a prayer along with her.

I prayed that her song would be heard all the way in heaven. That it would reach the world's hidden side.



# The end of the Vampire

How many minutes had passed? How many hours?

When I returned to the sanctuary after the final battle, fire had begun to envelop the area. An artillery bombardment must have hit nearby. The red flames crackled loudly, intent on burning down the Nightless Castle.

In the midst of the smoke and flames was a saint.

Had she fallen asleep, or had simply keeping her eyelids open become too painful? Jeanne sat with her eyes closed, leaning back against the wall. Perhaps it was the black dress she wore, but her characteristically pale vampire skin seemed to float there in the darkness.

"I'm sorry for making you wait."

At the sound of my voice, Jeanne slowly opened her eyes.

"I won."

I hadn't actually been able to kill Full-Face.

I'd destroyed more than half of the Federation Government force's weapons, though, and when I'd rained blows down on Full-Face with my sword, the enemy had retreated. Perhaps he'd decided that I was going to die soon anyway, so there was no point continuing. I'd been wounded so badly that my body couldn't regenerate. No back-alley doctor would be able to heal me now.

Even so, I was the one who'd remained standing on the battlefield until the very end. We vampires had been the ones to struggle against unfairness and strike back at the world. And so...

"We won," I said again, lowering myself to sit beside Jeanne.

She gazed at me. From her expression, I couldn't tell whether she was smiling or crying. I was almost about to ask her "Aren't you happy?" but then realized I was still seeking her approval, even after all this time. A self-deprecating smile crossed my lips.

"Eat me," I told her, although it wasn't as if I was trying to hide my embarrassment.

Jeanne's eyes widened slightly, as if she was startled.

"This is an order, as your king. Do not die before I do."

Even with my body in this state, I might be able to extend her life by a few minutes. I hung my head to one side, offering her my neck.

"This is how it should be."

After a short pause, Jeanne gently sank her teeth into my neck.

The sweet pain lasted thirty seconds or so.

"You're a fool, you know."

Time froze in that moment, and I looked to the side. Jeanne's fair throat was working. She was speaking. They were the first words she'd said to me in fifteen years.

"You reclaimed your voice with blood such as mine?"

"Of course I did. It's the blood of a king," Jeanne said with a smile, and I smiled back.

I really doubted my smile managed to match hers, though.

"Jeanne— No, Marie. Which name should I call you by?"

"Whichever you like, Judas. Or should I call you Scarlet?"

Any name would do. As far as I was concerned, words didn't matter. It had

probably always been that way: The really precious things lay beyond words.

"You've grown so big." I felt the weight of her head on my shoulder.

That's true for both of us, I thought with a snort. "I'm sorry to make you keep me company."

The flames were already closing in. My legs wouldn't work anymore. The smoke would probably kill us before the fire did, though. I'd committed the sin of extending her life by a few minutes, so at the very least, I wanted to let her die painlessly.

"Don't worry. Compared to your last fifteen years, it will only be a moment." Jeanne leaned against me. "From now on, we'll always be together."

"No—this is where we say good-bye."

I was bound for hell, bearing the sin of killing my kin for my own self-interest.

"I'm going there, too. I was the one who set you on that path."

That wasn't true... It wasn't...

"As long as I'm with you, hell doesn't scare me."

Her words pierced something my eyes couldn't see.

"—Ah, I finally understand. So that was it..."

I had thought I didn't need words; that was why I'd only searched for methods that didn't rely on them. However, what I didn't have was what I'd wanted the most.

I'd wanted words. The sort of words that could fill a gaping hole as deep as the pits of hell.

"Marie."

Calling her by her real name—the one she'd been given at birth, and the one she'd used while living as a human—I asked her for answers.

"Where do you suppose hell is?"

"No doubt it's close to heaven."

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"What do you think hell will be like?"
  "I'm sure it will be wonderful."
  "What color do you think hell will be?"
  "All sorts of beautiful colors."
  "Just like we are now," said Jeanne...or rather, Marie.
  I was red, dyed with blood. She was black, her dress the color of night.
  If that was that case, hell would suit us both.
  "Marie, one more thing."
  "What is it?"
  "Sing for me, one last time."
  "Of course."
 The saint's song gently engulfed this hell of flickering flames.
  My consciousness was growing faint, and I closed my eyes. As I drifted, the
last thing I heard were her words, like a song.
  "Marie."
  "Yes?"
  "I'm sorry."
  "No, I am."
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"Marie."	
"Mm?"	
""	
"To	you, too."

Thank you.





# An epilogue from the future

"This is the story of the vampire rebellion."

I told Siesta and the others the tale of the vampires, basing it on the memories the Sacred Relic had returned to me.

It was like that time with Reloaded; I'd already known most of the story, but certain keywords like "Singularity" and "Phantom Thief" had been missing.

In addition, the Sacred Relic had shown me a few of Scarlet's last moments that I hadn't known about. That meant this item wasn't just limited to things I'd seen and heard personally—it was a record of specific phenomena. That suggested we'd be able to learn various truths that had escaped us before.

"That really was one heck of a time, wasn't it?" Nagisa said, thinking back. She took a sip of tea. "With Yui as well."

"Yeah, but I'm sure Saikawa is where she is now because she overcame this all those years ago." She was a global phenomenon, and right now, she was incredibly far away. It made me so happy to see how successful she'd become, but it was also kind of lonely.

"I see. So the incident with Yui happened at the same time as the vampire rebellion." Siesta, who'd still been asleep back then, nodded a few times.

"Come to think of it, you knew what Scarlet meant with all that 'bride' talk even before you fell asleep, didn't you?"

"Yes. I first met him at a Federal Council just after I became a Tuner, and he took a liking to me. When he found out my heart was rather special, he decided I was qualified to be the 'bride' he needed to carry out his plan."

Ah. So Scarlet had told her about his plan directly?

"Then you suspected that the Vampire would become an enemy of the world someday," said Mia. "Even the sacred text didn't clearly state that."

"Well, I didn't know everything... I didn't even know about the real bride he wanted to protect." Siesta's eyes looked sad as she mentioned Marie. "I'd

anticipated that Scarlet might turn against the world, but what he wanted was to break the curse of the vampires' short lifespans and give his race new lives as humans. I didn't know whether that would be good or bad. Still..." She looked at Nagisa and me. "You two did a job I couldn't. Thank you again."

"...There's no need to thank us. All I did was grant my client's wish." Nagisa grinned and shook her head. "Besides, my decision ended up dashing Scarlet's hopes. I don't know whether that was really the best choice."

"You did fine. You really were a proper detective that time, Nagisa, no doubt about it. And you supported her decision as her assistant, Kimi." Siesta turned to me, smiling.

"A compliment from you? That's rare."

"I have to thank you for saving me, at least."

"...I dunno what you're talking about."

I'd stormed into the Nightless Castle and said some pretty embarrassing stuff, all to save Siesta from becoming Scarlet's bride. I remembered it just fine, but I pretended that part hadn't come back to me.

"Still, thanks for coming to my rescue."

Siesta gave me a smile so brilliant I couldn't even attempt to give it a score. I mumbled some unintelligible response and drank my tea.

"All right. Should we get into that other subject now?" Mia said, getting the ball rolling.

Pouring a fresh round of tea for all of us, Olivia picked up the thread of the conversation. "A term I'm not very familiar with came up in the story you just told. What was it? 'The Phantom Thief'?"

Yeah, I figured they'd be particularly curious about that.

Arsene, the Phantom Thief, aka Abel A. Schoenberg.

He was the twelfth Tuner—the one I'd forgotten.

Why had I forgotten him? Who exactly had made me forget?

"You spoke about him with Fuubi. She said the Phantom Thief could steal

absolutely anything, even if it wasn't physical."

Right. The Phantom Thief could steal people's hearts, or the concept of a thing from the place it should be, and he could even overturn common sense. If we assumed that to be true...

"Did the Phantom Thief engineer the weirdness that's currently happening to the world?"

Was he stealing the memories and records of mankind from every corner of the globe?

"But how would he manage something like that?" Nagisa asked. "And why?"

"I...don't know." It was a perfectly natural question, but one I had no answer to. We hadn't known everything about the Phantom Thief back then, either. In order to find out more...

"We're going to need a new Sacred Relic."

But where could we get one?

The first had been left to us by the world's wisdom, Bruno Belmondo. This second one had been discovered by Mia Whitlock, who could see the future. In which case, the third one...

"Let's go talk to her," Nagisa said resolutely. "To Fuubi Kase. She was pursuing Abel harder than anyone else."

...She was right. After the series of incidents involving vampires, we'd ended up working with Ms. Fuubi time and time again. She'd had only one goal: capturing Abel A. Schoenberg. However, the fact that Abel was also the Phantom Thief had completely disappeared from my memories... Just that one single piece of information. As we'd thought, the Phantom Thief was key.

"But didn't the Assassin...?" Olivia asked.

"Break out of jail?" I finished. "Yeah." Fuubi Kase had been arrested for treason, but Bruno had helped her escape before he died. What was their goal? Where was she now, and what was she up to?

"...Hmm? What's up, Siesta?"

Siesta's gaze was fixed on the smartphone in her hand.

"I haven't been able to get a hold of Charlie lately. It's been about two weeks now, and I still don't know where she is."

"You either? I messaged her once after the Ritual of Sacred Return, but she hasn't even read it."

Needless to say, Charlie was an agent who flew all over the world, so this sort of thing had happened before. Sometimes that was worrying in its own way, though. It was one thing for her to be ignoring messages from me, but if she wasn't even responding to Siesta...that could be cause for concern.

"You're worried about Charlie? You've changed, Kimi. You never used to get along."

"We're not exactly all buddy-buddy now, either... We've been through a lot, though. Quite a bit of it was while you were asleep."

Reminiscing a bit, I looked through the messaging app Charlie and I sometimes used. Her most recent text had been a photo of a little snowman by the side of the road. When had we gotten close enough to send each other pointless photos like that? I hadn't really known how to react to the snowman, though, so I'd replied, "It's well-built." She'd responded with "I didn't make it," and a stamp of a sleeping cat. I didn't feel like we'd really been communicating.

"So we have two problems. Should we split up?" Mia suggested. Did that mean one team would look for Charlie and the other would go after Ms. Fuubi?

"But if we do that, won't you people start fighting over who gets me?" I said.

"Okay, then let's split up into the girls' team with Siesta, Mia, and me, and the boys' team with Kimihiko by himself."

That was just bullying.

"That's fine, too."

"No, Siesta, it's not fine."

"Although I just said I haven't been able to contact Charlie, I actually received what looks like a scheduled text from her. It seems she set it up just before the Ritual of Sacred Return." Siesta read the message aloud. "It says, 'If you aren't

able to get in touch with me when you get this, I want you to look for Fuubi Kase."

"So...Ms. Fuubi may know why Charlie's gone missing?" Nagisa mulled over the meaning of the message.

About three weeks ago, Charlie had said she'd be absent from the Ritual of Sacred Return in order to carry out an important job. Had Ms. Fuubi been involved in that? Had Charlie left that text for Siesta because she'd thought something unexpected might happen?

"All sorts of incidents are getting tangled together," Mia said with a soft sigh. "The past and present twist again and again, converging into a single future. That future branches into multiple possibilities, and in the end, we choose one of those routes..." Mia gave me the faintest trace of a smile. "Let me witness your choice."

"Either way, it looks like we need to find Fuubi Kase." Both to talk about the Phantom Thief, and to get her to tell us where Charlie was.

I got to my feet and stretched my arms.

"You seem more enthusiastic than usual." Watching me, Siesta laughed a little.

"Of course I am. How many times do you think that woman's arrested me by mistake?"

In other words, this was my best chance to get a little revenge.

"Okay, let's get out there and arrest that cop."

I'd think up something to charge her with by the time we found her.

# The Detective is Already Dead

Short story and reversible cover art



The tail says more than the mouth!

When I opened the door, Siesta was in there. She was wearing animal ears and a dog tail, which was attached to her butt.

"You shouldn't talk about butts with girls, you know."

"I didn't say anything. Quit reading my mind," I retorted mildly, like I always did. Siesta's tail wagged back and forth.

"So? What kind of cosplay is that?"

"I thought even you might get tired of cat-eared maids all the time."

"Don't make it sound like I ask you to do stuff like this!"

That said, for the record, I wouldn't get tired of it... Just for the record.

"Honestly, I wish you'd put yourself in my shoes: Imagine having to wear cosplay on a regular basis just to keep you happy."

"You don't have to resort to any weird little tricks. I don't plan to quit being your assistant or anything."

"Heh-heh. Anyone would think *you* were the faithful hound here," Siesta said, and for some reason, her tail started gently wagging again.

# The Detective is Already Dead



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