Wasan Kurata
Ill. Kewi Hayashi

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This Gyaru's Got a Thing for... Vampire Hunters?!


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Hinaru
"Let's go till our throats quit on us!"
Meiri
Ruka
Ginka
As the three of them watched, Ruka started singing.
Of course, she kept going until she was
totally worn out!


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“Hey, Ginka.”
“What is it?”
“Win this thing!”
“Of course.”

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Prologue

Beneath the cross hung a man clad in black who did not even have the strength to lift his head. A shining silver spear piercing through his stomach pinned his body against the wall. As his feeble limbs dangled, blood flowed nonstop from his wounds. Some of that dark, murky substance trailed to his fingertips before dripping down into a steadily growing puddle on the floor.

As he took shallow breaths, one after another, the man heard the quiet footsteps of someone approaching.

A calm voice resounded through the desolate church. “So this is what the end looks like for a monster who has stolen innumerable lives over the course of countless years.”

Clouds drifted through the sky on a gentle night breeze, parting to let moonlight shine through the stained glass and illuminate the source of the voice.

Silver.

Her hair, her eyes, the spear she held with one hand, and even the motes of light lingering around her all shone silver.

The girl looked down at the bloody man with a coldhearted glare. “How unsightly.” Disgust crossed her face, distorting the faint scar running down her cheek. Pure animosity filled her silver eyes, and the spear she held awaited its turn to end the man’s life.

“Urgh... Wh-Why... Why is no one...coming to my aid...?” As the man lifted his hand in the air, fresh blood flew from the remains of his severed fingers.

And yet, nothing happened.

The girl held her spear level, right before the eyes of the man trembling in agony. “You really don’t know why your underlings and retainers aren’t coming?”

“What...are you saying...?”

“I’ll give you time to think. You should arrive at the answer soon

enough.”

While his face showed open irritation at the girl’s words, the man’s thoughts raced. After his dark red eyes glanced over the church, they shot open wide in shock.

“No... It cannot be...” He hung his head once more in despair.

“You finally figured it out. That’s right... You’re the last one,” the girl calmly stated. She brought her silver spear closer to the man. If she took just one step, that sharp tip would pierce his skin and draw even more blood.

He glanced at the instrument that would take his life before his whole body started trembling.

“Mwa... Mwa ha ha!” The man let out an unnerving laugh. His lips twisted into a grin at the girl standing in front of him. “Ah, I cannot help but laugh thinking of what shall become of people like you once I am no more.” The man paid no heed to the blood dripping from the corner of his lip and simply kept grinning with pure mirth. “Young hunter, it is precisely *because* we exist that your life holds meaning.”

The girl stood in silence.

The smile on the man’s lips grew all the more twisted—perhaps her reaction had amused him. “You were born and trained to fight us. That is why you exist. Honestly, such senseless, deluded conviction truly is something to be admired. How pitiable, to think that your foolishness has led you to try and destroy the last of my noble brethren... Once I am gone, what shall become of you?”

The girl offered no reply.

“Your people are denizens of the darkness now, just like my kin. You are heretics, fated to live in a world of pure and utter chaos. If you try to carry on in a peaceful world instead, you will have little choice but to await your own end... Now, if you understand all that, then swing your spear and end my—”

A *swish* cut through the air and the rest of the man’s words. A diagonal slice through his neck sent his lower jaw flying and made his head tumble back in an eruption of blood.

With an unbelievably cold look in her eyes, the girl—the silver hunter—uttered, “Such a sad attempt to beg for your life.”

Just then, the man's corpse began to change. His body seemed to dry up, and cracks formed all over his skin. An ashen darkness spread from his fingers, and what had once been a man soon turned to mere sand.

The hunter swung her silver spear to the side, sending black ash across the floor of the church. She looked down at the black attire, now absent its wearer.

"What will I do after killing you?" *That's obvious,* she thought. "I'll go to school."

Chapter 1: Flat Bangs and the Flashy Returning Student

The girl in the mirror glared at herself. Her hair was dyed platinum blonde all the way to the roots, and the ends of her curls were orange. The glitter around her eyes sparkled. Each of her ears had a single piercing, and she wore a choker around her neck. Her school uniform, which she wore like a casual outfit, had a red ribbon and a short checkered skirt. To top it all off, a garter belt was strapped around her leg.

Ruka Moriki stared her reflection down in the mirror over the sink and clamped her hot-pink hair iron over her bangs.

"Okay, okay... Atta girl..." she murmured as she ever so carefully slid the iron forward. This very moment would decide her mood for the whole day.

Can't let my guard down, she thought*. This is hairstyling... This is* fashion*.*

"There!" She twisted her wrist with a flick, lifting up the ends of her hair along with the iron, only for her bangs to fall flat against her forehead. "Ugh..."

The plan had been to curl both her bangs and the rest of her hair, but now she looked like a princess from the Warring States period. This was no ordinary screwup. It was a *massive* one.

"You're dead, huh," she told the hair iron. She had bought it secondhand from a flea market app, so it could've broken down at any time. Apparently, today was that day.

Thanks for everything. I'll never forget you.

After a short moment of silence for the departed, Ruka set the hair iron off to one side and looked at the mirror again. "Hmm, the princess thing is kind of a vibe, y'know... Should I, like, lean into it?"

Just as she grabbed her brush and hair dryer to redo her bangs,

she heard a voice behind her.

"What's the matter, Ruka-chan?"

In the mirror, Ruka saw a sleepy-looking woman watching her. She looked like an older version of Ruka with her hair dyed brown, and her name was Ryoko Moriki.

"Right back atcha, Ryoko-san. What's up?"

"Seemed like something was troubling you, so I got worried. I mean, I'm your mother and all..."

"I just couldn't get my bangs right. Go back to bed already."

Ryoko was a nurse at a nearby—and short-staffed—hospital. She took a lot of night shifts, so she was usually sleepy whenever Ruka saw her at home.

"Aw, don't worry about me. You look as cute as always, Ruka-chan."

"You loop your comments like crazy, Ryoko-san. Totes not trustworthy."

"I'm always serious, though! Uwaaah..." Ryoko's head started wobbling drowsily with a big yawn.

Ruka appreciated the compliment, but she really didn't want to eat into her mom's precious sleep time. So she finished setting her bangs in a hurry, picked up her school bag from the floor, and threw it over her shoulder.

"'Kay, gotta go." With that, she slipped past Ryoko and headed for the entrance. As she slid into her slip-ons and reached for the door, she called out, "Bye!"

"You gotta...at least say...'I'm heading out' properly..."

"Byeeee!"

"H-H-H-Hey, that's still not..." Ryoko drifted off, then yawned again. "Take caaare..."

Ruka stepped outside and felt the damp June air on her neck. *Summer's close. Might be good to swap uniforms soon...*

She turned around to look at the old Japanese-style house she had just walked out of. All the other houses around were Western style, so it really stood out. It wasn't cute. It wasn't cool. It didn't even look refined. But she still loved her home where she'd been born and raised.

Ruka's grandparents had built the house to celebrate getting married. Ruka had lived her whole life there, so it was a precious place packed full of memories. With her late grandparents on her mind, she bowed toward the house. After that, her footsteps were light and easy as she headed for school.

Hien Metropolitan High School, or Hie High, was on the edge of the district where Ruka lived and about a fifteen-minute walk from home. It was pretty big, and the students got okay scores on average. The school rules were lax—students had lots of freedom in terms of hair and outfits, and they could keep their phones on them all day.

After passing through the front gate and switching to indoor shoes at the shoe rack, Ruka headed for class 2-2 on the second floor. The room was already packed full of her classmates. The jocks, the serious students, the subculture kids... Each of those groups was starting off the morning in their own way.

As Ruka went to the back of the room, she called out to two girls sitting near her seat. "Heya, Hina, Mei!"


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“Hola!”

“Mornin’.”

Ruka giggled at how all over the place their greetings were and sat down.

Hinaru, the girl with champagne-pink twin ponytails, grumbled, “Ugh... Look, Ruka-chin.”

“Hmm? What?”

“Like, our latest masterpiece.”

Hinaru had the social media app DipZip open on her phone. There was a video of the Hie High dance club in a hallway, with Hinaru right in the middle. She was moving her arms and legs like a pro, her pink ponytails with bold, dark streaks swinging wildly as she danced. The whole club’s moves were so smooth, anyone could tell their dancing was top-tier just by watching a clip.

“Ooh, looking good.”

“Yeah, but check the comments.”

“Huh? Oh, oof...”

Their dancing was solid, and they’d chosen a popular song, so the video had a ton of views and just as many comments. But...

“‘Ty for the swinging tits, shake your ass more’...” Hinaru read out loud before making a face. “Gross! These comments are so ick. Ick, ick, ick!”

You never knew who or how many people were going to see you on social media. And you almost had to expect comments like that on a video of high school girls dancing. Hinaru getting angry wouldn’t get creeps like that to shut up—she’d just tire herself out. The best plan was to report those comments.

Ruka knew getting mad wouldn’t help at all, but she still felt anger boiling up inside. Hinaru was her friend, her adorable pal who was cute in her own way with the bright makeup she wore and the funny (and sometimes mysterious) things she said. If some random troll was causing trouble for Hinaru, Ruka wasn’t gonna keep quiet about it.

“Now I’m annoyed too... Hina, gimme your phone. I’m gonna fire back.”

“H-Hey, what’re you getting all worked up about, Ruka-chin?”

“I’m in the dance club too, so I gotta pitch off for my buds.”

“Yeah, but only on paper... And don’tcha mean ‘pitch in’?” With an awkward laugh, Hinaru held her phone away from Ruka.

Ruka couldn’t really do much to help, but at least her friend got to vent a little. It was frustrating, but maybe it was best to back down for now. Pushing harder would probably make Hinaru mad at her instead.

“Ungh...” another voice groaned.

Ruka turned and found her friend with black hair and peekaboo highlights, Meiri, glaring at her phone with a frown. A necklace swayed back and forth along the neckline of her slightly unbuttoned uniform top. She was pretty, which wasn’t surprising for an amateur model in a fashion magazine, so even her pained expression looked like something out of a painting.

“What’s up, Mei?” Ruka asked.

“The lip balm I’ve been wanting went up on Maruoku.” Meiri’s phone had an auction site called Maruoku up, and there was a picture of a package with “Lip Creature” written on it.

Lip Creature was a type of lip balm sold by the Japanese cosmetics company KATHY. It was famous for lasting all day and was *so* popular that it kept selling out all over the country. People buying and selling Lip Creature on an auction site like Maruoku proved how crazy the demand was.

“Wait, isn’t that kinda expensive...?”

The Lip Creature on the page Meiri was looking at was pricier than usual.

“It’s Maruoku. Everything’s kinda pricey there.”

“Isn’t Lip Creature budget stuff? Paying that much is, y’know...”

“I know. I know, but it’s not in stock anywhere...” Meiri replied with a sigh.

Ruka wanted to help her friends whenever they were in trouble, but she also had to keep the state of their wallets in mind. She’d been pals with Meiri ever since middle school, but money wasn’t something she could bring up lightly. So Ruka decided to stay neutral without agreeing or arguing with her.

But then Hinaru spoke up. “Mei-chi, you totally got swindled

when you bought face cream without thinking last time. Tryna buy Lip Creature's gonna be a total disaster, so you should quit before you make yourself look like a dummy again."

Everyone froze.

To be fair, Hinaru was right. Meiri *had* gotten screwed over on auction sites before. Last time, she'd agonized a ton over the package pics of the high-end cream like she'd just been doing with the Lip Creature listing. She'd decided to buy the cream...and they'd sent her an empty box. Total scam. Meiri had at least managed to return it, but she'd been a mess for a few days after that. Ruka definitely agreed it was best not to tempt fate again, but she also thought Hinaru could've phrased it a little more gently.

"Oh, like you've never done anything like that," Meiri snapped back. "There was that whole deal when you bought those knockoff hoops. Me and Ruka spent forever trying to cheer you up. Doesn't forgetting about that make *you* the dummy?"

"Um, *unrelated*." Hinaru looked more intense now. Her face wasn't scary or anything because she looked so young, but Ruka could clearly feel the anger coming off her.

Class hasn't even started yet, but sparks are already flying between Hina and Mei?! And the reason is kinda really dumb! Ruka sighed and braced herself for the oncoming crash. This was just a little squabble, not a serious fight*. They might stop talking to each other for a few days, but they'll make up on their own. No big deal—but dealing with* that *for a few days is gonna be a pain...*

Ruka was gonna be stuck scrambling between the two of them until they made up. Having fun was her number one priority, so she really wanted to avoid a situation that was basically a hundred percent pain.

She decided to interrupt her friends' argument. "No, you are both ze most foolish of fools," she announced.

Hinaru and Meiri both went pale.

"Ruka-chin, what's with that accent?"

"What the heck is that, an impression? Who or what, even?"

Ruka ignored those objections and kept going. "Madame Mei, ya worried over purchasing ze Lip Creature precisely cuz you remember

your previous failure, ja?"

"Well, yeah... Seriously, though, what?"

"Next, Señorita Hina, you didn't desire Lady Mei to be sad, so ya attempted ta make her give up with the harshest of words, si?"

"Right...I-I think. You're kinda hard to understand..."

As the pair of them grimaced, Ruka gave an overblown nod. "As I figure it, folks who learn from mistakes ain't no fools. And I gotta say, worryin' about buds don't sound so dumb. I'd reckon neither of ya's dumb, but what say ya?"

Hinaru and Meiri looked at each other, then awkwardly averted their eyes.

"I know you were worried, Hina, but that way of putting things..."

"Yeah, I shoulda watched my phrasing, maybe..."

"But you were right, and I know you were concerned and all... So, well, no need to apologize..."

Both of them started mumbling and squirming.

What. So adorable! Ruka thought. The hostile mood in the air was drifting away, and she was feeling pretty good from having avoided a lot of trouble. She shot her two friends a satisfied smile. "No shame, you two. I mean, I didn't even get embarrassed when I almost followed an old guy into a hotel because he said he'd give me some money."

"Um, you should be embarrassed," Hinaru and Meiri said at the same time.

"*Excuse* me?" Ruka snapped.

"Whoa, Ruka's pissed off— Ah, my phone!" Meiri yelped.

"My baby!" Hinaru reached for her phone and missed.

With both of their phones in hand, Ruka smudged her fingerprints all over the screens. Then, as the school bell rang, she handed the phones back to her friends. "That'll do it for today," she said. "Hina, head on back."

"N-No fair..." With her shoulders slumped, Hinaru took her phone and went back to her seat.

From the seat behind Hinaru's, Meiri glared at Ruka while wiping her phone down with a handkerchief. Everyone else had taken their seats too. Their homeroom teacher, Toumi Tani, would be there to

start the day soon. As Ruka started to get excited, the door at the front of the classroom opened.

"Huh...?"

It was impossible to tell who had said that. Maybe it was one of the noisy boys or serious girls. It could've been a loner guy or even that one sleepy girl. Heck, it could've been Ruka herself. Anyone could've been so surprised that they'd said something out loud. After all, it wasn't their teacher at the door. It was a beautiful girl with silver hair and silver eyes.

That gorgeous hair would've been tough to replicate with any amount of bleach. Her irises might've been color contacts, though. She seemed like a foreigner, and her face was almost *too* pretty. Oh, and she had a ton of piercings, with her main earring shaped like a cross. There was even a faint scar over her smooth cheek. To top it all off, she wore glossy black tights and leather gloves.

To Ruka, this beauty could have stepped right out of an anime. "A-An anime character..." she mumbled.

Since she was wearing the girls' uniform, the newcomer was a Hie High student. But Ruka had definitely never seen a flashy girl like her at school before. She had caught her classmates off guard too, because *everyone* started whispering.

"Who's that...?"

"What's with her hair color? Is she into visual kei or something?"

"So pretty... A little scary too."

Yeah, nobody knows this girl, Ruka confirmed. Someone poked her shoulder, and she turned around to look.

Meiri brought her face in close. "Thoughts on that girl, Ruka?"

"She's got a pretty face."

"For sure."

The silver-haired beauty glanced at the seating chart on the teacher's podium, then briskly strode through the center of the classroom in a way that seemed to overwhelm everyone she passed. She stopped all the way in the back at a desk where nobody had sat ever since they all became second-year students.

She's sitting there...? Ruka wondered.

There was a strange sense of solidarity among the students

watching her movements.

"Good morning, everyone! It's time for homeroom!" Toumi Tani, the slightly chubby history teacher (and mother of two children) who was in charge of class 2-2, stepped into the classroom with a gentle smile and looked at her students. Then she spotted the new student, and her composure steadily disappeared. "Hm? Hmm...?" was all she could say. Tani looked back and forth between the seating chart and attendance record on her podium, then between those and the strange new girl. "U-Um... Are you...Shijunana-san?"

As soon as Tani managed to say that mysterious name, the aforementioned beauty quietly stood up. "Yes, I am Shijunana. It is a pleasure to meet you, Tani-sensei. Good morning."

"Ah, yes. Pleased to meet you too..." Tani seemed to lose the last of her composure from Shijunana's clear, dignified-sounding voice. Despite being the homeroom teacher, she looked like a lost little kid as she tried to find someone in the room who could help her, only to realize she needed to confront the problem herself.

And so, she turned back toward the new student. "W-Weren't you supposed to return to school tomorrow...?"

"I decided to attend starting today, as I wished to begin my studies as soon as possible. I contacted the school about this matter. Were you not informed, Tani-sensei?"

"N-No, I didn't hear anything... Sorry..." Tani replied, her words trailing off at the end.

Ruka felt like the new girl was picking on the teacher, and she was not happy about that. *Who'd pick on a softie like Tani-chan? This pretty girl is a jerk.*

"W-Well then, everyone, Shijunana-san will be joining our class starting today. So, um... Shijunana-san, could you introduce yourself?"

"Understood." With that, the girl named Shijunana walked past all the other students again and stood beside Tani. She wrote her name on the blackboard, then straightened her posture and looked out over the classroom.

Her classmates stopped whispering when they saw that piercing gaze feeling each of them out.


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十七銀華

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Ginka Shijunana, and I have returned to school beginning today. As I have spent a long time overseas, I may not be properly acquainted with what is considered common sense in Japan. Please notify me if I happen to do anything rude. Due to my time away from school, I am one year older than you. However, you do not need to speak politely to me." After finishing her introduction, she bowed to her classmates. "I look forward to learning alongside all of you."

Every single word and action was so elegant and intense that all of class 2-2 went silent. There was this pressure in the room that felt like it would crush anyone who said something careless.

The tension in the air finally broke when someone hesitantly started clapping.

"R-Right. Everyone, let's give a round of applause!" said Tani.

More students started clapping in a hurry. The sound was scattered, and it didn't really make for a welcoming atmosphere, but Shijunana didn't seem to mind. She simply returned to her seat.

At the beginning of June, the silver-haired, silver-eyed beauty Ginka Shijunana returned to school. Ruka would later hear that pretty much all of her classmates had been thinking the same thing: *That girl looks like trouble.*

The classes they had after homeroom—and the conversations each teacher had with Ginka Shijunana—were all ridiculously awkward.

In modern Japanese class:

"Shijunana-san, that hair..."

"It's natural."

"I-I see. My apologies..."

In classical literature class:

"I-Is the color of your irises genuine, perchance?"

"I was born with this eye color."

"M-My..."

And in English class, where the teacher spoke in a mix of Japanese and English:

"*Teacher* Tani informed me about you. You studied abroad,

correct, *Miss* Shijunana? *Nice to meet you*."

"A pleasure. Your vowels have a strong accent to them, sensei. Where did you study English?"

"I've never been abroad..."

(By the end of that class, their teacher was almost in tears.)

After morning classes were over, Ruka and Hinaru went to buy lunch at the school store on the first floor. Meiri had brought a boxed lunch, so she stayed behind in the classroom. She was an amateur model, so every single thing in her lunch was always green. Ruka had been kind of interested in being an amateur model herself...but not after seeing what Meiri ate.

"Shijunana-chan was *wild*." Hinaru smiled as they got in line for the school store.

Ruka remembered how that girl had treated the teachers and nodded back. "For sure. Bad news all the way."

"The teachers were totally scared. She could cause all kinds of trouble out of the blue."

"Oh, she's done plenty already. Right?"

"True."

"Still, maybe she's just not used to the whole school thing. I can see things settling down soon."

Shijunana had overwhelmed the teachers, but Ruka didn't think she did it to be mean or rude. *That attitude's gotta be from living overseas for a long time,* she thought. *She'll probably adjust to how we talk to each other in Japan soon.*

As she came to that conclusion, the line came to a sudden stop. Everyone—not just the students, but the teachers and school store workers too—was staring in the same direction. Ruka and Hinaru turned to look and saw the beautiful girl with silver hair again.

Outside the counseling office, a group of teachers stood around Shijunana. They were talking about something, but Ruka was too far away to hear. *Maybe about her coming back to school or her attitude during classes this morning?* she wondered.

The new girl was just standing in the hallway and talking to some teachers, but she had captured the attention of everyone here in the school store. Her presence was so intense that everybody *had* to

acknowledge her. That was how it felt to be anywhere near Ginka Shijunana.

"Looks like that'll take a while..." Ruka tapped the student in front of her on their shoulder to get the line moving again.

As Ruka walked down the hallway, she was feeling all kinds of depressed about having gym class after lunch. *Who the heck came up with that terrible idea?!* she wanted to ask, and apparently all the other girls felt the same way. They grumbled stuff like "so lame," "let's just get this over with," and "unbelievable..." as they headed toward the girls' changing room on the first floor.

Ruka would rather avoid that listless feeling she got whenever gym was after lunch, but she was more worried about her makeup getting ruined. She had prepared for that in the morning by using a setting spray and a tinted lip balm, so she didn't think her makeup would end up being a mess...but she still couldn't help worrying about it.

How intense is gym gonna be today? Do I have antiperspirant spray? What about some wipes in case I get sweaty? Extra clothes? Oh, and another set of fake lashes just in case... She peered into her gym bag and blurted, "Ah. Crap, my towel..." and then froze in place.

Hinaru and Meiri turned around.

"Ruka-chin, you forgot your towel?" asked Hinaru.

"Yeah, no. I'm gonna have to pass on towel sharing, even for you," said Meiri.

"Hey, I wouldn't wanna either." Ruka closed her bag. She had a pack of wipes and antiperspirant spray in there, so she could at least clean up after gym. But it would be best if she could towel off as much sweat as possible. "Pretty sure there's a mini towel in my school bag... I'm gonna go back and grab it. You two go ahead."

"Gotcha!" Hinaru replied.

Ruka turned around and headed toward their classroom. *Glad I noticed before class,* she thought as she climbed up the stairs to the second floor, her short skirt fluttering with every step. She opened the door to class 2-2...and found Ginka Shijunana.

Shijunana was alone in the classroom, just breathing in and out

quietly. She might've been meditating, since her eyes were only slightly open and her lips looked relaxed. Gentle sunlight streaming through the curtains made her smooth skin seem to shine.

For a moment, Ruka forgot to breathe.

Meiri was pretty, and Hinaru was cute. Ruka was confident about her own looks and sense of style too. But no matter how hard any of them tried, they could never hope to measure up to Ginka Shijunana. That was the vibe Ruka got.

Wait, what is she still doing in the classroom...? Every student had to change into their gym uniforms before class started. The girls had their own changing room, and so did the boys. *If she doesn't know where to get changed, she could've just followed someone,* thought Ruka, but then she remembered Shijunana wasn't in the classroom during lunch. The teachers had been hounding her in front of the counseling office. *At this rate, she'll just keep meditating and miss class. I should say someth—*

"Shijunana-san, you're still here?" a girl's voice asked.

Ruka turned and saw some girls with black hair standing by the other classroom door. They were from the group of serious students in class. A pretty girl with braided hair who seemed like the neat and tidy type approached Shijunana.

"Who are you?" Shijunana asked.

"I-I'm Chinami Hayami, the class representative. It's a pleasure to meet you." Chinami talked fast, and she sounded anxious. Apparently, she couldn't maintain her composure in front of Ginka Shijunana. "Shijunana-san, for gym class you need to change your clothes in the women's changing room."

"The changing room..." Shijunana repeated. "So that is why no one is around?"

"That's right. Do you have your gym uniform with you?"

Shijunana nodded.

Chinami smiled like she was relieved. "Follow us. We'll show you the way there."

The silver-haired girl stood and followed the others out of the classroom.

Oh, so she can *make friends like a normal person. Good, good.*

Ruka felt an odd sense of relief mixed with a little embarrassment at swinging and missing on helping the new girl. She went to her desk and grabbed the mini towel from her school bag.

"Phew, I'm wiped..." Ruka sighed and lifted her ponytail up so she could pat down the nape of her neck with her towel. She then pulled out a wipe to clean herself off. The mirror in her changing room locker showed that her makeup was still hanging in there. *Glad I prepared this morning. Kinda freaked out when my color contact slipped, though!*

As Ruka pushed the wipe down between her cleavage, Hinaru narrowed her eyes and glanced her way. "I swear, Ruka, your boobs are freaking ginormous..."

"Wow, instant sexual harassment. Scandalous, Hina."

"It's not like I touched you or recorded anything, so no way that counts."

"Never said you were good at it."

Meiri tugged on the sleeve of Ruka's gym uniform. "That nee-san really was something else, right?" Ruka guessed Meiri was calling Ginka Shijunana that because she was a year older.

Meanwhile, Shijunana was surrounded by a bunch of other girls. During gym today, they had done sprints and high jumps. Shijunana had managed to run a hundred meters in twelve seconds and had easily cleared a two-meter crossbar. Those incredible results put her on the level of women's world record holders.

With that, the serious students and the jocks all started looking at Shijunana differently.

"You're amazing, Shijunana-san! How can you jump that high?"

"Join the track team! We could make nationals! No, wait, we could go global!"

"I know you said you went overseas... Did you play sports there?"

Despite all the excitement around her, Shijunana remained expressionless as she thought about each question. She provided a simple, brief answer or said she couldn't go into any details. Ruka couldn't help but think that the new student was giving everyone a chilly reception.

"I'd really like to get along with you better, Shijunana-san," Chinami Hayami said in her adorable voice. She had already finished changing. Unlike Ruka and Meiri, Chinami wore her uniform blouse properly and kept her blazer nice and neat. She was a perfect honor student, and everyone could see why her photo had ended up in their school's pamphlet last year.

"Stop lying," Shijunana said, her voice echoing curiously through the changing room.

Every single girl stopped what they were doing. Most of them were still changing, so they just froze in their underwear.

That included Ruka. *Wh-What the heck is she saying?*

"Hayami, you have been lying for some time now. What was your true reason for approaching me?" Shijunana ignored how everyone was in shock and continued. "Did the teachers issue an order? Are you suspicious of my background? Do you wish to learn my techniques?"

What? Girl, please. You've got an amazing body with legs for days. Your face is super pretty, and your voice is crazy cute. Who wouldn't want to talk to you?

"Unfortunately, my techniques are not something I can teach you. They take time to learn, and you need to be compatible in a special way, so it is best that you give up now."

Shijunana was blunt, her words weren't kind, and she just kept going.

"Th-That wasn't...what I... Ugh...*sniff*..."

Yeah, the class rep is, like, made of anxiety. She's definitely gonna start crying...

Ruka's group or the jocks probably would've shot back at Shijunana somehow, and the subculture girls would've faked a smile and changed the subject. But that wasn't the case for Chinami Hayami. She was the class rep because she was such an earnest person. That made the teachers rely on her too. And because she was like that, everything other people told her hit her hard, right in the chest.

"*Sniff*... Waaah..."

"Class rep, are you okay?"

"Come over here, Chinami."

As Chinami hung her head and bawled her eyes out, a group of girls gathered around her. They placed their hands on her shoulders and formed a wall between her and Shijunana.

Shijunana stared back at them—

Here comes the ice queen, Ruka thought.

—and looked totally confused. "Ah... I was simply asking... I didn't mean to hurt you..."

You seriously didn't mean to make her cry?!

The girls surrounding Chinami gave Shijunana some intensely hostile looks, and the other girls were giving off faint waves of disgust. All the anger in the room was starting to feel like legit air pollution. Nobody had done anything yet, but they were headed for an all-against-one beatdown at this point.

Welp, time to pitch off... Um, pitch in, Ruka decided.

"Yo, Shijunana-san! What's with all that awful stuff you're saying?" Ruka called out. She made sure she was loud enough to draw all of the attention to her. That was the reaction she was expecting for being an outsider stepping in. She was involved, now—if she backed down, this situation was gonna keep snowballing.

Looks like I'm gonna have to put on a show, but... There's a limit to how cool I can act standing in my underwear.

Ruka shrugged that thought off. "How do you even know she's lying?" she asked.

Pretty sure Shijunana said that because she has her guard up around Chinami. Or maybe she's not into getting flattered by someone she met, like, today. Anyway, she's just saying that...

Or so Ruka thought.

"The movement of her eyes and the speed of her breathing—subtle changes in countenance allow me to see through lies." The look on Shijunana's face was dead serious.

"There's no way that's—" Ruka stopped herself. She had only met Ginka Shijunana a few hours ago. Without knowing Shijunana's personality, there was no way Ruka could tell why she would say something like this. *I don't know enough to write Shijunana-san off just yet.* With that in mind, Ruka shifted gears. "'Kay, then, my

mom's name is Tokiwa. How about that?"

"You're lying."

Shijunana's response was so fast, it made Ruka gasp. *She saw through the lie, like, instantly? Maybe she really is telling the truth.*

"I know it is a lie, but I do not know her real name..." Shijunana murmured.

That brought Ruka back to her senses. *She got one right. That's all. Still too soon to believe her or call her a liar. Gotta keep testing her.* "My friends are Meiri and Hinaru."

"That one is true. It's possible you have other friends, but you are indeed friends with those two."

"I'm a D cup."

"A lie. But larger or smaller...? From your reaction, your chest must be larger than that."

"Crazy! Are you for real?!" Ruka was shocked. When she looked around the changing room, she saw that she was far from the only one feeling that way.

Ginka Shijunana can see through lies. As that fact sank in for the girls, the mood started to shift in a different direction.

Ruka turned back toward Shijunana again. "Fine. So, when you told her to 'stop lying,' what the heck was that supposed to mean?" Seeing through lies was one thing, but what Shijunana had meant by those words was a different story. *If we don't make that clear right now, the class rep's not gonna stop crying.*

With a brief glance at Chinami, Shijunana replied, "Hayami was lying about her own feelings. I sensed excessive stress as she interacted with me, and she appeared to be suffering from desperately forcing that down. As such, I wanted to learn her reason for getting close to me, then inform her that it would be best for her well-being to stop..."

"You were trying to look out for her?"

"Correct. I wished to tell her there was no need to oblige even if the teachers ordered her to do so and that it was unnecessary to investigate my background."

As Shijunana looked away awkwardly, Ruka grinned. "So...you're just crazy bad with words...? Bwa ha ha!"

Wow. She looks uptight, but she's got a cute side too. Ruka relaxed her shoulders before glancing at the serious girls. "Well, I get you were looking out for her, but you gotta at least respect Chinami's efforts a little."

"Her efforts?"

"Like how she tried to get along with someone she didn't really understand, or how she pushes herself to be a class rep for everyone's sake. She's gotta deal with all kinds of expectations from the teachers... That's a huge burden. And, like, she tries to live up to all that... Anyway, Chinami works real hard, 'kay? Maybe I'm being a pain by saying all this, but I want you to at least acknowledge that much."

As she listened to Ruka, Shijunana curled her lips inward. She didn't seem to have any objections.

"Sure, it might be kinda rough at first. But you two might really click if you try. Writing off someone you just met is silly *and* a total waste. Gotta have fun, y'know?"

Ooh, I did pretty good there, huh?

As Ruka was busy singing her own praises, Shijunana nodded with a pensive look on her face.

"You are correct. It seems I was shortsighted..."

"Shortsighted?"

"I was a fool who did not give the matter enough thought," Shijunana replied, her expression softening. "Could you tell me your name?"

"Me? I'm Ruka Moriki..."

"I see... Thank you, Moriki."

"No worries." Ruka shrugged and looked around.

All the tension in the changing room had vanished. The girls all seemed to understand this was just a case of Shijunana and Chinami both trying to be considerate but clashing by accident.

As Ruka stepped back, Shijunana turned her gaze toward Chinami. "Hayami-san, I insulted you by disregarding your kindness and courage. My deepest apologies." She bowed, and Chinami stared at her.

Yup, yup. Shijunana-san apologized, and Chinami got to hear

what she was thinking, so we can call it goo—

"Y-You say that now, but...but... Waaaaah!"

Um, I guess Chinami's still gonna be Chinami...

After that incident, all the girls came to one conclusion. And of course, it didn't take long for the boys to hear about what had happened and agree. Everyone now knew that Ginka Shijunana was *serious* trouble.

Chapter 2: A Legit Mystery Girl

Ginka went into a supermarket after her first day of school. With a shopping basket in hand, she approached the prepackaged meal section. This store carried a wide assortment of imports, and all the diverse options in front of her were impressive enough to make her sigh in appreciation.

She thought back on today's incident involving Chinami Hayami. Hayami had not stopped crying all day. Some other girls had recommended leaving her alone for the time being, so Ginka had distanced herself from Hayami, but she was sure that some unpleasantness lingered between the two of them. Ginka had not expected school life to go smoothly, and she had thought she was prepared to face numerous difficulties. And yet, she had never expected to make such a serious error on her very first day.

"Your people are denizens of the darkness now, just like my kin."

As Ginka remembered those words and the scornful laughter that had accompanied them, disgust welled up inside her. She had ended that savage conflict and returned to the world of humankind.

Was that truly the right thing to do...? Ginka shook her head. The purpose of those words had been to sow doubt in her mind, but she would not let herself be manipulated by the enemy. She needed to adapt to this world as soon as possible without causing any more issues like she had done at school today.

However, she did not know how to proceed. Her experience on this front was beyond insufficient.

"Ruka Moriki, was it...?"

Would that flashy classmate of hers be able to provide the answer? Moriki's mediation stopped the incident with Hayami from becoming a prolonged issue. Matters could have easily gotten far worse without her intervention.

I must express my gratitude to her once more. And I should

apologize to Hayami again... Those were Ginka's top priorities.

With another sigh, she grabbed a Thai meal and placed it into her basket.

◆ ◆ ◆

Ruka met up with Hinaru at the shoe rack at school in the morning before heading to their classroom together.

As soon as they walked in, Meiri showed them her phone screen. "So yeah, my man bought me the Lip Creature."

Her text messages read:

```
srsly? no pressure
> No worries! Swimming in cash this month lol
thanks love ya!
> Love you too ♡♡♡
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"Ugh..." Ruka and Hinaru said together. Both of their faces scrunched up.

Meiri looked surprised. "Um, why the cringe?" she asked.

"I'm getting diabetes from seeing something that sweet first thing in the morning..." Ruka complained.

"Plus your BF's so *old*, Mei-chi... Red flag?" added Hinaru.

Meiri pulled her phone away. "He's not old! He's in college! And a model too."

I don't think he's "old" like Hina says, but he's an amateur model in college messing around with a high school girl he met at a photo shoot... He even repeated a year. Twice. You can't tell me that's not sus. I get that age is just a number when it comes to love, but going after someone Mei's age when the modeling world's full of older, pretty women... Ruka had her opinions about Meiri's boyfriend, but she also didn't want her friend to get all pissed off again like yesterday.

"'Kay, Mei, take two," said Ruka.

"Huh?"

"Totes jealous of your super nice boyfriend, Mei! I wish I had

one!”

“Uh-huh, *real* sincere.” Meiri poked Ruka in the cheek.

Ruka grinned, though that was a little tricky with all the poking. *If that’s enough for her to feel like she got me back, I’ll take it.*

“Y’know, I’ve been wondering about this for a loooong time. Why don’t you get a boyfriend, Ruka-chin?” Hinaru asked.

“What do you mean, why?”

“I mean, you’re popular with the guys, aren’tcha? And you just said you wanted a BF. So why not go out and get one?” Hinaru grabbed a piece of candy from her bag and started rolling it around in her mouth.

Ruka had only said she was jealous to calm Meiri down, but Hinaru had taken her seriously. To Ruka, though, her reason for not getting a boyfriend was a no-brainer.

“Hanging out with you two’s way more fun!” said Ruka. “Doesn’t matter what we’re up to. It’s always the best with you guys!”

As the three girls giggled together, the room suddenly went silent. Ginka Shijunana had arrived.

Again, Ruka noticed her shining silver hair and eyes along with her pretty face. All that sparkly jewelry was hard to miss too. Everyone in class seemed to be holding their breaths. Of course, that included the girls who had been around during that whole mess yesterday, but the boys were also acting like they’d sensed *something*.

After setting down her bag at her desk, Shijunana headed toward Chinami at the front of the room. The class rep’s face tensed, and she looked uncomfortable. That wasn’t surprising when the girl who had revealed her secrets and made her cry was coming right for her. Everyone else in class seemed too fixated on Shijunana to make a move.

Shijunana stopped in front of Hayami and said, in her clear and dignified voice, “Hayami...san. I wish to apologize once more for yesterday’s incident. My sincerest apologies.”

“Ah, uh, buh...” Chinami didn’t seem like she could handle words right now. She was doing better than yesterday, but she still didn’t seem okay enough to accept that apology. As Chinami started to

panic, her eyes darted all over before stopping on Ruka.

"Be right back," Ruka said. *Not like I have a choice when she looks at me like a little puppy. And since I smoothed things over yesterday, it's my job to see it all the way through... I guess?*

"Want us to come along?" Hinaru asked.

"Nah, I'll be fine solo. Oh, but I'll take these." Ruka snatched something from Hinaru, then went to rescue Chinami.

"Ah, I was looking forward to those! Fine, whatever..." Hinaru grumbled as Ruka walked away.

At the front of the classroom, Shijunana shot a questioning look at Ruka while Chinami relaxed a little.

Yup, coming up here really was the right call. "Shijunana-san, you're way too uptight this early in the morning. Chinami's *freak-ing-out*!" At the end of that sentence, Ruka swung her hand between the two girls after each syllable to make her point.

"Ah, apologies..." Shijunana awkwardly replied.

Ruka wondered if Chinami wasn't the only nervous one up here. Maybe Shijunana didn't have much experience apologizing. *Gotta teach her, then.* She held out the bag of candy she'd snatched from Hinaru. "If you're gonna say sorry, throw in a bribe."

Shijunana's eyebrows lost their almost-perfect shape as she frowned at the bag. "I do not believe this type of thing is appropriate for an apology."

"Sure they are. They're crazy good."

"They look like ordinary candies, though..."

"Yup."

"In that case, I understand even less..."

"You gotta feel it with your heart, y'know?"

"I...do not know."

"Pffff...! Ha!" A burst of laughter cut through their conversation.

Ruka and Shijunana both turned and saw Chinami trembling with a hand over her mouth.

"Hayami-san?"

"Ah...!" After a quiet yelp, Chinami covered her face and looked down at the floor.

She was trying to hide her smile, but Ruka could definitely see

between her hands because her shoulders still shook a little.

"You two can handle the rest." She thrust the bag of candy at Shijunana's chest and turned around.

First yesterday, and now today... I'm almost too *good!* Ruka was feeling pretty fired up from what she'd just done. As she started walking away, she listened to Shijunana and the class rep talk things out.

"I thought about it a lot after heading home yesterday... I talked to you because the teachers told me to, Shijunana-san, but the way I did it was so awkward that I caused you trouble... I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize about, Hayami-san. The fault was entirely mine yesterday."

"No, but..."

"I mean it. I trampled all over your considerate actions and then embarrassed you in front of others. Upon reflection, I realized how utterly foolish I was."

"Why don't we say we were both at fault, then?"

"Yes, I would appreciate that."

Now that Shijunana and Chinami had made up, the tension lingering in the classroom was gone. Everyone looked relieved to see the issue resolved. Ruka, too, felt nice and refreshed. As she went back to her seat, Hinaru and Meiri held out their fists. Without a word, Ruka lifted her own for a fist bump with her friends.

Ruka worked part-time at a café called Bianco two or three times a week because it was close to school and the uniforms looked good. Maybe her reasons for working there weren't the best, but she got along great with everyone from the couple who ran the place to the other employees. She thought it was a pretty fun place to work.

"Got your order right here, my guy!" Ruka placed an espresso and a tart in front of a middle-aged man with stubble. The reason she spoke so casually with the customers was because the folks who owned the place had told her to be herself at work. That made life easier for Ruka, so she wasn't about to complain. "Take your time!" she added with a smile and a little nod. After roughly a year of working here, she was used to the whole routine.

Ruka glanced up at the pendulum clock and realized it was time for her break. “Back in a few!” she called out to the owner behind the counter.

He handed Ruka an iced coffee. She knew that he was offering it to her, so she thanked him and took it to the staff room.

Inside, she saw a slender girl collapsed on top of a small table.

“Yo, Tokiwa-san,” Ruka said to her coworker.

“Ah, Ruka-san... Good work out there...” Tokiwa Yagi lifted her head, fixed her crooked glasses, and smiled at Ruka.

There was a tablet and a stylus on the table, so Ruka asked, “Oh, were you drawing manga?”

“That’s right... Hee hee. I was...drawing manga...at work... Hee hee hee...”

Ruka took a seat across from the girl whose weird giggling really didn’t match her pretty face. Tokiwa was part of her college’s manga club, and she drew manga for events every few months or so. Normally she drew at home, but apparently she was using her break time at work for that now.

In other words... Ruka could guess what the deal was. “Hey, Tokiwa-san...”

“Y-Yes?”

“How’s the manga going?”

“Eeep!” Tokiwa squeaked.

Even without knowing the details, Ruka knew her coworker was in a pinch. *Well, Tokiwa-san’s always helping me out at work, so maybe this’ll be a good chance to pay her back.* After a quick sip of iced coffee, she looked straight at Tokiwa and asked, “Is there anything I can do? Y’know, to help you out?”

“R-Ruka-san, you’d do that...?”

“Of course. I mean, you’re always giving me a hand.”

“My angel...” Tokiwa’s eyes teared up behind her glasses. She tightly gripped her messy hair, which was sticking up all over the place. “W-Well, you see, I haven’t been able to come up with any ideas at all... S-So, I’m sorry to ask, but... Could you tell me some stories about your high school, Ruka-san...?”

“Oh, you want some gossip? On it!”

Sometimes, Tokiwa asked Ruka for stories from school to use as material in her manga. Ruka had fun talking to her coworker, and she got manga and cake in exchange for her stories, so she was happy to help. Part of her did wonder what the point was, because Tokiwa had been a high schooler herself until pretty recently. But when Ruka had asked one time, Tokiwa had looked so sad that she'd decided to never ask again.

Besides, Ruka wanted to talk about *that* girl. "Yesterday, we got a new student in class."

"Oh, a transfer student?"

"Nah, a returning student. I don't really know what her deal is, but I guess she took time off from school."

"Ah, I see..." Tokiwa's eyes shone. Ruka's story had caught her attention.

"Anyway, her eyes and hair are this flashy color, but she said it's all natural. Wild, right? Kinda cool too... Oh, and she's always wearing these black gloves, plus she can see through lies, and she's so pretty... She's seriously unbelievable."

Tokiwa muttered, "Archetype overload..."

"Ar-kuh... What's that?" Ruka asked.

"I-It means that there are a lot of elements to her character. Take you, for example, Ruka-san. You have light hair, you're a high school girl, and you're a g-gyaru..."

"Oh! I get it. Totes overload. She's got a ton of piercings too."

"Th-There's more...?" Tokiwa was now so excited about the creative possibilities that her voice was becoming shrill. "I-I'm sure she must have even more secrets to hide..."

"Secrets?" Ruka asked.

"Like, maybe she's an assassin who's part of the underworld. Or she could be the princess of some small country. Perhaps a knight from another world...? I-I'm sure there's a pompous pretty boy and a hot princely guy fighting over her...!"

Tokiwa's voice was getting louder and louder. Her eyes were losing focus as she fell into some kind of trance. Ruka didn't really mind, but if Tokiwa got too loud she would start bothering the people in the café. As Ruka got ready to warn her, Tokiwa snapped

back to her senses with a little cough.

"W-Well, everyone has their secrets."

"Is that how it is...?"

"It is."

Ruka thought back to that whole incident in the changing room yesterday. Shijunana had said, *"I wished to ask her reason for getting close to me, then inform her that it would be best for her well-being to stop."*

Tokiwa-san's right. That girl must be hiding a big secret. Well, even if she is, it's none of my business. I'm not gonna try to find out.

That night, at nine o'clock, Ruka left work and started heading home. As she walked down the road lit by streetlights, she looked up at a traffic mirror and saw a large shadowy figure a short distance behind her. They had been following her ever since she left Bianco. No matter how many turns she took and how much time she spent in the convenience store, they kept that exact same amount of space between them and wouldn't stop following her.

Craaaap! That's a stalker! Guys had tailed her plenty of times before, but it was still creepy every single time. She didn't get why they would even do that or what they got out of hiding in the dark and following someone. That scared her, but she shook it off and started to think about what she should do.

If she headed home, the stalker would figure out where she lived. That would put Ryoko in danger too, so she was going to avoid that option no matter what. If she tried to report the stalker, they would get away before anyone came to help. After that, the cops would just give her a lecture about not walking around at night or say it was because of how she dressed.

Ruka pulled out her phone and started talking to herself. "Hey, mom? It's me!"

She hoped the stalker would give up if it seemed like someone was on the other end. It would be way better if she *could* talk to somebody right now, but Ryoko was at work and Hinaru and Meiri weren't picking up. She had to fake it. It wasn't the best plan for

dealing with a stalker, but it was all she had.

"I'm heading home now. Want me to grab anything on my way back? Nope? Gotcha, gotcha..."

She turned the corner and peeked behind her. There, she saw a guy with stubble next to a vending machine. As his vacant eyes turned to Ruka, his face broke into a grin.

Ugh. He's locked on.

"'Kay, I'll hurry back," Ruka said, stowing her phone in her bag. At this point, she had to rely on her legs. She got ready to start runn—

"Ahhh!"

She spun around and saw the stalker guy face down on the ground. A black *something* covering his body looked like it wasn't letting him move. The black thing could've been a person, but it was hard to tell because the head and arms were bent at weird angles. Thanks to the light from the vending machine, Ruka saw that it had an outer layer that sort of looked like clay.

Oh, it's a fetish thing. Like a bondage suit. It was Ruka's first time seeing one of those, but she knew some people were into that. She wasn't about to kink shame anyone, but that didn't mean she wanted to see it.

The guy yelled again. "H-Help me!"

That snapped Ruka out of it. She threw her schoolbag at the black thing, which wasn't as heavy as it looked. It tumbled off the guy, and now he had a chance to run.

"Gun it, old guy!" Ruka yelled.

"G-G-G...?"

"Floor it! Run!"

The guy finally understood and stumbled away from the black thing before running away. The black thing stayed put. The part that was probably its face turned to Ruka's bag on the ground next to it.

Crap. Should've asked that guy to call the cops.

"My bad, sorry for interrupting... But, y'know, I didn't wanna see all that, like, maybe save the hardcore stuff for when you're at home?" Ruka backed away with her hands up and her palms facing out.

A short whistle was all Ruka heard before her schoolbag went

flying and burst open in midair. Her textbooks, gym clothes, makeup pouch, and phone all fell onto the asphalt.

"Huh...? What...?" As Ruka tried to process what had just happened, the black thing pointed a long and thin who-knows-what at her. She realized *that* was what had destroyed her bag. "Whoa, hey, this is no joke..."

Her instincts screamed at her to run, but her legs felt stuck when she saw all of her stuff just lying on the street. Meiri and Hinaru had given her some of that makeup for her birthday, and she'd splurged on that wallet with money she'd made working at Bianco. She couldn't just ditch all of that.

My life, or my money... Which is more important?

"My life comes first!" Ruka yelled.

She ran. There weren't any police boxes nearby, and she couldn't call the cops without her phone. It'd be nice if she could hide in a house or something, but all the buildings nearby were apartments, and she couldn't just walk into one of those.

My luck is just complete garbage! Ruka was already exhausted after school and work, but she ran with everything she had.

"Wha...?"

The black thing appeared right beside her.

Now that she was looking at it up close, Ruka shuddered at what she saw. The face was all slick like a mannequin's, and a blade was fused into one of its arms. Its waist was as thin as Ruka's own arm, so it probably didn't even have any organs inside. It did, however, have four legs.

Monster... It was the perfect word for that black thing. Ruka was absolutely horrified by the deadly presence in front of her. *I'm just a high schooler! I can't fight something like this! I don't wanna die!*

All she could do now was cling onto hope. "H-Help—"

A single black point in the sky grew bigger and bigger until it became a silhouette of a person dropping sharply through the air. They landed behind Ruka with an intense metallic *crash*.

Ruka's legs shook. She turned around and saw a figure in a long coat standing between her and the black monster. Their face was hidden by their hood, but they held a shining silver spear in one

hand and silver light shone all around.

"I made it in time," said the hooded figure.

Ruka knew that voice. It sounded familiar, and it reminded her of winter. And then, she saw a flash of silver hair from under that hood. Even though Ruka was shaken by this whole crazy situation, she knew exactly who she was looking at now.

"Shijunana-san...?" Ruka asked, and the person in the coat froze. *Wow, that reaction was stupid easy to read. She's totally Ginka Shijunana.* "Wh-What are you doing here...?"

"I'll explain later. Don't move."


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Shijunana slammed into the black thing with a roundhouse kick. The monster went flying like it was repelled by a magnet before slamming into a nearby fence. With silver light all around her body, Shijunana closed the gap between her and the monster.

"Raaaaaah!" she shouted, and she swung her spear.

The black monster's arm fell to the ground.

"Ugh..." Ruka had no clue what that black thing was, but it was definitely some kind of living creature. And Shijunana had cut right through it. Even though it was a dangerous monster, and Shijunana was fighting it to protect Ruka, Ruka couldn't help thinking that had been too brutal.

"Huh...?"

Something strange was happening with that sliced-off arm. Its claylike skin no longer seemed soft and flexible, and thin cracks like the veins of a leaf started to run across the surface. Little bumps popped up everywhere before the flesh turned into sand and lost its form.

H-How the hell does that work...?

Meanwhile, the battle between Shijunana and the black thing still wasn't over. The monster's other arm changed into a blade and unleashed a relentless assault. She casually dodged each strike, her movements almost like a dance as she made her way closer to her enemy.

"Now vanish!" Shijunana slashed up with her spear.

A diagonal slice through the monster's torso made it collapse like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Its body turned into black sand, just like the arm had earlier, and everything fell silent.

"To think a mere retainer would give me such trouble... I've gotten rusty." Shijunana sounded annoyed as she muttered to herself. She stretched out one of her long legs and kicked the black sand.

The fight was over, and Shijunana had won.

"Are we in a battle anime or what...?" Ruka tried to process all the crazy stuff that had happened right in front of her, but she more or less gave up on thinking after a while and just stood in a daze.

Shijunana approached her. "Moriki, are you unharmed?"

It really was hard for Ruka to believe Ginka Shijunana had just fought such a wild battle. How could she stay so calm? That gave Ruka the chills. She pointed at the pile of black sand and forced herself to ask, “Did... D-Did you...murder...?”

“That wasn’t murder. It was merely destruction.”

“Wh-What’s the difference...?”

“That wasn’t a person. *This* is the true identity of the monster you just saw.” Shijunana kicked the black sand again, and something small and furry rolled out.

A... A dead rat. That’s even creepier! The shock might’ve switched Ruka’s brain back on, because all kinds of questions started running through her head. *Why would a rat look like* that*? How did Shijunana-san know? Why did she show up here? And what’s with that silver spear and that shining silver stuff?* The questions didn’t stop coming, and Ruka had more and more she wanted to know and ask.

“Shijunana-san... What even are you?” That was what Ruka needed to know first.

“I’m a vam—” Shijunana hesitated. She started over, with a troubled look on her face this time. “I’m a *former* vampire hunter.”

As Ruka stared at the girl who had just said something ridiculous, she remembered Tokiwa’s words.

“Everyone has their secrets.”

A former vampire hunter... That was Ginka Shijunana’s secret.

“For real...?”

Chapter 3: Peak Gyaru Qualifications

When the notification popped up on Ginka's phone, her first reaction was this*: I'm just seeing things. Impossible. Unacceptable. If this is legitimate, then we've made a fatal error.*

No matter how much she blinked, the notification didn't go away. Opening the app revealed an orange dot on the map—proof that she *wasn't* just seeing things. She left her half-eaten meal on the table, headed to her room, grabbed her long coat out of the closet, and put it on. Then she leaped off the balcony.

With some concentration, silver particles—exoforce—started to float under Ginka's feet. She steadied herself, then took off running through the night sky with exoforce supporting her weight in midair. She sprinted toward the location marked by that orange dot while checking and confirming her phone along the way.

She just couldn't shake the feeling that this was impossible. *We finished the job. That bloody war with those repulsive monsters had spread far and wide, but we hunted them down using every method we could and emerged victorious. This is nothing more than a bug in the app.*

That last thought—Ginka's hope—was shattered when she arrived at her destination and saw a retainer attacking a girl. She immediately intervened and destroyed the clawed monster, but if she had been just a few seconds late, Ruka Moriki would have been torn apart.

Even though Ginka had made it in time, the sense of guilt she felt was intense. How could she have let peace dull her so? Her past self from just a few months ago would surely call her a slacker now.

And what in the world was a retainer doing here? There was no one left to make them, and one surviving on its own strength was

incredibly unlikely. Surely the retainer could not have been born naturally. *How would we even begin to come up with countermeasures for that...?*

Her thoughts stopped racing when she heard someone stepping away from her. Ruka Moriki, standing a few paces away, was staring at her with terror in her eyes. Observing the battle with the retainer had likely been a shocking experience. Though Ginka very much wanted to know how and why a retainer had appeared, providing mental care came first.

With a sigh, Ginka started to talk about herself—about vampire hunters.

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The water Ruka bought from the vending machine flowed down her parched throat, and she felt herself start cooling down and exhaustion leaving her.

"Phew! So refreshing!" She massaged her thighs and glanced to the side.

Shijunana, who had lowered her hood, was watching Ruka. She kind of looked like an anime cosplayer standing there in that long coat, with her silver hair and beautiful features lit by moonlight, but Ruka thought it was a weirdly good look for her.

Shijunana seemed to notice Ruka's gaze and asked, "Have you calmed yourself?"

"Seriously? No way." Ruka had cooled down a little, but her heart was still pounding and she was sweating up a storm. *What the heck was that black thing? What does she mean, "former vampire hunter"? And how the hell did that spear just vanish? I'm grateful she saved my life and all, but I need answers!*

"So vampires...like the ones in manga and movies, yeah?" Ruka asked.

With a calm nod, Shijunana replied, "Correct. They are also known as nosferatu, nightwalkers, and ghouls."

"And vampire hunters are...?"

"The people who exterminate them."

An awkward chuckle slipped out of Ruka, but Shijunana looked dead serious telling her this ridiculous story. Vampires and vampire hunters were just characters from manga or dramas on TV. Ruka felt like she had to ditch all of her common sense to accept any of this.

Still, a monster attacked me, and the girl who saved me's saying vampires and vampire hunters are a thing, so...

"'Kay, I made up my mind."

"What do you mean?"

"Vampires exist, and you're a vampire hunter. All good!"

Ruka was ready to max out her Shijunana trust gauge, but the hunter furrowed her brows.

"You really believe me?"

"Well, yeah. Why wouldn't I believe someone who saved my life? Oh, I know—you can tell when people are lying, right? C'mon, take a good look at me."

"Y-You really believe me..."

Ruka ignored the confused look on Shijunana's face and started picking up her stuff up off the ground. Even though it'd all slammed into the asphalt, nothing was broken. When she grabbed her phone, she saw the dead rat with its belly sliced open and its guts spilling out.

"Vampires are rats, huh? That's a new one," Ruka said, grossed out by the freaky little corpse.

"That is not a vampire," Shijunana replied.

"Huh...? Then what the heck was it?"

"A retainer—something akin to an underling. Vampires create such monsters by injecting their blood into small animals and insects."

"Gotcha... So what are legit vampires like? Are they all hot?"

Shijunana frowned. "The beautiful vampire is a fictional invention. Real ones are vicious and underhanded beings who only exist to harm humankind. In that sense, vampires are worse than pests."

"V-Vicious and underhanded..."

"They attack people and steal their blood. They take pleasure in destroying peace and order. They do not even see their own ilk as allies and live solely to bring harm to society as a whole... Truly,

vampires are inhuman in every sense of the word.” The tone of Shijunana’s voice was harsh, and her expression was intense. Her hair started floating like it was responding to her anger, and little silver specks of light appeared all around her body.

“Hey, whoa, something’s leaking,” said Ruka.

“My apologies... I lost my composure.” The lights around Shijunana steadily died down.

Does she have a light switch or something?! Ruka shook off that thought and asked, “What the heck’s that sparkly silver stuff, anyway?”

“Ah...” After hesitating a bit, Shijunana formed a little ball of light on her palm. “This is exoforce. It strengthens my physical abilities and lets me create weapons from thin air. Without it, we cannot fight vampires.”

A glow brighter than the streetlights slipped through the gaps in Shijunana’s fingers before disappearing like little shooting stars. It was so magical and mysterious that Ruka couldn’t make herself look away.

“I thought I would never have to use it again, yet here we are...” Shijunana whispered as the light vanished.

I don’t get this whole exoforce thing, but I guess it lets her fly and make that silver spear? That sounds hella convenient, so what does she mean by not having to use it? Actually, what does former *vampire hunter mean anyway?*

“Hey, when you said you were a former vampire hunter... Did you, like, retire or something?” Ruka asked.

Shijunana’s face scrunched up like she had trouble answering. “I didn’t retire. I am no longer needed.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“Because...not a single vampire remains...”

“Gotcha, so... Wait. What...?” Something about this bothered Ruka, and she started racking her brain. *If vampires make those retainers or whatever, and there aren’t any vampires left, then why’d one of those things show up now?* That was weird enough for Ruka to notice, so she knew Shijunana had realized it too.

But Shijunana simply—though awkwardly—continued. “Half a

year ago, the hunter alliance...the organization of vampire hunters I belong to executed an operation on a global scale. After several months of battle, we wiped out the last vampire, Albert von Dittersdorf, and fully eradicated their kind."

"Eradicated..." Ruka repeated.

Shijunana sounded frustrated when she answered—perhaps she had picked up the doubt in Ruka's voice. "Yes, I find it strange as well. A retainer indicates the presence of a vampire nearby. That would mean vampires were *not* truly eradicated—that the hunter alliance made a mistake in its investigation. Perhaps a vampire with the ability to evade the search app..." Shijunana pulled her hood over her head again and turned away from Ruka. "At any rate, we still have much to discuss, Moriki. Get on my back."

"On your back... Wait, a piggyback ride?"

Shijunana silently nodded, so Ruka did as she was told while doing her best to hold what was left of her bag without spilling everything in it. She could smell the stench of dirt and iron clinging to Shijunana's long coat.

"I am going to run home using exoforce. You may wish to close your mouth."

"Wait, what do you mean... Gaaah!"

Ruka's head jerked back as a gust of wind rushed past her cheeks. Her hair whipped behind her as they zoomed forward. She had to close her eyes, partly because she felt like she was going to puke up her guts. When she finally took a peek, she saw their town far, far below them.

So this is what she meant?! Damn, girl, you gotta explain better! So freaking scary!

"Vampires are creatures that prey upon the flesh and blood of humankind. They possess great physical strength, regenerative skills, and lifespans long enough to be considered immortal. Some even wield supernatural abilities such as flame summoning or teleportation.

"However, they are by no means superior to humanity. Exposure to sunlight brings about great agony, and they fear religious symbols

such as crosses and Buddha statues. Naturally, they are weak to exoforce as well.

"The greatest difference between vampires and humans, though, doesn't come from their strengths or weaknesses. No, it is their thinking: the fact that vampires do not hesitate to kill. To them, humans are simply prey. If hurting humans made vampires feel guilty, they would never be able to keep on living. Over time, they even started to enjoy the act of murder itself. Even though we were originally the same species...

"Ah yes, that's right. Vampires are transformed humans. As shown in many stories, a human infused with vampire blood will turn into one themselves. Their flesh changes, and their mind shifts as they come to crave human blood. However, not everyone with vampire blood in them will transform, and an ongoing transformation can be treated with exoforce and medicine.

"The police and those with governmental authority are aware of the existence of vampires. They devote their efforts to manipulating information and preventing widespread panic while leaving the fighting to us, the hunters, who have been trained to battle vampires.

"That is a general synopsis of vampires. Did you understand all of it? I am not the best at delivering explanations, so it may have been difficult to comprehend. What do you think?

"Moriki? You're not responding. Are you... Ah, you've lost consciousness..."

After all the shaking her brain and inner ear got on the way to Shijunana's apartment, Ruka was a complete wreck. She held her hands over her stomach as she followed Shijunana inside the building and sat in the corner of the elevator before stumbling out on the seventh floor.

Shijunana walked up to a door, swiped a security card, and went inside. Ruka followed, taking off her shoes and going down the hall into what looked to be a dark living room before collapsing on the spot.

"I-I-I'm cooked..." *I feel like absolute garbage. The floor is*

swaying, and my thighs are cold and shaky. If I'm not careful, something's gonna come back up...

"I will get you some water. Just rest." Shijunana turned on the light, revealing a soft-looking sofa nearby.

Ruka crawled over and flopped in front of it. The living room was huge, with five doors along the walls. The matching furniture looked high-end, and the place didn't really feel homey. It really didn't seem like a family lived here, so Ruka wondered if Shijunana was here alone.

"Here. Drink up." Shijunana came out of her kitchen with a cup.

"Thanks..." Even though Ruka had just downed a whole bottle of water a few minutes ago, her throat was already parched again. Drinking the water Shijunana offered didn't make Ruka feel any less awful, and her hand trembled as she held the cup, but she was grateful for the thought.

"So, do you have a proper understanding of vampires now?" Shijunana asked.

Shijunana had explained everything on their way here. Ruka had read plenty of manga and watched plenty of TV shows about vampires, and she had decided to trust Shijunana, so she didn't have trouble accepting everything she'd heard...though she really wished the explanation hadn't been in the middle of a free fall.

"So vampires used to be humans, yeah?" Ruka asked.

"That is correct," Shijunana replied. "However, it is impossible to coexist with them."

Ruka held her tongue. She had been working up to her real question—if humans could work with vampires, since vampires used to be humans and still spoke the same language—but Shijunana's ice-cold expression made Ruka lose her nerve.

"If vampires do not eat regularly, an intense urge to suck blood and kill takes over. They cannot exist without killing... We can't live alongside such a race." Shijunana paused and sighed. "The hunter alliance has already tried to come up with a way for us to coexist. Drugs, surgical procedures, and even all sorts of inhumane methods failed. Now, such attempts are no longer necessary."

Ruka could almost hear the words Shijunana didn't say—"*because*

vampires are extinct." She said that hunter alliance group she's part of wiped out all the vampires. So what's the deal with that retainer or whatever attacking me?

Shijunana shook her head like she was trying to clear out everything that didn't make sense. "I would like to start by investigating why you were attacked. I will need time to prepare, so please wait for a moment." She left the room right after that.

Ruka was still feeling unsteady, but she got up off the floor just long enough to plop down on the sofa. She didn't even care how messy her hair was at this point. "This is some dark stuff..." she mumbled to herself. It sounded like Shijunana had been fighting with vampires and retainers all this time. *What kind of life was she living till now? Surrounded by brutality... My life's nice and peaceful, so I can't even imagine.*

"Oh, that's why she took time off school," Ruka thought out loud.

That battle to exterminate vampires had gone on for months. While Ruka had been hanging out with her friends, cooking for Ryoko, and chatting with Tokiwa at work, Shijunana had been fighting and fighting and fighting some more. She should've been a normal second-year high school student, but she'd spent all that time battling monsters instead. *And* she'd won.

"Wow. Seriously." Ruka had to admire her classmate, who was only a year older than her.

Shijunana came back holding a flat box in one hand.

Ruka was pretty sure that was what Shijunana had needed to prepare for the investigation, but she couldn't tell what it was. "What's that?" she asked.

"It's a kit for extracting blood. I will use it on you."

"Wh-Wha?" Ruka tilted her head. *First she saves me from a bloodsucking monster, and now* she's *gonna take my blood?*

Shijunana's reply was expressionless. "Research conducted by the hunter alliance has proved the existence of additional blood types beyond those commonly known. Some types of blood make it easier to become a vampire, while others make it easier to become a vampire hunter. There's even blood that interferes with vampire abilities... According to what you told me, that retainer's target was

a man at first, correct? And then it decided to attack you—the reason must be your blood. Besides, checking your blood will not harm you."

Shijunana placed the box on the table and pulled out a cream-colored stack of paper and what seemed to be a baby bottle with some extra parts. Ruka was pretty sure it was a tool for drawing blood, but it looked more like a toy or maybe an ear piercer.

"Relax. This equipment has been certified by international medical associations. A needle will emerge from the tip and draw your blood into the vacuum interior. Placing the drawn blood on this paper reveals what type of blood you have. Simple, isn't it?"

"Um, not super thrilled about getting stabbed..."

"Have you ever had any allergic reactions to alcohol-based disinfectants?"

"I don't get a choice, do I..." After confirming she didn't have any allergies, Ruka rolled up her sleeve and placed one elbow on the sofa's armrest.

Shijunana grabbed Ruka's wrist, and Ruka knew there was no way she could get out of this now.

"Relax your arm," said Shijunana.

"Ugh..." Ruka groaned and turned her head so she wouldn't have to see the needle—

"All right. Done."

"So fast!" Ruka saw that the bottom half of the bloodsucking tool was red, and her arm was already bandaged up. *Okay, she's way too good at this. Did she pick up first aid skills from fighting vampires, maybe?*

Shijunana dripped some of the blood on one of those papers, and the blood started changing color almost right away. Ruka's blood had been a dark red at first, but it kept getting brighter and more saturated until it became a hot pink that almost hurt to look at.

Hina would probably love that color... Ruka glanced at Shijunana.

"The enticement quotient is quite high..." Shijunana murmured. "This is temptation blood."

"Enticement quotient? Is that, like, a math thing?"

"Blood with a high enticement quotient, such as temptation

blood, easily attracts vampires. Blood like yours is incredibly delicious to them, and they will prioritize attacking those who have it."

Does that make me some kinda feast for vampires and retainers? No wonder that monster went after me instead of the stalker.

"So it's just blood that makes vampires wanna attack me more?"

"No, that isn't all there is to it..."

"Tell me. It's my blood, so I wanna know."

"This may be nothing but a foolish, prejudiced idea..."

"Out with it."

"Well, erm, temptation blood... It's said that many who possess it are lascivious..."

"The heck does that mean?"

"It means they have strong sexual desires."

"So, like, horny."

"Indeed."

The two of them looked at each other, and it was awkward.

I got stalked, attacked by a monster, dealt with getting my blood drawn, and now she thinks I'm horny... Today is seriously the worst.

Shijunana said she would continue to investigate, so Ruka decided to head home for the time being. But since her temptation blood attracted vampires and retainers, Shijunana went with her. Shijunana had actually recommended moving through the sky with exoforce again, but Ruka was *so* done with that.

"Moriki, I know I am being persistent, but you must not speak of what happened to anyone else. Do you understand?" Shijunana asked as the two of them walked together.

Ruka rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I get it already. My lips are sealed. This might surprise you, but I'm actually pretty good at keeping my mouth shut."

"You are...? Truly...?"

"For real. 'Cross my heart and hope to die, eat a thousand needles if I lie' and all that."

"Even though you had issues with the needle when I drew your blood...?"

As they talked, Ruka's house came into view. It wasn't much, and

it was different from Shijunana's apartment in every way, but seeing it made Ruka so, so relieved. The tension in her shoulders finally lifted when she realized she was home.

"Well, I will see you again at school," said Shijunana.

"Oh, yeah, see you then." Ruka slid open the door. By the time she realized she forgot to thank Shijunana and turned around, though, the girl was already gone.

As she stepped into the empty house, Ruka pulled her phone out of a paper bag. "She put this app on my phone, but is it actually useful?"

On their way here, Shijunana had installed a vampire search app on Ruka's phone. The app had been developed by the hunter alliance, and it was supposed to show a dot on a map if it picked up on a vampire nearby. Vampires were red dots, retainers were orange, and vampire hunters using exoforce were blue... Of course, it wasn't showing anything right now.

"Well, I owe her my life and all, so I'll just take her word for it." *I've got all kinds of thoughts about this whole deal, but she saved me. So I'll put up with doing what she tells me to do even though it's kind of a pain.*

Ruka went into her bedroom and dumped the paper bag on her leopard-print bed. What was left of her schoolbag came tumbling out, plus the anti-vampire stuff Shijunana had given her: a UV light, a security buzzer, garlic chips, and a tiny bottle with silver powder in it.

Ruka picked up the bottle. The stuff inside was something called "sacred silver dust," powdered silver with exoforce added to it. Chucking it at a vampire or a retainer was supposed to break the bottle and hurt the monster.

Hope I never have to use this... Ruka held the bottle up high, and her ceiling light overhead shone through the bottle and made the powder sparkle. "Sure is pretty, though." As she stared at the pretty color that reminded her of Shijunana's hair and eyes, an idea came to her. "Wait, that could work, right? Oops!"

The bottle slipped from her hand and bonked her forehead. It hit her hard enough to leave a red spot, but Ruka still smiled.

"Yeah, that jerk was totally cheating," Meiri complained before homeroom the next day. "He was acting kinda sus, and I pushed him on it. He was like, 'No, you're the one I was cheating with!' And 'of course we were just messing around' and 'don't make it such a big deal, it's not like I did you or anything.' Then, when I slapped him in the face, one of my press-ons came off." She frowned and stuck a finger out. "It was the. Freaking. Worst."

"That jerk" was the college guy Meiri had met at her modeling job, so it seemed like Ruka and Hinaru had been right about him being sketchy.

Meiri leaned up against Ruka. "Pamper me, 'kay?"

Ruka patted her on the shoulder. "There, there. It was rough, huh?"

"H-Hey, I'm the one who had a rough time... I wanted to go to bed early last night..." Hinaru sounded exhausted. Apparently Meiri had kept her up late last night complaining.

Ruka could see dark circles under Hinaru's eyes, though she did do a good job hiding them with makeup.

"I mean, Ruka wouldn't pick up her phone, so what else was I supposed to do?" Meiri asked.

Hinaru groaned. "It's your fault, Ruka-chin."

"What? It is?" Ruka was about to complain about that ridiculousness, but the classroom suddenly went silent.

It was the third day in a row. By now, it was obvious that Ginka Shijunana had walked in.

"You got Mei, Hina?" Ruka passed Meiri over to Hinaru and stood up.

"No way, I don't wanna— Ahh! Too close!" Hinaru whined.

Ruka went up to Shijunana, whose expression was the same as it'd been yesterday. "Yo, Shijunana-san," she said, while thinking that poker face was never gonna crack.

"Good morning, Moriki," Shijunana got her brand-new textbook out of her bag and put it on her desk. She must've bought it just before coming back to school.

Ruka stuck her hands out in front of Shijunana's face. "Ta-da!

Thoughts?”

Shijunana looked bewildered. “About what?”

“My nails! Look!”

“Nails?” Shijunana’s gaze focused on Ruka’s fingernails. “Wait, you didn’t...!” Her face went stiff. “D-Did you paint your nails using sacred silver dust?!”

“Yup! Turned out awesome, yeah? Rawr!” Ruka roared like a monster, moving her hands back and forth as her silver nails reflected in Shijunana’s silver eyes.


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After Ruka had come up with the idea last night, she'd used the sacred silver dust, the UV light, and some gel polish to give herself glitter nails. She'd been too focused to hear Meiri's messages and hadn't stopped until she'd clenched her fists in a victory pose after her nails had ended up looking so good.

But Shijunana's reaction made Ruka think she wasn't gonna get any compliments.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked.

"No, I wouldn't say that..." Shijunana looked troubled. "Hmm, I see... For an average civilian, applying it to your body as protection makes more sense than throwing it...? Still, this is unprecedented..."

Ruka watched Shijunana mumble to herself. *If I tell her I used it like glitter around my eyes too, is she gonna snap?*

But then, Shijunana loosened up and smiled. "That certainly suits you," she said.

The gentle expression on Shijunana's face made her look like the Holy Mother herself, and Ruka stared at her. *This girl's face is seriously way too pretty.*

"Still, please contact me before you do something like that again. I don't want any unfortunate side effects to trouble you."

"Gotcha."

"Class will begin soon, so you should return to your seat."

"Right, right. See ya." Ruka gave Shijunana a quick wave before walking away.

From their seats near the back of the classroom, Hinaru and Meiri stared at her.

"What? What's with the weird faces?" Ruka asked.

Meiri was still staring. "That's our line..."

"Did something happen with Shijunana-san?" Hinaru asked.

Ruka thought about last night. *I ran into a stalker on the way back home, got attacked by a vampire's retainer, and ended up getting rescued by Ginka Shijunana. I wanna tell everyone about her saving me, but I promised not to...*

So she held back what she wanted to say and told her friends, "A good woman has her secrets, right?"

Ruka grinned. She thought that line sounded pretty great.

"Lame," Hinaru and Meiri shot back.
Um, rude!

Chapter 4: A Hundred Percent Blonde (On Paper)

It was morning, but Ginka still didn't have any answers.

Why did a retainer appear? Were the vampires not truly eradicated? And was giving Ruka Moriki detailed information about vampire hunters the right decision?

From her seat in the back of the classroom, Ginka stared at Moriki's platinum blonde hair. *She seems incredibly tired. Did she not sleep well due to yesterday's incident?* She was worried, but she didn't know if it would be proper to try to cheer Moriki up...nor did she know how to do so.

Ginka had never interacted with a girl like her before. Moriki was kind, trusted others easily, and took decisive action to solve other people's problems. Though she seemed to make decisions a little too quickly, Ginka had no doubt she was a good person.

And that good person was attacked by a monster.

Ginka was the only hunter in this town. She had reported the incident to the hunter alliance, but she would have to wait before she received a response. Having to resolve this incident by herself in the meantime made her feel on edge. She needed to steel herself and dedicate everything she had to solving this mystery.

"Sh-Shijunana-san?"

When Ginka looked up, she saw a man with an awkward smile on his face. His appearance was not memorable, and he wore a suit with a subdued color. Low-ranking vampires preferred that sort of look because it made blending in easier. *Is that the case with him?*

Under Ginka's stare, the man's smile vanished. He shrank back apologetically. "U-Um, could you...please answer...the question?"

Low-ranking vampires also tended to act weak to elicit sympathy. Just thinking about their cowardly deeds made anger well up inside

her.

"U-Um..." The man kept acting flustered and did nothing to change the state of affairs.

But that makes sense. He's a math teacher, not a vampire. Vampires can't be active during the day. I need to relax.

"My apologies. Could you repeat the question?" Ginka asked.

The math teacher looked relieved.

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Ruka stood up after class. She was gonna ask if Shijunana wanted to eat lunch together, but the girl was already gone. Then she noticed Chinami Hayami getting up and waved at her, but the class rep just looked embarrassed as she shrank back and sat down again.

Guess I'll eat with the usual crew. Ruka put her lunch bag on Meiri's desk.

That made Meiri look up. "Not hitting up the school store today?"

"It's always so crowded. Hina and I are taking a break from there for a while."

"Gotcha... Wait, that's your lunch?"

Ruka took a convenience store rice ball and a carton of milk tea out of her bag. "Yeah, what about it?"

Meiri's expression turned grim. "Y'know, ever since middle school, I've been wondering how you can drink something that sweet with a rice ball."

"Two times tasty equals double the tasty, right?"

"That's some idiot math."

"Hey, multiplication's my specialty." With a smug grin on her face, Ruka jammed a straw into her milk tea.

"'Scuze me!" Hinaru came over with a pink bento box. She sat down and opened the lid.

Ruka saw a little hamburger steak and mini croquettes inside. Hinaru's lunches were nothing like Meiri's salads, but she did need a ton of calories as a member of the dance club. As Hinaru pulled out her chopsticks, Ruka plopped a bag of ramune candy in front of her.

"What's this for, Ruka-chin?"

"I snatched your candy yesterday, so this is me paying you back."

"Ah, gotcha. I'll take 'em, then."

"Yup, go for it. The whole bag's for you."

"So what've you been hiding all morning, Ruka-chin?"

Hinaru's question came out of nowhere and made Ruka freeze.

Hina and Mei are staring... Not good...

"And what's with the Chaznel bag? Where's your school bag, hmm?" Hinaru asked.

"Um, I just, sorta wanted a change of pace..."

Meiri joined in. "Is that new nail polish? Where'd you buy it?"

"Um... Online! Yup, I ordered it online yesterday... No, wait, I mean the day before!"

Ruka's awkward answer made Hinaru roll her eyes. "How obvious can you get?"

"I mean," Meiri added, "Ruka sucks at lying. Nobody's surprised."

They know something's up. Crap! They're gonna find out, and then I'll have to eat a thousand needles! Ruka stared at the ceiling and started silently pleading for help from above.

That was when Meiri got down to business. "It has to do with Shijunana-san, right? You started talking to her all of a sudden this morning."

"N-N-N-No way!" Ruka blurted. "There's absolutely nothing going on! Nope! Yup!"

"This is for sure a thing."

"Fess up. It'll be easier if you do."

The two of them got closer, but Ruka didn't really feel like they were trying to corner her. *They're probably just messing with me, right? So I can probably...*

"Ah! Mmm!" Ruka shoved the rice ball into her mouth and chased it with milk tea. She gulped with all her might, yelled, "Gotta pee!" and shook off Hinaru's arm before running out of the classroom.

Escape was her only option. She ignored the "at least say 'use the bathroom'!" and the teachers telling her not to run as she sprinted down the hall.

Then she spotted a certain silver-haired beauty.

Perfect timing!

"Shijunana-saaaaan!"

"Moriki...?"

"Emergency! SOS! Help, help!"

As soon as Ruka got close, Shijunana pulled Ruka's head toward her chest.

"Mph!" Ruka was getting smothered by what was honestly a huge rack. She tried to resist, but Shijunana pushed her down.

Ow, my neck...

Shijunana swiftly glanced around. A light layer of exoforce glowed as it covered her body. "Where is it?!"

"Wh-Where's what?"

"The enemy. They're after you, correct?"

Shijunana looked like one of those savage guard dogs right now, which made Ruka *so* embarrassed. She'd gone way too hard asking for help, which made Shijunana think there was a vampire around.

"Um, Shijunana-san, about that..." Ruka muttered, trying to find the right words to clear this mess up.

Shijunana slowly let go of Ruka. She started to look uncomfortable. "You...were not attacked by a vampire?"

"Nope. Actually..." Ruka thought about what she'd learned yesterday. "They can't come out during the day anyway, right?"

"That..." Shijunana looked embarrassed now. "That is true. So what happened?"

Ruka was relieved they were on the same page, but then she remembered her emergency. "Bad news! Mei and Hina are trying to figure out what happened yesterday!"

"Please speak more quietly."

"Mei and Hina—Meiri and Hinaru were asking about yesterday, and they pointed out stuff like how my bag and nail polish were different... And I never really noticed this till now, but I guess I'm super bad at lying?"

"Did you not say, just yesterday, that you were good at keeping your mouth shut?"

"Yup, but I was wrong. My bad!"

Shijunana looked astonished at first, but then she crossed her

arms to think about the situation. “Perhaps we should have come up with a shared cover story...”

“Cover story...?”

“A fabricated tale for hiding what truly happened. When a mission took me to a new town, for example, I would say that I had just moved or that I was on vacation. Neither would apply here, though...”

So she’s trying to come up with some sort of lie to hide all that stuff from yesterday? I can probably help with that.

“What about, like, a hobby we both have?”

“I cannot imagine us having anything in common on that front...”

“Really?”

“We do not know each other very well. A sloppy cover story will have gaps in it, which can cause more problems than it solves.”

“Gotcha. Guess we gotta find out more about each other. What do we do till then?”

We need something to explain how we know each other outside of school. Except we don’t, so the story’s gotta be about, like, a random coincidence or something. But where?

Ruka was about to ask when she saw Shijunana staring at her like some sort of mysterious creature.

“Wh-What’s up?”

“Ah, never mind. What should we do...?”

Okay, I’m a little curious about why she brushed me off, but let’s focus on the cover story for now.

So they kept talking until they eventually came up with this: Ruka was heading home from her part-time job last night when her school bag ripped. Shijunana happened to pass by and let Ruka borrow a bag, and there was a sample of nail polish from overseas inside. After asking Shijunana if it would be okay to use it, Ruka did and showed off her nails this morning.

Sounds kinda forced, but I think it’ll work!

After school, Ruka hurried over to Bianco. She wasn’t supposed to have a shift today, but the owner contacted her because her coworker got sick. They even offered to pay extra, so she took the

hours.

Once Ruka got there, she said hi to the owner and put on her uniform. Not having Tokiwa around felt a little lonely, but work was work. So she started her shift in the dining area at just the right pace—not too intense but not too relaxed.

She heard the bell over the front door ring and called out, "Hiya. Sooo, how many?"

A middle-aged guy standing just inside the door stared at her.

Crap, did that piss him off? Ruka's bosses had told her to be herself, so she always talked to customers like that. But the customers wouldn't know, so some of them did think she was rude.

Should I say sorry? Hmm, how should I...

"U-Um... I-I..." The middle-aged guy's face turned red.

Wow, even his ears are red. He doesn't look mad, though... Wait, is he embarrassed?

Nobody was saying a thing, so Ruka took a better look at him. His hair was messy, he had a unibrow, and there was stubble all over his face. He was on the bigger side, and his T-shirt was tight around his belly and stretched out at the collar while his denim jeans were old and faded.

"Hey, you're that guy from yesterday!"

He was the stalker from last night. Ruka had forgotten about him, but it looked like he'd gotten out of that situation safe and sound.

"Good thing we both made it out okay, yeah?"

Ruka thought she'd sounded pretty casual, but the guy's face wrinkled up for some reason.

Huh? What now? She was starting to get scared.

But then, with tears from his beady eyes streaming down his face, he stammered, "Sh-Showwy... I-I...lebt you and ran abway..."

Kinda scary seeing a grown man cry like this...

"Don't worry about it, my guy. Anybody would've been scared."

I mean, a vampire hunter told me that vampires and retainers are literally monsters. Shijunana-san fights them for a living, but they're not something us normal folks can deal with. You were seriously lucky you got out.

"I can't really give you any details, but listen. I'm alive and

kicking, and you don't seem like a bad guy, so no worries."

Oh, wait, I guess there's still the stalking. Should I bring that up, though?

"I-I... I'm going to get a proper job! Then I'll come back...and I'll apologize again, so... F-Farewell for now!" The guy was still sobbing as he ran out of the store.

"U-Um, good luck with that?" Ruka called out. The bell rang as the door swung shut.

It felt awkward inside the café now. The owner was giving her a look like, *Why'd you let a customer slip away?*

Ruka did her best to say, *Hey, that wasn't my bad, y'know!* with her eyes before going back to work, but then the bell rang again.

"Hiya... Um, Shijunana-san?"

Ginka Shijunana walked in with her silver hair fluttering behind her. She looked at Ruka with her usual composed expression. "Your friends informed me of your part-time job and location. It appears to be a nice place with a relaxed atmosphere."

"Thanks!" Ruka glanced out of the corner of her eye at the owner to see if he appreciated the compliment.

Sure enough, he smiled and nodded. Ruka also noticed he didn't seem all that surprised by Shijunana, and she was pretty sure that had something to do with having a lot of life experience.

Shijunana slowly closed the door behind her. "Moriki, at what time does your shift end today?"

"Nine. Why, what's up?"

"Well... For now, might I have a seat?"

"Oh, yup. Table for one!" The sudden visit caught Ruka off guard, but she went ahead and brought Shijunana to an empty table.

As Ruka closed the curtain to block out the glare from the setting sun, she heard a whisper behind her.

"As I told you yesterday, there is a very high likelihood of them targeting you. Walking around at night means exposing yourself to danger. I want you to remember that well."

So she came here to warn me? Right, it is *more dangerous at night since that's when vampires are active. I should probably avoid night shifts to be safe. Makes perfect sense. It really does, but I*

can't just accept that.

"If I don't work when I can," said Ruka, "I can't buy clothes and makeup."

"What's more important? Going shopping or preserving your life?"

"If I gotta pick one, then my life matters more. But they're both important."

Shijunana kept opening and closing her mouth like she wanted to say something, but eventually she just crossed her arms and leaned up against her seat. "Hmm, so being unable to live normally due to the threat vampires pose is also a problem..."

Ruka thought Shijunana wasn't satisfied with her answer, but she also didn't seem like she was gonna argue. She looked more taken aback than anything.

"Until this incident is resolved," Shijunana said soon after, "I will guard you. When you take an evening shift, please contact me."

Huh? Really? Well, I mean, that's really nice of her to offer. I'll be safe at night and have someone to talk to on my way home. Not gonna complain about that.

"I know that this will cause you some degree of trouble, but please bear with it for now."

"Trouble? Nah. I'm glad I get to go home with you."

"Ah..." Shijunana suddenly turned away like she had in the hallway earlier today, but Ruka still had no idea what that meant.

This girl was such a mystery, and that made Ruka smile.

"So what can I getcha?" Ruka asked.

"What do you mean?"

"This is a café, so you gotta order something."

"Huh...? Ah, I see. My apologies." Shijunana picked up the menu and started looking it over. The warm lighting in the shop made the contours of her face stand out even more. Her eyes gleamed like precious jewels as her gaze flitted around the menu like a butterfly.

Watching Shijunana made Ruka restless until her patience ran out. "Lemme recommend the CC. Tasty AF compared to other shops."

"CC refers to cheesecake, correct? But what does 'tasty AF' mean, exactly?"

"It means the cake's so freaking delicious, it's on a whole other level. One of the owners used to be a pastry chef, and she's the one who came up with the recipe. Seriously, it'll blow your mind."

"Hmm... In that case, I'll take a baked cheesecake and an original cappuccino."

"On it!"

After grabbing the menu from Shijunana, Ruka went to the counter to put in her order. She told her boss what they had discussed, and he gave her a conflicted look.

I think he's really bummed about his wife's cheesecake clinching the order, instead of his coffee... What the heck. That's so childish!

When nine o'clock rolled around, Ruka and Shijunana left the café together. The sun had set, but it wasn't that dark out thanks to the streetlights. With Shijunana right beside her, Ruka felt like she could really relax. On the other hand, Shijunana was constantly looking around and on guard against any vampires or retainers that might suddenly pop up.

If one does *show up, will she use that weird power again...?*

"So hey, can I use that sparkly silver stuff too?" Ruka asked.

Shijunana's eyes kept on moving as she replied, "Are you referring to exoforce?"

"Yup. I can fight vampires if I have it too, right? What do you think?" It wasn't a serious question, but Ruka *was* a little curious.

"One acquires the use of exoforce through surgical operation and training. The amount you can store and output varies from person to person, but theoretically any human can obtain it."

"So I can too...?"

"I would not recommend it. Training to use exoforce requires a great deal of time and effort, and you must also swear to abide by the precepts of the hunter alliance."

"Precepts?"

Shijunana nodded. "Precepts are laws that hunters must follow. They cover a vast array of rules and regulations, but some examples include 'you must not reveal the fact that you are a vampire hunter,' 'you must not discuss vampires,' and 'you must not misuse exoforce.'

They have also been revised over time, so newer rules like 'you are not to appear at public events or talk to the media' and 'you are not to use social media' have been added."

"Welp, sounds like a no go." Ruka didn't even have to think before she said that. *I mean, I ended up in a freaking interrogation just trying to keep a secret. No way I can handle all those rules.*

Shijunana continued with a chilly look on her face. "Hunters who violate the precepts are punished by the alliance. Any hunters deemed incapable of rehabilitation are surgically stripped of their exoforce before their memories are wiped."

"Oof..."

"I, too, believe those methods are extreme. But when an individual possesses such great power, wrongdoing is an obvious possibility. There is also a risk of our abilities being weaponized in military conflicts among humans. And so, restrictive rules are necessary."

So those precepts are to keep vampire hunters from running wild. Well, I get it. Just look at that whole fight between her and the retainer yesterday. But wait...

"Uh, didn't you do a bad, then? You told me all that stuff about you guys!"

Shijunana shrugged. "Exceptions are allowed under emergency circumstances. As such, I should have the opportunity to defend myself... Of course, that will have to wait until other hunters arrive. It's not something you need to worry about."

She sounds so calm, but that's not okay. I mean, she's been fighting vampires all this time. It had to be tough—she's got a scar on her cheek and everything. And she doesn't even get anything for making it through all that! And *if she breaks their precepts, she has to* defend *herself?!*

"Hey, Shijunana-san, why'd you become a VH anyway?" Ruka asked.

Shijunana furrowed her brow. "By VH, do you mean vampire hunter? Why do you ask?"

"I mean, this whole VH thing... How should I put it...?" Ruka mumbled and trailed off. She didn't know how to put her feelings

into words—or even what exactly those feelings were—but maybe she didn't need to. If she did, she would probably end up arguing against the whole concept of vampire hunters and the system surrounding them. Saying stuff like that would be like denying who Shijunana was, though, and Ruka definitely didn't wanna do that.

But keeping my mouth shut is frustrating too...

"I became a vampire hunter in order to carry on my grandmother's will," said Shijunana.

Oh, phew. At least it doesn't sound like she got forced into it.

"My grandmother entered the world of hunters after her husband was murdered by a vampire. Even after completing her quest for vengeance on that vampire, she devoted her life to protecting humanity from those monsters... I really admired her, so I became her apprentice. My parents were fiercely opposed, however."

Ruka heard the hint of self-deprecation in Shijunana's voice and put the pieces from her story together. *So that's why she's living alone. But I get how her folks feel. Like, one day their daughter suddenly says she wants to put her life on the line fighting monsters... Of course they're gonna try to stop her. She ignored them, became her grandma's apprentice, and threw herself into such a violent world. I'm sure they still don't know what to do about all that.*

Yeah... This whole system the vampires hunters have is really bugging me. They're in danger all the time, but since they're chained down by those precepts, they can't even use their skills how they want. It wrecks their relationships with their families too. There's, like, nothing good about this!

Ruka looked up and saw Ginka Shijunana staring at her.

"Even so, I am proud of what I have accomplished as a hunter. No matter what anyone may say, the hunter alliance's mission to protect the innocent is just, and I have saved numerous lives since becoming a hunter. I most certainly do not regret my decisions."

Ruka couldn't take her eyes off the beautiful and noble silver hunter as she walked down the street, her rhythmic steps in perfect sync with her elegant and efficient motions.

I swear, the more I get to know her, the more I feel at ease.

"You really worked hard," Ruka said, and she meant it.

For some reason, though, Shujinana's expression looked stiff. "Fighting vampires was simply my mission as a hunter, and eradicating them would not have been possible without the power of the entire hunter alliance. Furthermore, I suspect we may have overlooked a surviving vampire. I certainly do not believe I am worthy of praise."

"No way, you're totes amazing, Shijunana-san. You can do all this crazy stuff, but you don't brag at all. Respect."

"Any hunter is capable of using exoforce. And I do not boast about my techniques because I follow the precepts. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Nuh-uh, nope. Not buying it."

Shijunana turned away with that same stiff look on her face.

Does she think I'm just saying that to be nice? Ruka was worried, but then she noticed Shijunana's ears were a little red. "Wait. Are you embarrassed?"

As soon as Ruka asked that, Shijunana suddenly picked up her pace. Ruka caught up and tried to catch a glimpse of her face, but she turned her head away.

That reaction told Ruka she was right. A sly grin spread across her face. "You're a total cutie, Gin-chan!"

"You should respect your elders."

"Whoa, you're bringing up age now? We're classies, y'know?"

"Classies...?"

"'Cause we're in the same class! So we're, y'know, pals! Buds!"

Ruka tried to get in front of Shijunana, but she got embarrassed and pulled ahead. So Ruka picked up the pace, only for Shijunana to move faster too. The scenery around them went by in a flash as they kept going.

Come on, you can at least stop for a sec!

Their game of tag lasted all the way until they made it to Ruka's house.

Chapter 5: A Real Gyaru and a Super Unreal Beauty

After classes ended for the week, Ginka stopped by her usual supermarket. As she headed toward the produce section, she scrolled through recipes on her phone while thinking about what to eat.

How many years has it been since I've cooked in a kitchen? While I was active as a vampire hunter, I generally ate out or had prepackaged meals. I'm looking forward to cooking, but it feels like a hassle at the same time... Now that I think about it, can Moriki cook?

"A friend..."

Moriki had called her that when Ginka had escorted her home.

Ginka had fought bloody battles with vampires one after another, while Moriki had lived a fulfilling life as a high school student. Their upbringings, personalities, and hobbies were all completely different, so it was difficult for Ginka to imagine them ever becoming friends.

Am I even qualified to be her friend in the first place? She shook her head to clear away that idle thought. For now, she needed to concentrate on finding out why that retainer had appeared. *I've let my guard down since returning to Japan. As the only vampire hunter in this area, I should be more alert and vigilant.*

Neither headquarters nor the Japan branch had yet to respond to Ginka's report. She had heard that the alliance's organizational capabilities had dwindled since their war ended, but she had never expected it to be this bad.

The best course of action would be to continue protecting Moriki and wait for the enemy to go after her temptation blood. Ginka thought it was a haphazard plan at best, and she wasn't fond of using an ordinary civilian as bait, but this was the only option

available right now.

When Ginka had informed Moriki she would accompany her as a guard on their days off from school, Moriki had smiled and readily consented. “Then let’s go downtown on our next day off!” she had said.

Supposedly, the goal of such a trip would be to purchase clothing. Ginka had suggested simply making such purchases online, but Moriki had said it was necessary to try the items on in person. Ginka had been pressured into agreeing to go on said trip, but there was no real need to guard Moriki during the day.

That was quite the pointless promise... As regret swirled inside her, Ginka placed a cabbage in her shopping basket. She caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror attached to a pillar in the store. Her mouth looked relaxed and distorted, almost as if she were—

As she hurriedly corrected her expression, she swiftly moved toward the meat section.

Th-Thank goodness none of my acquaintances saw that...

◆ ◆ ◆

It was early afternoon, and the weather was nice and sunny with a few clouds overhead. It was warm enough to go outside without a jacket, which made it a perfect day for a shopping trip.

Ruka got to their meeting spot in front of the station and pulled out her eyeshadow palette, the one with the mirror in the cover, to check her makeup. She’d gone all out today, with extra-thick eyelashes and flashy highlights right under her eyes. She hadn’t slacked on her clothes either—she wore a brand-new cap and a high-collared tulle top under a leopard-print bustier, plus a high-waisted skort to show off some serious leg.

These are pretty short... But this is the least I can do to not look like garbage next to a beauty like her. I don’t wanna die from embarrassment.

Ruka took one more look in her mirror and gave herself a satisfied nod just before she spotted Shijunana coming her way.

“My apologies for the wait,” said Shijunana. She was wearing a

plain-looking hoodie and jeans, an outfit that gave her a casual and relaxed boyish vibe, but she still had her usual black gloves and sparkling jewelry on.

She said she doesn't have a lot of clothes, but does that matter when she makes any outfit look good? Seriously, that inseam is insane. Is she an edited pic or something?

"Those legs are totally unfair. Lemme have some of that length!"

"I cannot share the length of my legs with you."

Oof, if she's gonna shoot down my jokes, I should probably give up on acting silly. But there's something I gotta say before we get going.

"'Kay, starting over... I got my paycheck, so today's on me!" Ruka announced, and she threw in a peace sign too.

Shijunana tilted her head. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I owe you my life, so I gotta pay you back somehow."

"That is wholly unnecessary. I only did what was natural as a hunter."

"Heh, thought you'd say that."

"What...?" Shijunana furrowed her brow.

Ruka cleared her throat and said, with a serious look on her face, "It isn't just because I owe you my life. It's also a welcoming gift for you, Shijunana-san. At times like this, the polite thing to do is to accept without saying anything else."

"Is that so...?"

"Yup, sure is!"

I haven't known her for very long, but that whole talk we had about those precept things made one thing super clear: She respects rules.

That helped Ruka come up with using manners to talk Shijunana into doing stuff, and it was seriously effective.

Shijunana sighed. "If I decide you are spending too much, I will put an immediate stop to this."

"Aw yeah, pledget!" Ruka pumped her fist in the air.

"What does 'pledget' mean, exactly?" Shijunana asked.

"It's, um, y'know, that thing... You get the, uh... It's like a promise?"

"Is it a shortened form of 'getting a pledge,' perhaps?"

"Yeah, that! Getting a pledget!"

"Moriki... Are you not familiar with the word 'pledge'?"

"Hee hee!"

"Don't just laugh it off."

Oops. Made her mad!

Ruka tried to escape by running into the station. But with her long legs, Shijunana caught up right away.

The way the train shook and swayed whenever it rounded a curb made Ruka feel more and more like they were really heading into the city. There were department stores and clothing shops where she lived, but what they sold just couldn't compare to what downtown had to offer. That was why trips like this got her way more excited than shopping in her own neighborhood. Even though this was officially a welcome present for Shijunana, Ruka wanted to buy some stuff for herself too. She'd already made sure that would be okay with her classmate.

"By the way, what do you do on your days off?" Ruka asked.

Shijunana stared at the ceiling as she pondered the question. "On days off...? Training, generally, or sleeping. I spent the past six months in the mountains, and rest was insufficient during that time."

"In the mountains? Like camping...?"

"I would say it was closer to a survival mission. It was necessary to hide in the mountains as part of our war. I needed to keep moving in order to secure food and search for the enemy, so I was unable to properly train or sleep."

"Wh-Why'd you have to do all that?"

Shijunana pulled her phone out of the pocket of her jeans and started messing with it—apparently her black gloves worked just fine on a touch screen. She handed it to Ruka, who recognized the same vampire search app that had been installed on her own phone.

"As I mentioned before, this application uses electronic devices that act like sonar in order to determine the location of vampires and retainers as well as hunters utilizing exoforce. That means it is useless in areas without electronics. Our enemies learned of the app

and its flaw, though we are unsure when, and they fled to remote mountains and uninhabited islands to avoid detection. Naturally, we hunters pursued them."

Shijunana summoned a little exoforce at the tip of her finger and tapped on the screen. A fast-moving blue dot showed up in the app. "The mountains were even more frightening than our enemies sometimes. I still occasionally have nightmares about when I almost froze to death or when we had to fight a bear."

"A bear...? Wait, like an actual, IRL bear?"

"Indeed. The animal was as massive as a car and moved with unbelievable agility... It took three of us to emerge victorious."

"Of course you won." Ruka smirked a little, but her eye was drawn to the faint mark on Shijunana's face. "Did that scar come from the bear?"

Shijunana stroked her cheek like she was remembering something. "No, this came from my battle with the enemy. One of them had poison claws. I made a mistake and was slashed for it. Though I recovered from the poison, a faint scar remained."

"Why not cover it up with concealer?"

Shijunana's lips twisted into a sad smile. "This scar is a part of me—proof of the battles I fought. I find it unsightly, and I would not mind if it were gone, but I cannot bring myself to cover it up."

Ruka gripped her shoulder strap. *I said something I shouldn't have...* She had rudely stomped onto something sacred to Shijunana and trampled all over it. Meiri and Hinaru were always telling her to watch out because her sense of distance was completely out of whack, and now she'd gone and done something like this.

"Hey, I'm really sorr—"

"But what is 'concealer' a short version of, exactly?"

"Huh...?" *What is this girl even saying?* That comment from Shijunana was so wild that Ruka forgot she'd been apologizing.

"VH is vampire hunter, and pledget is to get a pledge. So concealer...means contact sealing, perhaps? No, that doesn't sound right..."

She was so off the mark that Ruka had to frown. *Seriously, what the hell is she saying?*

“Sh-Shijunana-san, do you...not know what concealer is?”

“That’s correct.”

“Whaaaaa?!” Ruka couldn’t believe it. Was this really possible in the twenty-first century?

“Moriki, you will cause trouble for others by being so loud in the train,” Shijunana warned.

Ruka ignored that. She reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a bottle of concealer from her makeup pouch and held it in front of Shijunana’s face. “This is concealer! You use it to cover up blemishes and dark spots under your eyes!”

“Ah, some form of makeup...?”

“You seriously don’t know it?”

“I do not. I have no experience with such things.”

“W-Wait, you don’t mean...”

Ruka opened her eyes wide and studied Shijunana’s beautiful face. She had silver hair, eyebrows, and lashes. Her nose had a really nice shape, her lips looked soft, and her smooth, perfect skin...


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!?

Ruka gulped. “Are you...not wearing any makeup?” she asked carefully.

Shijunana leaned away from her. “I am not. Is that an issue...?”

“A-A-A-Awaaaaaaah!” Ruka’s lips trembled as she started freaking out, and soon her whole body was shaking. “Unbelievable. Impossible! A high school girl going out without any makeup?!”

Shijunana looked offended. “I-I do maintain my eyebrows properly.”

“Y-Y-Your eyebrows?! That’s the bare minimum! It’s, like, basic etiquette or whatever! Except an etiquette teacher wouldn’t even bother bringing it up! Sheesh. Now I feel like an idiot for going all out with my makeup because I was so excited for today!” Ruka covered her face with her hands (without messing up her makeup, of course).

“So you were excited...” Shijunana murmured.

Ruka peeked at Shijunana between her fingers and saw a complicated look on her face.

Ugh, she’s super cute even now?! So annoying! So many feelings, and it’s all her fault!

“Change of plans!” Ruka grabbed Shijunana by the shoulders and turned her so they were face-to-face. “Shijunana-san, it’s makeup time! We’re going makeup shopping!”

“Weren’t we going to purchase clothes...?”

“Forget that. Just come with me once we get off the train, you damn natural beauty!”

“Was that meant as an insult...?”

Shijunana looked confused, but something about Ruka’s intensity seemed to make her stop asking questions and just nod instead.

After they got off the train, Ruka pulled Shijunana through the ticket gate. They headed into a huge department store connected to the station and walked past a bunch of different cosmetic counters before reaching the shop for a big brand called Corolle on the third floor.

Ruka asked about booking a makeup lesson. Thanks to a last-minute cancellation, an employee said she could fit them in soon.

Shijunana kept fidgeting while they waited, and she looked like she couldn't calm down with makeup products all around her. That made Ruka smile, but she couldn't afford to right now. It was time to get serious about cosmetics.

There was a long table in the center of the shop with makeup stations used during lessons on top. Everywhere else was packed full of products. Lipsticks, glitters, tinted face powders, primers, foundations, blushes, eyeshadow palettes, eyebrow pencils, eyeliners, mascaras, perfumes, scented candles, essential oils, shampoos, hair oils, body soaps...

This brand's been around for forever, so they have a ton of products. The whole place is classy too. Yup, feels like Corolle for sure.

"Do you use these products, Moriki...?" Shijunana seemed like she had to force herself to speak up because she couldn't deal with this atmosphere anymore.

"Nah, I go with affordable brands like Willmake and Thenand. But sometimes I'll use something pricier like Julia."

"Affordable...? Julia...? Then why did you select this shop?"

"It's your first time, so it's best to have a pro give you a makeup lesson!"

"That's a surprisingly sensible reason..."

"Hey!" Ruka tried to glare, but Shijunana turned away.

"Oh, and I had a feeling high-class stuff would be a good fit for you," Ruka added. "Going all out with makeup like me's one way to go, but you gotta learn the normal way first, y'know?"

"Are you really Ruka Moriki?" Shijunana asked. "You're making far too much sense."

"And you're being crazy rude!" Ruka elbowed Shijunana in her arm.

A woman in her twenties wearing a black Corolle uniform came over and bowed. "Thank you so much for coming to our store today. My name is Orii, and I will be the cosmetics employee in charge of Shijunana-sama today." As Orii straightened back up, the smell of perfume wafted through the air.

That's gotta be a Corolle product. The scent is so nice...

"I-I am in your care," Shijunana replied with a stiff bow.

Ruka noticed how nervous Shijunana was and rubbed her shoulders to try and loosen her up. "I'm with her, so is it okay if I come along?" she asked.

"Customers not receiving a lesson would need to stand. Is that acceptable?"

"No prob! I'm used to standing lots at my job," Ruka replied.

Orii smiled at her. Ruka could tell it was only a polite customer service smile, but she still thought it was pretty charming.

"Shijunana-sama, this way, please."

"R-Right."

Orii led Shijunana to a seat in front of a big mirror. After making sure Ruka was there too, she asked, "Shijunana-sama, what products do you generally use?"

"G-Generally...? Well, um..." Shijunana muttered, and she looked around awkwardly.

She looks so helpless. Hard to imagine she's a warrior who took down vampires and a bear... I better give her a hand, quick.

Before Ruka could, though, Orii continued. "I've tried silver myself, but it didn't work well because of my base color. And your eyes look quite beautiful, Shijunana-sama. Which color contacts do you use?"

"C-Color...contacts...?"

She doesn't just need a hand—she needs my whole arm!

"Orii-san, Orii-san," said Ruka.

"Yes?"

"She's not wearing color contacts."

"Huh...?!" Orii's kinda-natural-kinda-not smile started to look a little weird.

Color contacts were pretty common in makeup routines. Ruka often popped in a bluish-purple pair, and she knew some girls wouldn't even go out if they didn't have them in. That probably made Orii assume Shijunana was wearing silver contacts, but...

Sorry, that eye color's totally natural!

"Sh-She doesn't have contacts in?! Are you for real?!" Orii stared at Shijunana in the mirror. She seemed to be shocked enough to

forget her job and her polite customer service voice.

Ruka thought that made her feel a lot more casual and friendly. "Wild, right?"

"Yes...! It is...!"

"And she's not wearing makeup."

"N-No makeup?! A-A-Awaaah!"

Orii's flustered reaction was the same as Ruka's had been back on the train, and Ruka gave her a big nod to show that she understood.

"My feelings can get hurt too, you know..." Shijunana said quietly.

Oh no. I can't see her face because she's looking down, but she seems so sad...

"Um, sorry, I went too far..."

"My deepest apologies for being so terribly rude..."

Shijunana still didn't look up even after Ruka and Orii said they were sorry.

She's really bummed. Time to get serious here.

Ruka put her hands on Shijunana's shoulders and brought her face in close. "I didn't wanna say this in front of Orii-san, but you know what? I think you look totally fine without makeup. I mean, makeup takes time and money, and you're so pretty already. There *is* a difference between not wearing makeup without knowing anything and making that choice when you understand it, though." She paused and stared straight into Shijunana's silver eyes. "You've fought...uh, worked hard for everyone till now, Shijunana-san. Now I wanna show you all the fun things on *our* side, 'kay?"

She's been fighting all this time to protect us from vampires. So I want her to know how great this world really is. Seeing that and having fun should be her reward for all the time she gave us and the suffering she went through.

"But still, uh, I'm sorry... Heh, um, so... What do you think...?" Ruka mumbled.

"Very well. I forgive you." The furrows between Shijunana's brows started to fade.

That was close! Ruka realized she was covered in cold sweat and stepped back. *Seems like she's in a better mood, so I think we're good!*

Orii apologized to Shijunana once more and started talking to her again. “Did you live overseas, perhaps, Shijunana-sama?”

“Yes, until recently.”

“Ah, I can see that.”

“You can?”

Orii nodded. “Many Europeans and Americans take a more minimal approach to makeup instead of applying a full face every day as we do here in Japan. There are also climate and skin type differences... Shijunana-sama, I believe that your feelings toward makeup were shaped by your time overseas.”

Ruka could tell that Orii was pinning Shijunana’s lack of makeup knowledge on cultural differences. *Well, she’s actually been living in the mountains, but she does come from a whole different world in a way. Guess Orii-san’s not off the mark.*

“But doing your makeup for formal occasions, for example, is important no matter where you are,” Orii continued, “so I believe it would be best for you to learn the proper methods.”

So she’s saying that learning makeup techniques will help you not embarrass yourself at fancy events and stuff, huh... Orii-san really is a pro. She did get a little flustered at first, but she knows how to make her customers see why makeup’s important.

“Go ahead and give her the full course, Orii-san,” said Ruka.

“The full course...? Do you mean a complete makeup lesson?”

“You got it.”

With an awkward look on her face, Orii leaned in close to Ruka. “Pardon me for saying so, but we ask our clients to purchase the products used in a makeup lesson. For a full lesson, that would amount to quite a few...”

“Oh, no prob. We figured that out already.”

Orii blinked a few times and stepped back. Ruka knew Orii probably felt like she should say something as an adult, but as an employee she didn’t want to raise an objection. So Ruka decided to give her a little nudge.

“Do your thing, Orii-san,” she said.

“Understood.” Orii moved quickly and smoothly as she started placing brightly colored bottles and palettes branded with the Corolle

logo onto the table in front of Shijunana. “Let us begin with a cleanser. Normally it’s meant for removing makeup, but this product also plays a role in general skincare. We will be using it for that purpose now.”

Orii added some of the cleanser to a cotton pad, then gently rubbed it against Shijunana’s face. “Women’s skin is more prone to damage compared to men’s skin, because it produces less sebum. Please remember to be gentle when cleansing your skin or applying product.”

She pulled out another bottle and put some of what was inside on her fingertip before dotting it on Shijunana’s face. “I’ll apply the base and primer now. The base acts as the groundwork for your makeup and makes your skin more vibrant, while primer controls shine and enhances your complexion.”

Next, Orii took out a cushion pad and began carefully spreading the products she had placed. “Together, base and primer help your makeup last longer and improve the overall texture and finish. Some people only use one, because their effects do overlap, but others use both.”

“I-I see...” Shijunana seemed overwhelmed.

Ruka smiled at her. “Makeup is freedom, y’know?” *Well, she probably feels like she’s getting an info dump from a whole other world. Of course she’s confused.*

“Orii-san, did you pick pink because of her blue base?” Ruka asked.

Orii’s eyes narrowed. “I do believe she’s a summer type, but I cannot say for certain since I’m not a personal colorist. With that in mind, I have selected an intermediate color.”

“Intermediate color, huh... That’s tough to work with.”

“Wh-What’s a blue base...?” Shijunana asked.

Orii must’ve picked up on how Shijunana sounded like she was struggling, because she started working slower and explaining more. “Bases refer to your personal color. In other words, it’s the type of color that best suits you. Your base is important for selecting makeup and clothing, and it is determined by analyzing the color of your skin, hair, and eyes.”

“Skin and hair...” Shijunana repeated as she stared at herself in the mirror.

Is she thinking about figuring out her personal color from her silver eyes and hair?

Orii smiled at Shijunana. “Everyone has a personal color. There are three bases, blue, yellow, and green, and then there are seasonal classifications like summer or winter types. There are even more specific categories overseas, such as cool, warm, and neutral as well as light, deep, vivid, soft—”

Ruka cut in. “Hold it, Orii-san, you’re gonna break her.” *All of this probably sounds like some kinda mystery chant in a foreign language to Shijunana-san. She’s as still as a statue.*

Orii dabbed the sweat on Shijunana’s forehead with a cotton pad. “Your personal color is only a single factor, and you are free to choose whether to follow it. Prioritizing your own preferences when it comes to your appearance is perfectly fine.”

She smiled, and Shijunana nodded stiffly.

Ruka had been planning to just stand and watch without getting too involved, but she caught a glimpse of Shijunana’s scar twitching and decided to speak up. “Orii-san, were you gonna use concealer next?”

“Yes, that was my intention...”

“Shijunana-san, what do you wanna do about your scar?”

Concealer was for covering up stuff like acne and bad skin, so it could work for a scar too. But back on the train, Shijunana had said the scar was a part of her and that she didn’t necessarily want to get rid of it herself.

Just because you can do something doesn’t mean it’s okay.

“Hmm... Let’s give it a try,” said Shijunana. She then bowed to Orii. “Orii-san, please do what you can.”

Really? That was easy! I was getting all nervous for nothing...

“Understood.” Orii pulled an applicator out of a bottle and started applying concealer on Shijunana’s scar before adding foundation, a light sweep of blush, contouring powder...

After Orii finished, Shijunana looked at the spot where the scar had been. “Not seeing it feels surprisingly lonesome...”

Wait, maybe I should've kept my mouth shut after all...?

Ruka was worried about Shijunana's reaction, but then Orii brought out a fresh batch of makeup tools.

"This is for the area around your eyes," she said.

In Orii's skilled hands, eyeliner pencils and angled brushes danced around Shijunana's eyes. She added some glitter to accentuate her undereye area and worked on her lashes with a curler and mascara. To finish the look, Orii applied a pink lip. After that, she spent some time tweaking the contours and highlights...

Orii set her tools down on the table and smiled. "That concludes your makeup lesson. Do you have any questions or concerns?"

Shijunana didn't answer. She just kept staring at her face.

"Well? How'd your first makeup sesh go? How do you feel?" Ruka asked nervously.

When I first saw her, I was shocked by how pretty she was. But something about her felt...cold. I get she's just awkward, now that I know her better, but I don't see that coldness in her face anymore. In other words, she's not just pretty—she's a stunner.

Shijunana looked up. "I feel like I did when I first wore a skirt. Like I cannot relax."

"You don't like it?"

"That's not it... I just feel awkward... No, perhaps I'm just being bashful." Shijunana replied with an embarrassed smile.

I'm so glad I brought her here! Ruka smiled back. All the tension in her shoulders loosened up, and all the nervousness she'd been feeling since their talk on the train went away.

"'Kay, take a good look at yourself for a sec!" Then Ruka stepped away from the table and gestured for Orii to follow.

I don't want Shijunana-san to hear this part.

As Orii approached, Ruka whispered, "Orii-san, how much for all the stuff you used today?"

She wanted to know the total because she was paying for everything like they'd discussed earlier. But since she didn't want Shijunana to hear, she'd stepped away to ask.

"This is the total." There were four zeros in a row on the tablet Orii was showing Ruka.

Oof, that's rough... Ruka had expected it to be expensive from the number of products, but the damage was even more intense than she'd thought. That much was enough to put her wallet on the verge of death.

"I'll take it all. The brushes and other tools too."

If buying this stuff helps me pay Shijunana-san back, that's not expensive at all.

"Purchasing every single product isn't necess—"

"Like I said, I'll take all of it."

"Is that truly acceptable...?"

"Course—"

Shijunana appeared behind Ruka. "I believe I said I would stop you if you go too far."

Damn vampire hunter skills. I didn't hear her at all! She did say she'd stop me—that was her condition for letting me pay today. But it's not like I'm doing anything wrong by paying.

"Eighty percent. I'll pay that, then you take twenty. How's that sound?"

"That is not the issue..."

"Seventy?"

"As I said..."

"Half? How about half?"

"Why are you acting like I'm accepting your contribution...?" Shijunana gave a long, long sigh. "I will pay half and buy something for you. Those are my conditions."

"Aw yeah, pledget!" Ruka pumped her fist. "Looks like we've settled things, Orii-san!"

Better get this done before she changes her mind!

"Allow me to apply a modest discount," Orii said with a smile. Her voice was soft enough for only the two girls to hear. "I can mark some of these as defective merchandise..."

"Ooh, thanks!" said Ruka.

"Please wait a moment." With a bow, Orii disappeared into the back of the shop.

As they waited, Ruka looked around before catching a glimpse of Shijunana. Just seeing her with her new makeup on made Ruka grin.

"Y'know, seeing my bud look so pretty just makes me happy!"

"Bud..."

"Oh, that one's short for buddy. Like, friends."

"I know that much." Shijunana pouted.

That adorable look made Ruka smile even more.

"Moriki, are we friends?"

It took a moment for Ruka to take in what Shijunana had just said. *I mean, the two of us are shopping together, so what else would you call us? But that's not really what she's asking, right?*

"Oh! Are you talking about calling each other by our first names and stuff?"

"No, well, I mean..."

Shijunana seemed embarrassed, but Ruka could see she was hoping for something too.

Ruka cleared her throat, made sure she looked as cute as she could, and flashed a teasing grin.

"So greedy, Ginka."

"Yeah, yeah, Ruka."

After that, Ruka and Ginka wandered around the department store. They looked at clothes and some other stuff, got themselves something to eat, and checked out other makeup brands. They didn't buy much, but Ruka still had a lot of fun seeing Ginka get all flustered wherever they went.

After they left the department store and crossed the street, Ginka asked, "Are you really okay with that?"

Ruka was holding a little box with the Juliart logo on it and a citrusy perfume inside. That was what Ginka had bought her after their promise in Corolle.

"Yup, super satisfied!" she replied.

"But..."

Ginka was clearly feeling uneasy because of the price of the perfume. Juliart and Corolle were both sold at the same department store, but Juliart was way cheaper since it was more of a budget brand. Still, Ruka didn't think high quality meant high price. In fact, she liked those two brands about the same.

“Hey, I’m happy just getting a present from my pal.”

Ruka thought she’d just said something pretty great, but Ginka still didn’t look satisfied.

Guess I’ll need to shift gears... Ruka glanced all around as they walked down the main street and spotted a food truck selling crepes.

“Ooh, let’s have those!”

“Crepes...? But we just had sweets at the department store...”

“No worries, my stomach’s bottomless!”

“Bottomless...?”

Ruka headed for the food truck, and Ginka followed her. When Ruka looked back, she saw a ton of people staring at Ginka. Both men and women were walking slowly with their mouths hanging open because they couldn’t tear their eyes away, and it was starting to cause a scene.

“Wow, the makeup’s seriously working. Everybody’s looking at you, Ginka.”

“The makeup?” Ginka glanced around. “This is the same as always, though...”

“Huh? Oh yeah...” Ruka had thought Ginka was getting those reactions because of her makeup, but that was probably how things were for her every day.

It’s way too hard to tell if the makeup’s working! Ruka complained to herself while ordering crepes for both of them.

“M-M-Mori... I-I mean, Ruka...” Ginka seemed to be having trouble getting her words out. “They seem to be looking at you too.”

Ruka stood up straight and threw her shoulders back. “I mean, I went all out with my clothes and makeup and everything today.”

“I know it’s a little late to be bringing this up, but aren’t you showing too much of your legs?”

“Nah, the more legs you show, the cooler and cuter you look.”

“Is that how it works?”

“For sure.”

Their order was ready, so Ruka grabbed her strawberry tiramisu crepe and handed the chocolate banana one to Ginka.

“Let’s dig in!” Ruka took a big bite.

The sour strawberries, sweet cream, and warm crepe were all *so*

satisfying and put her in a great mood already, and she was with an adorable cutie getting all flustered trying to eat her crepe. *If this isn't heaven, I don't know what is.*

But it only took a few seconds for something to ruin all that satisfaction and bliss.

That something was a group of guys, maybe high school or college students, creeping behind them. They had been following Ruka and Ginka since the department store. Ruka had ignored them because she'd figured they would give up at some point, but they were starting to get closer and closer. She didn't hate guys hitting on her, but she just wanted to have fun with Ginka right now.

"Hey, Ginka..."

"I know. We're being followed." Ginka had finished eating and was crumpling up the paper her crepe had been in. She was back in hunter mode, and the look on her face was intense. "We can't cause trouble. Let's find somewhere to hide."

"For sure." Ruka sighed, finished her crepe, and started walking down the street next to Ginka.

Getting stalked didn't feel great. Fortunately, there were a lot of people out and about, so it would probably be pretty easy to lose those guys. All the people who kept staring at Ginka would probably help get in the way too.

"Let's head in there." Ruka made sure their stalkers were out of sight before grabbing Ginka's arm and pulling her into an arcade with a big sign out front.

Intense music and dazzling lights washed over Ruka and Ginka as they hurried up the stairs. The guys seemed to be gone by the time they made it to the second floor, though Ruka still wondered if they should stay on guard. On the third floor, where the coast was clear, Ruka had a new idea.

"Since we're at an arcade, why don't we get something to remember today by?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just follow me."

Ruka led Ginka around until she found the booth she was looking for. She pulled the curtain open—inside, the light was even more

dazzling than the rest of the arcade.

"You gotta hit up purikura when you go to an arcade!" said Ruka.

Why do I get so excited about taking pics and drawing on them? Who knows...

Ginka looked confused. "Purikura..."

"Oh, it means—"

"I know that much. These machines print out something akin to ID photos, correct?"

"Heh, that's not all there is to it!" Ruka wagged her finger. "You gotta pose too!"

"Pose?"

"Yeah, like this, or this."

Ruka posed with both hands out in front of her, then again with a peace sign over her eye while twisting her hips. Ginka looked like she was watching something bizarre.

"Oh, the pinkross is super popular right now," said Ruka.

"Pinkross...?"

"It's when you use your pinkies to make a cross shape like this. Two people can do it together too, so hold yours out."

Ginka did, after a little hesitation, and Ruka added her own to make a little cross—one pinkie with silver glitter nail polish and another in a black glove.

The hunter looked at their fingers and murmured, "I have to hurry up and get used to things like this too."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Ruka asked.

Ginka didn't answer, at first. Ruka watched her press her glossy lips together, and she wasn't sure what that meant, but eventually Ginka started to explain.

"Once this incident is resolved, I will no longer be a vampire hunter. So I need to stop being surprised by every little thing I come across... I don't want to make Hayami-san cry again, after all."

After all that fighting, it was clear Ginka was having trouble adjusting to her new life. Being blunt to Chinami Hayami and making her cry was a good example of that. Of course Ginka would want to get used to everyday life, and Ruka wanted to support her, but...

"Nothing wrong with getting surprised, right?" Ruka said.

"Wanting to get used to a normal life is great, but there's no rush. Honestly, I like you the way you are right now. So take your time, 'kay?"

She's got plenty of problems but more than enough good in her to make up for that. If she tries to force herself to change, she'll cover up all the stuff that makes her so great. I don't think that's the right way to go... And I would really miss her if she did that.

Ginka seemed to be deep in thought.

"What, did you think I said something surprisingly sensible again?" Ruka asked.

Ginka shook her head. "No. I was impressed."

"Impressed...? For real?"

"Yes."

"Jeez. Gonna make me blush!"

I have no clue what impressed her, but I'm not gonna ask. I don't wanna do anything to make her smile go away.

Ruka pulled Ginka in close and brought their pinkies together again.

"Let's take the pic. Pinkross time!"

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The booth took their picture with a loud and energetic announcement. Then Ruka and Ginka moved over to the part for drawing and adding effects. Seeing a version of themselves with their eyes twice as big seemed to really throw Ginka off, but Ruka went straight for the pen.

"Gotta write BFFs on here, right?"

"BFFs...?" Ginka repeated, before her face went red. "Best friends forever...?"

After writing on their pic, Ruka drew a little flower on top as a finishing touch.

When they left the arcade, Ruka felt her phone vibrating in her bag. She had a message with a pic of Meiri holding a mic in a dark room. There was a text that said, "C'mon, karaoke time!" and a pinned spot on a map.

Normally Ruka would already be on her way, but she was with Ginka right now. All of them were her friends, of course, but they weren't all friends with each other yet. So she had to check first.

"Mei and Hina are singing karaoke nearby. Wanna go?"

"Sure. Meeting up with the two of them would be fine."

Ginka's answer made Ruka happy, and she smiled when she texted Hinaru back. And as the two of them walked to the karaoke place together, Ruka stopped caring about all the random people around them.

I just wanna hurry up and see those two!

They made it to the spot Hinaru had sent them, checked in with an employee, and walked into their room. As soon as they were inside— "You're heeeere! Ooh, and it's Shijunana-san! WELCOME!" Hinaru yelled.

So freaking loud! My eardrums hurt! Why'd I get so excited about seeing these dorks again?

Ruka gave Hinaru an intense look, while Meiri sipped on her juice and stared at Ginka.

"You look different, Shijunana-san. Aren't you, like, even prettier now?" Meiri said with a smile.

"Heh, you're making me blush," Ruka replied.

"What're *you* blushing for, Ruka?!" Meiri asked.

Just then, the music started again, and Hinaru's singing filled the room.

She's seriously loud AF.

Ginka put her Corolle bag on the sofa and took a seat near Meiri. "Ruka brought me to a cosmetics store, and they did my makeup."

"Ah, so that's what's up."

"It is my first time wearing makeup, so I was nervous. I'm sure I would have run away if Ruka hadn't been there."

"Wait, it's seriously your first time? Wow, I missed out on a real... Hrmm?" Meiri started swirling her juice around in her cup. "Wasn't something kinda off just now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Shijunana-san, you said you got your makeup done, got nervous, and ran away... Wait, you didn't actually run..." Meiri tapped her forehead as she thought. "Ah, got it! You called Ruka by her first name!"

"Ooooh, so you realized, huuuuuh?" Ruka grinned, took the pics from the arcade out of her bag, and showed them to Meiri. "Starting now, we're Ruka and Ginka, flower BFFs! Y'know, 'cause of how our names are written! Nice to meetcha!"

"Wh-What's with this pic? I'm so jealou—"

"No fair, no fair, no fair, no fair!" Hinaru shouted into the mic and made everyone's ears ring. The walls shook, and some of Meiri's juice splashed out of her cup. "I wanna be friends with Shiju...er, Ginka-chan! Hey, Ginka-chan, can I use your first name too?"

"I-I suppose I don't mind..." Ginka stammered.

"Then can I call you Gin-neesan?" Meiri asked.

"D-Do as you please..."

Now that they had Ginka's permission, Hinaru and Meiri gave each other satisfied looks.

Something's going on, 'cause they're fired up today. Or, wait, they're always like this...

"Hinaru, Meiri, thank you for inviting me here. I'm glad I could see you today," Ginka said with a smile.

Hinaru and Meiri froze.

"Wh-Whoa... I couldn't breathe for a sec..."

"Gin-neesan, I feel like your beauty's healing my soul..."

Ruka stared at them. "Aren't you two way too in love with her already?" She took a seat on the sofa and handed the song selection console to Ginka.

Ginka shook her head. "I don't know any popular songs, so I'll refrain from singing."

"C'mon, you came all the way out here, so let's hear you sing," Ruka insisted.

"But... All I know are old songs..."

"No worries. Mei and Hina are always picking nonsense to sing anyway."

Ginka reluctantly poked around on the console until a song title in English showed up on the screen.

"What kinda song is that?"

"A really old metal song..."

Hinaru finished singing, and Ruka and Meiri clapped for her. The intro for the next song started playing right away. As soon as Ginka took the mic from Hinaru, she looked more calm and peaceful than Ruka had ever seen.

Ginka's singing voice was incredible. The cheap electronic music suddenly became a full-on EDM arrangement with Ginka's voice, and the intense melody got the other girls all fired up even though none of them knew what the song was about.

Ginka wasn't using any exoforce, but she was shining. Ruka, Hinaru, and Meiri looked like they were watching a goddess at work. Once the song was over, the usual background music started playing again, but the three girls were still frozen in their seats.

Meiri moved first. She stood up with a bright, innocent smile and said, "So good..."

"Amazing! Incredible!" Hinaru yelled. She was clapping so hard, it looked like her nails were gonna come off.

"That was exhausting. I'll be taking a break." Ginka put the mic down on the table and leaned back on the sofa. Her beautiful silver hair sparkled as it dangled over the backrest. "It really has been a long time since I last tired myself out having fun..."

A mix of relief and excitement welled up inside Ruka. “Glad to hear that...” she said softly.

And then she picked a song, grabbed the mic, and jumped to her feet. “All right, we’re gonna sing our hearts out today! Let’s go till our throats quit on us!”

“I just said I was tired, didn’t I...?”

“Forget that! Because! Our stamina! Is! Infinite!”

Ginka looked shocked, Hinaru laughed, and Meiri grinned. As the three of them watched, Ruka started singing. Of course, she kept going until she was all worn out!

Chapter 6: A Totally Indescribable Shock

Another metallic roar like crashing thunder resounded through the moonlit forest. A few minutes had gone by since these deafening noises first began, but then they stopped as suddenly as they had started. A chorus of creaks and groans took over as the trees around Ginka fell to the ground, sending the mountain of black sand on the forest floor flying in every direction.

The floating grains of sand formed a dark fog. Ginka focused her exoforce to search for the enemy, but nothing caught her attention. With no enemies remaining, the battle was over. She started to put her silver spear away when she heard someone clapping beyond the fog.

"Splendid work. Just as I have come to expect from our beacon of hope."

A tall man in a long coat emerged. A smile crossed his pale face as he nodded with a look of deep admiration.

"If you were watching, then you should have lent me a hand," said Ginka.

"Me, help you? What an amusing joke." The man's laughter made his shoulders shake unnaturally. "I'm a support hunter, so my reserve and output of exoforce pale in comparison to yours. You are the strongest vampire hunter, after all. My interference would have been a burden to you."

I suppose he's not wrong. He's a scout specializing in exoforce-powered searches. As noncombat personnel, there's a good chance he would perish if he gets involved in a fight between me and a vampire. His job, and his best course of action, is to watch from afar.

"Let us return to base. There are no more vampires here."

Once again, he's not wrong. It would be best to return to their

allies now that the battle was over. Even if no vampires were nearby, they still lurked elsewhere in the mountains. Hunters didn't have time to waste standing around.

Ginka started to dismiss her spear again, but she stopped herself. "There is a question I've wanted to ask you for some time now, and this seems like a fine opportunity to do so."

The man tilted his head. "A question? Whatever might that be...?"

"Why are you a hunter?"

"What do you mean by that?" the man asked with an amused smile.

Ginka narrowed her eyes. "All hunters have a reason for doing this job. Some, like me, carry on the will of their predecessor. Some seek revenge for family or friends. There are even those who do so under orders from national agencies. In the past, you said you felt a sense of duty to protect humanity."

"Yes, that's right."

"I wish to ask if that is true."

The man pressed his lips together, but his face remained smooth and undisturbed. "The power to determine the truth of a statement using eye movements and facial expressions... That is one of the incredible abilities you have obtained using exoforce, is it not?" He praised Ginka while keeping an eye on the shining spear in her hand, as if confirming her ability to attack at any moment. Then, with a cynical smile, he added, "Were you aware of the fact that I worked in Silicon Valley before becoming a hunter?"

"Yes."

"And that the CEO of my corporation was a vampire?"

"Indeed..." Ginka nodded heavily.

The man smiled again. "When the CEO's identity was revealed, I thanked this world for its gifts... Because the hunters saved my life, of course, but also because monsters truly exist."

Ginka's exoforce flared up. Vampire hunters were human—no matter how much you tried to shape and restrain them with reason and logic, some would still feel sympathy for vampires or even admire them. If that was the case with this man, she would need to deal with him immediately.

Despite the menacing pressure coming from Ginka, the man calmly continued. “This world consists of good and bad people. Some people devote themselves to helping others or even improving things for all of mankind, while others live solely to look down on others... Vampires are different, though. They are unable to suppress their natural impulses to drink blood and kill. We can speak with them, but we can never understand one another. For mankind, vampires are an absolute evil. Would you agree with my assessment?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“From humanity’s point of view, exterminating vampires is the correct course of action. And doing that feels *wonderful*. I would not trade the pleasure of wielding my strength in the name of justice for anything.” The man’s grayish eyes looked on fondly. “My goal is to live my life as an ally of absolute justice... I know it is a twisted desire, but I cannot do anything about that.”

He killed vampires for pleasure. That motive would be difficult to accept for hunters driven by a sense of duty or a need for vengeance, and he seemed to know that his desire was abnormal. He must have anticipated criticism from other hunters and thus misrepresented his “twisted desire” as a mission to protect humanity.

Ginka sighed. “So that is your reason for becoming a hunter?”

“Yes. You can tell if I’m lying, can’t you?”

Eye movements, expressions, muscle twitches, the flow of exoforce... By observing all of that, Ginka confirmed that the man had told the truth.

In one smooth motion, she dismissed her spear. “Carry on as you please.”

His motive is truly ridiculous, but it does not change the fact that he is humanity’s ally and an enemy to vampires. There is no point in punishing him. Ginka had heard rumors of a large-scale operation in a few months, which would surely require the combined strength of every vampire hunter. This was no time for fighting allies.

“I am grateful to hear you say so, our beacon of hope,” said the man.

“Can you stop calling me that?”

"Why would I? Having mastered combat and exoforce, *you* are the strongest vampire hunter. If you are not our beacon of hope, then I cannot even imagine who or what I would believe in." The man punctuated his words with a polite bow.

Ginka knew trying to convince him otherwise would be pointless and sighed again.

The two of them conducted one more search before returning to base. As they moved through the forest, a single thought came to Ginka.

He says defeating vampires is justice, and he lives for that, so what will he do once we eradicate all of them?

But she soon left that vague question behind her like the trees she could no longer see.

◆ ◆ ◆

That super fun day off was over, so it was back to everyday life—which Ruka still thought was fun in its own way. After making it through morning classes, Ruka, Meiri, and Hinaru gathered around Ginka's desk to eat lunch. They were all really into the Turkish lunch Ginka brought, but that excitement died down after a while. Ruka finished eating and checked her phone, while Meiri started doing her own nails.

"By the way, Gin-neesan, why do you wear gloves all the time?" Meiri asked.

Ruka's ears perked up. *Yeah, she always wears those. Is it to hide her battle scars, or does it maybe help control exoforce? I have no clue, but I'm really curious.*

"I suffer from a unique skin condition," said Ginka. "The skin on my hands breaks out when directly exposed to air. I received permission from the school to keep these gloves on at all times, even during gym."

Must be nice being able to lie like that... No fair... Mei and Hina always see through my *lies right away!*

Meiri looked disappointed. "Aw, I really wanted to do your nails. I think black would look amazing on you."

"Nails... I know it's rather late to be asking this, but does this school not forbid cosmetics?" Ginka whispered.

Hinaru had been digging into her bento, but she looked up and said, "Nah, Hie High's cool with makeup. You can dye your hair, and piercings are no prob. Actually, about that... Nobody else is gonna say it, so I will. *You're* asking about this now, Ginka-chan?"

"Ah..." Ginka trailed off. Her silver hair, silver eyes, and piercings would break most schools' rules. It was only okay here because their school was so lax.

"They tell us it's a good thing," said Ruka. "Tani-chan especially. At our entrance ceremony, she was like, 'It's better to mess up now than become an adult without knowing anything about makeup and embarrassing yourself,' which seriously threw the guy teachers off."

Meiri and Hinaru laughed a little.

"It was cool, but also kinda scary," said Meiri.

Hinaru nodded. "She was, like, obsessed or something. Bet something happened when she was in school..."

Ruka and Meiri nodded along with her. Then Ruka caught a glimpse of the serious girls and said, "Oh yeah, Chinami wears makeup too."

"Hayami-san does?" asked Ginka.

"Yup. Hey, Chinami, you got makeup on today?" Ruka called out.

Chinami's shoulders twitched. Her glossy black hair swayed as she turned and gave an embarrassed little nod. Ruka took a good look and thought her neat and tidy makeup might really work for Ginka.

"That's it. Gin-neesan, let's do your makeup." Meiri put another bottle on the desk, next to her nail polish.

"What's 'it'? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're not wearing makeup today, right? It's a waste since you're so pretty."

"Th-That is untrue. I applied skin lotion."

"Ooh, Ginka-chan's growing up!" Hinaru grabbed Ginka's shoulders and held her down in her chair.

Ginka could send Hina flying, but she doesn't look like she's gonna resist even though she's complaining about Mei doing her

makeup. She totally likes it!

"M-Moriki." There was a guy from their class standing in front of the door.

Hmm... His last name's Chikado, I think? No clue what his first name is.

Ruka left her seat and headed over his way. "What's up, Chikado?" she asked.

He rustled his short hair like he couldn't stand still. "Someone said they want to talk to you. They're waiting behind the gym."

"Who is it?"

"Yoshiyama-senpai from the soccer team."

"Yeah, who is that?"

"H-Hey, he just told me to tell you that. I don't know anything else." Chikado awkwardly looked away.

If someone's calling me out, we gotta know each other. But I have no clue who this soccer guy is.

"Did I do something to him?"

"I-I told you, I don't know."

He looks so confused. I don't need the power to see through lies to know he's telling the truth here.

Ruka decided asking Chikado more questions would just make him more uncomfortable, so she said, "'Kay, got it. Behind the gym, yeah?"

"Yeah... W-Well, see you around..."

"Hang on." Ruka grabbed Chikado's shoulder.

Was he about to run away? We're in the same class...

"Wh-What...?"

"Don't be so nervous. We're classies! We're gonna be together till spring, so take it easy."

"Ah, s-sorry..."

"Don't apologize! You know, you're a pretty interesting guy, Chikado."

Chikado's face turned red, and his eyes started looking up and down Ruka's body.

Oh yeah, he's a guy. I meant what I said, and he can look at me if he wants, but I should probably be clear with him.

"Hey. Don't go falling for me, 'kay?"

"Um, uh..."

"Missed your chance to say something funny, my guy." Ruka patted Chikado's shoulder and left the classroom.

High school guys fall in love way too easily. What a pain.

"Be my woman."

Ruka's eyes went wide when she heard that.

The guy with spiky bleached hair standing in front of her behind the gym was in pretty good shape, but he was staring at Ruka like he didn't think much of her at all. The way he kept tapping his foot made him look all worked up, and not in a good way.

"But, um, Yoshiyama-paisen... We've never met before," said Ruka.

"Shut up. That ain't right."

I don't like the way he talks. And this is the first time we've met. I'd never forget someone so arrogant.

"I don't remember you."

"Tch... Downtown."

"Downtown...?"

"Psh, don't tell me you forgot."

A hazy memory started playing in Ruka's head. When she and Ginka had gone shopping, they'd gotten crepes from a food truck. Some guys had started creeping on them after that, so they'd gone into the arcade to shake them off. Ruka thought there might've been a blond guy in the mix, but she really wasn't sure.

"Were you one of the guys, uh, looking at us?"

"What? Nah, you kept staring at me."

Crap...

"I don't think we're on the same page here."

"Don't be shy, Ruka."

Crap, crap...

"I never said you could use my first name."

"You're a gyaru. Means you're trying to get with a guy, right? Guess I don't have a choice. I'll go out with you."

Crap, crap, crap, CRAP! This guy is bad news! First of all, stalking

doesn't count as meeting someone. And does he not get that I'm not interested?! We don't even know each other! I should've brought someone with me. And a gyaru's not a slut, you jerk! How do I turn him down? It would suck if he got all butthurt about me rejecting him... Gotta handle this right. Ugh, this is so damn tricky!

"Just be honest already. I'll make you feel *real* nice."

Ruka started to panic. When Yoshiyama walked right up to her and put his hand on her shoulder, something snapped inside her.

Goodbye, Yoshiyama-paisen's, y'know... And sorry to his parents. You might wanna give up on ever having grandkids.

She got ready to kick him in the—

"Ugh!" Yoshiyama's face twisted in pain.

Two hands in black gloves glowing silver gripped his head from behind. "Can't you tell you're upsetting her?"

"Wh-Who the hell are you?!"

"I have no intention of giving you my name."

"What are you... Agh! Ahhhhhh!" Yoshiyama screamed, and his arms and legs started flailing around. Then his face went slack. The gloved hands let go of his head, and he slumped to the ground with his body sprawled out on the dirt.

"G-Ginka..." Ruka stammered.

Ginka Shijunana looked down at Yoshiyama with a harsh glare before letting her exoforce fade. "I made the right choice coming here."

"Wh-What'd you do to Yoshiyama-paisen?"

"I ran a small amount of exoforce through his body, which rendered him unconscious. Don't worry, he should wake up in a few minutes."

Her cheeks are pink. She must've left in the middle of Mei and Hina doing her makeup.

Ruka stared at Yoshiyama before looking back up at Ginka with a strained smile. "There's a ton I wanna say, but... Thanks for saving me."

"You're welcome. Shall we head back to the classroom?"

"No, wait, we gotta take this guy to the nurse's office."

"Hmm...?" The look on Ginka's face said she didn't understand

Ruka's suggestion at all. "Why? This man tried to assault you."

"Sure, but he's knocked out. I feel bad just leaving him here."

"You feel bad...?"

"Uh, yeah. Is that a problem?"

"No, I wouldn't say that, but..." Ginka opened and closed her mouth a few times without any words coming out. She shook her head. "Ruka, why are you so kind?"

The compliment made Ruka flinch. Normally she would've just accepted it or maybe joked about it. But she was still tense because of Yoshiyama, and that made her feel weird about what Ginka had said. It took her a sec before she could say anything.

"Where's this coming from? My wallet's seriously hurting after we went shopping, so I'm not gonna give you anything just for saying something extra nice."

"That wasn't flattery. I truly wish to know... He is a wicked person who used violence to try to force you to obey, yet you wish to take him to the nurse's office. Why show a villain any kindness? How were you raised into such a caring person?"

"S-So many questions..." Ruka tried acting like she was overwhelmed, but Ginka wasn't backing down.

Guess I gotta give her a serious answer, but...

"I don't think I was raised in a special way or anything. Everything's normal... *I'm* normal. A normal gyaru. Wait, what does a normal gyaru even mean?"

"Anything you can think of would be appreciated. Please, tell me anything that comes to mind."

"You really want a serious answer, huh..."

Ruka felt Ginka's intense questioning wearing her down. She made sure her skirt didn't flip up as she squatted next to Yoshiyama. Then she grabbed one of his arms with both of her hands. He probably had thick arms and legs because he was on the soccer team, and he was too big and heavy for her to carry on her own.

"Help me carry Yoshiyama-paisen," she told Ginka, "and I'll see what I can remember."

Ginka didn't look too happy about that, but she grabbed his other arm.

The two of them started pulling Yoshiyama toward the nurse's office. His feet dragged on the ground, and his arms were at weird angles like they were rotated back behind his shoulders. It was a pretty awful way to move someone, but Ruka didn't feel too bad about it because of what he'd tried to do to her.

She thought about Ginka's question as they dragged Yoshiyama along. "If you're hoping to hear a whole backstory about my kindness or whatever, I got nothing..."

When she rooted around her brain for the word *kindness*, nothing stood out. She was happy Ginka had said something so nice, but she felt like her life wasn't really about that.

"Whatever you can recall is fine," said Ginka.

"Okay, but, hmm..." *Come on, there's gotta be something rolling around in here...* Ruka thought hard until something finally came to her. "Ryoko-san—my mom, she's a nurse, and she came into my school when I was little to be, like, a guest speaker? She told our class, 'Don't forget how precious life is, and don't forget to be kind.' It was pretty awkward having my mom teach a health class, though..." Ruka chuckled a little.

Ginka's expression didn't shift. Ruka got serious *that's it?* vibes, so she thought about it some more.

"Oh, my grandma scolded me once, and she said to remember that everybody's circumstances are different. And my grandpa used to tell me to follow my heart when I wasn't sure what to do, I guess..."

Ruka groaned like a broken vacuum. She could probably come up with something better if she calmed down, but those sad examples were all she could think of between the gym and the nurse's office.

I'm sure Gin-san's mad... But when Ruka glanced to the side, Ginka looked fine.

"I see... So there's nothing special about you, Ruka."

"That's so mean!"

Ginka gently smiled and nodded. "No, that's fine. It's better, honestly."

"Huh? What? What's that mean?"

"Don't worry. I'm satisfied now."

"I'm not!"

"It's fine. It really is."

"Hey, don't go looking all satisfied by yourself!"

No matter how much Ruka tried to get Ginka to explain, Ginka just kept nodding. After they dropped Yoshiyama off at the nurse's office, Ginka even had a happy smile on her face.

I don't get it at all!

Since Ruka's shift at Bianco was going to end before dark today, she texted Ginka to say she wouldn't need a bodyguard on her way home. Getting a text back from Ginka that said "update acknowledged" made Ruka laugh when she was changing into her uniform.

Since Ruka was on register duty, she checked to make sure it was good to go before starting to dust and clean the area. It was a pretty slow day at the café. Since Ruka loved working when there was a full house and lots to do, she was seriously bored right now.

She thought about the middle-aged guy with stubble from a few days ago. "Wonder if he found a job..."

He ran outta here yelling about getting one. What happened to him after that? I don't have to deal with career stuff till I'm done with school, so it's kinda hard to imagine what that's like.

Ruka glanced around the shop and saw Tokiwa Yagi wiping a table down.

"Hey, Tokiwa-san, what's your plan for getting a job?"

"Gwah?!" Tokiwa suddenly slumped over.

"A-Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine... Having something I've been desperately trying to avoid come at me all of a sudden was just... Shocking..." Tokiwa sounded like she was in pain as she adjusted her crooked glasses.

Right... I don't have to worry about that yet, but she's a college student. That's probably on her mind all the time these days.

"You draw manga, so why not make that your career?" Ruka suggested.

"Eep!"

"Seriously, are you okay?"

Tokiwa awkwardly nodded. “U-Um, Ruka-san...” She sounded like she was trying to catch her breath. “Pro manga artists and doujinshi artists...are a bit different...”

“But your manga’s really good.”

“Ohh, s-such open praise is blinding...!” Tokiwa gripped her duster tight with both hands. “I-I’m approaching publishers and applying for competitions... But I’m aiming for shonen magazines, and my work isn’t a good fit... I’m trying hard to change course, but it isn’t going very well...”

“Oh, uh, gotcha?”

I don’t really get what the problem is... I mean, I think it’s great she’s taking a shot, but I guess that’s not all there is to it. Probably better for an amateur like me to keep my mouth shut. I don’t wanna give her weird advice that throws her off. Ruka thought that was a good decision and nodded to herself.

Just then, the bell by the entrance rang. Since Tokiwa was in charge of the dining area, she went to greet the customer.

Ruka leaned on the register. “Everybody has a lot going on...”

It feels like everyone’s working on something for their future’s sake. With Mei it’s modeling, Hina has dancing, and Tokiwa-san has manga. Even that one random guy’s looking for a job. I’m just having fun with my friends every day, and that’s enough for me right now, but I’m not sure I can do that forever...

“What about Ginka?” Ruka wondered if the beautiful vampire hunter had goals for the future too.

I should ask the next time I see her.

After wrapping up her shift, Ruka left Bianco and saw everything tinted orange by the setting sun. It was pretty and peaceful, but she needed to make it home before dark. She’d promised Ginka, plus the risk of running into weird guys at night was way higher.

Lots of those lately... Ruka started jogging down the sidewalk.

“The hell? It’s you...” said a man’s voice behind her.

Ruka turned around to look and regretted it as soon as she saw a tan guy with bleached hair standing there. She groaned.

Yoshiyama seemed too surprised to see Ruka to be mad, at least.

He kept looking back and forth between her and Bianco. "You work there? Wait, the school's got a rule against part-time jobs." He seemed to realize something and grinned. "Yo, Moriki, what do you think would happen if I told the school?"

Ugh, now he's trying to threaten me... Ruka felt the same unpleasant feeling she'd had behind the gym at school.

"You'll get in trouble. They'll make you write a long apology. Hell, you might even get suspended or expelled. You won't graduate, then. Damn, that would suck."

"Oh. Is that so."

"No shit, you dumbass."

He's swearing more now. And he's so into insulting me, he hasn't noticed I don't care what he thinks...

"If you don't want that to happen, you know what you gotta do."

"What?"

"Do everything I say if you want me to keep my mouth shut about your job."

Well, our school does have a rule against students working part-time. It's not a huge deal, but he's not wrong. If I were working without permission, and the school found out, I would get a lecture, they'd make me write an apology, and all that. But...

"I got permission from the school, though."

"Whaaa...?"

Ruka shook off how stupid Yoshiyama sounded and got her thoughts together. "Hie High does have a rule like that, but they're fine with us working as long as you let them know. I told my homeroom teacher. So you don't have to, like, keep quiet or anything..."

Hie High gave permission for students to work based on their financial situations. Since Ruka's mom was a single mother, the school let Ruka have a part-time job. Nothing would happen if Yoshiyama reported her.

"By the way, paisen, didn't you wanna date me? You might wanna try showing me your good side instead of, y'know, threatening me." *Except I'd rather go out with that old stalker guy. Would love to say that right now, but I shouldn't piss him off. Dealing with someone*

who has such a huge ego is like disarming a bomb. Gotta be careful.

"Don't be such a stuck-up bitch!"

Welp, no stopping this bomb now.

"I-I don't give a shit about you! You were just a step on the ladder to get with *her*! With the silver hair! So don't get carried away, you ugly slut!"

Oh, so he was after Ginka. I don't see the point in going after another girl to get the one you really want, plus she already hates him. You got no chance, buddy. "Paisen, lemme give you some friendly advice: Give up on her. That bar's way too high in, like, every way."

"I don't need you to tell me that! She's mixed up with someone like you, so she's gotta be a stupid bitch too! I'd turn a freak like that down even if she begged me to bang her!"

"What did you say?" *Insult me as much as you want. And threatening me? I can just call that bad judgment. No big deal—that's how I avoid trouble. But Ginka... She fought so hard to protect the whole world and to protect people like us. I'm not gonna let an ignorant idiot like you say anything about her.*

Ruka grinned. *Hmm. Never expected anything to make me this mad.* "Hey, you know how lame that was, right? The threats and stuff?"

"Huh?"

"Who says garbage like, 'If you don't want that to happen, you know what you gotta do'? Did you steal that line from a porno manga? Pathetic. You could've just told me you've never talked to a real girl before."

"Y-You... You...!" Yoshiyama's face went from red to pale.

Crap, I overdid it.

"Sh-Shut your damn mouth!" His eyes went wide, and he held his fist up in the air.

Am I seriously getting assaulted twice in one day? By the same guy?! Ruka got ready to dodge.

"Agh! Ahhhh!" Yoshiyama screamed just like he had earlier today. A black hand around his neck seemed to be lifting his body off the ground, and his arms and legs flailed around.

“Young lady, are you all right?” A white guy in a dark suit was looking down at Ruka with grayish eyes. He was at least two meters tall, and he didn’t look Japanese, but he spoke the language just fine.

“Y-Yeah, thanks...”

“Oh, no, there’s no need to thank me.”

“L-Let me go! Gaaaah!” Yoshiyama was still yelling and struggling, but the man did nothing.

He’s bad news. Way worse than any of the creeps from before. My instincts are screaming for me to run, but I can’t move my legs. Besides, I can’t just leave Yoshiyama... Even though he’s a scumbag.

“U-Um, that guy’s my pal, so could you let him go?”

The man’s lips twisted. “You most certainly don’t look like friends.”

“W-We fight ’cause we get along. It’s a Japanese culture thing.”

“Hmm...” The man’s grayish eyes narrowed. He reached into his pocket with one hand. “What if he’s not your friend anymore?” He pulled out a little bottle with a pointed tip and a sticky brown liquid inside. Then he broke off the tip with his thumb and shoved the bottle into Yoshiyama’s mouth.

“Pfff! Gmph!”

Yoshiyama tried to cough, but the man held the bottle in place. It seemed like Yoshiyama couldn’t even breathe anymore, since he was getting more and more pale.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Ruka yelled.

“I suppose I can call it a drug to make him more unfriendly.”

“I-I don’t get it, but let him go!”

Ruka kicked the man, but he easily caught her leg with one hand. She tried to pull back, but he was way too strong—she couldn’t move her leg at all.

“You would fight to save the man who assaulted you? You certainly are a brave one...” The man pulled Ruka’s leg up.

“Ahhh!” In a flash, Ruka’s world turned upside down.

“Brave, but foolish. You should take better care of yourself.”

“Wh-Wh-Whoa! Not like this! I can’t let anybody see what I’m wearing today!”

“What you’re... Ah, your underwear? My apologies.” The man was holding two people up in the air, but he was perfectly calm and composed.

Ruka desperately tried to pull on her skirt. *Black clothes, pale skin, incredible strength, and he doesn’t treat people like human beings... That sounds a lot like what Ginka told me.*

“A-Are you...a vampire?”

“Heh. Am I a vampire, you ask? How truly amusing.”

“S-So you are?” she asked again.

The man shook his head. “No, I am not. If anything, I’m the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“Yes, I—”

That sentence got cut off by a silver-haired beauty sending him flying with a kick.

“Ruka, break your fall!”

“How do I— Ah!” Ruka slammed into the ground shoulder-first.

Better than falling on my head, but it still hurts like hell!

Ruka held her shoulder and stood on shaky legs. She saw Yoshiyama collapsed on the ground. The strange man, who looked imposing in his dark suit, was already on his feet. Ginka, in her long coat and covered in exoforce, stood facing him.

“Ruka, get behind me.”

Ruka circled behind Ginka. “Wish I knew judo...” she mumbled.

The hunter gripped her shining silver spear. She was ready to fight.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Ginka?” The man looked calm. He even sounded friendly.

“What are you doing here, David Highgate?!” Ginka’s voice, on the other hand, sounded harsh and bitter.

Well, I don’t need anybody to tell me they’re not strangers.

The man dusted off his coat. “I am relieved to see that your skill in exoforce has not changed.”

“I asked why you’re here. Answer me.”

“Or what? You’ll cut me down? That’s all well and good, but if you don’t treat that boy soon, it’ll be too late.”

“Too late...?” Ginka finally noticed Yoshiyama.

Something was seriously wrong with him. His face was pale and he was drenched in sweat, plus his breaths were short and heavy. His eyes were closed, and his face was distorted from pain.

“It can’t be... Is he turning into a vampire...?”


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"Yes, but not by his volition."

"What does that mean?!"

By the time Ginka and Ruka looked at David again, a faint light shone around his feet.

"I'll take my leave for now. Farewell, Ginka and friend."

With a sound so quiet Ruka wasn't even sure she'd heard anything, David vanished.

"Damn it! I'm not letting you get away!" Ginka swung her hand and formed an exoforce arrow. She shot it high and fast into the air before making another and repeating her attack.

Up above, they saw David running in midair with disks of exoforce under his feet. He was just barely fast enough to dodge Ginka's arrows and shake them off.

I can't even believe what I'm looking at here.

"It's like a fantasy anime..." That was all Ruka could say.

Chapter 7: Ally ≠ ♡

During the war, Ginka had never imagined she would be going to school and making friends her age. But ever since she started attending Hie High, she found herself enjoying her new, peaceful life.

It would be nice to keep living like that. She truly felt that way thanks to her friends, Ruka in particular. Getting along with Meiri and Hinaru and learning all sorts of fun things was possible because of her. Ruka's energy and drive were overwhelming on occasion, but that never detracted from her wonderful charm.

Though Ginka was allowing herself to indulge in a peaceful daily routine, she most certainly had not forgotten the incident in which Ruka had been attacked. Ginka had started patrolling the area at night and checking the search app regularly, but she hadn't seen any signs of the enemy. And all she had gotten from the hunter alliance so far was an automated response: "Under investigation. Will contact once cause determined."

Ginka was studying at home, but the situation was just too frustrating for her to concentrate. *This is a stalemate. Should I go to the Japan branch office on my next day off?*

Then her phone started to vibrate.

Is that from Ruka? She reached for the device and saw a notification from the search app. There was a red mark on the map —a vampire.

Finally, a lead! I can't let this opportunity slip away.

Ginka threw on her long coat, jumped off her apartment balcony, and started running through the sky. Exoforce shone under her feet as she headed for the location marked in the app. *Why did a vampire suddenly appear in the middle of town? Why did it become active so early in the evening?* She could think about that later. The answers would be clear once she reached her destination anyway.

When Ginka arrived, the first thing she saw from where she stood in the sky was a man in a dark suit holding Ruka upside down.

Her eyes shot wide open in shock. *It can't be... What is he doing here?! David Highgate...*

That man was one of Ginka's allies during the war—a vampire hunter.

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David had vanished, leaving Ruka, Ginka, and an unconscious Yoshiyama at the scene. The two girls stared at the sky until some groaning noises brought them back to their senses.

"Umph... Ugh..."

Ruka crouched next to Yoshiyama and shook his shoulders, but he didn't respond. His breathing sounded rough, and sweat was pouring off him like a waterfall. Clearly, something was wrong.

"G-Ginka, is Yoshiyama-paisen gonna turn into a vampire?" Ruka asked. *That's what Ginka said to that guy, so she has to know what's going on.*

"If we leave him be, yes," Ginka replied. "Or, if he is incompatible, he will perish."

"Peri..." Ruka couldn't even say the rest of that word. Yoshiyama had threatened her, and he'd even tried to attack her. No matter how you sliced it, he was a bad guy who deserved to be punished. But death was way too harsh.

"Calm yourself. At this stage, we can still heal him." Ginka grabbed Yoshiyama's arms and started moving him over to the side of the road.

Ruka grabbed his legs to help out. "W-We can?"

"Yes. However, healing is not my specialty. The treatment will be crude, and I'll require assistance. Your clothing will get very dirty, but could you—"

"Got it. What do you need me to do?"

Ginka's eyes went wide when Ruka agreed so quickly, but her surprise didn't last long. She put him down on the ground and placed her hand on Yoshiyama's side. "I'm going to stream exoforce

into him and destroy the vampire cells. His body will attempt to reject the exoforce, and he will spasm and vomit, so I want you to keep him on his side to prevent suffocation."

"The recovery position, right?"

"I'm impressed you know that."

"Well, my mom's a nurse."

Ginka nodded, then took Yoshiyama's uniform off. "Before we begin... If a third party shows up, you should run. Also, you may feel the exoforce, but it is not dangerous to you—"

"Okay, okay! Let's just hurry and do this thing!"

"Yes, you're right." Ginka rolled up her sleeves and crouched down, placing one hand on Yoshiyama's shoulder from behind. Her grip was tight. "Starting now."

Exoforce welled up all around her as she gently reached out with her free hand and touched Yoshiyama's side.

"Gaaaah!" His body jerked and seized as he screamed.

His bloodshot eyes were so wide open that even Ruka could see them from where she was, and his intense full-body spasms sent a weird pulsing sensation through her hands. He was muscular from being on the soccer team, and his strong arms and legs started flailing like they were wild and out of control.

"Raaargh!"

"Ruka, hold him down tighter!"

"O-On it!"

"Urgh! Graah! Raaaaargh!"

Ruka figured her arm strength wasn't gonna cut it, so she leaned in with her whole body. Her chest was pressing up against Yoshiyama now, but this wasn't the time to get embarrassed. She just kept holding him down and hoped Ginka would be done as soon as possible.

"Gyeeeeh! Grah! Guaaaaaargh!"

Holding Yoshiyama in place made Ruka's arms and legs hurt, but she couldn't let go. If she did, his life could slip away right in front of her.

"Uck... C-Croak..." With a cough that sounded like a toad, something black came flying out of Yoshiyama's mouth.

“The vampire cells are out!” Ginka shouted.

“I-Is it over?” Ruka asked.

“Not yet! I still need to deal with the remaining cell damage!”

“Still a ways to go, I guess! Got it!” Ruka planted her feet wide to steady herself. She didn’t care about anyone seeing under her skirt anymore. All she wanted was to hurry and get Yoshiyama fixed up.

“Okay... Come on...” Ginka’s voice was calm as she treated Yoshiyama, and his spasms and breathing started to even out. Then, with a long sigh, she backed away from her patient. “I’m done. You can let go now...”

Ruka did, and she fell right on her butt because she was so tired. She looked up and saw Ginka covered in black stuff. *I wonder if I look like an absolute mess too...*

“So... Did you save him?” Ruka asked.

“Yes. He’ll be in poor shape for a while. However, as long as he rests, he should recover before too long. Ah, but stomach acid will erode his teeth if we don’t do anything, so I’ll go buy water to wash out the inside of his mouth. Rest here, Ruka.”

“On it.” Ruka took Ginka up on that and flopped on the ground. Exhaustion was really getting to her. *Do nurses deal with craziness like this all the time? Respect. Seriously.* “Ryoko-san sure is amazing...”

Ginka came back with a bottle of water in one hand and her phone in the other. “I contacted emergency services. An ambulance should be here to transport him soon. The rescue workers will contact his guardians.” She wrenched Yoshiyama’s mouth open and poured water in.

Ruka was too tired to do anything except stare at the water spilling out from Yoshiyama’s mouth. *Ginka really healed him, no sweat. Literally... Not a single drop on her face. Nurses are amazing, and vampire hunters aren’t bad either.*

“David, why would you do such a thing...?” Ginka whispered.

Ruka heard the pain in her voice and remembered the man from earlier. *David’s that tall white guy in the dark suit with kinda bad posture, yeah? The super dangerous guy who forced Yoshiyama to drink that stuff to turn him into a vampire...*

"You know him, right?"

"Yes. He is also a former vampire hunter."

"Makes sense." *I mean, he can use exoforce and Ginka knows him, so I can't imagine him being anything else.*

"But I have no idea why he's doing such a thing, or how..." Ginka sighed and crushed the now-empty water bottle.

So Ginka gets irritated too, huh... Ruka ran her fingers through her messy hair, and sticky black gunk came off on her fingers. She groaned and tried to shake the stuff off. *I've been doing my best to ignore it, but way more of this gross stuff from Yoshiyama got on me than I thought.*

"Once he's in an ambulance," said Ginka, "we can get cleaned up at my place. David is also a matter of concern, so I'd prefer to be cautious and have you stay the night."

Ruka wasn't expecting a sleepover all of a sudden, but she nodded a bunch of times.

We can deal with the tricky stuff later! Right now, I just wanna be clean!

After making it to Ginka's apartment, Ruka let Ryoko know she was staying at a friend's place. Then she practically flew into the bathroom, threw off her clothes, and rinsed off in the shower. Everything from what Yoshiyama had puked on her to her exhaustion went down the drain.

"So goooood!" The water felt just right and relaxed her muscles. Even her voice seemed to melt like chocolate. Then Ruka took off her makeup and got ready to wash her hair and body. She reached for a shampoo bottle from the cabinet...

"U-Uwaaaah!"

"Ruka! What's the matter?!" Ginka rushed into the bathroom with a knife made of exoforce in her hand.

Ruka trembled and grabbed the shampoo bottle. "This is Occitania!"

"Huh...?"

"It's the high-end stuff too! I'm jealous! How'd you end up with something this nice?"

"My grandmother sent me that..." Ginka's exoforce knife disappeared. She pressed her hand against her forehead, mumbled something about feeling foolish for worrying, and left the bathroom.

Well, I couldn't help it. I was shocked!

After enjoying a soak in the bath, Ruka got out and found plain sweats and underwear waiting for her. She hadn't worn sweats in a long time, since she normally wore soft and fluffy loungewear at home, but she put them on before drying her hair and dealing with skincare.

After she finished, Ruka put on some slippers and went into the living room. "Phew, thanks for letting me go first," she said, but Ginka was nowhere to be seen.

"Over here, Ruka."

Ginka's voice came from another room, through a half-open door. There was an electronic keypad on the wall beside it, and a light scratching noise was coming from inside. Ruka wasn't sure what to make of it, but she went in.

"Whoa, what the heck is all this?"

Western swords and katanas, pistols and rifles... Helmets and bulletproof vests... Tents, sleeping bags, and other camping supplies... Some kinda cane with crystals in it and a ton of stakes... So many bottles filled with silver powder... I don't even know what a lot of these are for.

There was a workstation with a vice past all the weapons and tools packed in this room, and Ginka was sitting there in comfy clothes and a tablet in one hand.

"Ah, this room is..." Ginka trailed off and frowned at Ruka.

"What's up?"

"You're Ruka...aren't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"You seem different. Why is that, I wonder...?"

What's this hunter girl trying to say? Oh. I get it. "I took off my makeup for the bath."

"Ah, I see."

Ruka felt a little awkward. *Ginka seeing me without makeup is kinda embarrassing...*

She put up her hands to block her face, but Ginka just stared at her even harder.

"You're very lovely even without makeup, Ruka."

"Th-Thanks?"

"Of course, you look pretty with makeup on as well. Either way, I like—"

"N-Never mind me!" Ruka blurted. She couldn't deal with the compliments anymore. "Weren't you gonna tell me what the deal is with this room?"

That seemed to snap Ginka out of it. "This is my armory. I have permission from the government for these weapons, so it's all legal, but please don't tell anyone. I don't want to deal with any unnecessary trouble."

"So you're saying this room's, like, bad news?"

"Correct. There are also hazardous materials here, so don't touch anything without asking."

"Gotcha." Ruka glanced around the armory. "But don't you make weapons out of exoforce?"

Ginka had made a silver spear to fight that retainer, and there were those silver arrows she'd shot at David plus the knife from when she'd busted into the bathroom. *Do you need the real thing when you can just make weapons whenever you want?*

"That's true, I can make weapons from exoforce. But incorporating an existing weapon uses less exoforce and makes it easier to wield. I don't use physical weapons often because they tend to get in the way outside of battle, but I keep them here in case I need them."

Ruka stared at the swords and guns while nodding along. *Some of those look pretty well used. So she's used these to fight?*

"By the way, what does that David guy use?" Ruka asked.

Ginka's face tensed. "He was fond of a revolver made from refined silver. Hold on..." She messed with her tablet for a bit before showing Ruka. "This is the hunter alliance's registration profile for David Highgate."

Ruka looked at his picture. His facial features should've made him handsome, but his glaring eyes and sunken cheeks absolutely ruined

his look. There was also a ton written in English next to the picture that Ruka couldn't read.

"Lucid Eye, David Highgate," said Ginka. "A vampire hunter and one of the leaders of the alliance's intelligence development group."

Ruka shook her head. "I don't get any of this. Can I ask a question?"

"I'll reply to the best of my ability."

"VHs aren't all silvery, then?"

"Silvery...? Ah, you're referring to my hair and eyes. That comes from my Scandinavian background. Race has nothing to do with hunter qualifications and characteristics."

"Gotcha. 'Kay, keep going."

Ginka nodded and lowered her voice. "The intelligence development group created the technology hunters use to coordinate and search for enemies. The vampire search app was David's idea."

"Seriously? He's amazing!"

"Yes. That search system forced vampires to avoid electronics and helped us eliminate them from the human world. David brought about a great shift in our battle with the enemy and was celebrated for his great achievements. Yet..." Ginka's voice sounded harsh at the end.

Ruka was worried about her. *It's gotta be tough for her to see her former ally, somebody she respected, coming to Japan and trying to make more vampires.*

"Oh yeah, what's that 'Lucid Eye' thing about?" Ruka asked.

"That's his alias. It's customary for a hunter to be given one based on their combat style or accomplishments. His comes from the fact that he developed the search app."

"Hmm... Do you have one too?"

"Mine is Silv..." Ginka stopped herself and made a face.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't want to say it."

"Huh? Why?"

"I just don't."

"Well, now I *really* wanna know!" Ruka puffed up her cheeks and

gave Ginka a cute look but got ignored instead of an answer. *Tch, so shy.*

Ginka put the tablet down, and she looked tense again. "For now, we should be thinking about David. I reported him to HQ, so I'd like to believe we'll get more information back soon. However, the alliance's capabilities are not what they used to be, and they have gotten worse at responding among other things. It's best to assume we won't hear back for several days."

Ruka noticed that Ginka didn't say *why* they were less capable now. She wasn't going to ask, but she had a pretty good idea. *It's because they think they got rid of all the vampires. That's right and wrong at the same time. They wiped out the vampires but not the method for making more.*

"At any rate, we'll need to remain on guard against David. Until HQ or one of the branches responds, I would like you to stay at my apartment."

Nobody knew why David was doing such vicious things, so they had to be careful. It was too dangerous for Ginka to leave Ruka on her own. The situation was urgent and scary, but Ruka grinned.

"Why do you look so happy...?" Ginka asked.

"I mean, we'll be roommates! Like we're in college or something. Isn't that kinda fun?"

"Listen..."

Ruka put her hands on her cheeks and kept grinning. "And if I stay here, I get to use as much Occitania shampoo as I want. Plus you have some shower gel and bath bombs I've never used before. So hype!"

"I suppose it's better than you being depressed..." Ginka muttered.

After grabbing dinner from the convenience store near Ginka's apartment, the two of them got ready for bed in the living room with Ruka on the sofa and Ginka in a sleeping bag. It was already eleven o'clock, so they turned off the lights.

Ruka checked her socials on her phone, but she couldn't help feeling on edge. Was that because David had dangled her upside

down? Or because she'd helped Ginka treat Yoshiyama?

How's Yoshiyama-paisen doing? Ginka said there was nothing to worry about, but I can't help it. I'm sure he's fine since the ambulance picked him up and all, but what if something crazy happened? That made Ruka nervous, and she really wanted to talk to someone. *Good thing that someone's right here, right now!*

"Gin-saaaan, let's chat."

"I refuse."

"Huh?"

"We have school tomorrow, so it's best to get to sleep."

Yeah, I guess a lot happened today. Probably a good idea to rest and be ready for tomorrow. I'll just close my eyes and try to—

"Ah!" Ruka suddenly sat up. She had wanted to ask Ginka something before she fell asleep and her memory got all hazy. "Do you have any dreams for the future?"

"Go to sleep."

"Come on, just answer this one question. I'll go to sleep right after."

"I said, sleep."

Ruka pressed her hands together. "I'm begging you, Gin-neesaaaan."

Ginka slowly sat up in her sleeping bag.

Whoa, she looks kinda sexy with her eyes half open like that.

"If I tell you, will you go to sleep?" Ginka asked.

Ruka gave a big nod, so Ginka ran her fingers through her own hair and started talking.

"Before the global extermination operation, I teamed up with another female hunter."

She sounds a little out of it. Maybe 'cause she's trying to remember? No clue what this random woman's got to do with Ginka's dream, but I guess I should just shut up and listen.

"She was very surprised when she first met me. When I asked why, she told me she used to be a teacher. Pairing up with someone around her students' age was shocking to her. But she was a hunter, of course, so she soon regained her composure."

Hearing about a teacher who became a vampire hunter made

Ruka think of her homeroom teacher, Tani. *She's so gentle... What would she do if she had to fight vampires? She'd be a mess. No, actually, I can see her surprising everyone and putting up a good fight.*

"We spent a few months together, and I told her I was not attending school for the time being. When she heard that, she suggested that I return to school once our battle was over. She said school life would be a valuable experience regardless of whether I enjoyed it. To be honest, I had no intention of doing so. I never imagined the battle with the vampires would end in my lifetime, and my grandmother taught me that attachment to normal life was a sign of weakness."

Ginka's awkward chuckle and sigh sounded sad to Ruka.

"She kept encouraging me to go, even though I kept telling her I wouldn't. She was so persistent, I even started to think that I would never set foot in a school no matter what... But since she never stopped telling me to go until she breathed her last, I decided to heed her suggestion."

"'Breathed her last'...?"

"She wasn't suited for combat. She was incapacitated within a few minutes of encountering the enemy."

In other words, a vampire killed her.

"Then... Then you came back to school because of what she said?" Ruka asked.

Ginka stared straight ahead and nodded. "Now I'm glad I listened to her."

Ruka heard the gentleness in Ginka's voice and saw her smile. *So she's having fun at school? I'm so glad.*

"My dream for the future was to go to school. Now that it has come true, I don't have any other dreams." Ginka turned to Ruka. "Are you satisfied, Ruka Moriki?"

"Yup, a hundred and ten percent!"

Ginka and Ruka smiled at each other. Then, all of a sudden, Ginka's face went blank. She got back into her sleeping bag and said, "Well, it's time for bed. Talking made me tired."

"What?! I wanna talk more."

"If you're not going to sleep, I can make you."

"Huh?"

"Hunters are permitted to knock civilians out as an emergency measure." Ginka's body glowed silver, and a misty shimmer flicked at Ruka like a snake's tongue.

"O-Okay, I'll sleep! I'll sleep!" Ruka plopped down on the sofa in a hurry. *Nope, not gonna be put to sleep with exoforce like Yoshiyama. That looked like it hurt.*

With her heart still pounding, Ruka did her best to fall asleep. Her mind started getting hazy after an hour or so.

Oh yeah, I forgot to tell Ginka I don't have a dream... That thought faded as Ruka drifted off.

For now, the plan was to go to school and work and all that like usual while waiting for the hunter alliance to get back to Ginka. Since their uniforms had been wrecked by all of Yoshiyama's gunk, Ruka and Ginka dropped those off at a cleaner first thing in the morning before heading to Hie High in their school-issued tracksuits.

As the school gates came into view, Ruka and Ginka froze in perfect sync. A man in a dark suit stood beside the gate. His sunken cheeks and pale skin were the same as they had looked yesterday. For some reason, he was greeting all the students and teachers.

"That's..." Ruka trailed off. *I think it's obvious he's not anyone's dad or whatever. Someone's gonna report him for being sus, right?*

"David..." Ginka looked surprised. She stood and glared at David.

"I knew it! I thought I was just seeing things or something! Phew." Ruka grabbed Ginka's shoulder, leaned in close, and whispered, "Should we say hi?"

"No, I don't know what he's after. We should sneak into school without him noticing and attack him from—"

"Good morning, Ginka and friend. Wonderful weather we're having, isn't it?"

It only took David a few steps to reach the two of them. His smile was so bright and sunny, it looked downright creepy. Then he squinted down at Ginka like he was looking at something way too bright.

"What are you doing here?" Ginka asked.

"That much should be obvious. I'm here to see the two of you." David shrugged a little, then turned his attention to Ruka.

But Ginka didn't let him. "Are you targeting Ruka?"

"You really think I would do something so awful?"

"I do."

"Why, you'll hurt my feelings."

"Fine by me."

Ruka looked around and saw that people were starting to watch this intense showdown between a beauty with silver hair and a tall guy in a dark suit. *We'll have a whole crowd here pretty soon. It's like we're filming a drama... Ack, hold on! He's a vampire hunter too, so he can use exoforce. What'll happen to all these people if he goes wild?*

"Hey, hey, guys," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Oh?"

Good. I was kinda worried they were already too fired up to hear me. "Lots of folks are staring, y'know. So why don't we, like, go to a restaurant or something?"

Ginka seemed to finally notice the people all around them. She gave a stern nod.

"You good with that too, Davy-san?"

"Davy-san...? Are you referring to me, perhaps?"

"Well, yeah."

David looked like he didn't know what to say at first, but he recovered right away. "Very well. As a matter of fact, I have yet to eat breakfast today."

A chat in broad daylight and the breakfast special at a restaurant? That's about as far from vampire stuff as you can get, so I guess he really is human. He's still dangerous, though...

The three of them went into a family restaurant near the school, and a waitress led them to a table for four. Ginka and Ruka were next to each other on one side, while David was on the other.

As soon as Ginka sat down, she glared at David. "What are you

plotting? If you don't tell me, I'll smash in your teeth."

David was calm, even after that violent line from Ginka. "Can we order first? I am rather hungry."

Ginka ignored him. "I'll start with the front, then the incisors..."

"Whoa, hold on!" Ruka grabbed Ginka's raised fist. "He said he'll talk, so let's just chill for now, 'kay?" *She's usually so calm, but now she looks like she's ready to bite him! And what the heck are insizers? Insiders?*

Ginka leaned back against her seat in frustration, but her piercing gaze stayed on David.

Ruka hit the call button on the table. When the waitress came over, Ruka said, "I'll take your specialty fries and a mixed vegetable salad."

"I would like to order a choco-banana sundae," David added.

"Water is plenty for me," said Ginka.

The waitress seemed to be intimidated by how Ginka and David looked, but she still remembered to leave some glasses of water on the table before she walked away.

After making sure the waitress was gone, Ginka drank a whole glass, slammed it down on the table, and started confronting David again. "Let's get down to business. How are you turning people into vampires and why?"

"That look... It's how you used to stare down vampires. I'm getting chills."

"The next time you say something ridiculous, I'll send your jaw flying."

Whoa, Ginka has a death grip on the table. It's creaking and everything... She might actually break it!

David reached into his breast pocket, pulled out a little bottle of dark brown liquid, and placed it on the table. He had shoved something just like that in Yoshiyama's mouth. "Vampires have an incredibly simple method for increasing their numbers. They inject their own blood into another organism to stimulate change. That is enough to turn small animals into retainers and humans into vampires. This ampoule contains vampire cells extracted from that blood, adjusted to make the resulting being obey orders."

“Why do you have something like that?”

“What would you do if I told you I stole it from the hunter alliance?”

Ginka smashed her hand down and shattered the bottle. Dark brown liquid seeped and oozed on the table.

“Ugh...” Ruka groaned.

Ginka glared at David, and he looked down at her with amusement in his eyes.

“I have plenty of spares, so one broken bottle is no skin off my nose.”

“If I defeat you, it won’t matter how many spares you have.”

“Oh? You think I’m the only one who has these?”

“You have supporters? To think there are other hunters as insane as you...”

The two hunters stared at each other until the waitress’s voice broke the silence.

“Thanks for waiting! Here are your orders...”

“Th-Thanks!” Ruka moved Ginka’s hand off the table and wiped it down with some napkins to make room for the food. *I think working at the café helped me deal with that pretty quick, but wiping up vampire cells like it’s spilled coffee feels kinda wrong.*

The waitress looked confused, but she set the dishes down on their table and left.

“L-Let’s eat,” Ruka suggested.

“I shall begin as well.” David brought his gloved hands together before grabbing his sundae.

It’s definitely weird to see a big guy in a dark suit eating a girly dessert...

“Your next question was about my motive, correct? Mmm... To begin at the end... Ah, this is delicious... I wish to bring vampires back into this world.”

“It seems you’re not that attached to your jaw after all.”

“I’m quite serious... Mmm... You returned to Japan right away, so you don’t know... Ah... The current state of the hunter alliance is... Oh, this was a good choice!”

“Speak or eat! Pick one!” Ginka shouted.

David reluctantly put down his spoon. He intertwined his fingers and stared at Ginka. "After you defeated the Secluded Demon—Albert von Dittersdorf, the last of his kind—vampires were eradicated from this world. However, what happens after a war is of the utmost importance. It appears you are unaware of that."

"What do you mean?"

"The hunter alliance is in a truly awful state. Absconding leaders, battles over rights and interests, requests from allied governments, hunter insubordination, insufficient funds for equipment maintenance, and so on—none of the branches are capable of action at present. Why, this nation's branch has yet to grasp what I'm up to."

Ginka's been worried about how slow the alliance seems to be. She figured it was because they weren't working super well these days, but if what Davy-san's saying is true... They're slow because they're falling apart.

"I do not wish to see the hunter alliance decline any further. That is my reason."

"You want to create vampires in order to stimulate the alliance?"

Ginka's question made David smile.

Ruka watched anxiously as she munched on her fries. *Looks like a yes. His plan's definitely over the top, and it's gonna do a lot of damage. But if he wants the hunter alliance to step up, he's not, like, barking up the wrong tree. Having vampires around would probably make the alliance strong again.*

Ginka held up one of her fingers to object. "Reviving dangerous beasts we worked so hard to eliminate is utterly insane. Coming all the way to Japan just to try and spread such foolishness was a waste of time. Go back to England and check yourself into a mental clinic while you're at it."

Wh-Whoa, harsh!

David shrugged his shoulders. "How cruel. I came here to Japan for *you*, you know."

"What do you mean by that?" Ginka furrowed her brows.

He looked amused when he answered her. "You, Ginka Shijunana, are the strongest vampire hunter alive, with unparalleled combat

abilities and near limitless exoforce. Don't you think it would be a terrible shame to let all that strength go to waste? I would like you to support our plan to revive the vampires."

"What are you saying...?" She stared at him like he was a disgusting bug.

"I came to Japan to offer you an invitation. In fact, I created that retainer to call you out. After I joined the revival initiative, I searched for your whereabouts in the alliance database. That gave me a general region but not your specific address. The search app could not locate you either, hence that course of action."

"You created a retainer just to lure me out? You're the reason Ruka almost died?"

"My target was a man who would be better off dead. What occurred was an unfortunate accident. My apologies, young lady," David said with a slight bow toward Ruka.

Ruka felt sick. *Sure, that middle-aged guy didn't take care of himself, and he was a stalker without a job. That doesn't mean it's okay to kill him!* "Hey, that guy said he was gonna get a job, so—"

"You should have made contact with me right after that incident," said Ginka.

Oof, she cut me off. Guess I'm an outsider here. And I don't think Davy-san's gonna apologize even if I tell him more about that guy. Maybe I'll just keep eating my fries and salad...

"That was my wish, but I must follow the precepts. This young woman is a civilian, so revealing myself under those circumstances..."

The precepts again? Those are the rules vampire hunters have to follow. They're supposed to keep vampire hunters from running wild...and from getting any praise for their hard work.

"You're plotting to revive the vampires, yet you claim to care about the precepts?!" Ginka yelled.

David calmly held his arms out wide. "I followed the two of you that night and learned where you live. However, I am occupied by other work during the day, and your nighttime patrols make it rather difficult to meet with you. That's where the young lady came into play." He turned to Ruka and narrowed his eyes. "I intended to use

her to approach you. But, as I continued to observe her, I realized she was aware of our existence. Thus I no longer needed to hide, and I could simply summon you by turning someone into a vampire."

That was last night. Ginka gave him a solid kick, so he retreated before showing up in front of school this morning. That's what he's been up to, huh.

Every question about that retainer, Yoshiyama turning into a vampire, and David's actions now had an answer. Ruka didn't feel any better, though. His plan to revive vampires only made her more confused and overwhelmed. *How do you deal with something so complicated?*

There was an icy look on Ginka's face. "I'm sure you recall my ability to see through lies."

Oh yeah, she can totally do that. Guess it works on vampire hunters too.

"Unfortunately, most of what you have said is true. Your plan to bring vampires back, your needless fears regarding the alliance, and your motives... But I question your desire to recruit me. Did you really think I would join you after you created a retainer and endangered innocents?" Ginka moved her cup to the side of the table. "Eliminating me as a potential threat makes far more sense. What do you say to that?"

David shrugged his shoulders a little. "Feel free to think whatever you please."

"Turning people into vampires, then protecting other people from them... For the sake of such a ridiculous charade, you abuse the knowledge cultivated by hunters to hurt people and bring disaster to this world. You've fallen far, Lucid Eye." Ginka's right arm started glowing silver with exoforce. She was ready to fight.

W-Wait, you're gonna throw down with Davy-san? Here? Ruka moved her fries and salad closer to herself. *Good, I'm next to the aisle. I can run for it if I need to.*

"I've fallen, you say...?" David repeated with a sad smile. "I chose to follow unreasonable laws and forsake normal society just to kill creatures capable of communicating in our language... I lost my humanity long, long ago."

"I tire of your foolishness. Your ambitions end here and now." Ginka's exoforce made a sound like a fizzy drink before it became a sword.

David stared at the weapon. "You are the alliance's greatest combatant. I handle support. I can't possibly face you in battle, so I'll do this instead." The sundae in front of him tipped over, and something silver appeared in its place.

What is that? I feel like I've seen something like it before, but I never really paid attention... It's long and narrow, and there's a hole at the end. It almost looks like a gun. There were a bunch at Ginka's apartment, and I think they kinda looked similar...

No, wait, that's a real gun. It's pointing at me.

"Ruka!"

Ruka threw herself into the aisle as soon as she heard Ginka yell her name. She'd covered her head with her arms and hands, so her shoulder and hips slammed into the floor. Then there was a loud *whoosh* and the sound of wood cracking and splitting.

By the time Ruka dared to take a peek, their table was wrecked and David was gone.

"Stop, David!" Ginka's leg shot past Ruka's face. She was holding a silver spear now, instead of a sword.

With a loud *crash*, David jumped through the huge restaurant window.

"You're not getting away!" Ginka got ready to throw her spear, but she stopped herself when she noticed people watching and made a frustrated face.

David ran farther and farther away until he vanished from sight.

"Damn...!" Ginka hissed.

Ruka got to her feet. She was dizzy, her body hurt, and she couldn't figure out what to say. That was when something popped into her head.

Did Davy-san just dine and dash?

The employees at the restaurant had called the cops after seeing the absolute mess Ginka and David had made, and Ruka and Ginka were questioned by the police. Ginka did all the talking, Ruka just

nodded whenever it seemed right, and eventually—just past noon—they were allowed to leave the restaurant and go to school.

"David... David..." Ginka's voice was full of hatred, and she looked intense as she stared down at the ground.

Ruka wasn't sure how to approach Ginka when she seemed so angry, so she tried to clear the air. "Th-Those cops really talked a lot, am I right?"

Ginka didn't say anything.

She's my pal, and she's feeling down, so I wanna cheer her up. But this whole problem's way too big, and I have no clue what to do. Ugh, so frustrating.

Ruka tried again. "Th-That was rough, but at least it's, like, a step forward?"

"Indeed. I finally understand the enemy's goal."

The word "enemy" made a chill run down Ruka's spine. As far as she knew, Ginka had only ever used that for vampires and retainers—for monsters she had to kill. *If she's putting David into that category...*

Hie High's front gates were closed, of course, so Ruka started going to the side entrance. That was when she noticed Ginka wasn't there anymore. She turned and saw her standing in the middle of the road, and her expression was as cold as it had been on her very first day.

"I'm not going to school," said Ginka.

Ruka tilted her head. *Not going to school? Why?*


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"I've learned David's plan. He will surely attack to keep me from leaking that information. People around me will be in danger when that happens, so I will stay away from school until I defeat him."

"W-Wait a sec!" *Okay, I know Ginka's right. Davy-san's after her. He's a human, not a vampire, so he can attack whenever and people can get hurt anytime. But I can't agree with her. I feel like she's really gonna hurt Davy-san if I don't stop her.* "He's not gonna march into our school just to fight you. Aren't you overthinking this? Plus retainers and vampires can't do anything during the day, so—"

"Ruka, this is my responsibility."

"R-Responsibility...?"

Ginka stared at Hie High with a nostalgic look in her eyes. "In the past, I asked David why he became a hunter. 'From humanity's point of view, exterminating vampires is the correct course of action. And doing that feels *wonderful*. I would not trade the pleasure of wielding my strength in the name of justice for anything.' That was his response. I saw he was enraptured by the idea of righteous power—I knew that made him dangerous—but I looked the other way." Her words were heavy and measured. "I brought about this rampage of his myself. And so, it's my responsibility to take him down."

"B-But..." Ruka stammered, but she couldn't think of anything else to say. She knew she couldn't change Ginka's determination, no matter what. *I'm not a vampire hunter, and I don't know much about those precept things either. I do know how strong her sense of responsibility is and how deadly serious she is right now. Persuading her feels...like a lost cause.*

"I'm returning to my old life. You should do the same, Ruka." Ginka took one step back, then turned around and started sprinting away from Hie High.

"H-Hey, hold on!" Ruka dropped her bag and ran after Ginka.

I gotta stop her! If I don't, I might never see her again. Ruka desperately willed her legs to move faster as she stared at Ginka, who was steadily getting farther away.

Ginka slipped around a corner. Ruka was completely out of breath, but she did her best to follow—

Nobody was there.

Chapter 8: When to Make Up's, Like, Totally Not Obvious

This is how it should be, Ginka thought as she dashed over buildings and rooftops.

Now that she knew David was after her, distancing herself from others was the right thing to do. She was happy Ruka had tried to stop her, but she didn't want to get her friend involved.

This really is for the best.

Ginka considered her next steps. First, she needed to connect with the hunter alliance—surely becoming substandard didn't make them completely useless. But when she pulled out her phone, the battery was dead. She knew she had charged it last night when she was with Ruka, so the only possibility was...

"I see. Your skills from the intelligence development group..."

David must have done something back in the restaurant, or he was deploying some sort of jamming signal.

I can't believe I didn't notice until now. Pathetic.

Ginka put her phone away—it was useless now. She made her way to her apartment balcony with exoforce and saw that the window was open.

"Hm. We were thinking the same thing."

David had evidently prioritized shutting Ginka's communications down and taking her equipment away. The inside of her apartment was probably about as messy as a scrambled egg by now, and he may have set traps for her too.

As Ginka hovered in midair, a black hand crept out of the balcony window. Two, no, three of those eerie black puppets created by sacrificing small animals soon appeared on the balcony. The retainers' bodies, each a mockery of the human form, wriggled and writhed in pain. Sunlight hurt both vampires and retainers, so Ginka

had never seen vampires deploy their underlings in the light of day. But *this* was a battle between hunters.

She took a breath, concentrated her exoforce into her hand, and closed her fingers around a weapon with which to slaughter her enemies.

◆ ◆ ◆

During her shift at Bianco, Ruka thought about everything that had happened today. After that crazy morning, Meiri and Hinaru had teased her for showing up to school in a tracksuit. Tani had gently chewed her out for being late too. But none of that had reached her at all, because Ginka was gone.

Ginka had said she wouldn't come back until she took David Highgate down. Ruka knew that pretty girl didn't joke around. She would be gone until she settled everything.

I know she made the right choice. David's after her, so everyone around her would get mixed up in their fights. Obviously, we shouldn't be together. I'm an outsider and *a normal person. I would just get in her way. But it's not like I can stop worrying... Can't I do anything to help her?*

When break time rolled around, Ruka took an iced mocha to the staff room.

"Ruka-san, is something the matter?" Tokiwa Yagi asked. She was holding a cookie and looking anxious as she stared at Ruka.

Crap, I'm making her worry about me! Ruka figured she probably looked super upset, so she made herself smile as fast as she could. "It's nothing! Just a bad makeup day!"

"O-Oh... How unusual for you to mess up when it comes to cosmetics, Ruka-san."

"Huh? I screw up a lot."

"Oh, really...?" Tokiwa sat across from Ruka and ate her cookie.

It was quiet and awkward in the staff room. Ruka would normally tell Tokiwa about school, or the two of them would talk about manga together. This was the first time they had sat together without saying anything.

"Um..." Ruka couldn't deal with the silence anymore.

"Yes?" Tokiwa asked.

"Well, I kinda got in a fight with a friend... Actually, we didn't even make it to the fight part." *Tokiwa-san doesn't know Ginka, so changing some details should be enough to not give too much away... Probably.*

"Is this friend that returning student you mentioned the other day?"

"Ah, yeah." Ruka was a little surprised Tokiwa still remembered their conversation about Ginka. "I can't tell you too much about what happened, but she really helped me out a bunch of times. So we started eating lunch together, hanging out, having sleepovers..."

I never thought we would end up, like, together all the time. Not seeing her for a few hours feels like forever.

"She got mixed up in something serious. I wanna help her out, but we live in different worlds, and I have no clue what to do..."

Ruka had lived a peaceful life while Ginka was fighting monsters and protecting the world. Just thinking about how different the two of them were made Ruka frown. At least she knew about vampires and hunters now, thanks to Ginka, but that didn't mean she could just butt in.

"I'm jealous," said Tokiwa.

"Huh?"

"You're worried because the two of you are so close."

"Close...?" Ruka repeated.

Tokiwa gave a gentle nod. "Yes, maybe too close. That's why you understand what she's going through, but it's also how you know you can't help her."

Ruka wasn't sure what Tokiwa had picked up from her story, but what she'd just said didn't seem too far off. *Ginka and I* are *really close. I know her personality and her history, and I get that she's facing this massive challenge. That's why I'm worried I can't help her.*

"Close friends are rare. That's why I'm jealous," said Tokiwa.

Ruka nodded. She pressed her lips together and frowned. *The closer you get to someone, the more you can cheer them up. The*

more you know about someone, the better you can help them. I really believe that. But Ginka Shijunana is too different. She's an exception to every rule. I seriously don't know what to do.

"I-I'm sorry!" Tokiwa bowed her head. "I only made you worry more..."

"Nah, just having someone to talk to helped a ton. Thanks."

Ruka meant it, but Tokiwa still looked troubled.

"That's all well and good, but—"

A phone notification sound came from somewhere else in the room.

"Excuse me, I'll be right back." Tokiwa stood up, went to her locker, and opened it. Suddenly, her body jolted like she'd been shocked. "Woo-hoo!"

"Wh-What the heck was that?!" Ruka wasn't sure if she should be worried or scared.

Tokiwa held out her phone. There was a weird grin on her face. "I got a BBM ticket!"

"A what?"

"I can't believe it! I thought it was impossible!" Tokiwa got so excited, she started jumping up and down.

She was so mature earlier, but now it's hard to see her as the older one here... Ruka thought, but then she remembered something Tokiwa had said before. "Oh, wait, is that the 2.5D live show you were talking about the other day?"

"Yeah, the Ball Boys Musical! And my seat's *so* close to the stage! Whoo! This is the best! I would *die* for my best boy!" Tokiwa was yelling and spinning in circles with her phone now.

Wow, she's so excited. I think those pretty fictional boys are the only things on her mind now. Ruka chuckled and decided to keep her thoughts to herself.

"Good for you," she said.

After her shift, Ruka stopped by the cleaners for her uniform and headed home alone. No silver-haired girls or murky black monsters showed up. There weren't any suspicious stalkers or creepy tall guys either.

It's not like I had a boring life before I met Ginka. I can have fun from now on too. Now that I think about it, she left to protect people like me. I should live my life the best I can to make sure I don't waste what she's doing for all of us.

Ruka nodded to herself. She soon saw her cozy little house and remembered she'd stayed at Ginka's apartment last night, so this was her first time home since the day before yesterday.

"I'm back!" Ruka slid the door open, stepped inside, and took off her shoes.

"Ruka-chaaan, welcome home," Ryoko sluggishly called out from the living room.

Ruka was really glad her mom was home, since that didn't happen very often. A warm aroma tickled her nose.

"Do you want a bath first or dinner?" asked Ryoko.

"You cooked, Ryoko-san?"

"Gotta act like a mom every once in a while, y'know?"

"'Like'? You're my mama for real!" Ruka did her best to smile as she went into the living room. "Whoa!"

Big plates packed with croquettes and fried shrimp were on the table, and little plates full of other deep-fried dishes were crammed in between. There were a few salads in small bowls too, but fried stuff was definitely the main event.

"It's our first time eating together in forever, so I gave it my all!"

"O-Okay, but don't you think you went a little overboard?"

Ruka was happy her mom had made them dinner, but it was way too much for two people. Most of it was heavy fried food too.

"Well, I had a craving! I haven't had a chance to eat anything like this lately."

"Ah, gotcha."

Ryoko had told Ruka that there were times where she couldn't even eat lunch because she was so busy at work. Maybe making and eating all this food was her way of de-stressing.

In that case, I guess I can put on a few kilos for my hardworking mom's sake.

"'Kay, I'm in, Ryoko-san."

"Ooh, thanks!"

Ruka saw the earnest smile on Ryoko's face and smiled back. "Why are you thanking me like I'm the one who made all this?" But asking that question made her think of...

"Why are you acting like I'm accepting your contribution...?"

What Ginka said in Corolle, and that face she made... When will I get to see her? That girl's too pretty, too serious, and too stubborn... What if she comes back to school and says she wants to be alone?

Ruka did her best to shake off those gloomy feelings with another smile. "I don't want my school clothes to smell like fried food, so I'm gonna go change."

"'Kay, I'll be waiting. Oh!" Ryoko gasped at her flip phone vibrating on the table before she hesitantly answered.

Ruka could tell from watching and listening to her mom that it wasn't a nice phone call. *Another phone getting in the way today...*

"Um, Ruka-chan..."

Ruka knew, from the way Ryoko had said her name like an apology, that the hospital was calling her in. Ryoko was on call a lot as a nurse, so she had to go to work as soon as they asked her to.

"Get going," said Ruka.

"But..."

"You're always saying how shorthanded they are, yeah? We'll eat together some other time."

"Sorry..." Ryoko apologized before rushing to get ready for work.

"I'm gonna go change." Ruka had to stop her voice from trembling as she picked up her bag and went to her room.

She tossed her bag on her leopard-print bed and thought about taking a bath before eating. Then she reached for her phone but felt something else inside her bag.

"Hmm...?" She grabbed whatever it was and held it up in front of her eyes.

It was the Juliart perfume Ginka had bought her as a gift. Ruka shook the jewel-shaped bottle, and a citrus scent wafted out.

"Ugh..." Ruka collapsed on her bed and felt her body sink into the soft mattress. She was still gripping the bottle. "Ginka, you dummy..."

She told me to go back to my old life, but I can't do that! Life

without her doesn't feel right anymore. That girl is unbelievably strong, and righteous, and kind. She's out there fighting, and here I am in bed even though I owe her my life. It's so frustrating. I can't stand it!

"Dummy..." This time, Ruka was talking to herself.

She had once called herself a normal gyaru, and that was exactly right. She was perfectly and pathetically normal, so she couldn't do anything to help someone as amazing as Ginka.

It's...so...damn...frustrating...! Ruka kicked her bed over and over, but that didn't stop her feelings from overwhelming her.

When she heard Ryoko's "I'm heading out!" she couldn't even make herself respond.

Ginka wasn't at school the next day. Her seat in the back of the classroom was empty, and it stayed that way when homeroom began. When Tani confirmed her absence, everyone in class was shocked.

Meiri poked Ruka in the shoulder. "You know something."

"I don't..."

"You one hundred percent do... Wait, why are your eyes all swollen?"

"I'll tell you later. Just leave it for now, 'kay?" Ruka knew she was an awful liar, so this was her way of defending herself.

Meiri looked like she still wanted to say something, but she must've sensed something was up and left Ruka alone.

Ginka's absence seemed to make their first period English teacher nervous at first, but class got back on track soon enough.

Everyone's gonna get used to not having Ginka around, thought Ruka. *Mei, Hina, even me... Ugh, when did my thoughts get so depressing? Gross...*

As soon as first period ended, Ruka slumped on her desk.

"Ruka's been acting kinda strange all morning," Meiri told Hinaru.

"Is something wrong, Ruka-chin? Are you depressed or something?"

Hinaru's voice was weirdly muffled. Ruka looked up, saw her friend wearing a black mask, and put her head back down.

"Depressed?" Meiri repeated. "Yeah, maybe..."

"Why? Did Gin-chan say something?"

"That's not it." Ruka wasn't going to say anything, but the words just came out when she heard Hinaru's question. *Ginka's the reason I feel like this, but it's not like we had a fight, and it's not her fault anyway. If I'm gonna blame someone, it's gotta be me.* "I've got nothing... No strength, no dreams..."

Meiri and Hinaru gave Ruka an uneasy look.

"Oof, this is a bad one... Let's do it, Hina," said Meiri.

"Do what?" Hinaru asked. "Oh! Whoever wins cheers her up?"

"Sounds good."

The two of them started playing rock-paper-scissors. Hinaru won with paper, and her face scrunched up so that anyone could tell she was smiling. "You've got nothing? No way! Your face is super cute, Ruka-chin, and you're great with makeup. Your fashion's on point too. You're...okay, I guess, at studying and dancing. You're pretty popular with the guys, and, um... Oh, you can do latte art!"

"That's not what I'm looking for right now..." Ruka mumbled. She knew Hinaru had to try pretty hard to come up with nice things to say, but she also knew none of it was fake. Stuff like that normally made Ruka really happy, but she wasn't her normal self at all.

"Huh? Really?" Hinaru asked.

"Makeup and fashion is so...normal," grumbled Ruka. "Normal girls think about stuff like that... I'm normal. A normal girl with no strength or dreams... A normal gyaru."

"What's a normal gyaru?"

"Not sure..."

Ruka was feeling more and more down. *I already know I can't do anything, but I'm still being pathetic and getting all worked up and bothering my friends. I'm worse than "normal"... I'm a giant pain in the butt. Sorry, Hina. I know you're trying to cheer me up.*

"I-I think you have something special, Moriki-san," a nervous voice chimed in.

Ruka looked up again. She saw a pretty girl with her black hair in braids standing behind Hinaru and Meiri—the class rep, Chinami Hayami.

"Um, I-I came to pick up the student council surveys, and I happened to overhear..." she added in a fluster.

Meiri and Hinaru each placed a hand on her shoulders and led her closer to Ruka.

"Chinami, you're up."

"Go for it, Chi-tan."

"Huh? R-Right... A lot happened between me and Shijunana-san in the past. I mean, I said something weird in the changing room after gym, and, well..."

On Ginka's first day here, she'd made Chinami cry with her power to see through lies. That incident had been a rough experience for Ginka, and apparently it'd been the same for Chinami.

"Back then, I couldn't think at all. My friends covered for me, but I had no idea what to do..."

Well, yeah. Of course she was gonna be a mess after Ginka called her a liar in front of every girl in class. Plus she knew it was true.

"But you stepped in, Moriki-san. Not just to protect me but Shijunana-san too. I can't imagine anyone else doing that. You may think that you don't have anything that makes you special, but I don't think that's true."

Sure, I got involved, but Chinami's wrong. I wasn't trying to protect them. I just didn't want the whole thing to get worse and more awkward. I didn't do it because of some sense of justice or whatever. "You're making a big deal out of nothing. Anyone could've done that."

Chinami turned bright red and slammed her hands down on Ruka's desk. "That's not true!"

"S-Sorry..." said Ruka.

"I-I've really, really wanted to thank you. But I haven't been able to...until now. I'm sorry... A-Ah, no, I-I mean, thank you, s-so..." Chinami stammered.

Meiri tugged on her shoulder. "Chinami, you're getting too worked up."

Chinami seemed to realize Meiri was right. She looked embarrassed and took a few steps back.

"Did that shake you outta your slump?" Meiri asked Ruka.

"I shook right past it. Now I'm just embarrassed..." Ruka replied, but she really was relieved.

Meiri slowly smoothed back her hair, and the bold smile on her face made her look fearless. "Lemme show the two of you how it's done."

Ruka wasn't sure what Meiri was gonna do. *Why's she being so confident all of a sudden?*

"We've been close since middle school, so I *know* you," said Meiri. "A slap on the butt gets you more fired up than a compliment."

Ruka looked at her. "That's sexual harassment."

Meiri sighed and patted Ruka's shoulder. "Not what I meant. You're overthinking this. Just have fun. If you don't have a dream, then look for one. Nothing wrong with that, right?"

"I'm not *that* dumb..." Ruka trailed off. *Come on. I know I'm not smart, but I would have to be really dumb for something* that *simple to make me feel better. Even if I go find Ginka, I'll just get in her way. It sucks, but it's true. That's why I'm not even trying. Sorry, guys, but I'm still gonna be depressed for a while.*

Meiri narrowed her eyes. "Hm. Fine, you're not dumb. But I'm pretty sure you have to be an idiot to have so much fun hanging out with your friends and doing fun stuff together. It takes an idiot to get up in other people's business just to help them out too. Are you really okay with not being dumb, Ruka?"

"That's different..."

Everything just feels bleh right now. I can't get excited about stuff with Mei or Hina, and I can't accept the nice things Chinami's saying either. Making people around me worry isn't fun at all. I hate this.

But then, something shifted in Ruka's mind.

A pretty girl with silver hair, silver eyes, and black gloves... A returning student so beautiful, she'll throw you for a loop but so bad at expressing herself... A serious and blunt vampire hunter... You gotta be crazy to hang out with a girl like that. But I wanna be her friend. Maybe being crazy's totally fine.

"You're right. I've been a real dummy."

Do what's fun. If I don't have a dream, look for one. If my only

other choice is getting all depressed over complicated stuff, I'd rather be an idiot. Better to be dumb if that means I get to see Ginka. Why do I need to be smart anyway?

"Mei."

"Yeah?"

"Are you a genius?"

Meiri didn't answer Ruka, but the smile on her face basically said, *"What, you just noticed?"*

"Y-You're good now, Ruka-chin?" asked Hinaru.

"No way..." Chinami looked stunned.

Ruka stood up, faced the girls, and said, "Meiri, take a step back. Hinaru, Chinami, move a little closer. Mm-hmm, closer..."

The three girls looked confused but followed Ruka's instructions. When they couldn't get any closer to each other, Ruka wrapped her arms around all of them and squeezed as hard as she could.

"Waaah!" Chinami yelped.

"I get it. I'm normal. I'm nothing special at all!" said Ruka.

"C-Can't. Breathe..." Hinaru wheezed.

Ruka beamed at everyone. "But I've got the greatest buds! That's more than enough!"

"L-Let go, dummy!" Meiri snapped. "You're wrecking my hair!"

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"My bestest buds!"

Ruka ignored the groans, yells, and complaints and hugged everyone tighter. She finally let go after a few minutes, and the three girls wobbled and reeled.

"I'm good now! Thanks! You're the best!" Ruka yelled with a grin on her face. Then she tossed her bag over her shoulder. "Gotta run! Later!"

"M-Moriki-san, the next class is about to start..."

"I'm leaving early! Make up an excuse for me, 'kay, Chinami?"

"H-Huh?!"

Her friends were shocked, but Ruka ran out of the room and didn't look back.

Why'd I even worry about causing trouble or getting in the way? If I wanna see her, then that's what I'm gonna do! 'Cause we're friends!

When Ruka got to Ginka's building, she pulled a card out of her wallet and grinned. "Hee hee... So naive, my dear Ginka."

Ginka had given Ruka her spare card key and never took it back, so Ruka walked right in, got on the elevator, and went to the seventh floor.

"Huh? Her door's open..."

The busted door handle made Ruka nervous, so she carefully peeked past the door. The hallway inside was so torn up, it looked like a hurricane had come through.

Ginka and David's fight had already started.

Ruka tried to shake off her fear. "Nope, come on, I can't get scared after coming all this way."

I'm here to help Ginka! How am I supposed to do that if I start freaking out? My nails are still covered in sacred silver dust, so a retainer popping up should be fine, right? Probably?

"G-Ginka, you here?" Ruka asked, but no one answered.

She didn't bother taking her shoes off before going inside. The living room was in way worse shape than the hallway. The table had been sliced in half, the cupboard was toppled over on the floor, and there was a big hole in the window. Black sand all over the place

made the apartment look like a freaky desert, so Ginka must've taken down a ton of retainers here.

Ruka noticed the door to the armory was open. The panel had been ripped out of the wall, and wires were sticking out. Someone had forced their way in. The mess inside was just as bad as the one in the living room. Black sand covered everything, and the shelves were broken into pieces. Pretty much all the swords and guns were gone, and the tablet was in two pieces on the floor next to the workstation.

She checked the kitchen and bathrooms next, but Ginka, David, and the retainers were nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, wait..." Ruka pulled out her phone and tapped the vampire search app. Hunters using exoforce were supposed to show up on the map as blue dots, and that would tell her where Ginka and David were. But when the app started, a bunch of orange dots popped up on the screen.

"Whoa, so many?!" She counted at least ten retainers until she found a blue dot on the map—Ginka.

The orange dots closed in on the blue one before they all vanished. More popped up and moved toward the blue dot, then disappeared right away. The same thing kept happening over and over...

Ginka's fighting a ton of retainers. I think she's winning, but she might hit her limit with this much coming at her.

"I gotta help her."

But if I go like this, I'll just get in the way. Lemme find a weapon or something.

Ruka went into Ginka's almost-empty armory. She frowned when she heard a clattering noise and took a closer look. A bunch of little bottles filled with powder had tumbled over on some shelves, and their color made Ruka think of the person she wanted to see more than anyone else in the world.

Chapter 9: Style's for Yourself, Y'know?

Ginka launched herself off a utility pole into the sky. A horde of black clay retainers appeared in midair and unleashed a flurry of attacks at her with swords and axes.

"So irritating!" She swung her silver spear and turned the retainers to black sand. Their weapons clattered to the ground.

A chill down the back of Ginka's neck made her turn around just in time to dodge a bullet. She looked closely at the buildings behind her and saw retainers armed with guns and rifles on a rooftop.

"How dare you steal my weapons...!"

Those firearms had been stolen from her apartment, which was bad enough, but now the retainers were trying to kill her with them.

Ginka was furious. She fired exoforce arrows and sent the retainers flying. The guns rolled off the building, where other retainers picked them up and fired back. More retainers were picking up the fallen swords and axes too.

They attack, I defeat them, and then they attack again. This has been going on since yesterday.

She couldn't use her phone, and her weapons had been stolen. And she had to be careful about damaging buildings or being seen by civilians. This endless battle was slowly but steadily wearing her down.

I can't keep going like this.

Ginka gathered her concentration and sent her exoforce out far and wide. By following its flow, she sensed someone else's exoforce and found its origin in a distant, deserted parking garage. David was using the same method to determine Ginka's location and continue sending retainers after her.

"Is he trying to lure me in...?"

His deployment of exoforce felt unnatural. As a vampire hunter focused on support, he could surely make himself undetectable. This was almost certainly a trap.

But it's best to fight while I still have energy, she thought, so she scattered the retainers swarming around her like mosquitos and headed straight for the parking garage.

Ginka flew into the building, kicking up a cloud of dust as she landed. The floor and pillars were cracked, and there wasn't a single car parked there. That, along with how the structure looked from the outside, told her the garage had been abandoned.

"Show yourself, David! Or do you intend to hide like a scared child forever?!"

She didn't think he would come out just because of a cheap taunt like that, but she wanted to make her presence known. That would lower the possibility of getting civilians involved. Of course, it would be ideal if what she had said did bother him, but...

"After twenty-four hours of fighting, your supply of exoforce remains inexhaustible—proof of the requisite mental fortitude you're blessed with. You truly are the Silver Dancer, our beacon of hope," said a low voice.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. David Highgate wore the same dark suit he had worn yesterday, and his gray eyes narrowed in amusement.

"I told you to stop calling me that!" Ginka threw her spear at David.

Five retainers materialized in front of him. The spear disintegrated the first, pierced through the second, and punctured the third's abdomen. It was losing speed after each retainer. By the time the fifth had turned to dust, the spear was slow enough for David to disperse it with a backhand blow.

"A hunter protected by retainers? Shameless," Ginka said with all the loathing she could muster.

David sighed. "I'm sure you must have realized how difficult it is to live in this world. Everything we so diligently studied is of no use here, and our accomplishments will never be acknowledged."

"Hunters are not to seek honor and glory. Have you forgotten the

precepts? How far you've fallen..."

"The precepts were established by a degraded and decayed hunter alliance. If we do nothing, the precepts themselves may deteriorate. Now is the time to act."

As they spoke, Ginka carefully measured the distance between her and David. *Less than ten meters. I can close that gap in an instant with exoforce. But the fact that he showed himself like this concerns me. His odds of winning would have been good if he had remained hidden. I'm sure he has a plan...*

"Many have struggled due to the ineptitude of the hunter alliance. Some have even taken their own lives. We simply wish to stop all of that. Ginka, please lend us your aid."

To think he has the audacity to try and recruit me now...!

Ginka's voice was full of fury. "We hunters resolved to face new challenges after the war. It is a trial we must overcome. What you're doing is an insult to those of us attempting to do just that."

Vampire hunters could not live normal, everyday lives. In exchange, they could obtain and use exoforce. Hunters were surely capable of handling struggles and difficulties without a teenager's help. Besides, making any kind of decision based on David's words alone was illogical.

"It seems as if I must defeat you, after all..." David gestured like a conductor, and four figures emerged from behind the pillars. They were twitching slightly in the sun like retainers, but these four wore clothes and didn't seem to be made of clay.

"Humans changing into vampires..." said Ginka.

All of them had pale skin. With their eyes unnaturally wide open, the whites of their eyes were clearly visible. They didn't seem to be conscious, and they were moving in sync like broken machines.

"I gave these four diluted vampire cells. It will take time for them to fully transform, which is rather convenient for my purposes. Also..." David gestured again.

Retainers appeared from the ceiling and floor. They stretched their claylike bodies out and clung to the four pale figures until the humans looked just like pitch-black retainers.

"I see. So this is your plot." Ginka considered her options. She

had to hold back against the humans, but then she wouldn't be able to defeat the retainers. She couldn't attack humans with the force needed to defeat retainers either. Her expression grew grim as she realized what David had done.

My hands are tied. I can't attack at all because I can't separate them.

The retainer-covered people threw themselves at her. She dodged with exoforce under her feet, which wasn't difficult because her enemies were slow, but their attacks kept coming and there were far too many for her to deal with.

I'm losing energy. This is just a repeat of that fight earlier.

"Silver Dancer, this is no time for dancing if you truly wish to defeat me," David jeered from far away.

I hate to admit it, but he may be right.

She could simply cut through the retainers *and* transforming humans, but that would go against the ideals she and her grandmother both held. They had always fought these monsters to protect the innocent. Hurting them was wrong. She couldn't do that, no matter what.

But what if I let David escape? What if his plan to revive vampires succeeds?

Murderers would run rampant once more, and people would disappear into the night. The deaths of these victims would be treated as suicides or missing persons cases, but in reality their bodies would be consumed by monsters. The success of David's plan would destroy the dignity of all humankind and sow seeds of suspicion that would threaten this peaceful world.

I have to decide quickly.

Ginka silently apologized to her grandmother for what she was about to do. With a vampire revival on the horizon, such a merciless act was her only choice.

I won't ask for forgiveness. Once this is over, I'll ask to be punished for my crimes.

She drew upon her exoforce to destroy her enemies. But as it filled her body, she heard quiet footsteps behind her.

More retainers? Or more victims? She turned around cautiously.

A girl with platinum-blonde hair wearing makeup and a bright smile was coming this way, her short skirt fluttering as she ran.

Ruka Moriki.

What? Why? How is Ruka here? Ginka couldn't understand, and she couldn't move.

"Hup!" Ruka yelled. She took a big step forward and threw a number of small bottles in the air.

They flew over Ginka's head and burst like fireworks. A blizzard of silver powder filled the parking garage with shimmering light. Sacred silver dust turned the retainers to black sand. The humans, released from their captors, collapsed on the ground. They were unconscious, but their breathing was calm and they appeared to be safe for now.

"Huh...? Wha...?" David was frozen in shock after his plan fell to pieces in an instant.

Ginka assumed that David's inaction meant that he didn't have any more transforming humans up his sleeve. But that also meant her resolve was now meaningless. *Is this really happening?*

Both vampire hunters stood dumbfounded.

Ruka Moriki stood in front of them with a sunny smile on her face. "Thanks for waiting!"

◆ ◆ ◆

With the vampire search app as her guide, Ruka had hopped on a train to the next town, climbed over a fence around a parking garage with No Trespassing signs on it, and found Ginka in a pinch with retainers all around her. So she'd tossed the sacred silver dust and hoped for the best. The bottles had shattered over the retainers, and the silver powder had made them melt like slugs.

Ruka cheered and yelled. "Whoa! Yay! That worked crazy well!"

Ginka gawked at her through the glittery smoke. "Ruka...? How are you here...?"

"Um, I took a train and a taxi."

"I wasn't asking about your means of transportation, I was... Ah!"

Ginka dashed in front of Ruka, grabbed her shoulder, and pushed her down. She formed an exoforce spear and threw it. A sizzling

sound like flesh burning made Ruka turn around to see what was happening, and she saw a retainer fall to the ground.

"You chose your target quickly, David." Ginka glared at him. She was still holding Ruka.

"Vampires tend to go after the weak. Know your enemy, know thyself, and you shall not fear a hundred battles. It's strategy, not cowardice," David replied.

Then he pointed his silver gun at Ruka and pulled the trigger.

Just like that?! Ruka was too shocked to move.

Ginka reinforced her hand with exoforce and deflected six bullets, one after another. "Time for a temporary retreat. Ruka, close your mouth and hold on to my shoulders."

"Gotcha, I'll— Gah!" Ruka squealed as Ginka grabbed her waist and took off. Everything around her went blurry. It was all happening so fast, Ruka didn't realize Ginka was jumping at super high speeds until they had turned two corners.

When Ginka finally stopped and let Ruka go, Ruka's legs wobbled, and her inner ear was yelling at her to stop moving or start hurling. She brought her hands up to her mouth. "Oof, I'm gonna feel this tomorrow..."

Ginka ignored that and pointed her finger at Ruka. "Why did you come? I warned you. I said you would get mixed up in all this if you were near me, didn't I?"

Her voice sounded like a cracking whip, but that just made Ruka smile. *So clumsy with your words, Ginka. That's so you.*

"Welp, I'm just a big dummy," said Ruka, "so I didn't really get that."

"Oh?" The tone of Ginka's voice was intimidating, and the exoforce around her started billowing like waves.

Ruka had never seen exoforce move like that. *She's super mad. But it's not like I did anything wrong.* "Ahem. I gave it a lot of thought in my own idiot way. I know you were worried about us and all that, but friends support each other when things are tough too. It's not like we're only around when things are happy and fun, y'know? So I came here."

I'm here 'cause we're friends. I wanna have fun with Ginka and

help her out when she's in trouble. I don't care if that makes me pushy or nosy or whatever. That's how I really feel.

"It looked like you were in a tough spot too. You were totally surrounded when I saved you."

"I wouldn't say I was in a tough spot. I was simply holding back against the transforming humans."

"Oh. Really?" Ruka looked away awkwardly. *Does...that mean I shouldn't have done that?*

"But, well, sacred silver dust was modified to only attack vampire cells. As a result, depending on your viewpoint—though it was merely a fortunate coincidence..." Ginka hesitated. "One *could* say, perhaps, that deploying silver dust was the best choice given the circumstances."

Ruka grinned. She was pretty sure that was Ginka's grumpy way of saying she did good. "Hee hee hee, Gin-saaaaan, don't you have something else to tell me?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself. You succeeded by coincidence, but that does not change the fact that you are a hindrance here."

"Aw, c'mon, be honest!" Ruka elbowed Ginka.

A flash of irritation passed before Ginka slumped her shoulders. "Fine. You saved me. Thank you."

"No prob."

"I can't believe you..." Ginka shook her head, but there was a faint smile on her face.

That alone makes coming here worth it, Ruka thought.

But Ginka's smile soon disappeared, and she looked like she was ready to fight again. "David will, without a doubt, come after you. There is no reason for you to stay, so get yourself to a safe location. I'll cover your retreat."

She's dead set on making me leave. Ruka kept her mouth shut, but she showed Ginka her sacred silver dust nails like she was saying she wanted to stay. She had even given herself a pedicure to make sure she could defend herself.

But Ginka shook her head again. "I don't know how, but David can produce hordes of retainers. Even if your nails allow you to deal with a handful of opponents, they won't help when you're

surrounded. On top of that, your temptation blood will draw the retainers to you, so—”

Ginka peeked around the corner and threw a knife. The sounds of something hitting the ground and crumbling sand came soon after.

“They’ve already caught up...” The desperate tone in Ginka’s voice made one thing clear: The clock was ticking.

Ruka gripped her bag and faced Ginka. “Um, I actually had one more idea. Can you hear me out? You told me to let you know if I was gonna do something weird, yeah?”

“In other words, you intend to do ‘something weird’?”

“Hee hee!”

“You can’t laugh this off. I’m uneasy, but I suppose I’ll hear you out. But I am extremely uneasy.”

Ouch. She didn’t have to say “uneasy” twice... Ruka took something out of her bag and stuck it in front of Ginka’s face. “How about this?”

Ginka’s brows furrowed. “Isn’t this the perfume I gave you?”

“You got it! Except I did something to it.”

“Hmm?” Ginka stared at the swaying liquid inside and tilted her head. “Wait, you didn’t...” Her expression went from confused to shocked to confused again. She looked at Ruka and the bottle and said, “It may prove effective...”

“Yup, already tried it, totally worked.”

“I-It did?”

“Just watch.” Ruka grinned and sprayed the citrusy perfume on her palm. She dabbed it on the nape of her neck and looked proud of herself. “Well?”

Ginka’s eyes went wide open. She poked and patted different parts of Ruka’s body and muttered, “Is... Is such a thing even possible...?”

“Hey, that tickles! Th-Those are my boobs!”

“Amazing...”

“W-Wait, what’s amazing? The perfume, or— Whoa, my bra came off?!”

Ruka pushed Ginka aside, and Ginka took a few steps back. She didn’t look satisfied, but she also didn’t seem as eager to make Ruka

leave.

"I find it hard to believe, but it should be effective..."

"And?"

"I'll leave this area to you while I concentrate on David."

"Yeah!" Ruka clenched her fist and cheered.

Ginka made a face like she had just eaten something bitter. "No matter how well that may work, you are a civilian. Focus on running away."

"Roger!" Ruka brought her hand to her forehead in a salute.

Ginka narrowed her eyes. "Do you truly understand...?" She sighed and turned away from Ruka to get ready for battle again.

"Hey, Ginka."

"What is it?"

"Win this thing!"

"Of course."

That got Ruka even more fired up. *Ginka's gonna blow that whole vampire revival plan to smithereens! Oh, there's one more thing.* "By the way..."

"What is it?"

"Silver Dancer is a cool nickname, so you didn't need to try so hard to hide it, you— Ah, she's gone."

◆ ◆ ◆

Ginka rounded a corner with twin blades at the ready and found David standing in the middle of a lane in the abandoned parking garage. The light from the setting sun had taken on a bluish-purple tint, making it more difficult to discern the expression on his face.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, David."

David did not respond. He waved his hand, and a new swarm of retainers came crawling out of the shadows.

"Go," he ordered.

The retainers scuttled along the walls, avoiding Ginka and continuing past her.

Ginka did not move.

"Are you abandoning your friend to her fate...?" David asked. He

seemed surprised that she would prioritize taking him down over protecting Ruka.

"No, I trust her," said Ginka. "I have not abandoned her like you have abandoned the alliance."

She saw the corner of David's mouth twitch and noted his growing levels of stress and anger.

David let a long breath out—to calm his emotions, perhaps—before pouring exoforce into the cylinder of his gun. "So you intend to defeat me before the young lady's supply of sacred silver dust runs out? Very well... Very well, indeed. A showdown it is. I'll take you up on that." He closed the cylinder of his weapon with a snap of his wrist.

Looks like he's completed his preparations for battle. Good. I'm ready too. Ginka brandished her two silver blades and pointed them at the slender renegade before her. "I'll take you down here and now, Lucid Eye."

"Just what I was hoping to hear, Silver Dancer." David aimed his gun at the girl he acknowledged as the strongest vampire hunter.

Ginka charged forward, propelled by exoforce under her feet. At the same time, David reinforced his legs with exoforce and ran up a pillar and across the ceiling to distance himself from her.

"Did you think I would face you directly?" David pulled the trigger again and again. His shots were straight, curved, fast, slow, and all aimed at Ginka.

Ginka easily deflected the bullets with her twin blades and sped up to close the distance between her and David. "Did you think shooting me would work?"

He only laughed. Somehow, his voice didn't sound tense at all.

As she chased after David, Ginka's thoughts raced. *I heard the cylinder... He must have finished reloading. Those retainers were troublesome, but they possess far less combat ability than vampires—especially right now when the sun is out. David's attacks are becoming weaker. Victory is well within my reach, but there's no way he hasn't realized that too.*

David jumped off the ceiling and hid behind a nearby pillar.

Pure reflex made Ginka throw her blade. It spun and carved

across the floor until it sliced through part of the pillar. David's foot, severed at the ankle, flew through the air. His leather shoe slid along the floor.

Too easy. That didn't feel right... Something's wrong. "David, I'm sure you don't want to suffer any more injuries. You can still use exoforce to reattach that foot. If you wish to make it to the grave with your body in one piece, show yourself."

David didn't respond and showed no signs of moving from behind the pillar.

I didn't really want to use this, but he leaves me no choice.

"I warned you," said Ginka, and she focused on her hand.

The parking garage shook as a wild storm raged inside. Dust scattered everywhere, and a high-pitched, ear-shattering noise rang out. All the light in the garage started to disappear like it was being sucked into the silver whirlwind forming on Ginka's palm.

She aimed at the pillar and got ready to unleash the exoforce she had been holding back.

"Hyaaaaaah!" Ginka launched a swirling blast from her hand.

A thunderous explosion shook the entire building, and debris rained down from the ceiling. The exoforce surrounding Ginka's body protected her from harm, but the same could not be said for the rest of the garage. Through the new hole in the pillar, she heard and saw the rebar inside bend and groan before a cloud of dust and rubble shot out from the other side and David fell.

"Respond if you're still alive. You're a hunter, so that attack shouldn't have killed you." Ginka used her silver blade to clear away the lingering dust clouds and approached David's body.

A retainer lay motionless on the rubble. One of its feet was missing.

"A decoy?"

"Indeed."

Ginka sensed the presence behind her, but before she could react, something hard slammed into the back of her head. She didn't need to look to know it was a gun.

"I disguised that retainer to take my place using a face mask and a speaker," David explained, "but it was pointless against a beam

attack like that."

Ginka breathed out through her nose to steady herself. "It wasn't a beam. That attack is called Ring Achoo."

"Ring Achoo... Quite the intense sneeze," David replied with an unpleasant laugh.

After distancing himself from me, thought Ginka, *he hid in the shadow of the pillar, disguised that retainer, and moved to the ceiling. After my attack, he looked for an opening and found one.*

"Still, it feels rather pathetic for the strongest vampire hunter to meet her end this way," said David.

Ginka noted a faint tinge of elation in his voice. *Is he impressed with how well his plan is going? Excited by the chance to defeat me? Both, perhaps.*

"Do you have any last words?" he asked.

She had once asked the last vampire the same question.

How ironic. To think I would be in that position now. Maybe it's fate... The thought amused Ginka, but she did not smile. After all, this battle wasn't over yet.

"David, you did not fight on the front lines until the war of extermination. In other words, you're not familiar with all the skills I possess."

"What of it?"

"This will be a good opportunity for me to demonstrate." Ginka let her arm hang down. "First, I can manipulate the exoforce of those I touch to a certain degree. Moving an entire body may be difficult for me, but immobilizing a single finger is simple enough."

"Wha...?!" David seemed to have realized that he could no longer move his finger. His arm muscles were tensing and flexing, so he must have been trying to pull the trigger.

He's panicking. I wonder when he'll realize he can't move his legs either?

"You've been fighting me for twenty-four hours straight, so your exoforce is running low. I suspected you would attempt a close-range shot before you ran out. You haven't cornered me—I've cornered you."

Ginka started to focus her exoforce. It was weaker than when she

had destroyed the pillar, but she knew she still had enough to do some damage.

"Next... I can radiate exoforce from anywhere on my body. From my back, for example."

David didn't react.

He must be utterly dumbfounded. Even though we're in battle, he's letting his cowardice get the better of him. That's fine, because I'm ready to do this.

Exoforce sprouted like wings from Ginka's back with so much intensity, David was launched into the air.

"Noooooooooooo!" he screamed.

Ginka heard a gunshot, but the bullet went in the wrong direction. Her exoforce had probably overwhelmed David's gun. She turned around and saw him sprawled out on the ground, so she ran over and stomped on his wrist.

"Agh!" David's wrist bones snapped. His hand twitched and released his silver gun. "I-I will not...fall...to such tactics..." He groaned.

That face he's making... It looks more like frustration than pain. Well, his carefully crafted plan was *crushed by a rather crude method. I can see why he can't accept that, but I don't care. Resorting to combat was illogical in the first place.*

Ginka thrust her sword at him and declared, "You've lost, David Highgate."

David's face remained twisted for a moment, but he soon seemed to relax. His smile was resigned, like he had given up. "I lost, but we both suffered damages. You lost your friend, after all..." He gazed beyond Ginka and pointed to another area of the garage. "The retainers there are no longer moving, and I cannot hear your friend's screams... I think we both know what has happened to her."

Ginka sighed. *He sounds confident for a sore loser, but he has no idea what he's talking about.*

"David, have your search capabilities dulled?" she asked.

"What do you—"

"I'll give you time to take a proper look." Ginka lowered her sword.

As David searched by dispersing small amounts of exoforce into the air, he broke out in a cold sweat. “What is this presence? It’s almost like...” He trailed off. His unsteady gray eyes reflected unease and confusion at what he could not understand.

Considering everything he has done, I could let him continue suffering... But there’s a lot to deal with after this. I suppose I should give him the answer.

Ginka turned to where David had been pointing and called out, “Ruka, we’re done! You can come here now!”

“Ooh, you are? Good work!” Ruka’s voice was so bright, it felt out of place in this half-destroyed parking garage. Her platinum-blonde hair trailed behind her as she ran toward Ginka. She also had bluish-purple color contacts, pierced ears, a choker, and a garter belt around one thigh.

That wasn’t all, though. A mist of silver bubbles that looked like they came from a carbonated drink were floating all around her.

David looked astonished. “E-Ex-Exo-Exoforce?!”

Exoforce made Ruka’s hair flutter as she casually walked over. “Yo, Davy-san, you really went all out! Hey, isn’t your hand bent kinda weird?”

“Ruka, behind you,” said Ginka.

“Huh? Ah, crap!”

As Ginka wondered if Ruka’s temptation blood might have drawn these retainers to her, Ruka just waved her hand like she was shooing them off. The exoforce on her fingers turned them to sand.

“Whoa, they melted again... This exoforce stuff is no joke.” Ruka flapped her hand a few more times.

That was how she had faced fierce attacks from retainers without getting a single scratch on her.

“Sh-She’s...a...v-vampire hunter...?” David was panting like a dog. He was beyond panicked now.

“No,” Ginka replied. “Ruka is an ordinary civilian.”

“Th-Then... How did she acquire exoforce...in such a short period of time...?”

“She didn’t. Performing the surgical procedure for that in a place like this is impossible.”

"D-Do you possess...the skill to grant another person exoforce?"

"That skill does exist, but I do not have it."

"Th-Then how... H-How in the world is she using exoforce?!"

Ginka ignored him.

Ruka, on the other hand, pulled the perfume bottle out of her skirt pocket. "The right answer's right here! Ta-da!"

"Wh-What is that bottle?"

"It's perfume. You use it like so, and so." Ruka sprayed some on her wrist, which started shining with silver particles and smelled like citrus too.

David's eyes were so wide open, it looked like they were going to come out of his head. "Y-You... You mixed sacred silver dust...with perfume...?!"

Ruka nodded. "By the way, I did my nails with the stuff too. Looks cute like glitter, right?"

"N-No! Such a thing couldn't possibly be possible...!"

"B-But I did—"

Ginka held up her hand to stop Ruka. She didn't want the conversation to get any more off track.

But David was already lost in his own thoughts. He was mumbling to himself and seemed too shaken to keep English and Japanese separate. "The perfume *oil* bonded with, or the scent...? Is it volatile...? What about the durability...? But there are no precedents..."

Ginka was starting to feel some sympathy for David, but it was the tiniest, most minuscule amount possible. "I was surprised too, at first. But for those who cannot use exoforce, applying it to the body appears to be a more effective means of self-defense than throwing it. It's an idea we exoforce users never would have thought of."

"Th-That's..." David's mouth flapped open and shut. When he couldn't come up with any more words, his head drooped as if he had been dealt a devastating blow.

Ginka supposed David had to admit that Ruka's methods were effective. Perhaps he was humiliated by the fact that a Japanese high school girl had come up with such a simple technique he had never thought of as an engineer.

It wouldn't hurt to rub it in a little more, she thought.

"David, allow me to give you one more important piece of information."

"What...?"

Ginka grinned. "Makeup is freedom."

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Aw, yeah, we did it! Victory! Yay!

While Ruka was off enjoying feeling like a superhero, Ginka had taken David down. His arm was bent at a weird angle, and one of the garage pillars was wrecked, so lots of stuff had happened.

But we totally won! All's well that ends well, right? I wonder if I should give Ginka a high five... Would she be into that?

"So I've lost? Completely and utterly? H-Ha ha ha...!" David sounded like he was mocking himself with that laugh.

But then—

"Argh!" David screamed and writhed in pain.

Ruka didn't see how it'd happened, but there was a silver knife through David's wrist now.

Ginka pointed her silver sword at David's nose. "Make no mistake. I didn't leave you alive just to chat. Give me the names of your collaborators in the vampire revival plan. You'll get more knives in your arm until you tell me every one."

Both of his wrists were wrecked, and he was covered in cold sweat, but David grinned like he was challenging Ginka. "Y-You think mere threats would make me sell out my allies?"

"All right, time for another." Ginka summoned and brandished a second knife.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Gross! Grotesque!" Ruka objected. *The brutality threw me for a sec, but I gotta stop this.* "We already won, right?! Davy-san doesn't look like he can move, so you can stop now!" She made a big X with her arms and held it in front of Ginka's face.

Ginka shook her head. "Ruka, this matter is on a different level."

"L-Level? 'Kay, then, how do I level up?!"

Ginka ignored that. Her eyes were still firmly locked on David. "We should assume that anything this man did can also be done by his allies. If we do not extract their information from him, the world will plunge into chaos. I'll use any method necessary to obtain their names."

She's dead serious, thought Ruka. *She's gonna keep hurting Davy-san... That's no good.*

"L-Let's contact the hunter alliance," Ruka suggested, "or maybe the police."

"The hunter alliance cannot take action, and the Japanese police lack the strength needed to restrain a hunter."

"O-Okay, but torture's bad news."

"The hunter alliance granted me the right to kill another hunter."

That coldhearted statement made Ruka freeze. *Ginka's exoforce lets her cut down retainer after retainer. Heck, she can even bring a building down if she wants. And she can use it against humans...* "M-Murder. That's murder."

"The vampires I have killed used to be human. Retainers are made from animals and insects—living beings. I've injured many and stolen countless lives. This would be just one more sin out of many... If you cannot watch, then you should leave." Ginka's voice carried a hint of sadness, but it was full of cold, detached resolve.

I don't want to see anyone get hurt. And if it's Ginka doing the hurting? That's way worse. I wanna run away... Which is exactly why I gotta stay right here.

"I'm not leaving," said Ruka.

"You'll watch?"

"Nope!" Ruka grabbed Ginka's wrist.

A massive rush of exoforce hit Ruka like an overflowing river. The dim silvery glow around Ruka was nothing compared to the blinding light coming from Ginka's body.

Davy-san called Ginka the strongest vampire hunter. I guess this is what he meant...

"Let go," Ginka commanded.

"No...way! Don't...wanna!" Ruka clung to Ginka's arm with everything she had, with her body pressing up against the hunter.

Ginka looked annoyed, but she didn't send Ruka flying. Ruka knew she was only harsh with her enemies like vampires and David, and she held back against civilians.

This is my only chance to convince her!

"Th-The fight's already over!" Ruka yelled.

"No, it isn't. Not until I've extracted the information from this man."

"That's not what I mean!"

"What are you talking about?" Ginka's voice was quiet, but her exoforce flared.

Come on, brain! Give it all you've got!

"I mean your fight with the vampires, not Davy-san! If you torture him, you'll be at war again! You can't do that! All you VHs worked so hard to end the war. If you start again, then that makes all your hard work pointless!"

It took all of Ruka's willpower to keep going. This time, she whispered to Ginka. "You said being with us is fun, didn't you? So stay with us. Stay in this world a little longer."

It comes down to our feelings. I just wanna be with her. It's not the best argument, but I don't think it's wrong. I wanna know more about her, and she feels the same about me. I'm sure she does.

"If I don't extract information from him now, there will be more victims..." Ginka hesitated.

That was when Ruka really knew Ginka felt the same way. She let go of her wrist and took a deep breath. "I don't think Davy-san's a terrible guy anyway."

Ginka and David both flinched when they heard that. Both of them looked intensely pissed off. Ruka thought she even felt some bloodlust mixed in, since they were still coming down from their fight, but she decided to ignore that.

Ginka pointed the tip of her blade at David again. "For the sake of his ambitions, this man harmed civilians—including you, Ruka—and even tried to turn them into vampires. You're saying someone like that isn't 'a terrible guy'?"

"I mean, he saved my butt."

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember Yoshiyama? That senpai who almost turned into a vampire?"

"What about him...?"

"I ran into him in front of Bianco. One thing led to another, and he almost hit me. That's when Davy-san stepped in. Isn't that, like, super good timing?"

"You're saying he stepped in *to save you*?" Ginka whispered. "In other words, he's not past the point of rehabilitation?"

"Yeah, that! He can still be, um, rehabbed!"

Ginka looked down at David with a chilly gaze. "That's Ruka's story. What's yours?"

If Davy-san agrees with me, then maybe Ginka will take that one good thing into account when she decides what to do. But if he doesn't...

"She's delusional." David had a broken wrist and a knife through his other one, but his words were clear and firm. "I appeared because I saw that boy had the makings of a vampire. Youth and irritability are important qualifications. A quarrel would have been troublesome to deal with, so I got involved. To think that my actions would be misconstrued in such a way..." he said with a deep, throaty laugh. There was a sarcastic look on his face. "I won't sell out my allies. I'm confident I can endure any torture you have in mind. If you wish to protect civilians from further harm, I recommend killing me here and now."

Um, I can't understand him at all?! Is he just trying to make Ginka mad? How is dying better than literally anything else?

"Ruka..." said Ginka.

Ruka turned around, but Ginka was talking to David. "Ruka...acts impulsively before giving matters serious thought, and her beliefs are biased toward people being fundamentally good. Thus she sides with those who do her harm and easily experiences Stockholm syndrome. To be honest, her testimony is not trustworthy."

"Ouch. You're dragging me pretty hard..."

Ginka ignored Ruka's comment and kept going. "However, that also proves Ruka is a good person. The way she lives her life—how she tries to enjoy every single day—is like a celebration of peace.

She knows nothing of the bloody world we hunters have lived in... We are here to protect people like her. I am very glad to have met her, and the fact that she is alive and well is something I am proud of."

"Wh-Whoa, now you're being super nice?!" Ruka laughed, but she couldn't hide how embarrassed she was. "That's a crazy one-eighty all of a sudden. You gotta work up to stuff like that!"

"You thought so too," said Ginka, ignoring Ruka once again, "which is why you saved her, isn't it?"

David was silent at first, but then he sighed. "I realize I'm repeating myself, but my involvement was mere coincidence. You seem to be prone to flights of fancy, Silver Dancer."

He sounds harsh...and disappointed. And he's still trying to piss Ginka off. Why does he wanna die so bad?

"David, you've forgotten yourself," said Ginka.

She was so calm, it almost seemed unreal to Ruka.

"What are you trying to say?" asked David.

"In your agitation, you forgot my ability to discern falsehoods."

"Ah...!" David started trembling, and his mouth fell open.

Whoa, his mouth is huge. I could probably fit my fist into it... Wait, that's not important! Ginka can see through lies, so Davy-san was lying just now?!

Ginka lowered her sword. Her will to fight seemed to be gone.

"I-I was struck by a fleeting whim, that's all!" David shouted. His face was burning red like he'd just been stripped naked. "By supporting the vampire revival plan, I put lives in danger! That is an irrefutable fact! I am a criminal who must be judged!"

"How we judge you is our choice. I will take the fact that you protected Ruka into consideration," said Ginka.

"You really did save me, huh, Davy-san!" added Ruka.

"As if I would do such a thing...!" David hissed.

"More lies, David?" Ginka asked.

David's anger was replaced by disappointment as he hung his head. "I never intended..." He paused, then let all of his regret and anguish out. "Because I was only watching the young lady to find a way to contact you, Ginka, I had no intention of revealing myself to

her. But my body moved on its own... I tried to make the boy into a vampire to cover my tracks. I do not know what I was thinking...”

David reached for Ginka with his battered arm like he wanted to be saved. “Even as a criminal, I am only capable of half measures. I find myself unable to embody evil or return to righteousness... Rather than live in disgrace, I wish to die by the strongest vampire hunter’s hand. That is my only desire...”

He looks so sad, begging for his own death... If Ginka hadn’t been holding Ruka back, Ruka would probably be trying to make him feel better right now.

Ginka had once said that David became a vampire hunter to be an ally of justice. She’d also told Ruka she regretted letting David be when she’d had the chance to do something about him. Ruka could understand that. *If she had, maybe he wouldn’t be suffering so much.*

“I understand, David.” Ginka waved her hand for Ruka to step back.

“G-Ginka...”

Ginka smiled at her. “Ruka, leave this to me.” She stood in front of David and raised her silver blade up high.

David closed his eyes with satisfaction. He seemed to be moved by Ginka stepping forward to take his life. Even though he still trembled in a cold sweat, he looked like he was at peace.

The silver hunter gripped the handle of her sword and—

—stomped with her heel, right between his legs.

“Urmph!” David’s gray eyes rolled back. A bunch of sweat flew off him as he twitched and spasmed on the ground.

“As if I’d just grant your wish, dumbass! Cool your head!!!” Ginka’s angry yelling shook the parking garage.

Foam trickled out of David’s mouth. His head drooped to one side, and he passed out.

Ruka was honestly a little overwhelmed by what happened to David. All she could say was, “Doesn’t getting kicked down there really hurt for a guy?”

Ginka, who had been looking pretty satisfied, made her expression neutral again. “A woman would find a kick to the groin

painful as well."

"I mean, yeah, but..."

"I held back, so everything should still be functional. Besides, that fool is a hunter. He can use exoforce to heal himself."

"So jealous... I'd love to have exoforce for real."

Ginka ignored that and crouched next to David. She dispersed the knife in his arm and bound his wrists with his coat. For a moment, there was a sentimental look in her eyes.

Ruka watched without saying anything. *There are some things only vampire hunters understand. Butting in right now would be lame.*

Ginka stood up and looked at the unconscious people lying around and all the black sand in the parking garage. "We need to deal with the aftermath," she said.

She sounds exhausted. How long has she been fighting?

"Break time first?" Ruka asked.

"No. I need to remove the vampire cells from those people and contact the hunter alliance. Then I'll need to collect the weapons scattered around town... There are apartment repairs to consider as well..."

Okay, fair. Sounds like she can't rest if she wants to get all of this done.

"I'll help you out," said Ruka.

Ginka looked like she was going to say no again, but she smiled at Ruka instead. "Right. I'm counting on you."

Seriously, why is she so pretty... Ruka's heart skipped a beat.

Ginka rolled her shoulders. "We'll need to start by treating these people."

"Aw, yeah, bring on the puke party!"

"That is the worst victory party I have ever heard of." Ginka cringed.

Ruka gave her a big smile. "Then let's celebrate some other time."

"My treat, then. We'll have crepes and go to karaoke and such."

"Yup! Looking forward to it!"

Ruka and Ginka nodded at each other and got to work.

Epilogue

The end of June rolled around, and summer was in full swing. Trees grew vibrantly green under the intense sun piercing through white clouds, everyone wore their lightest clothes, and air-conditioning units worked overtime.

After morning classes at Hie High, it was time for lunch. Students were free to do whatever they wanted—eating, chatting, getting exercise, studying, watching videos, listening to music, playing games, reading, napping...

Ruka Moriki stood behind the gym in front of a guy named Yoshiyama. His spiky blond hair was now plain and black, and the arrogance Ruka remembered was gone too.

"I acted tough and said some bad stuff and went outta control..." he said nervously. "I was lame, pathetic, the worst... But you saved my life... S-Seriously, I'm so, so sorry."

"Don't worry about it, dude," said Ruka.

"Huh?! A-Are you sure? Really sure?"

"What, you don't want me to forgive you?"

"I do. It just... I mean, i-it feels too easy..." Yoshiyama looked awkward, like he was having trouble accepting what Ruka was saying.

A few weeks ago, a suspicious person had attacked Yoshiyama. Ruka and her friend had happened to be around, and they had taken care of him until the ambulance had arrived... That was the official story, anyway.

Ruka made a peace sign and waved it around because she felt like it. "I mean, you regret all that stuff, right? A good woman wouldn't hold that against you. Grudges are no fun, plus I said some pretty awful stuff too... Anyway, I'm glad you're okay. I was freaking out when you suddenly collapsed. My friend and I were pretty worried, and... Um, Yoshiyama-paisen?"

No response. He was shaking all over and biting his lip.

Are those aftereffects or something? Ruka wondered.

"M-Moriki... Moriki-san..." Yoshiyama muttered.

Ruka took a step back. "Wait, 'san'? What the heck?!"

Yoshiyama started to cry.

Seriously, what's this guy's deal?

"I-I'm g-gonna work hard on my team. I'm already a third year, and it's June, so I probably won't be a regular... B-But I'm gonna work myself to the bone. S-So, Moriki-san, um, c-could you c-c-c-come see my next..." His tan face glowed red as he ran off shouting, "S-Sorry!"

This is the guy who threatened me and tried to hit me? So much for that. Did he ditch his anger in the hospital? Well, whatever. Good for him for wanting to work hard.

"Give it your best shot, I guess?" Ruka called after him.

Why do I feel like something like this happened to me before?

Once Ruka was alone, two girls came out of hiding from the shade by the gym building.

"You said he was pushy, but he was totes nervous. And he's super into you." That was Meiri, the girl with glossy black hair and magenta highlights.

"You gotta tell us if you get yourself a guy, 'kay, Ruka-chin?" said Hinaru, the girl whose pink hair was up in two ponytails with dark streaks.

They were Ruka's classmates and best friends. Ruka had really regretted not bringing anyone with her the last time she'd come out here, so she'd asked the two of them to keep watch. That had ended up being pretty pointless, though.

"Yoshiyama-paisen's into me...?" Ruka repeated.

"Does he have a chance?" asked Meiri.

"Nah. Less than zero."

"Ruka-chin, you mean..." Hinaru trailed off.

"Yup, it's way more fun hanging with you!"

Ruka and Hinaru cackled together. Then the three girls left the area behind the gym and cut across the grounds, passing by students and teachers enjoying their break. There weren't any pitch-

black monsters or creepy guys in long coats around, and shining silver swords and guns were nowhere to be seen.

This soft, gentle, peaceful world I'm in now... She protected all of it. Ruka thought about the girl with silver hair and eyes, and her heart started to ache.

A week had passed since that incident, but Ginka Shijunana still hadn't returned to Hie High. She had gone to the Japan branch of the hunter alliance to deal with the aftermath, but Ruka had no idea what was going on with her because she wasn't replying to texts.

Is this what a long-distance relationship is like? Huh. What a weird thought...

Ruka walked ahead of her friends and turned around. "Hey, seriously, thanks for before."

"For what?"

"Y'know, when I was all bummed out. You two and Chinami helped me pick myself back up."

Meiri and Hinaru were both nodding, but Ruka couldn't tell what they were thinking. Maybe they didn't remember what she was talking about—last week *did* feel like forever ago. *I guess I should remind them...*

Meiri rolled her eyes. "You should be grateful all the time. Not just for that."

"Hey, if you're thanking us, then buy us something tasty to eat," Hinaru suggested. "Feed! Us!"

"I was being serious!" Ruka complained.

"So are we!" Meiri and Hinaru said together.

Ruka staggered back. Meiri and Hinaru both smiled and took a step forward.

"That's not like you, Ruka. Just smile like a dummy like you always do," said Meiri.

Hinaru nodded. "Yeah! When you don't, we get all worried."

Their trust and friendship shook Ruka to her core. She spread her arms wide and leaned forward. "Y-You guys are so great. I lo—"

Hinaru and Meiri jumped out of her way.

"Why'd you run away...?"

"Who wouldn't?"

"Your big hugs hurt like hell, Ruka-chin!"

"Come on," Ruka pleaded, "just lemme do it one more time! I'll stop if it hurts, I promise!"

"Ruka-chin, you sound like a creepy old guy. You don't actually think that'll work on us, right?"

Meiri thought about it. "Well, if it's just one more time..."

Hinaru groaned. "Mei-chi! Don't trust this dummy! She's gonna go way too hard and— Ahhh!"

Ruka tackled them in a hug.

Hina and Mei smell so good! They're so soft too—

Steady, rhythmic footsteps behind Ruka interrupted her thoughts. No one else made a sound, like they had all stopped what they were doing just to stare at someone.

I don't even need to turn around to know who that is.

"What are all of you up to?"

Meiri's and Hinaru's faces lit up as soon as they heard that elegant, dignified voice.

Ruka let go of her friends. With her heart about to burst from the surprise and a giant grin on her face, she slowly turned around.

A girl with silver hair and silver eyes stood watching the three of them. The way she held herself was so proper, she almost looked like a mannequin. Her uniform was so crisp and clean, it could've been brand new.

"G-Ginka-chan! You saved us!" Hinaru skipped over to Ginka, grabbed her black-gloved hands, and shook them up and down.

Ruka and Meiri followed her.

"Gin-neesan, did you have fun on vacation?" Meiri asked.

"It was all right," said Ginka. "I bought some candy, but you don't eat sweets, right?"

"I do if they're souvenirs!" Meiri replied before glancing at Ruka.

Are Ginka and Hina waiting for me to say something? I feel like Mei's waiting too. That's kinda embarrassing, but...

"Welcome back, Ginka," said Ruka.

Ginka gave her a gentle smile. "It's good to be back, Ruka."

Ruka and Ginka had Meiri and Hinaru head back to their

classroom first. Then the two of them went to a quiet stairwell to talk about everything that had happened.

After defeating David, Ruka and Ginka started treating the people who almost got turned into vampires. People in long coats showed up at the parking garage, and Ruka and Ginka worried that they were David's allies and reinforcements.

But they were actually from the hunter alliance's Japan branch, and they ended up helping with the treatment. Exhaustion and relief hit Ruka once she found out who they were, but Ginka got angry at them for responding so slowly and not being careful enough. She scolded them and they thanked her, back and forth, over and over.

Ginka leaned back against the railing on the staircase landing. "David was deported, and he is under investigation at headquarters."

The man who had attacked Ruka and plotted to revive the vampires was in England now. Apparently he still hadn't named his collaborators, but he no longer seemed interested in carrying out their plan.

"He had a message for you, Ruka."

"Wait, from Davy-san? For me?"

"Yes, though I don't particularly want to tell you."

"Aw, come on!"

Ginka reluctantly nodded. "He said, 'Thank you for saying we worked so hard.'"

"Oh, that." Back when Ginka was trying to interrogate David, Ruka had talked about how the vampire hunters had protected the world. She'd said all that for Ginka's sake, but apparently it had affected David too.

"Part of the reason that man ran wild was his desire for acknowledgment. He must have been happy to hear your praise... What a foolish man," Ginka grumbled.

I don't know how they're gonna punish him, but I hope he gets the chance to find a different path for himself and his friends.

After thinking that, Ruka glared at Ginka. "Y'know, something's been bugging me for a while..."

"What is it?"

"You've got a real mouth on you sometimes."

"Hrm, really...?"

"Yeah. Like when you told Davy-san you were gonna keep putting knives through his arm."

"I was attempting to interrogate him..."

"Plus you called vampires vicious and underhanded."

"That much is true. And it's important to shake your opponent's composure in battle..."

Ginka looked embarrassed, which made Ruka smile.

She's upset because she knows she hasn't been acting like herself, and that bothers her. So cute!

Just then, Ruka remembered what she'd forgotten to say that night. "Ah!"

"Yes?"

"You said you didn't have any dreams for the future."

"What are you talking about...?"

"Just hear me out. You did say that, right?"

Not so long ago, Ruka had asked Ginka about her dreams. But she'd forgotten to tell Ginka that it was because she didn't have any herself. This seemed like a good chance to bring it up again.

As Ginka looked out on the school grounds, her silver hair fluttered in the breeze through the open window. "I told you before. My goal as a hunter was to exterminate all vampires. After that, my dream was to go to school. Nothing in particular remains." She looked at Ruka like, *Why did you ask me that?*

"I don't have a dream either." Ruka propped her elbow on the railing and looked out the window too. "But Mei told me I could just look for one. I thought that made a lot of sense."

Ginka rested her chin on her hand and nodded. "That's certainly true. If you don't have a dream, you just need to search for one."

"Yup. Wanna look for one together?"

"I wouldn't mind that."

"'Kay, that's what we'll do!"

They exchanged gentle smiles before staring at the scenery outside together. All the noise and chatter from down below grew distant. The wind dancing through the leaves on the trees performed a soothing, relaxing concerto, and— "Hee hee...!"

“Pffft...!”

Ginka stifled her laugh with her arm. Ruka bent over, and soon neither of them could stop giggling.

“E-Even I can tell that was too much.”

“Oh man, that’s the best laugh I’m gonna have all day.”

Ruka wasn’t messing around about wanting to find a dream, and she was serious about wanting to do it together. But it just sounded too funny. And Ginka always had a blank look on her face, so maybe seeing her giggle like that really got Ruka going. That made Ruka wonder if she had the same effect on Ginka too.

They kept laughing until the school chime rang. Break was over.

“Let’s give afternoon classes all we’ve got!” said Ruka.

The two of them started heading downstairs together, but Ginka looked troubled.

“I suppose it’s about time for me to decide on extracurriculars,” she said.

“Oh yeah, I guess VH stuff doesn’t count as a club activity. And you can’t be in tournaments or anything ’cause of the precepts, right?” Ruka asked.

“That only applies to sports teams. Other clubs should be fine. Maybe something with home economics or art...”

“Gotcha... Ah, I guess I should go to dance club, huh? It’s been a while...”

“You’re in the dance club?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you that?”

“I’ve never heard anything about you dancing. You’ll have to show me sometime.”

“I mean, I only joined to help them have enough people in the club. I can only dance a little.”

“That’s fine.”

“So persistent... Welp, maybe if I feel like it.”

They kept chatting about nothing in particular on their way to class. Meiri and Hinaru were probably doing the same thing. So were Chinami and her friends, and everybody else.

In the hallway outside their classroom, Ruka remembered how Ginka had said she was kind.

I don't really get it, but I'll treasure the memory because she's the one who told me that. I just feel like it's more fun that way!

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Afterword

Pleased to meet you. My name is Wasan Kurata. Thank you so much for reading *This Gyaru's Got a Thing for...Vampire Hunters?!* The title's a little long, but I figured it could be shortened to something like "VampGyaru" or "VG." Please go ahead and use those abbreviations with your friends.

As you would expect from the title, this is the story of a friendship between a gyaru and a vampire hunter. I wanted it to feel cheerful, fun, and energetic! Ruka Moriki's gyaru energy and Ginka Shijunana's vampire hunter power triumph over any obstacles in their way! Or something like that.

I researched gyaru culture for this book, and I was impressed by how it's so strong and full of energy. I've said this before, in my comments for the GA Bunko Competition special website—I really admire and respect gyarus. Gyaru power is incredible.

On the vampire hunter side of things, this story is like an epilogue. Their war is over, so what happens to their organization? How will the members live from now on? It's a tough problem, but those girls will make it through somehow.

I'd also like to add a few additional comments about the contents of this book. When Ruka deals with a stalker in the story, she doesn't report it because she feels like it's a hassle. I strongly recommend contacting the police right away if you find yourself in the same position. I don't want to exaggerate, but trying to resolve those types of situations on your own can be very dangerous.

There's also a scene where Ruka and Ginka visit a cosmetics store for a makeup lesson, but not all of them provide that service (I modeled the one in this scene after a store that does.) Most lessons require an appointment, so please make one in advance if you're interested in getting one.

The pinkross pose in the purikura part of the story is an original

creation of mine. You can't do it with one hand like the "kyun desu" pose, so it doesn't work for selfies, but it seems to be popular in the world where this story takes place. How mysterious.

I know I've already gone on too long, but I would like to thank the following people. This book delivers so much more power and impact thanks to Kewi Hayashi-sama's beautiful and delightful illustrations. The editing team at GA Bunko, who selected this story for the silver prize of the Fourteenth GA Bunko Competition, and my incredibly reliable editor, Jo-sama, who always had abundant knowledge and precise advice to share—thank you very much. I would also like to thank everyone who worked on the production of this book.

And to everyone who has read this story, thank you all so very much. Let us meet again as the gentle breeze blows.

Wasan Kurata


Wasan Kurata
Ill. Kewi Hayashi
1
This Gyaru's Got a Thing for... Vampire Hunters?!

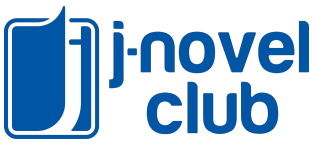



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Hinaru
"Let's go till our throats quit on us!"
Meiri
Ruka
Ginka
As the three of them watched, Ruka started singing.
Of course, she kept going until she was
totally worn out!


© Kewi Hayashi
“Hey, Ginka.”
“What is it?”
“Win this thing!”
“Of course.”



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