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Chibi Vampire™

The Novel

Story: Tohru Kai
Art: Yuna Kagesaki

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The Novel

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Story By Tohru Kai
Art By Yuna Kagesaki

TOKYOPOP®

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Chibi Vampire: The Novel 7

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PROLOGUE

"I love you, Maaka," Kenta Usui said, clear as day, when they were alone aboard the Ferris wheel.

Karin Maaka sat frozen to her seat, staring at the floor. It took a second or two for her brain to comprehend the meaning of his words. When she glanced up, she could see Kenta's face. His eyes, which revealed that he was simultaneously suffering shyness and anxiety, gazed straight at Karin. Despite the chilly February air, his cheeks were slightly flushed and beads of sweat collected upon his face as he awaited her reply.

Kenta . . . Karin said to herself with a sigh. It sounded as if he'd said he loved her. Had he actually said it? Maybe he meant that he cared about her as a friend. But Kenta *had* told her that he had something important to talk to her about, and that he wanted to go somewhere where nobody would interrupt them. Besides, he had that look on his face . . . Was this really happening? Did Kenta really love Karin in a romantic way? *No . . . it's too good to be true!* she thought.

Karin had been in love with Kenta for a long time. But Karin was a vampire, and Kenta was a human.

As different species, Karin figured there was no way a romantic relationship could exist between them. That was why she'd kept her feelings bottled up all this time.

"You can't!" Karin shouted. Without thinking, she sprang out of her seat at full force and conked her head against the ceiling of the gondola. As she sank back down, she clutched her head and sobbed. Her brain was completely scrambled from the pain of the impact and the shock of Kenta's unexpected declaration. Between muffled cries, she explained why their romance could never be. They were different species! And there were other girls who would be much better for Kenta.

But Kenta stuck to his guns. "It has to be you, Maaka."

Hearing this, Karin could no longer contain herself and bellowed, "Kenta!" She stood up, clinging to Kenta as she wept. "Kenta, Kenta, Kenta . . . I love you . . . Kenta, Ken—Aaaiiieee!" Without warning, the gondola lurched. It detached from the strut and plummeted through the air, taking Karin and Kenta with it.

"Ugh! K-kenta . . . Are you all . . . Huh?" Karin blinked several times as she took in the familiar sight of a checkered floor and a long, thin window with white curtains. She wasn't on a Ferris wheel. She was in her own room. Karin had tumbled out of bed—quilt, pillow, and all.

She sat up straight and exhaled. According to the clock, it was a few minutes after one in the morning—still the middle of the night. "Just a dream, huh? Phew, that was crazy!"

Except that everything up until the part where the gondola fell hadn't been a dream. It had really happened. She'd gone a date with Kenta several days before, on Valentine's Day, and he'd confessed his feelings to her.

They'd known each other for nine months. Karin had developed feelings for Kenta over time, but she was certain a love relationship was hopeless. She happened to be a special type of vampire that could abide daylight, so it was possible for them to be friends. But that was all they could ever be. Being together in a romantic sense was another story.

As a vampire, there was no way anything could come of her love for a human. Karin told herself that just being friends was plenty, and tried not to hope for more. But then Kenta had confessed his feelings to her. Karin had never imagined that her love might be requited—that they could actually be a couple. Just remembering it filled her heart with warm happiness.

Still . . . *Ha-choo!* No matter how warm Karin's heart was, sitting on the floor in only her pajamas allowed the cold to creep up through the soles of her feet and chill her body. *Better go back to sleep,* she thought.

Karin wanted to get back to that delightful dream. As she crawled back into bed with her quilt and pillow, she noticed that her cell phone was vibrating on her desk. She hadn't noticed it when she was sleeping because the ringer was off. Curious, she reached for her phone. It was a text message from Maki. When Karin opened it, the message she read gave her a shock.

It was only one line long: "Quit texting me over and over!"

But Karin hadn't texted Maki that day.

"I wonder what's up with Maki?" Karin murmured.

A moment later, another text came in. It was another message from Maki: "Yikes! Sorry! That was a mistake! That wasn't supposed to be for you, Karin. Delete it and forget it, please!"

Karin was relieved. When she'd read the first message, she worried that she'd done something to offend Maki, even though she had no idea what. But if it was a mistake, then everything was okay.

Ha-choo! Katchoo! Karin sneezed again. "Oh, no! Am I getting a cold? Or maybe someone's talking about me? Maki? Or maybe Kenta? Heh-heh. Yeah, right!"

Karin returned the phone to her desk and went into the kitchen to take some cold medicine before going back to sleep. When she opened the door, her father came stumbling into her room.

"Yikes! Daddy? What were you doing there?" Karin asked.

"Oh, nothing! I just heard you mention Kenta's name, so . . . I was wondering what was up . . . ." her father stammered.

Vampires have excellent hearing. Her father probably overheard Karin talking to herself as he was passing through the hall, and stopped and put his ear to the door in an attempt to hear more.

Karin's face flushed with embarrassment. "Daddy, you jerk! How could you listen in on your own daughter?"

"I-I'm sorry, Karin! I just—"

"Get out! *Out,* I said!" Karin barked as she shoved her father into the hallway. She slammed the door shut before jumping back into bed.

"Forgive me, Karin! I didn't mean anything by it. I was concerned . . . Don't hate me, Karin!"

Her father's tearful apology reverberated through the door, but Karin pulled the quilt over her head and pretended not to hear. *That jerk!* she said under her breath.

Overcome with aggravation, Karin forgot the old saying, "Three sneezes mean bad rumors." Of course, there was no way she could have known that someplace far away, someone was talking about her.

CHIBI VAMPIRE AND THE OUTCAST VAMPIRE

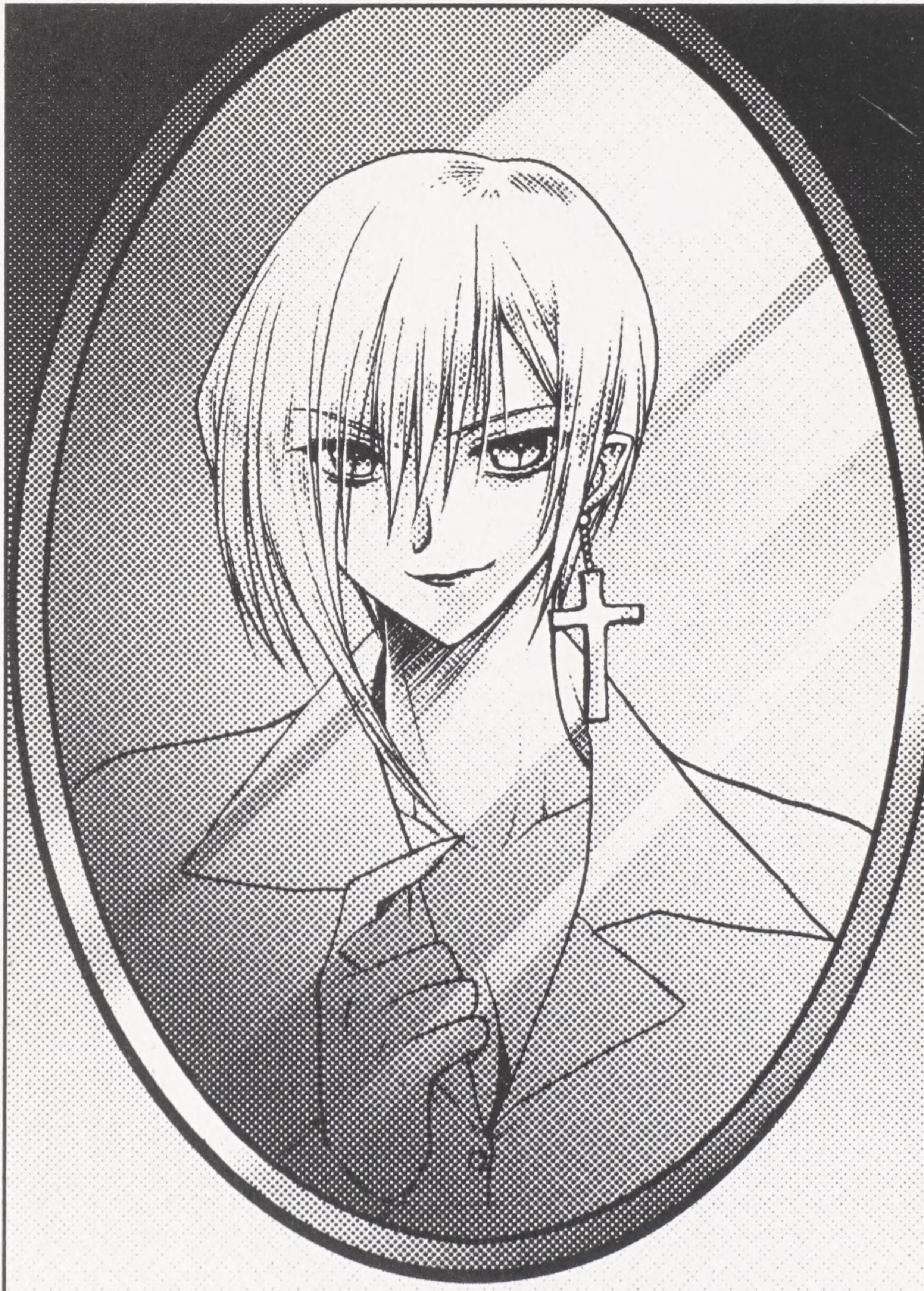
Right around the same time, in a town approximately sixty miles from Shiihaba City, a woman gazed into a mirror as she straightened her lapels.

"So, Calera Maaka was the talk of this year's Assembly?" she murmured.

The woman wore a pantsuit and necktie that accentuated her short hair, and wore no trace of makeup. It was a masculine look, but the swell of her bust and the curve of her neck were clearly feminine characteristics. A glittering cross dangled from her left earlobe. Her delicate face was attractive but devoid of warmth, and her straight, platinum blonde hair and ice blue eyes intensified the chilly vibe she exuded. Dressed differently, she might have been unattractive, but a woman in masculine attire often possesses a mysterious sort of allure.

"How many children did you say she has?" the blonde woman asked with interest.

"Three," replied a second woman as she sat up languidly in the bed and glanced around. She appeared to be in her early twenties. Her plain face and messy brown hair made her markedly less attractive than the blonde woman.



"Three! That *is* odd. For the past two or three hundred years, vampire couples have been struggling to conceive at all! Most are lucky to produce one child after decades of trying, and yet Henry and Calera have three? That explains the run-in with Elsman!" The blonde woman threw her head backward, laughing. Her golden locks shimmered in the glow of the evening light.

Something else glinted, too. The woman's canines glistened behind her slightly parted lips. They were far larger than normal—sharper, too.

Unsatisfied with how her bangs were falling, the blonde woman raked the tips of her fingers through them as she addressed the other woman's reflection in the mirror. "Do you suppose there's a reason?" she asked.

"She claims their secret is a loving marriage."

"You're kidding!"

"She says the secret to conceiving a child is the passionate communion between husband and wife in bed each night—as if to insinuate that childless vampires don't love our husbands enough. How *dare* she! I *hate* Calera! Deep down, I know she looks down on us because she has children and we don't!" As she spoke, the woman's expressionless tone grew increasingly emotional. She unleashed a stream of invective against Calera as she collapsed and wept in front of the blonde woman.

The blonde woman shrugged with an air of annoyance, her lips curling into a pitying sneer—but the sobbing woman took no notice. The blonde then walked over to the bed and sat down, stroking the other woman's back with a tenderness that belied the icy expression on her face. "Do you want a child, Emily? Your husband's child? Do you love him that much?"

"N-no . . . I don't. Not at all! My parents arranged the marriage—I had no say! I don't love him—but that makes it all the more painful when my husband and mother-in-law berate me for failing to get pregnant." The woman called Emily looked up, her face awash with tears.

Instantly, the blonde woman's sneer transformed into a sympathetic smile. "Then, who *do* you love?" she asked.

"Why, I love you, Noel!" Emily replied obediently, sighing softly and glancing away. "I still can't believe it—I can't believe the famous Noel Ambrose would have any use for plain old me!"

"Famous? They call me 'Ambrose the Twisted' or 'Noel the Outlaw' at the Assembly, don't they? I don't attend the Assembly, and I don't obey the Elders," the blonde woman said matter-of-factly.

The Assembly was an Assembly of the vampires lurking secretly throughout Japan. It took place once a year, on Christmas day. Children and the elderly were

exempt, but every vampire family was required by law to send a representative. Noel's parents were already dead, and she had no family. According to the law, Noel herself was supposed to attend the Assembly, but she'd never bothered.

"That just goes to show how strong you are," Emily declared. "You're fine on your own, without any help from other vampires. You're rumored to be very powerful. I heard about you from my parents. Of course, nobody dares mention your name at the Assembly."

"Of course not. If word got out that there was a maverick vampire who does exactly as she pleases, it would jeopardize vampire law and order. Vampires might question the authority of the Elder!" Noel replied with a hint of sarcasm.

"Some of the younger generation haven't even heard of you."

"Fine with me. You're the only one who needs to know about me, Emily."

"But why? What do you see in a woman like me? I'm plain . . . I have no talents . . . even my husband says I'm dull. He constantly cheats on me with human women."

"You can't trust men. We're vampires, but more importantly, we're women. Men are animals. They're a different species. There's no way for different sexes to understand one another."

"But even I know it! I'm not beautiful or smart, and my vampire powers are average at best . . ." Emily glanced into the mirror on the wall and hung her head.

Noel chuckled, placing a finger under Emily's chin and lifting her face. "Do these lips speak ill of my lover?"

"Oh . . ."

Their lips met, and for a time the room was silent except for the sound of wet, entwining tongues. When their faces finally drew apart, a glistening strand of saliva stretched between their lips.

Noel held Emily's face in both hands. "Your husband is a bona fide idiot. He doesn't know how to appreciate a real woman—not that I expect any better of a mere boy of 80 or so years."

"Noel—"

"I'd love to stay with you longer, but the sun will rise in another hour. You go ahead. If your husband suspects us, he might be watching with his bats."

A shadow of fear crossed Emily's face as she imagined what might happen if her husband or mother-in-law learned of her infidelity.

Noel gave her a reassuring smile. "That's why you should go ahead and leave first. I'll keep watch, and if there are any bats, I'll destroy them. There's nothing to worry about."

"Thank you. You're the only one who's this kind to me, Noel!" As she gathered up her things, Emily

glanced hesitantly at Noel. "When will I see you again?"

Noel regarded Emily as she spoke. "Hard to say. If we meet too often, your husband and mother-in-law will notice. It's better if you forget about me until I contact you next, Emily." When she recited the final sentence, Noel's voice dropped into a chanting tone.

Emily's body trembled for a moment, and her eyes grew foggy. She answered in a dream-like trance, "Yes . . . I will forget . . ."

"Yes. Forget. But you'll remember when I contact you. You'll remember how you feel about me. Got that? If you understand, then leave!" Noel ordered.

Emily obediently left the room.

Once she was alone, Noel enjoyed an extended stretch. "Phew! If she knows she's dull, why not at least try to improve a bit?" Her tone was completely different now, and the aura of a mysterious, cool lover—the type a boring, self-conscious woman prizes—evaporated. A playful, mischievous air took its place.

"The absolute devotion thing is cute, but that woman is *way* too pent-up!" Noel mused as she stood in front of the sink, fixing her hair once more. "All the energy I got from the human blood I drank on the way here is totally spent! Still, I need a spy to tell me about the Assembly, and Emily's excellent at the plain and inconspicuous thing. And she really gobbles up the whole 'I'm-special-because-a-notorious-vampire-loves-

me' fantasy. I guess I can bring myself to play the ideal lover for her." As she continued to stretch, a glint of curiosity shone in her blue eyes.

"So this year's hot topic was Calera Maaka and her three children? It doesn't sound as if it's something that will have any bearing on my life . . . but considering that the information's fallen into my hands . . . perhaps I should do a little investigating? Better safe than sorry!"

Noel sauntered over to the window and drew open the curtains. The city was still shrouded in darkness. Right around now, Emily would be paying for the hotel room.

"Let's see . . . Shiihaba's this way, right?" The corners of Noel's mouth twisted up into a smile as she hopped up onto the windowsill, and without any hesitation, plunged into the air. The room was on the tenth floor. A fall would result in much worse than a broken bone or two.

But Noel didn't fall.

Thousands of tiny black shadows sliced through the darkness, speeding toward Noel. An observer with the night vision of a cat would have detected that each of them was bat-shaped. The tiny shadows united into a single form, attaching to Noel's shoulders and lifting her body. Filled with wind, the inky-blackness now seemed to form wings, or perhaps a cape.

"I know we won't arrive tonight, but let's see how far we can get. Fly, little ones!" Noel whispered to the

bats that made up her wings as she soared through the sky. After about a hundred feet, she began drifting downward, only to launch off the rooftop of a tall building and spring back toward the sky.

The flying figure in the black pantsuit was soon lost in the darkness, invisible to human eyes.

"All right, class, that's it for today. Be sure to review the sections I said I'd test you on," instructed an authoritative voice.

The clock read noon. The teacher glanced at the time as he wrapped up the last class of the morning and left the classroom.

The Shiihaba High School building erupted into a chorus of chatter as the bell rang. Some students hurried off to the school cafeteria, others unpacked their lunches in the classroom, while others sprinted off to various activity rooms to make the most of their lunch hour.

Kenta Usui of First Year, Class D was climbing the stairs with his packed lunch. He reached the rooftop landing at the top of the three-story school building and opened the door, only to be assailed by an icy gust of wind.

Brrr! Kenta ducked his head and pulled the door shut. "Not today," he said as he turned. "It's too cold. Let's eat in here."

Kenta wasn't alone in the stairwell. He was with Karin Maaka, also of Class D. Karin smiled as she attempted to smooth her windswept locks. "Right. It's nice out on the roof when it isn't too windy, but on a day like this . . ."

Normally, Kenta and Karin ate together on the ledge by the fence enclosing the rooftop. But it was late February now, and on windy days, it was no fun to eat outside. On the other hand, it would've been too embarrassing to eat together in the classroom.

Kikuchi and the other boys in the class had been accusing Kenta of being in love with Karin since the end of first semester. Recently, when Kenta had turned up his collar to hide the fang marks where Karin had bitten him, Kikuchi had asked Kenta if he was trying to hide a hickey!

The girls were far worse, however. Kenta had seen them mob Karin countless times, flooding her with questions.

Maaka and I are dating now . . . and we decided to have a clean, high-school relationship, so there's nothing to be ashamed of, Kenta tried to tell himself. Still, they couldn't quite bring themselves to eat lunch together in front of all those prying eyes. That was why they always headed for the rooftop. But there was another reason they needed to find time alone together. They needed a chance to discuss things in private.

Kenta couldn't imagine that anyone would find out that Karin was a vampire. She wasn't bothered by garlic or sunlight, and she went to school like anyone else and even worked part time in a family restaurant. Who would suspect her of being a vampire? She was no different than any other ordinary teen; she was an everyday, run-of-the-mill sixteen-year-old girl. In fact, Karin was a real, live vampire, but she didn't drink blood. The reason she was able to go out during the day was because she was a sort of vampire mutant—a blood-injecting vampire.

Kenta had met Karin's entire family. Karin's little sister was still young and hadn't yet awakened as a creature of the night. But Karin's father, Henry, her mother, Calera, her grandmother, Elda, and her older brother, Ren, were all full-fledged vampires who shunned sunlight, manipulated bats, and lurked in shadows, drinking human blood. For some reason, though, Karin was perfectly fine in the sun. On the other hand, she had poor night-vision and no ability to control bats.

The most peculiar thing about Karin was that the blood in her body increased uncontrollably. If Karin didn't do anything about it, once a month or so the pressure would become overwhelming and the blood vessels in her nose would explode, spewing forth a fountain of blood. It was pretty hard on her body when that happened, so generally Karin found a

person to bite and inject with the excess blood before she reached the breaking point.

As a defective vampire, Karin was unable to manipulate human memories. For that reason, she had to rely on her younger sister Anju to erase the memories of her victims and protect her secret.

When I first transferred to this class, I thought Maaka was totally weird for running away whenever she saw me, Kenta remembered. But how could he have known that Karin was avoiding him because being near Kenta made her blood increase?

Later, Kenta learned that vampires all have unique preferences with regard to blood type. It had a lot to do with the personality of the victim—some vampires might prefer the blood of stressed-out people, others might prefer to drink from liars. When a normal vampire got close to a person whose blood matched his preference, he was overcome by a powerful lust for blood. But when Karen got too close to a person with the right type of blood, her own blood would start to surge and she would be overtaken by the urge to bite the person and inject him with her excess blood.

As it happened, Karin's blood responded to unhappy people. When Kenta had tried to find out why Karin always avoided him, he wound up discovering her secret. *Of course, it was a real shock to learn that I was so unhappy back then that I was triggering her vampire instincts!* he remembered.

Now things were different. Somehow, Kenta had managed to get over his resentment toward his father, who had abandoned him and his mother, as well as feelings of alienation toward his grandmother, who had rejected him his entire life. These days, he could be near Karin without provoking her blood rush—and it was Karin's support that had helped him overcome those issues.

As long as they cared about each other, it didn't matter to Kenta that he was human and Karin was a vampire. He'd declared his love for her during their first date, on Valentine's Day, and they'd decided to become a couple in spite of belonging to different species.

In the beginning, Karin's family had more-or-less scared Kenta into helping Karin hide her true identity. But now, Kenta genuinely wanted to be there for Karin. He didn't care that she was a vampire, even though he knew there were probably plenty of people out there who would hate and reject Karin solely for that reason, without any regard for who she was inside.

I have to protect her, Kenta told himself. *Maaka really is a good person.*

Karin and Kenta sat side by side on a box of emergency supplies, and Kenta opened the lid of his lunchbox. It was just him and his single mother at home, and money was always tight. To make sure he got enough to eat, Karin packed Kenta a lunch every day.

"Wow! Salmon today!" Kenta exclaimed. The lunch featured generous portions of fried salmon and a variety of sides, including boiled pumpkin, deep green spinach, and a boiled egg cut like a flower. Karin had sprinkled colorful seasonings over the rice creating an attractive presentation that made Kenta's mouth water.

Karin opened her own lunchbox, which was slightly smaller than Kenta's, and smiled. "It's fun cooking for you because you aren't picky, and you always eat every last bite!"

"Of course I do! Your cooking's delicious!" Kenta raved.

"R-really?" Karin's cheeks turned scarlet at the compliment.

Just watching Karin made Kenta begin to blush, too, so he quickly changed the subject. "Actually, my mom has a job now, so I get to have breakfast every day. Depending on my hours, I get free food at Julian sometimes, too. Tonight I work 'til eight, so if I'm lucky, I might get dinner."

"You sneak off and stuff it in a container to take home, right?" Karin asked.

Kenta raised his eyebrows. "Yeah. You noticed?"

They both laughed.

"I wonder if Tachibana will be at Julian tonight," Karin said softly.

From the sound of it, Karin was looking forward to seeing Yuriya Tachibana, a new employee at Julian.

Kenta recalled something Karin had told him earlier. "Tachibana's father was a vampire and her mother was human, right? So she's a half-vampire?"

"That's what Yuriya said. And her mother died, so now, she's totally alone in the world. . . ."

Once, a boy claiming to be Karin's father's illegitimate son had shown up from the United States, and Kenta had learned that the chances of a child being born between a human and a vampire were less than one in a thousand.

"Tachibana's situation is highly unusual," Karin explained. "It seems as though she doesn't want to talk about it much for that reason, but I think it's been very hard for her. She probably feels terribly alone, since she's not a regular human being. That's the sense I get."

Kenta spied a trace of loneliness in Karin's wide eyes and felt his heart twinge. He remembered the beginning of the fall term, when Karin had remarked to him with a sad smile, "The girls in our class tease me about romantic stuff, but I can't date, because . . . I'm not human." It had occurred to him that Karin seemed to have a normal high-school life, but she was actually shouldering all kinds of burdens no one else knew about.

The other girls all chattered about love, what they wanted to do after high school, and even lofty dreams of marriage. Although Karin joined in their

conversations, deep down, Kenta suspected she was telling herself that she could never have those things because she wasn't human. On the other hand, she wasn't a proper vampire, either.

Kenta worried about how hard Karin's lifestyle had to be on her. He'd told her that when she needed to get rid of excess blood, she should go ahead and bite him. That way, she'd have one less thing to stress about.

Over the past months, Kenta and Karin had been through a lot together. Gradually, Kenta had realized how special Karin had become to him. He'd confessed his feelings to her, and they'd finally progressed from a platonic relationship to a romantic one.

"It must have been extremely lonely," Kenta unwittingly murmured aloud.

Karin lifted her eyes and regarded him. The fall of her short hair changed, and the fresh scent of Karin's shampoo tickled Kenta's nostrils.

"Yes. I think it's been a very lonely time for Tachibana," Karin agreed, smiling.

"No . . ." Kenta shook his head with a wry smile. "I'm sure it's been lonely for Tachibana, but I was talking about you. The fact that you sympathize with Yuriya so much makes me realize how lonely you must be, always aware that you're different from your friends and your family. You said so yourself, before you bit me on New Year's."

Karin's sable eyes widened. Kenta gazed into them as he said, "It doesn't matter what species you are. You're *you,* Karin."

As he spoke, Kenta recalled the words of a girl who'd appeared in his dreams—a girl who was both Karin and not Karin. After New Year's, when Karin had bitten Kenta, the Karin look-alike had occasionally appeared in his dreams. Perhaps it was because his memory hadn't been erased after he was bitten, unlike Karin's other victims.

The girl had told Kenta about the dreams people had when they received Karin's blood. According to the girl, when people were injected with Karin's blood, they dreamed of someone they cared about a lot, or someone who affected them greatly. That person encouraged them, comforted them, even scolded them, giving them the strength to overcome their fears and weaknesses, to conquer their insecurities, and to carry out whatever they yearned to achieve. When Kenta woke up and realized that the person dearest to him was not his mother but Karin, it was a huge revelation.

I didn't realize it, but somewhere along the way, Maaka had come to mean everything to me . . . Kenta thought.

Now, the girl who looked exactly like Karin no longer appeared in his dreams.

The effects of Karin's blood only lasted about a month. The black fang marks faded away, and after

they disappeared completely, Kenta stopped having the strange dreams. Right before she vanished, the girl in Kenta's dreams had said, "I'm worried. Now you won't have me around any longer. And Karin is . . ."

Kenta had been unable to hear the most important part. Karin was . . . *what?*

The girl had told him that although he and Karin had overcome a hurdle, they were far from home free. In fact, great trouble was yet to come. So Kenta was sure that whatever the girl had been trying to tell him was terribly important, and might contain a hint as to the danger that was in store.

I love Maaka.

Maybe Kenta couldn't relieve Karin of the loneliness of being a blood-increasing vampire. But if nothing else, he could stay by her side, support her, and protect her. Yes—he had to!

"Anyway . . . what I meant was . . . um . . . you aren't alone anymore . . . okay?" Kenta's admission made him feel ridiculously awkward, but if Karin felt better after hearing it, Kenta was happy to say it.

Tears welled up in Karin's eyes. "Kenta!" she exclaimed as she sprang to her feet.

Oh, no, thought Kenta. He hadn't meant to make her cry, and he felt a mixture of distress at her reaction and determination to make her feel better.

Kenta was just about to open his arms to hug Karin, who had lunged toward him, but—

"Ugh—your lunch!" Kenta spotted Karin's lunchbox at the moment it began to slip from her lap. Food was precious to Kenta.

Clinging to his lunchbox with his left hand, he threw himself to the ground, catching Karin's plummeting lunchbox with his right hand. It was a deft movement, and if the coach of a sports team had been watching, he probably would've drafted Kenta on the spot.

"Yeah! Got it!" Kenta crowed triumphantly.

"Eeek!" The sound of Karin screaming cut Kenta's self-congratulation short. Kenta's first instinct was to protect the lunches, but he dived for them just as Karin was lunging into his arms. With no one to catch her, she smashed right into the wall of the small landing.

"I'm sorry! You okay, Maaka?" Kenta inquired as he placed his and Karin's lunches in a safe spot and helped Karin up.

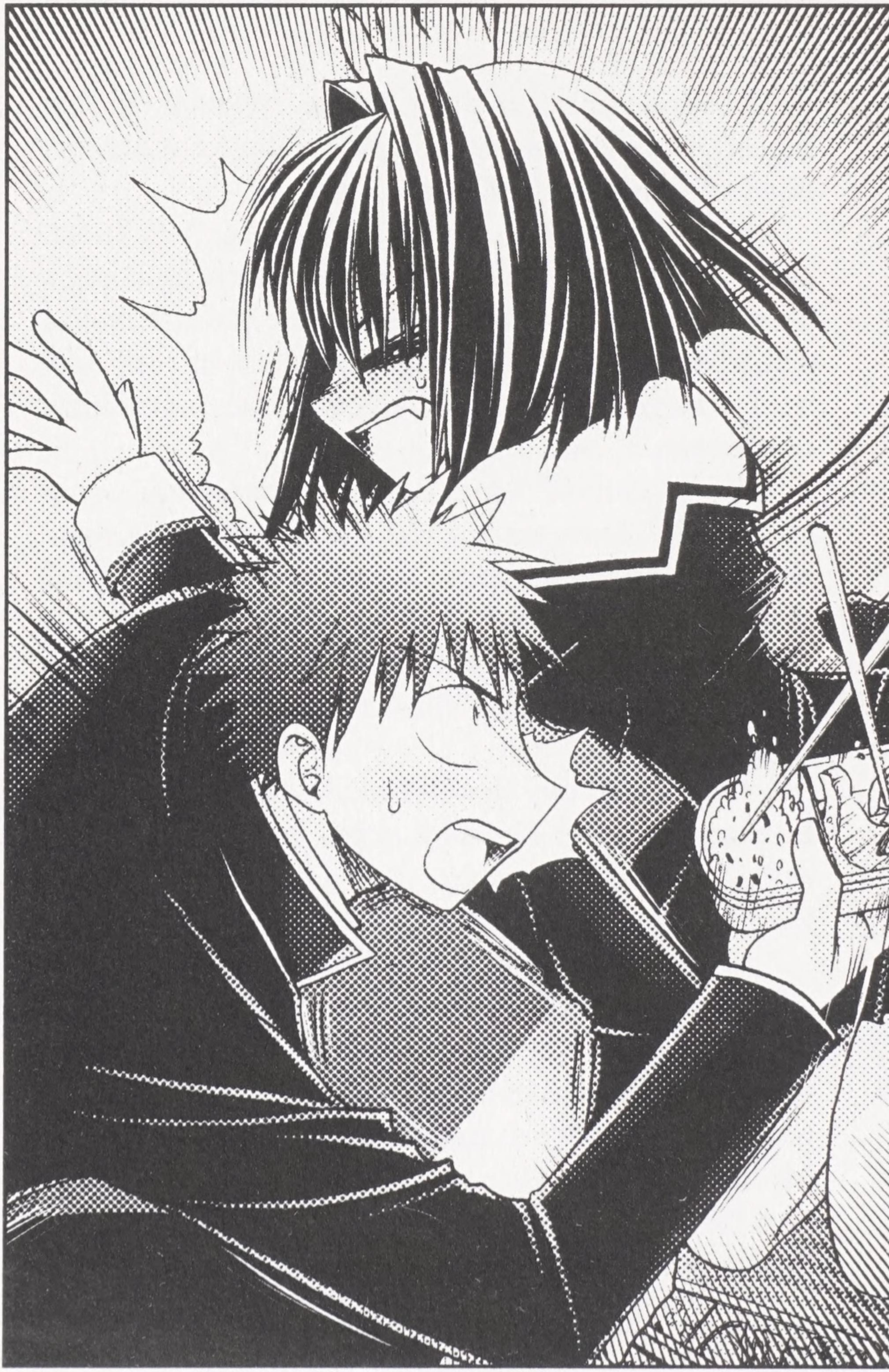
"Oof! I-I'm fine. It was only a little bump."

"I'm so sorry," Kenta repeated.

Once again, they sat down side by side on the supplies box.

"I didn't mean to dodge you. I was worried about your lunch, and my instincts took over. I'm sorry, Maaka."

"It's okay. I know how important food is to you. Eh-heh-heh," Karin chuckled.



"Sorry. Now that my mom's working, I get breakfast every day, and thanks to your lunches, my food situation's much better now. I guess I lost my head."

"Don't worry about it!" Karin smiled, pressing a hand against the red spot on her forehead. "And . . . thank you, Kenta," she began, bowing her head, "for what you said about not being alone anymore. That means a lot to me."

Karin's glowing cheeks were so pretty that Kenta felt his own pulse race. Quickly, he averted his gaze. "Well, uh, it just occurred to me that on top of the challenges of dealing with your blood increasing, it's probably been rough on you emotionally, too," he mumbled.

"Yes, it's been hard being a mutant vampire at times—but if I weren't, I never would've met you, Kenta. And I have Maki, too!" Karin declared.

Maki Tokitou's face popped up in Kenta's mind. He nodded.

Maki and Karin had been friends since elementary school, and Maki watched over the shy, accident-prone Karin like a parent. When other girls in their class had picked on Karin because they were jealous of the attention she was getting from a new boy, Maki had defended her. Recently, she'd gotten Karin and Kenta tickets to the zoo, setting the stage for their first date.

Most everything Maki did was well intentioned, but sometimes she went a bit too far. She'd advised Kenta to borrow some dirty magazines from a classmate, arguing that he was too clueless about romance, and had even tried to lend him a rather steamy girls' manga. Kenta had refused to take it—merely the picture of a half-naked high-school girl in the arms of her teacher on the cover had made his head spin.

"The only drawback is that sometimes Maki gets a little carried away trying to look out for you—but yeah, Tokitou's a good friend," Kenta agreed.

"She really is. She always helps me out whenever I'm in a pinch. I hope I can return the favor someday . . . Oh!" Karin clamped her mouth shut suddenly.

"What is it?" asked Kenta.

"Last night, Maki mistakenly sent me a text telling me to quit messaging her all the time. I was worried someone might be harassing her!"

"For real? That sounds serious!"

"You think so, too? When I asked her about it today, she said not to worry about it—that it was no big deal. That's all she would say. What do you think I should do?" Karin asked earnestly as she looked up at Kenta.

Kenta stopped eating and thought for a moment. "She wouldn't tell you, huh? In that case . . . Tokitou's pretty tough, and I think she's capable of taking care of most things on her own. I don't think you should pry

if it's something she doesn't want to talk about. Maybe you should just keep an eye out for her."

"Yeah, you're right," Karin agreed. "There are things I can't tell Maki, either. I shouldn't pry."

Karin was probably referring to being a vampire. Her face had grown doleful, and Kenta racked his brain for the right words to make her feel better. "Why not wait another day and if it seems as though something's still bothering her, you can ask her again. Today, at least, Tokitou acted the same as ever to me, so I'm guessing it's nothing too terrible."

"You're right. Thanks, Kenta," Karin replied with a smile. "Maki's my best friend, so I hope I can help." There was a hint of nostalgia in her expression, as if she were remembering something. "I've never told Maki about my true identity," Karin continued, "but in junior high, when I got a nosebleed and stopped coming to school, Maki got worried about me and came to my house looking for me."

Kenta was confused. "What? But there's a barrier that protects your house, isn't there?"

The bats wielded by vampires had the power to befuddle human beings' perceptions and erase their memories. Karin's family maintained a bat barrier around the hill where their house stood, preventing any humans from drawing near. Long ago, Kenta had tried to find Karin's house on his own and had ended up walking down the same street more than ten times.

"Maki had her dog with her," Karin explained.

"I get it. A dog's sense of smell is another matter. Come to think of it, when I ran into her at Christmastime she was walking a dog," said Kenta.

"Exactly. Anyway, she got almost all the way to our house and found me." Karin said that she'd gone outside, unable to bear the fact that her parents were fighting because she was a defective vampire. When Maki found the crying Karin, she'd expressed her concern. Karin had tried to turn her away for fear that Maki would find out her family were vampires.

"I don't care where you live. I'm not going to stop being your friend, Karin!" Maki had declared wearing a supportive smile. Only, Maki wouldn't remember that now. Karin's family had erased Maki's memory of the incident.

"It meant so much to me. When I went back to junior high and the boys teased me and called me 'Nosebleed Girl,' Maki stood up for me. If not for Maki . . . I don't know if I would've been able to hang onto my daytime life."

Kenta had a mouthful of fried fish, so he was unable to speak, but he nodded emphatically. Maki interfered too much at times, but he was grateful to her, too.

Karin nodded back. "I hope we can be friends forever," she said softly. "Although . . . I can never tell Maki what I really am." She was smiling, but her voice took on a tone of regret.

Kenta knew he could never completely assuage the isolation Karin felt as a blood-increasing vampire. *But I can help a little—no, I want to help as much as I can!* he told himself resolutely. After all, he was the only person who could be there for Karin during the daytime.

"Why so quiet all of a sudden, Kenta? Did I leave a bone in your fish?" Karin asked.

Oops, Kenta said to himself. Karin seemed to have misinterpreted Kenta's silence as he stared down at his salmon lunchbox, lost in thought. *Never mind. It isn't the kind of thing I should blurt out in casual conversation.* "Nope. I was simply savoring my lunch," Kenta reassured the concerned Karin as he shoveled seasoned rice into his mouth.

Karin beamed as if relieved.

Neither of them could have known that danger was approaching from a completely different direction.

That evening, without anyone's knowledge, a shadow descended upon Shiihaba City.

"Boy, I'm beat. It's been a long time since I've traveled this far using my own power." Noel said, stretching, her stiff joints popping.

She'd avoided the daylight hours in a cargo container at an abandoned factory. When her

clairsentience told her that night had fallen, she emerged and made her way to Shiihaba City. Upon entering the prefecture where Shiihaba was located, she removed her bat wings, leaping from roof to roof on foot. If the Maaka family's bats overheard Noel commanding her own minions, they would know she was coming.

If I lose the element of surprise, it'll spoil everything. Too bad I screwed up, though, Noel silently berated herself as she remembered. Without the navigational support of her bats, she'd gotten disoriented and overshot Shiihaba, arriving in the next city over before realizing her mistake and doubling back. The extra effort had worn her out.

In order to maintain her independent lifestyle, Noel took pains to stay well informed. Sometimes it got tiring, however, and she wasn't as careful as she should be. That was when this kind of sloppy miscalculation happened. *Well, never mind. It wasn't a major setback. Besides, I can't use trains or taxis.* Inside a vehicle, with small windows limiting the view, the Maakas' bats would be much more difficult to spot.

Noel knew that the Maakas lived in Shiihaba, but she didn't know the exact location. There was no telling where they might have lookout bats, so she couldn't be too careful.

Vampires kept to themselves by nature. In a sense, they were a fairly antisocial species, rarely sharing the

location of their lair with anyone but their closest relations. Each family staked out its own territory, and it was perfectly acceptable to kill vampires who violated those boundaries.

Only once a year, the vampires throughout Japan gathered at the Assembly—an extreme departure from their customarily solitary lifestyles. In the old days, the Assembly had been a venue for important discussions—arranging marriages and discussing measures to take in case vampire hunters from Europe tried to pursue them. But lately, with few new vampire children being born, there were no young vampires to marry off, and over time, the threat of vampire hunters had become less of a concern. Now, the Assembly's agenda lacked substance.

Noel didn't give a fig about vampire infertility or the future of the species. But she had to remain in the know in order to maintain her maverick lifestyle.

Now—how will I find the Maakas? I can't simply march up to them and introduce myself! James is dead now, but that leaves Elda, Henry, Calera, and the three kids. Noel was confident she could hold her own in a one-on-one battle, but six-on-one was another matter!

She wanted to learn about the Maakas without them noticing her. Unfortunately, she was exhausted from the long journey. *Better eat first. If I had to fight anyone in this state, I'd starve to death before suffering any bodily harm.*

Noel pondered whether she should head for the downtown area, where there would be plenty of night owls to choose from, or try for a quieter neighborhood with fewer targets, but more hiding places and less exposure.

After a moment's thought, Noel opted for the latter. It wouldn't be surprising if members of the Maaka family were out feeding at this hour. If she went downtown, she might run into them. She was trespassing on their turf, so they'd be well within their rights to attack her. She definitely didn't want to risk an encounter in her depleted state.

Noel perched on the rooftop of a tall building and surveyed the surroundings, noting a patch of trees and greenery nearby. *A park? That'll do,* she said to herself. There were sure to be people out strolling or walking dogs. Noel made up her mind not to be picky—she would simply find someone who was alone to prey upon. She was bordering on ravenous.

As she made her way to the park, Noel bounded from rooftop to rooftop, concealing herself in shadows. When she arrived, a plastic sign tied to a tree read: SHIIHABA NATURE PARK.

Hey, this place is pretty nice, she thought. *Lots of greenery—plenty of places to hide, that is.* It was the perfect place for Noel to stalk her dinner. Of course, that made it an ideal hunting ground for other vampires, too.

Noel surveyed her surroundings, sharpening her ears, eyes, and nose. When she drank blood, her attention would be compromised. If someone were to attack her from behind, she'd be helpless to defend herself.

No Maaka bats . . . and no sign of any other vam . . . hmmm?

Like a Geiger counter detecting the faintest radioactive activity, Noel's vampire instincts sounded an internal warning bell. *There's a vampire nearby! I sense its energy—ever so faintly.*

Noel dove into the bushes, breathing as quietly as possible, trying to make herself undetectable. The sound of footsteps and voices drew closer. Two figures. Noel didn't want to be seen, but with only two potential opponents, she didn't feel the need to flee, either. She decided to remain hidden and get a look at who she was dealing with. After all, the only Maakas she'd ever met were Elda and James. She had no idea what the younger ones looked like.

Times sure have changed, Noel thought. *Elsman used to be a snot-nosed, poopy little kid, and now he lords over everybody at the Assembly . . . Uh-oh. I'm starting to sound like a real old fogey!* It didn't matter how much she drank blood and took pains to keep herself looking youthful on the outside if she let herself grow old and crotchety inside.

Noel turned her attention back to the path. The footsteps belonged to a tall boy in a school uniform

and a petite girl in a double-breasted coat. The boy's shadow fell across the girl's face, so it was hard to see, but she carried a school bag. It was evident they were both high schoolers.

Wait a minute. High schoolers? Noel said to herself, perplexed.

That was odd. At the youngest, they would have to be fifteen or sixteen to be in high school. It was unheard of for a vampire to reach that age without having awakened. Besides, the presence Noel sensed was that of an awakened vampire. Or so she'd thought . . .

The boy gave off purely human vibrations. It had to be the girl.

But—what's going on? It doesn't make sense. She doesn't seem like an ordinary vampire!

The pathway made a slight curve, and the girl's face came out of the shadow and into the light.

Elda M-maaka? Noel was astounded.

Elda had been one of Noel's fellow travelers when they'd fled human persecutors in Europe and crossed over to the Orient. Noel hated being part of a group, so she'd vanished at the first opportunity and had kept to herself ever since. Still, she'd never forgotten the faces of her fellow exiles. And now Elda Maaka was strolling through the park, chattering happily with a young boy in a school uniform.

No, that isn't Elda. After scrutinizing the girl's face from her hiding place in the shadows, Noel let out a

slow breath. The girl closely resembled Elda, but she wasn't her. The young girl's bust was so prominent that it stood out noticeably beneath her thick coat. *Elda was flat enough to go braless. There's no way she's filled out since then. Or is it a padded push-up bra?*

This girl's vibe was completely different, as well. Elda had a freewheeling, bold, devil-may-care personality. And she had been deeply in love with James Maaka. The young girl now approaching wore a bashful, wide-eyed smile. It was clear from the slight flush of her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes that she harbored romantic feelings for the boy she was with.

Noel knew that James Maaka had died last year, but she couldn't imagine Elda taking up with a new lover this soon. *Any way you slice it, that boy's clearly an ordinary human. Elda was a dyed-in-the-wool human-hater. There's just no way.*

Then, the only possibly explanation was . . . *Oh, right. Must be one of Henry and Calera's three kids! If so, the girl is Elda's granddaughter. No wonder they resemble each other. But if she's a vampire, she should be awakened at her age. How could she be in school? She shouldn't be able to go out during the day. So what's going on? Could she be a very late bloomer? Hmm . . . I wonder how sharp her senses are . . .*

Noel drew her index finger to her mouth, piercing its flesh ever so slightly with her fang. When she removed the finger, a bead of blood welled on its tip.

Vampires have far keener senses than humans, and the hunger-provoking smell of blood should have been unmistakable. Plus, this was vampire blood. If the girl were a vampire, she would pick up the distinctive smell and react.

The couple had nearly reached the bushes where Noel was hiding. If Noel had been a cat, the fur on her back would've been standing on end. Rigid with anticipation, she eyed the girl intently. She didn't want to miss even the faintest reaction.

The couple continued to chatter as they strolled past.

"You're working at Julian tomorrow, too, aren't you, Maaka?" asked the boy.

"Yeah. Four-thirty to eight. How about you, Kenta?"

"Same."

"Oh! Oh, *gahhh!*" As the girl gazed happily up at the boy's face, her foot caught on a ledge in the pavement. She fell flat on her butt in the grass opposite Noel. "Oooh, ouch!"

Kenta sighed as he reached out a hand to help Karin up. "You okay? You should really watch your step, Maaka!"

"Well, I didn't know there was going to be a step there!" Karin grumbled.

"You tripped there the day before yesterday, too, didn't you? We pass through on the way to school practically every day!"

The girl hung her head, and immediately Kenta realized he'd said too much and began to backpedal. "You okay? If you're hurt, I can carry you on my back . . ."

"I-I'm okay. I landed on my butt, but I'm totally fine! See?" Karin swung her bag in the air to show Kenta she was unhurt, but miscalculated the bag's momentum. "*Yiiikes!*" Losing her balance, she toppled over again, landing once more on her backside. "Ouch. Heh-heh," she chucked in embarrassment.

"Are you all right?" Kenta asked, laughing. "C'mon, get up."

"Thanks."

"Honestly . . . you sure fall down a lot, Maaka. Be careful, would you?"

They walked off together, still giggling.

Noel watched them go, feeling a combination of disappointment and relief. There was only one word for a duo like that. "Idiot lovebirds," she muttered, licking the drop of blood from her fingertip. "What a waste. I drew blood for nothing. If she were a vampire, she would've noticed for sure. . . ."

Still, Noel was puzzled. *When I first sensed her energy, I was sure she was a vampire. And she looks too much like Elda for it to be pure coincidence. And her teeth! Her canines were bigger than a regular human's.*

With that many factors, it was impossible not to wonder.

She isn't human, but she isn't a normal vampire . . . Could she be a Day Walker? A vampire impervious to daylight . . . God forbid! Noel shuddered.

With the decline of religious fervor in human society, crosses and holy water had lost their potency. The greatest remaining threat to vampires was sunlight. There was no getting around it. There were ancient stories of tremendously powerful vampires who'd been immune to sunlight, however. These indomitable vampires were called Day Walkers, and they'd been the object of all other vampires' awe and veneration.

Now, all that remained were the stories. The Day Walkers had died off long before Noel was born, leaving behind only tales of their powers. It seemed unthinkable that a Day Walker could be born in this era, when hardly anyone was able to have children. Regardless, the fact that the Maakas had three children attested to their virility. Perhaps some kind of mutant gene could lead to the birth of a Day Walker.

Please, no! The last thing I need is to accidentally make enemies with a Day Walker! Noel said to herself. Even the possibility that a being more powerful than Noel existed filled her with uneasiness. She didn't like the idea of anything that might threaten her safety.

Noel thought about the girl she'd seen moments before. *Not exactly what I'd expect of an invincible vampire.* She remembered the magnificent spill the girl had taken and sighed. *That clumsy, clueless oaf? I*

would've expected more of a quiet, elegant-young-lady type. Then again, I wouldn't mind giving those knockers of hers a squeeze . . .

Noel ceased her musings before they wandered off in an untoward direction. This wasn't the time for that.

If she's a vampire, I don't get how she can be in high school. And she didn't notice the smell of blood! Or perhaps she only pretended not to notice? Maybe she knew I was watching her and deliberately led me astray? If so, she's a heck of an actress.

Noel would have to find out. If the girl's resemblance to Elda was only coincidence and her investigation led nowhere, that was fine with Noel. She had plenty of time. She was over three hundred years old, and there was no telling how much longer she might live.

But I don't want to risk a head-on confrontation. Better take a more indirect route.

Noel leaped up into the trees and sprang from bough to bough as she set off to seek an appropriate target. If the girl she'd just encountered were a Day Walker, it wouldn't be a good idea to drink blood nearby. Noel didn't want the girl sneaking up on her while she was feeding.

She left the Shiihaba Nature Park, crossed a boulevard, and entered a residential area. There, she spotted a high-school girl about to enter an apartment

building. The girl was wearing a coat, so Noel couldn't see her uniform, but her shoes and book bag were exactly like the ones the girl called "Maaka" wore. Probably schoolmates, Noel surmised.

After making sure there was nobody else around, Noel pounced toward the girl.

" . . . !?" The girl turned, her body stiffened in surprise. Before the girl could scream, Noel swept her up and sank her fangs into the girl's neck.

"Oh . . . ooohhh . . ."

Noel drank to her heart's content, savoring the girl's faint moaning and the way her young body convulsed in Noel's arms. The long journey had left the blonde vampire famished.

"Ah!" Noel let out a sigh of satisfaction as she drew her lips away from the girl's neck. The girl slumped limply against her like a marionette with its strings cut. Noel gripped her arms and held her up.

"Do you know a girl named Maaka? Petite, with big boobs and a bob cut. She goes to your school, doesn't she?"

The girl's eyes were unfocused, as if she were dreaming. "Maa . . . ka? I've heard her name. I've seen her talking with a girl in my class, Ougimachi. But she's a year behind me and I don't really know her."

"Oh, right. Just because you go to the same school doesn't mean you know her, huh?" Disappointed, Noel released the girl, allowing her to collapse on the

pavement. Noel leaned over her limp body and peered into her eyes. "In three seconds, you will forget all of this," she said. "You stumbled and fell, that's all. Got that?"

Manipulating the human mind was child's play to a vampire. The ability to erase a victim's memories was essential to vampires' survival. But Noel's abilities went beyond mere memory deletion, entering the realm of mind-control through hypnosis.

"Yes . . ." the girl responded obediently.

"Good." With that, Noel sprang skyward once more, landing atop a telephone pole.

The girl scanned the area around her wearing a bewildered expression. "Ouch! I tripped! Sheesh, I must've hit my head—I feel kinda dizzy . . ." she muttered as she stood up, brushing the dirt off her coat.

Meanwhile, Noel vaulted from the telephone pole to the roof of a house, and from there, to the roof of a taller building, whizzing through the sky in search of her next meal. She'd met her bare minimum caloric needs, but now she wanted information. She was searching for students who attended the same high school as the Elda Maaka look-alike. But the hour was late, and there weren't a lot of teens in school uniforms still out and about. Noel was hoping to find some stragglers on their way home from cram school or after-school activities, but she was having a hard time locating any.

On her eighth try, Noel finally got a girl who was in the same class as Maaka. The girl wore her hair in two ponytails on the sides of her head. Noel led her into a playground and sat her down on the only bench, draping her arm across the girl's shoulders. Noel's manner of dress often caused people to mistake her for a man. At a casual glance, they could probably pass for a couple on a date.

Noel cast a gentle hypnosis on the girl to keep her from causing a stir, but her stomach had been full since her fifth victim and she had no desire to drink more blood. Besides, this girl wasn't Noel's type, blood-wise or otherwise. All Noel wanted from her was information. Her name was Chika Otani.

"Chika, was it?" Noel whispered in the girl's ear. "I'd like to ask you some questions. First, what's this Maaka's full name? And how old is she?"

"Karin Maaka. Um, I think Maki said Karin's birthday was in October . . . so she's sixteen," Chika responded.

Sixteen? She should be awakened by that age, Noel said to herself. "Does she really come to school during the daytime?"

"Yes," answered Chika.

"Maybe she's lying about her age. Did she transfer in recently? Maybe nobody really knows her true age," proposed Noel.

"No," Chika maintained. "There are a few kids who've been going to school with her since elementary."

"Is that so? So she hasn't awakened . . . maybe she's a late bloomer," suggested Noel.

"But Karin wears an E-cup!" Chika argued with open admiration. "Last time we were changing for gym class, she'd gone up a cup size again! It isn't fair! We're both freshmen!"

"Um, that's not what I meant . . ." Noel countered. The mention of gym class gave her an idea. "Does she avoid sunlight? Perhaps she stays off the field on sunny days?"

"Nope. She takes gym just like everyone else. Oh, but she's kinda sickly. She gets these anemic spells and passes out a lot."

"Anemic spells? Hm . . ." If Maaka was a vampire—even if she hadn't been awakened yet—anemic spells fit the profile. So far, it was impossible to conclude whether Karin Maaka was a vampire or simply an ordinary human. *She looks far too much like Elda for it to be coincidence, and their names are even similar. But she also has way too many qualities that don't fit the vampire profile. . . .*

Then again, the mere fact that the Maakas had three children was abnormal given the current infertility problem among vampires. Maybe it made sense for an exceptional vampire child to be born of exceptional vampire parents.

The secret of the Maakas, huh? There's definitely something fishy about this Karin girl. Now what? Noel wondered. Based on what Emily had told her, the elders and other members of the vampire community had been suspicious of the Maakas' unusual virility. It was quite possible the Assembly might also initiate some sort of investigation. Noel didn't want them catching wind of her activities any more than she wanted the Maakas to.

If Karin were a Day Walker, Noel didn't stand a chance in a direct skirmish. After all, she was powerless in the daylight. *Before anything else, I have to figure out what the deal is with Karin Maaka, and I must exercise extreme caution doing it. I'll use the most indirect methods I can.* Noel had already lived to the ripe age of three hundred. She didn't want some young upstart of a Day Walker shaking things up for her.

She would find out more about Karin Maaka, and if she really proved to be a Day Walker, Noel would report her to the Assembly. Even if it meant stretching the truth, she would incite a conflict between the Maakas and the rest of the vampire world. As a lone wolf, Noel stood to benefit if her potential enemies were busy fighting each other. The restrictive, stuffy old Assembly and the almighty Day Walker were both threats as far as she was concerned.

After all, I've got time to spare . . .

Her mind made up, Noel leaned in once more to whisper in Chika's ear. "Chika? Do you talk with Karin Maaka a lot?"

"Kind of. Yukari's my best friend—Yukari Hashimoto, that is. But Karin and Maki are probably my next best friends," Chika explained.

"That's good enough. Now, be a good girl and tell your friends something for me tomorrow."

"What?"

"Just a rumor—an urban legend. Teenage girls like scary stories, don't you? Listen . . ."

When Noel finished whispering into the girl's ear, she stood up and thumped Chika on the head. Then she zipped away, as swift as the wind, and hid in the shadow of a concrete wall.

Chika stood up and wandered off, her gait wobbly. As she exited the park, the cloudiness of her gaze dissolved. Without looking around, she strode confidently away. She seemed to have completely forgotten having entered the park or sat on the bench.

As Noel watched the girl depart, she mentally sorted through what she knew about the Maaka clan. *I've never met Henry or Calera, have I? No. I* have *met their parents, though. Calera's mother was quite the beauty, I recall. Quiet, but solid to the core.* Noel chuckled, remembering the time she'd hit on Calera's mother, only to be coolly rejected. *Of course, I was*

already seeing someone else, so I backed off pretty quickly. If I ever come across a woman like her again, I won't give up so easily next time! Come to think of it, it's been a while since I've had any romance in my life, serious or otherwise. That's no good. I'd better find somebody to have some fun with soon. It's bad for the health not to.

But first, she had to learn more about Karin Maaka. With that, Noel disappeared into the darkness, her coat fluttering behind her.

CHIBI VAMPIRE AND THE IDIOT LOVEBIRDS CONTEST

Naturally, Karin didn't have the faintest idea another vampire was watching her. The next morning, she packed two lunches as she always did.

I didn't see Kenta on the way to school today . . . she reflected.

Karin and Kenta usually left home at around the same time, but it wasn't as if they were obligated to walk to school together. Sometimes, like today, Karin ended up reaching school without running into Kenta.

"Good morning!" Karin called out to nobody in particular as she opened the door to freshman Class D. Kenta's seat was empty; he hadn't arrived yet. But a group of girls congregated around the desk in front of his—Maki's spot—including Fukumi Kaito, Chika Otani, and Yukari Hashimoto. At the sound of Karin's greeting, they all turned around.

"Good morning!"

"Morning!"

"Hey, you didn't come with Kenta today? Did you two have a fight?"

Karin blushed at her friends' teasing. "N-no! It isn't like we make a point of coming to school

together!" she protested. "We live near each other, so we happen to meet up a lot."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. We believe you."

"C'mon, quit teasing!" Karin pleaded. "So, how come you're all clustered together, anyway?" Karin placed her bag on her own chair and approached the group.

Yukari was seated sideways in the seat in front of Maki, twisting her body to listen to what Maki was saying.

"The Newspaper Club's doing a story on urban legends," Yukari explained, tapping her mechanical pencil against an open notebook on the desk as she spoke. "You know, school ghost stories and that kinda thing. And Maki said she knew one, so she was telling it to us. Do you know any, Karin?"

"Why now?" Karin asked. "I thought ghost stories were a summer thing."

Yukari flashed Karin a mischievous smile and shrugged dramatically. "Oh, reeeally? Boy, some people are totally oblivious! Haven't you noticed how steamy it's been in this classroom lately, despite the fact that it's winter? Thanks to the red-hot passion of a certain sizzling couple . . . We're simply trying to cool things down a little bit!"

Flustered by the insinuations, Karin began to sweat profusely. "R-red-hot passion?! Kenta and I aren't like that at all!" she declared, shaking her head vigorously, her hair flapping audibly from side to side.

"Well, well! I never said I was talking about you and Kenta, Karin!" said Yukari.

"Ugh!" Karin was at a loss.

Next to her, Chika propped her elbows on the desk and grinned. "Your reaction gave you away, Karin! How 'bout letting us in on how things are progressing with Kenta? Of course, the Newspaper Club's feature article has nothing to do with you, Karin. We just didn't have anything else to write about."

Yukari poked Chika and exclaimed, "Chika! Don't tell people we don't have anything to write about!"

"Oh, come on. I was the one who came up with the idea of urban legends in the first place!" Chika grumbled, rubbing her head where Yukari had poked her. "And I came up with lots of stories, too. Like the school bus one, and the one about the paintings in the art room—"

"That isn't true," Maki interjected. "I told you the art room story. And wasn't it Fuku who gave you the school bus one?"

"It was Chika. I'm not too into horror stuff, so I don't know a lot of scary stories," Fuku confessed.

"Yeah! And then there was the one about the high-school girl who went into an abandoned building. Heh-heh-heh! Want us to tell you the stories, Karin? First, Maki's spooky story about the art room!" Chika placed a hand on Karin's shoulder and lowered her voice to a whisper.

"A girl in the art class stayed late after school one day," Chika continued. "She was painting a landscape to submit to an art show, and the deadline was coming up. But as she was working, she heard this knocking sound. 'Maybe one of the other art club kids forgot something,' the girl thought. So without turning around, she called out, 'Come in!'—but nobody did. And then—"

"Oh, uh . . . I'm not really into scary stories . . ." Karin cut in.

"Just listen . . ." Chika insisted, proceeding with the tale. "The art club girl figured she'd imagined the knocking, so she continued painting. But once again, she heard the knocking. And once again, she called out, "Come in!"—but there was no response. After several times, the girl figured someone was playing a prank on her and began to get angry, so she decided to wait by the door for the person to knock again. The moment she heard the knocking, the girl pushed open the door. There was no one in the dark hallway. But all of a sudden, the girl sensed something slip past her into the classroom. A chill ran up her spine as she turned to peer into the classroom. And what do you think happened?" Chika paused right at the story's climax and smirked.

Karin was terrified, but her curiosity got the better of her. She gulped. "Wh-what happened?"

"Hee-hee! The landscape she'd been painting had become a portrait! There, in the painting, a high-school

girl with the same sailor-type uniform stood gazing at the floor. But when the girl looked closer, she saw that the girl in the painting wasn't standing—she'd hung herself! It was the ghost of a girl who'd committed suicide in the art room years before!"

"Eeeeeek!" Karin squealed in horror.

"Exactly! The girl screamed *exactly* like that! And that instant, the dead girl in the picture raised her head and smiled . . . as she reached out and . . . grabbed the girl's arm!" Chika seized Karin's arm right as she finished her dramatic account.

"Eeeeeek! Eeeeeek! Nooo! Stop, *stop!* You're freaking me out!" Karin's shrieks echoed through the classroom.

"Come on, that's enough," Fukumi interceded, pulling Chika's hand off Karin's. "You know Karin scares easily. Don't overdo it."

"Karin, that was a story I heard from a girl in the badminton club, but it isn't about our school," Maki chimed in. "She heard it from someone at another school during a meet when they were swapping stories about school mysteries. Honestly, Chika! You were terrified yourself when I told the story a few minutes ago!"

"Not as scared as Karin!" Chika argued. "Oh, come on. It's good for her to build up a little tolerance for scary stuff. Karin, if you go around being terrified all the time and you never learn about these things, you're all the more likely to wind up getting possessed!"

Karin blanched. "P-possessed?"

"Heh-heh-heh! I'm only saying you could put yourself in danger." Chika replied. She seemed to relish Karin's reaction. It was clear from her expression that she was finding her stride as she launched into another ghost story. "Here, I'll tell you one more. Several years ago, a school club did a group trip to the mountains—"

"I'm not in any school clubs, so I never go on group trips," Karin muttered in an attempt to cut Chika's story short.

"The trip part isn't really important. This is something that happened when four girls went exploring nearby during a break." Chika assumed her spookiest face. "They were wandering through the woods when they came to an abandoned house. Curious, they decided to go inside. 'Anybody home?' they called as they stepped through the door. One of them had a video camera, so she filmed it—like an adventure movie. But they didn't find anything interesting there, so they decided to go. As they left, they called out, 'Goodbye!' But in fact, one of the girls had found a beautiful ring in one of the back rooms, and she pocketed it when nobody was looking. She told herself it would be a shame to leave it there. But later, when they watched the video—"

"Stop! That's enough!" Karin pleaded.

"Although they hadn't heard anything at the time, there was a woman's voice on the tape. When the girls

asked, 'Anybody home?' the voice called out, 'Come in!' And when they said, 'Goodbye!' the voice called out, 'Leaving so soon?' Later, they found out that a foreign woman had once lived in that house, but that she'd been murdered by a burglar."

"Nooo!" Karin wailed.

"And that isn't the whole story. When the woman said, 'Leaving so soon?'—"

"No! Stop! I don't want to hear it!" Karin covered her ears with both hands, pressing her face to the desk. If she heard anymore, she knew she'd be too scared to go to the bathroom at night. Her house was spooky enough at night already, with the audible footsteps of Anju's dolls scurrying around in the darkness. Last night, Karin had left her room to go to the bathroom and had seen a dark figure crouched in the hallway, which made Karin scream in terror.

In fact, the dark figure was Karin's father, lurking in the hallway waiting to apologize for listening in on Karin the night before. But for that brief moment, Karin had been truly terrified. She'd accepted his apology, figuring it was better than having him startle her in the dark hallway again, but now Karin didn't want to add any new reasons to be scared.

Chika wasn't about to stop, however. She was enjoying herself too much. "Oh, come on! Just listen, Karin. The girl who'd taken the ring was scared, but she couldn't turn it in to the police because she'd stolen

it. And, of course, she was scared to go back to the abandoned house again. Then, that night—"

"Please, *please* stop!" Karin begged. She could still hear Chika's voice, even with her ears covered.

"Come on, Chika. That's enough. You know how easily Karin cries," Maki reminded her friend. Maki was always the one who backed Karin in these types of situations.

"Yeah, but isn't it scarier *not* to hear the end?" asked Chika.

"Just drop it," Maki insisted. "By the way, have you all heard? Next Wednesday they're going to open a new Angel Moon branch in Shiihaba!"

"Oh, I heard about that! Everyone raves about Angel Moon!" Yukari exclaimed.

"I should've known you'd be up on the latest news, Yukari," Maki replied.

Relieved that the conversation had shifted, Karin uncovered her ears.

Angel Moon was a famous cake shop. The deserts were sophisticated and not overly sweet. They were also low in calories, and made from only the highest quality ingredients. In other words, it was a teenage girl's dream come true. The chain was frequently featured on television programs highlighting the most sought-after deserts in Japan. Karin had also seen Angel Moon mentioned in magazines and on television, and longed to try the much-hyped treats. Unfortunately, it was a

bit expensive for high-school girls to afford on their allowances.

Chika and Yukari seemed to be thinking the same thing. Fervently, they racked their brains for a way to make it work.

"Do you think they'll offer any discounts for the grand opening?" Chiki inquired.

"Your family runs a bookstore, right Maki? Maybe they'll give your dad some coupons or something, since they're going to be in the same shopping district," added Yukari.

"I wondered the same thing, but no dice," Maki replied. "Oh, but next week the Shiihaba Shopping District celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. There's going to be a bunch of different events, and I remember hearing that one of the prizes is free tickets to Angel Moon's cake buffet."

"Really?" Chika and Yukari asked in unison.

"Yeah. Four tickets," Maki said.

"What's the contest?" asked Yukari.

"Let me think," Maki replied. "It wasn't an eating contest or a screaming contest. Oh, I remember—it was a Hot Couples Contest! There were a bunch of other prizes, too, like ten pounds of Uonuma premium short-grain rice from the rice store, and matching T-shirts and rings."

Before Maki could finish, Chika and Yukari began shaking their heads dejectedly. "Yeah, but we can't enter a

'Hot Couples Contest.' Who cares about the other prizes? We only want those Angel Moon cake buffet tickets. Is Angel Moon giving them out at any other contests?"

"I asked about that right away, too. I'd really like to eat their cake again . . ." Maki said wistfully.

"You've had it before, Maki?" asked Chika.

"Just once, when some relatives brought it as a gift when they came to visit. A pear tart—it was *so* good. But seven hundred yen is a lot for only one piece of cake," Maki said, sighing regretfully.

"That *is* expensive." Karin's shoulders drooped as she calculated the equivalent time it would take her to earn that much at her part-time job at Julian.

Suddenly, Yukari let out a cry. "Hey, I know who we could enter in the contest!" she exclaimed, pointing at Karin.

"Huh? M-m-me?" Karin stuttered.

"Yeah! Karin and Kenta can enter and win the prize for us!" Yukari declared. "Boys don't care about cake buffets, do they? Karin and Kenta can divide up the rice and the other stuff between them, and we can all go to the cake buffet together."

"All of us? But there are five of us," Chika reminded Yukari.

"Oh, you can count me out. I have cram school on Wednesday, so I can't go anyway," said Fukumi. "But don't you think your plan's fundamentally flawed? Karin and Kenta would have to *win*, right?"

The excited Chika and Yukari tuned out Fukumi's attempt at being realistic. "Thanks, Fuku! Okay, the four of us'll eat cake together!"

"Oh? Well, whatever. Good luck, Karin. Okay, I'm off to pick up the class minutes," Fukumi said before departing with an exasperated air.

Chika and Yukari, both grinning from ear to ear, turned toward Karin once again.

"We're counting on you, Karin!" exclaimed Chika.

"Everything's riding on you and Kenta!" Yukari added.

"Ack! Forget it!" Karin screamed desperately. She began to sweat again, despite the brisk air. "There's no way Kenta and I could win a Hot Couples Contest. I'd be way too embarrassed to even enter!"

"Why? Everyone in the entire school knows you're going out. What's the big deal?" Yukari asked.

"What? The *whole* school?" Karin squawked in disbelief.

"Come on, isn't it a little late to act all surprised? The entire class was onto you by the end of last semester. We were all waiting for you guys to finally admit you were an item," Chika giggled.

"The end of last semester? But we weren't even going out yet!" insisted Karin.

"Maybe not, but it was totally obvious you were into each other," said Chika.

"Ugh!" At a loss, Karin cradled her head in her arms and collapsed against her desk. Her entire body burned with embarrassment.

As Karin mentally reviewed what had just happened, she remembered that a few days before at Julian, where she and Kenta worked, Yuriya Tachibana had caught Karin and Kenta holding hands and proclaimed, "Oh, I get it! After everyone you two know said you were a completely mushy, huggy, lovey-dovey, sweet-on, keening couple, you finally made it official!"

So everyone else was thinking the same thing, too? Oh, how embarrassing! Karin lamented to herself.

Chika interpreted Karin's silence as consent. "Since everyone in school already knows, what difference does it make if a few more people find out? Right?" she said brightly.

"It isn't that simple, Chika!" Karin protested. "For one thing, can you imagine Kenta agreeing to take part in something called a 'Hot Couples Contest'?"

The three other girls shook their heads.

"Good point . . . Kenta's awfully straight-laced," Chika admitted. "That time when Kikuchi suggested he was wearing his collar up to hide a hickey, Kenta grabbed him by the shirt and gave him a real tongue-lashing!"

Karin remembered that incident well. Kenta hadn't been hiding a hickey—he'd been hiding the fang marks from where she'd bitten him. More than a

month had passed now, so the marks had disappeared completely, but the mere memory of it prompted a wave of mortification. *I mean, what I actually did was far more embarrassing than giving Kenta a hickey! I grabbed him and sank my fangs into his neck . . .* Once again, Karin hid her face on her desk.

As usual, Maki came to Karin's rescue. "Come on, don't you think that's asking a bit much of Karin? Let's just save up our allowances 'til we can all go to Angel Moon together."

"Yeah . . ." Chika relented, crossing her arms.

Yukari refused to give up that easily. She poked Karin's arm with her mechanical pencil. "How 'bout this, Karin? Will you do it if Kenta agrees?"

"There's no way he'll do it," Karin stressed. "Kenta's too serious to agree to something like that. Besides, he works on the weekends."

"Maki, when's the contest?" asked Yukari.

"The same day as Angel Moon's grand opening—Wednesday evening," Maki replied.

"Then maybe he can do it. Tee-hee! If Kenta okays it, you'll do it, won't you, Karin?" Yukari prodded.

Karin peeked up from her desk. "Sure, but Kenta will never say yes . . ."

"Leave that to me!" Yukari declared, puffing out her chest confidently.

At that very moment, the classroom door swung open and Kenta entered.

"Perfect timing! Good morning, Kenta!" Yukari called out cheerfully. The rest of the girls followed suit.

"Mornin'. You all seem pretty high-energy for this early in the day," Kenta mumbled, confused. He noticed that all the girls' chairs were situated around Maki Tokitou's desk, directly in front of his. "I don't want to get in the way. Should I come back when it's time for class to start?" he asked nobody in particular.

"No, no, you're fine! In fact, this is perfect. We were just talking about you," Yukari replied with a huge grin.

Karin was so nervous to hear what was coming next that she didn't even manage to return Kenta's greeting.

Kenta scanned the four girls' faces, his brow knit in bewilderment. "Taking about me?"

"Yeah. Kenta, there's an opportunity to get ten pounds of rice for free, see—" Yukari began.

"Where? How?" Kenta sprang at the bait without waiting to hear the end of the sentence.

Once again, Karin hid her face on her desk. *Oh, right . . . the rice . . .*

Food was Kenta's most powerful motivator. He put in long hours at his job, his stomach often growled at school, and he was known to sprint off after class to catch hot supermarket sales. By now, everyone in the class was clued in to Kenta's economic situation at home. Kenta would undoubtedly come to his senses

and try to refuse when he heard it was a couples contest, but by then, Yukari would have tricked him into committing and it would be too late to back out.

"Karin! Hey, Karin!"

Karin felt someone poke her shoulder and glanced up. Maki regarded her with an expression of concern. "Listen, Chika and Yukari have completely lost their minds over this cake buffet thing."

Karin's eyes darted across the room and noticed that Chika and Yukari had ganged up on Kenta, trying to persuade him. He'd been excited by the promise of ten pounds of rice, but was balking after hearing what the contest entailed. From the looks of it, he'd tried to escape but had been thwarted. They'd previously been standing by Maki's desk, but now they had him cornered in the back of the classroom. Here and there, he managed to get in a "Yeah, but . . ." or a "Gah!" but at this rate, Chika and Yukari would probably wear him down.

Maki sighed. "If you don't want to do it, you should just say so," she told Karin. "Don't worry about us, okay?"

Karin remained silent. Maki's kind words were actually beginning to weaken her resolve. *Maki really wants to have cake at Angel Moon, too. She said so earlier,* Karin remembered.

Maki had come to Karin's rescue more times than Karin could count. Minutes earlier, when Karin had

been freaked out by Chika's spooky stories, Maki had forcibly changed the subject. More importantly, Karin and Kenta's relationship probably never would've become romantic without Maki's support.

When I met Yuriya, a half-vampire, I thought I'd finally found someone in a similar situation, with the same problems, but . . . Karin's thoughts trailed off. Really, Maki was Karin's best friend—even if they were different species. *I'd really like to make Maki happy. And of course, I want to have cake at Angel Moon, too. If it's a cake buffet, we eat all the cake we want within the set time period.* What more could a girl ask for than the opportunity to go to a dessert shop and chit-chat with a group of friends while eating one's fill?

Karin smiled. "If Kenta's okay with it, I am, too," she declared.

"Really?" asked Maki.

"Absolutely," Karin affirmed.

Because the grand opening was on a Wednesday evening and not on the weekend, Karin figured the event wouldn't be too crowded.

Maki still appeared worried as she peered into Karin's eyes. "But . . . it's hard to imagine a shy, quiet girl like you in a couples contest. I know I got a bit carried away and got all worked up about it with the others—but are you sure you're okay with this?"

"I'm sure. After all, I want to try the cake at Angel Moon. And it's so expensive! Oh, wait a sec, Maki . . ."

An idea suddenly struck Karen. "Were you thinking of entering with someone?"

"D-don't be ridiculous! I don't have a boyfriend. You know that!" Maki stammered.

Karin certainly did. Maki wasn't a very skilled cook, and since the last few years of grade school, Karin had helped Maki make chocolates each year for Valentine's Day. But they'd only ever made the kind of chocolate you pass out to your friends. Maki had never asked Karin to help her make the sort of sophisticated, fancy chocolate you make for someone you really care about in a romantic way. Maki had plenty of friends, both male and female, but she never seemed to have anything going on in the romance department.

"I know, but I thought maybe you could use entering-the-contest-to-win-the-cake-prize as an excuse to approach the guy you like, or something," Karin reasoned. "That TV drama with the actor you like had a plotline like that last week, didn't it?"

"Oh, please! I try not to base my life completely on TV dramas, Karin! Besides, I don't like anyone in that way," Maki scoffed.

"Maki, you're always helping out with my love life, but you never seem to think about your own. Every year, you only give out chocolates to your friends. You gave out twenty or thirty chocolates to the members of your badminton club this year, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah . . . ha-ha!" Maki scratched her head as her face gradually turned pink. "Seeing you and Kenta together does make me envious of what you have. But what can I do? I don't feel that way about anyone."

"But even if you don't like anyone, somebody might like you without you even knowing about it, Maki. Hasn't anyone ever asked you out after you gave him Valentine's chocolate—even if you intended it as a friendly gesture?" Karin inquired.

After all, they were in high school now. It was entirely possible for something like that to happen. Sometimes she butted in too much, but Maki had an honest, open personality, a kind heart, and a strong sense of morality. It would come as no surprise to Karin if Maki had a secret admirer or two.

Maki turned away bashfully. "Well, now that you mention it . . ." she mumbled, "not exactly, but . . . kind of. But, as far as I'm concerned—"

"What?" Karin begged.

"Nothing! Ha-ha-ha!" Maki giggled.

Suddenly, Karin remembered the text Maki had mistakenly sent her the other day. When she'd asked Maki about it, Maki had dismissed her with the exact same response. "Maki, does this have anything to do with the text you accidentally sent me the other day?" Karin demanded.

"Oh! Uh . . . nope! Forget it! Seriously, it was nothing," Maki contended. "Anyway, right now, my

prospects for love or a boyfriend or that kind of thing are totally zilch."

Karin knew that something strange was going on, and she could tell something was bothering Maki.

All of a sudden, they heard Chika and Yukari's jubilant shrieks reverberate from the back of the classroom.

"Hooray, Karin! Kenta says he'll enter the contest!" Chika blurted out.

"He doesn't have to work on Wendesday evening! You can do it, too, right Karin?" asked Yukari.

It was decided. *I'm entering a couples contest with Kenta!* Karin repeated to herself.

Talk about embarrassing. Regardless, it made Karin happy. When she remembered how awful she'd felt over winter break when she'd thought she might never see Kenta again, entering a contest with him almost seemed too good to be true.

"Wow, you're really going to do it? Well, I'll be there to cheer you on!" Maki promised.

"Huh?" Karin looked surprised. "But Maki, don't you have badminton practice on Wednesdays?"

"I don't care. I'll ditch it," Maki replied coolly.

Once again, Karin felt a stab of doubt. It wasn't like Maki to casually skip out on club activities. She'd been strangely tight-lipped when they'd talked about the Valentine's chocolate thing—maybe the reason was connected in some way to the badminton club.

Maki was Karin's best friend. If Maki were having some sort of problem, Karin wanted to help. *A second ago, Maki laughed and changed the subject when I asked her, so there's probably no point in asking again. I guess I should do as Kenta said, and wait until Maki feels ready to talk to me about it,* Karin assured herself.

When she glanced up, Karin's gaze met Kenta's. Still in the corner of the classroom, he grimaced helplessly, and Karin knew he must be embarrassed, as well. But the fact that he'd agreed to enter the contest meant that Kenta didn't mind people knowing that he and Karin were dating.

Kenta . . . Karin's heart thumped sweetly.

It wasn't until Wednesday that she regretted the decision.

"Why are there so many people here?" Karin groaned.

It was a late February evening. The conditions weren't the greatest for an outdoor event, but nonetheless, the contest venue was bustling with people. On one side of the plaza, an eye-catching stage was adorned with decorations and lights, and had benches set up in a semicircle in front of it. There were four hundred—no, probably closer to five hundred people sitting on the benches. Nearly all the seats were taken, and there were even spectators standing up in the back.

An eating contest was being held onstage. When it was over, the Hot Couples Contest would begin. Karin, Kenta, and the other entrants were waiting behind the set next to the stage. They'd come with Maki, Chika, and Yukari, but when the time came to fill out the entry forms, the other three had taken their seats and left Karin and Kenta on their own.

"Why's everyone so interested in a couples contest, anyway? It doesn't have anything to do with them," Kenta muttered, peeking out at the audience from behind the set.

Kenta was as conventional as they came, always insisting that high schoolers should focus on their studies, not on romance. He probably expected everyone else to have the same mindset, and hadn't counted on such a big crowd gathering on a winter's evening when he'd allowed himself to be enticed by the ten-pound bag of rice.

Karin was equally perplexed. *We have to get up there together in front of all these people? How embarrassing! I wonder if the other couples are okay with that . . .* She glanced at the couples next to them, who were also waiting to take the stage. *Gah!* Quickly, Karin averted her gaze. There was one odd couple that didn't seem the least bit affectionate, but most of the guys had their arms around the girls. Others were engaged in barely audible conversations, their faces nearly touching. Over in the shadows, one of the couples seemed to be locked in a passionate embrace.

Y-yikes! I guess to enter a contest like this, you have to be the type of person who's okay doing stuff like that in public! What were we thinking? Karin had to turn away from the couples because she was so embarrassed. Maybe that was why Kenta was focusing on the audience, instead. But that option presented an entirely different set of problems.

"Well, well. If it isn't Karin and Kenta. What are you two doing here?" a voice asked.

"Eeeeeek! Yuriya?" Karin gasped.

They weren't in a secluded dressing room, after all. Anyone could see the contestants simply by looking behind the wood-veneer backdrop. Yuriya Tachibana, Karin and Kenta's coworker at Julian, had done exactly that.

When she saw the numbers pinned to Karin and Kenta's chests, Yuriya nodded as though it all made sense. "Same number . . . so you're entering together? The next event is an Idiot Lovebirds Contest, isn't it?"

"Not an Idiot Lovebirds Contest—a Hot Couples Contest!" Karin countered, flustered. No sooner had the words left her mouth than she realized that the actual name was even worse. Her face felt as though it were ablaze.

Yuriya laughed politely, her hand covering her mouth. "A self-proclaimed hot couple? Well, I see you two are as passionate as ever!"

"I-I-I didn't mean—" Karin stammered.

"It isn't anything to be ashamed of," Yuriya interrupted. "You'll have to be at least that bold if you want to win the contest."

Karin was at a loss for words, but Kenta answered on her behalf. "That isn't it, Yuriya. It's just that we heard there was a ten-pound bag of rice for the winning couple. We never imagined there'd be this many people watching, and we signed up without giving it too much thought. Now we're regretting it . . . so please don't give us too hard a time about it. . . ." Kenta's cheeks had also reddened, revealing his discomfort.

Yuriya gaped. "A ten-pound bag of rice? In this day and age?" She adjusted her glasses. "Oh! Come to think of it, you're always barely scraping by, aren't you, Kenta? Now I see!" Yuriya glanced from Kenta to Karin and back again with an expression of comprehension. Then she glanced toward the other couples and shrugged. "In that case, you'd better really flaunt your passion for each other."

"F-flaunt it?" repeated Kenta.

"How do you expect to win if you turn red as a beet being seen by only me?" Yuriya demanded. "Now, I'll get out of your way—so you can show off how hot and heavy you are."

At the words "hot and heavy," Karin and Kenta nearly turned to stone. Yuriya gave a derisive laugh and made her exit.

Karin slumped a little lower in her seat. *Well, I guess Tachibana's right* . . . She realized that if being seen by Yuriya made them cringe, there was no way she and Kenta could demonstrate their passion in front of a huge audience. Karin regarded Kenta, whose ears and neck had turned crimson. He felt the same way as Karin, it appeared.

I didn't realize this would be such a big deal. We should have said no! Who knew there'd be this many people watching? As Karin battled a sudden wave of regret, a member of the staff began shouting instructions at the contestants.

"All right, everybody. It's almost time to take the stage! Line up by number over here, please!" said the man.

"Um, excuse me . . ." Karin muttered.

"Yes, girl number four. This way. Hold your boyfriend's hand. Or he can put his arm around you. Hurry up! We're about to go on!"

Karin had summoned her last reserves of courage with the intention of asking to drop out of the contest, but the staff member rushed off without stopping to listen. Now there was no escape.

Music blared, and the emcee's voice rang from the other side of the set: "And now, let's welcome our couples! Our Idiot Lovebirds . . . er, I mean Hot Couples! Come on in!"

Karin and Kenta were supposed to be holding hands, but they found it excruciatingly humiliating.

Karin followed the other couples out onto the stage, taking the number four spot. As she and Kenta emerged onto the bright stage, the glare was almost blinding. The audience cheered wildly. Maki, Chika, and Yukari hollered from their front-row seats.

"Karin! Kenta! Go for it, you guys!"

"Win the prize!"

"We're counting on you for those cake buffet tickets!"

Ack! Don't call our names. Jeez! Karin's face began to drip with sweat, and not solely from the heat of the stage lights. She was as stiff as a board. Kenta squeezed her hand.

The emcee was a male comedian who had achieved minor television fame. He introduced the couples one by one, inciting laughter from the audience with clownish posturing and goofy comments. "Check out couple number four, ladies and gents!" the emcee guffawed. "This pair is really showing off their affection for each other, folks! Just look at how tightly they're squeezing each other's hands!"

"Ugh!" Flustered, Karin released Kenta's hand. The audience burst into laughter.

"There's no need to let go, sweetie!" the emcee said patronizingly. "Go ahead and cling to each other. Now, both contestants in couple four are high-school freshman; they're our youngest pair! Tell us your names, kiddies!"

"I-I'm Kenta Usui."

"I'm Karin Maaka."

"Well, well! Don't tell me you're nervous, kids! Relax, relax! And where did you two lovebirds meet?" The emcee thrust his microphone in Karin's face.

"Well . . . at school . . . We're, uh, in the same class . . ." Karin answered, her voice shrill.

The comedian assumed an exaggerated expression of surprise. "Well, well, ladies and gentlemen, did you hear that? They didn't meet through an online dating service or at a club. They're in the same class at school. Now isn't that refreshing? But I hope you don't skip classes and sneak off to get romantic!" he teased, turning toward Kenta.

"Of course not!" Kenta insisted indignantly. "We have a wholesome relationship, as befits high-school students!"

The emcee flinched and stepped backward. Karin noticed that Kenta's face had turned white as a sheet. Alarmed, she tugged at Kenta's arm. "Kenta! Y-you're glaring!"

Kenta's narrow eyes radiated antagonism. Startled by Karin's admonition, he softened his expression, but it was already too late. The audience had fallen silent. With a stiff smile, the emcee moved on to the next couple.

Oh, Kenta, always so serious! Karin grimaced.

When the emcee finished introducing the couples, a partition was brought out to divide the stage in half

for a quiz. "Now, how well does each of our young couples *really* know each other? This quiz will test the bonds of their love! First question: On what date did you first meet?"

That was easy. Karin wrote the date Kenta had transferred to their school.

"Hold up your answers, please!" the emcee instructed. "Let's see, couples one, two, four, and five have the correct answers! Couples three and seven, you'll have to do better than that! Now, question two: After you met, when did your first date take place?"

Karin knew that one, too.

The emcee waited a moment before saying, "Your answers, please! Couples one, two, and three, good job. Couple four . . . what's this? February fourteenth? This Valentine's Day?" The emcee directed his question at Karin this time, as if he'd learned his lesson.

"Y-yes . . ." Karin stuttered.

"Why, they're a brand-spanking new couple, folks! Fresh, young passion! And she's turning red now, ladies and gentlemen. That's young love for you. You know, I was young once, too . . . Or was I? Well, you've had two right answers in a row now, so keep it up, kids!" The emcee walked over to another couple.

Thank goodness he didn't grill us about the details of the date. Karin let out a sigh of relief.

After the third question, one of the couples was eliminated. From the looks of it, they'd paired up and

entered the contest just to take a shot at winning the prizes. They descended from the stage, scratching their heads uncomfortably.

Maki, Chika, and Yukari cheered wildly when Karin and Kenta had answered all three of the first questions correctly.

"Way to go, Karin! Keep it up!"

"Go for the gold! The cake buffet tickets are as good as ours, girl!"

"You can do it, Kenta!"

Timidly, Karin turned her head to glance at Kenta. He was wearing a relieved smile, as if encouraged by having made it through the first round. Karin returned his smile as she turned back around. Perhaps they would be fine, after all. But reality was about to deliver them a rude awakening.

"All right, sweethearts, the quiz isn't over yet! Question four! What's *her* secret that only *he* knows?"

Karin flinched. Karin and Kenta's answers would definitely match. There was no doubt about that. But what a question! Behind her, Karin heard Kenta shout, "W-wait a minute! If I answer that, I'll have to give away her secret!"

The emcee laughed heartily. "That's how the contest works, buddy! Good luck, now!" he said, sidestepping Kenta's objection.

So this was how they would narrow down the number of contestants.

Karin stared at the floor and groaned as she gripped her marker. *I can't write that I'm a blood-increasing vampire!* she thought. Time was running out. She had to come up with something that sounded like a secret and write it down, fast! *A secret . . . a secret . . . I'm a creature of the night? No, no, that's even worse! Where my house is? That's no good, either. What can I write? Something secret-like . . .* After mulling it over, Karin wrote "my grades in physics" on her panel.

"All right, show us your answers! In couple one, the boyfriend's answer was "minor cosmetic surgery" and the girlfriend's answer was "my eye job." Nice one! Couples two and three have matching answers, too. Couple four . . ." The emcee approached Karin and Kenta. "His answer—looks as though he scribbled it out several times! Let's see, now . . . 'her frail constitution'? And what did she write? 'My grades in physics'? Sorry kids, no dice!"

The three girls in the front row slumped their shoulders dejectedly. Then, as if they'd had a quick change of heart, they turned to Karin and tried to cheer her on.

"Don't take it too hard, Karin!" Chika shouted.

"Hang in there, girlfriend. Everyone knows you're almost failing physics—that's no secret!" Maki added.

Thanks a lot, Karin said to herself.

"Next question! Up until now, what's been the biggest threat to your relationship?"

Another problematic question. Karin cradled her head in her arms. *Being different species? I can't write that! The biggest crisis we've been through was during winter break . . . when Kenta found out that his unhappiness was what caused my blood to increase. Ack! There's no way I can write that my blood increases!* Karin was thinking so hard about what to write, she was afraid steam would rise up from her head.

Wait, I know! What about the person who tried to keep us apart? thought Karen.

She had just enough time to scribble down "my father," but Kenta's answer was "I said some things I shouldn't have." He was probably referring to when he'd tried to distance himself from Karin during winter break after learning that his aura of unhappiness caused her blood to increase. He'd screamed at Karin: "All of that was because of pity?" and "Stop hurting me like this, Maaka!"

I wish he didn't still feel bad about that, Karin thought wistfully.

At the time, Kenta's emotional stability had been rocked by the sudden appearance of his long-lost father and memories of how his grandmother had always rejected him. Karin understood that, and she didn't hold the things he'd said against him. Besides, when it was all over, Kenta had apologized profusely, and they'd completely patched things up. In fact, they were closer now than they ever were. So there was

really no need for Kenta to continue to feel bad about what had happened—but it made Karin's heart ache to realize how much Kenta regretted it.

Still, a wrong answer was a wrong answer. Cries of distress arose from the three girls in the front row.

"What's wrong? Come on, you guys!"

"You'll be eliminated if you miss the next one! Try to stay calm!"

Chika and the gang were right. Karin took a deep breath as she braced herself for the next question.

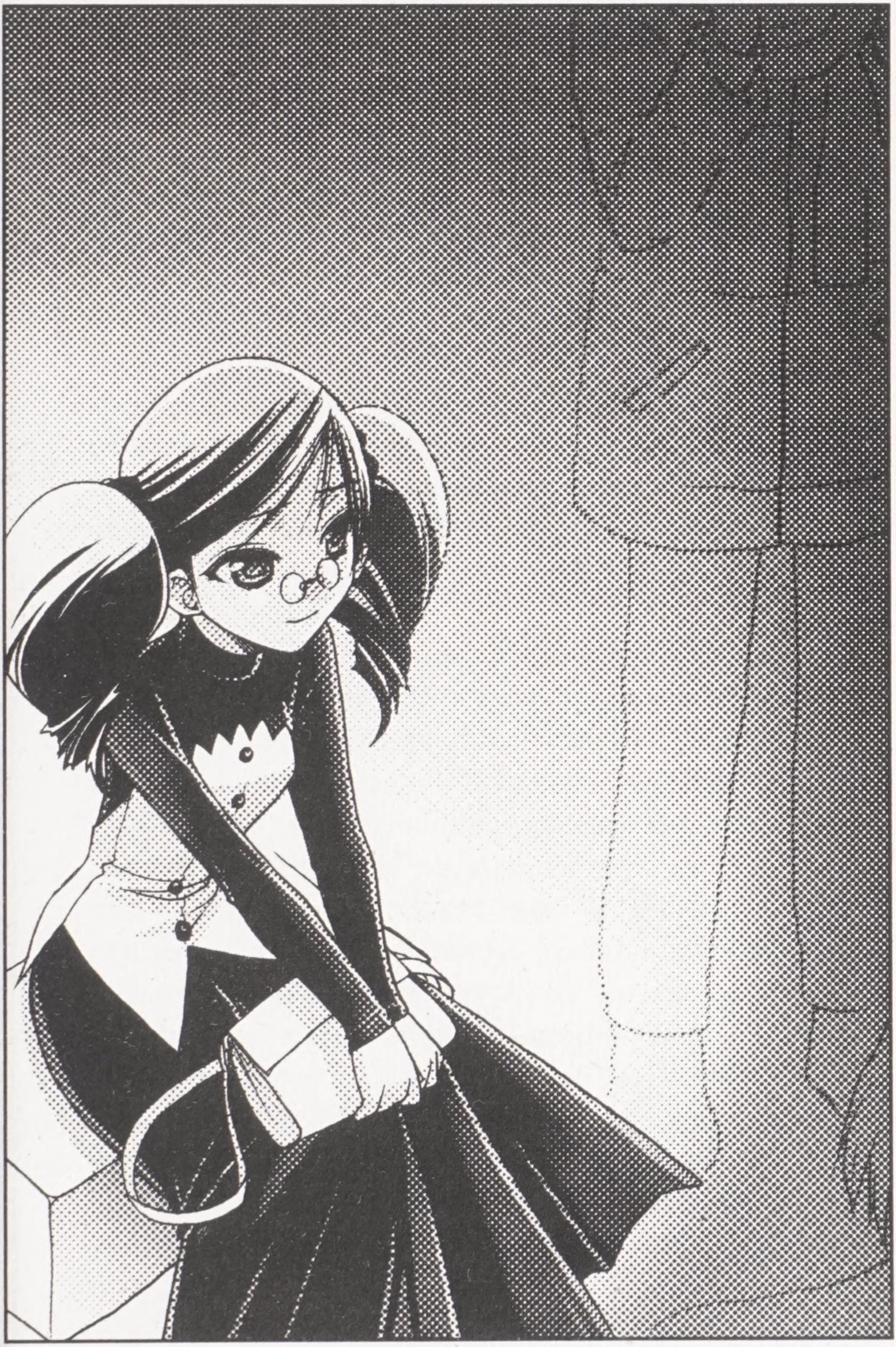
"Question six!" the emcee called out at the top of his lungs. "What was it that brought you together as a couple?"

Karin nearly tumbled out of her chair. The only words that popped into her mind were "my nosebleed."

I can't write that!

Yuriya peered from a corner of the audience, grimacing at Karin and Kenta's string of wrong answers. Karin's face was an easy read. She was clearly struggling with how to answer the question. *It must have something to do with Maaka's being a vampire,* Yuriya concluded silently. *No wonder she doesn't know what to say in front of all these people.*

Predictably, the emcee let out a cry of disappointment. "Too bad! Her answer was 'nose,'



with the rest of the answer scratched out. Oh, what's this? I see, there's something written in very small letters here . . . 'a stuffy nose'? That's what brought them together? But his answer was 'cleaning up.' Too bad! Couple four, you're eliminated!"

Karin and Kenta exited the stage, trudging down the steps. Karin's face was bright red. Kenta stooped down to whisper something to Karin.

Yuriya looked away with a sigh. *How can they behave like an ordinary human couple like that? Doesn't it bother them that they're different species? Honestly, I've never met anyone so carefree! Well, I certainly don't envy them. . . .*

Unlike Yuriya, Karin was of pure vampire blood, but she did have a peculiar sort of constitution that allowed her to be out and about during the day. Yuriya didn't know the details of Karin's condition, but it was clear there was something unusual about her.

"There's another vampire who can go outside during the day . . . that makes me so happy!" Karin had babbled tearfully when she'd found out Yuriya was half-vampire. "Since you live in a world between humans and vampires, you must understand how I feel!"

Yuriya had no doubt that Karin's words were sincere. Karin must have had it rough for a long time on account of her unusual attributes. Yuriya certainly had. In a sense, Karin might have had an even harder

time than Yuriya, having been born a mysterious mutant to two proper vampire parents.

But Maaka has a family . . . and even a boyfriend who loves her despite the fact that she's a vampire.

Yuriya had a love of her own. She'd never openly confessed her feelings to him, but she had a sense that there was a connection. She knew he didn't dislike her, anyway. Still, as to whether he held the same true-as-an-arrow feelings toward her that Kenta did toward Karin, Yuriya really couldn't say.

When Yuriya had first come into contact with Karin, the Maaka family had kidnapped her, convinced she was a spy. She'd managed to hide her true objective and convince them to let her go, but she'd been truly terrified when Karin's family had tied her up and interrogated her. After her release, when she'd tried to express to her beloved how frightening it had been, all he'd said was, "Huh? Oh, sorry. But you sound okay now."

Tears welled in Yuriya's eyes, but she told herself that it was merely the dust in the air. She retrieved a lace-edged handkerchief from her handbag, removed her glasses, and patted her eyes dry. *No—I shouldn't think about such things and allow myself to become depressed. The shopping district certainly is crowded tonight, no doubt because of the sales going on. Perhaps I'll have a look around for some daily necessities. Uncle never sends me anything, after all.*

Karin and Kenta had already been eliminated, so there was no sense in watching the rest of the Hot Couples Contest. Yuriya replaced her glasses and stood up, glancing casually around her. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed someone who caught her attention. The woman had straight, blonde hair in a neat short cut. Ice blue eyes. Mannish clothing, including a pantsuit and trench coat worn like a cape. A cross-shaped earring.

Wait. Isn't that . . ?

Just as Yuriya was craning her neck to get a better look, a group of boisterous teenagers passed directly in front of her. Several of them were tall, blocking Yuriya's line of vision. Yuriya quickly circled around them, but by then, the blonde who'd caught her eye was gone. Yuriya surveyed the area, but to no avail.

Perhaps I was wrong. Or maybe it was someone who closely resembles her? But still . . . this is worrying. Spotting someone in this town at this point in time who looks like Noel the Outlaw . . . "Noel Ambrose the Outlaw," Yuriya murmured under her breath.

Yuriya had never met Noel in person, but she'd heard rumors from her late father, and from her Uncle Glark. Noel was a powerful vampire who'd been among the first generation that migrated to Japan, and yet who lived by her own rules, refusing to participate in the Assembly or obey the laws agreed upon by the vampire community. Noel Ambrose, female vampire.

The fact that a vampire had a Christian name like Noel was a testament to the eccentric, nonconformist tendencies of the Ambrose family, even in Noel's parents' generation.

I remember Uncle telling me she had blonde hair and blue eyes, and the face of a twenty-year-old. He said she wears masculine clothes and a cross in her left ear. The person I saw matched that description exactly! Besides, that aura . . . Yuriya had only glimpsed the person for a split second, but the sight had caught her attention and caused her to do a double take.

Most people would never notice an oak leaf butterfly camouflaged against a background of dead leaves. But fellow butterflies were sure to spot their own kind without fail. By the same token, Yuriya sensed that the person she'd spotted in the bustling crowd was someone unusual. Yuriya, too, was an unusual being. She was half-vampire; that was why she could tell.

Is she here to investigate the secrets of the Maakas? Yuriya wondered. *It's quite possible. After all, I'm trespassing on Maaka territory, myself.*

Noel didn't attend the Assemblies, but Yuriya had heard that the blonde vampire had her methods of staying informed, nonetheless. Back when the vampires had first come to Japan, a radical faction of vampires had attempted to apprehend and punish Noel for refusing to conform to Assembly rules.

According to rumor, Noel had fought back, dealing each of her would-be punishers a broken fang. On the other hand, during the Second World War, she had suddenly approached a group of vampires and provided them with a safe haven without requesting any form of payment. One thing was for sure: she played by her own rules.

It was entirely plausible that Noel had heard about the Maakas' unusual fertility and had shown up to research the claim. *Perhaps I should warn Maaka,* Yuriya contemplated. *I could tell her to be on her guard. But* . . . How much should she tell Karin?

Yuriya had supposedly come to Shiihaba to seek the help of James Maaka, an elder of the Maaka clan, after losing her parents and finding herself completely alone. In fact, she was here to investigate the Maakas' secrets on Glark's orders, but she couldn't tell the family that. If the Maakas found out that she was a spy, they might tear her to pieces!

According to Glark, the rumors about Noel the Outlaw were a taboo topic among vampires. If word got out that there was a renegade vampire who didn't obey the Assembly, it could pose a threat to vampire law and order. Yuriya didn't want Karin to start posing questions about why a half-vampire—a black sheep of the vampire race—knew so much about a taboo topic among vampires.

Still, I have to do something.. I'm sure Noel was watching Maaka! Yuriya thought.

Yuriya didn't know if it really was Noel the Outlaw, and if so, why she was here. But the whole situation gave her a bad feeling. Perhaps the fact that she was a spy sent to investigate the Maakas made Yuriya all the more suspicious of Noel.

A chilly wind cut through the night air, and Yuriya hugged herself. *Perhaps I should tell Maaka without mentioning my uncle. I could say my father told me . . . Not that I'm on Maaka's side . . . Honestly, that girl is way too carefree.*

Although Yuriya had come at Glark's bidding to spy on the Maakas, her feelings had changed ever so slightly during her stay in Shiihaba. She wasn't being completely obedient to her uncle. In fact, she hadn't reported back to him about Karin.

The truth was, the fact that they were both non-standard vampires made Yuriya feel somewhat sympathetic toward Karin. But at the same time, she envied Karin's circumstances and found her naiveté annoying. Yuriya's feelings vacillated like a pendulum.

Following their elimination from the contest, Karin and Kenta had reunited with Maki and the gang.

"You did your best, Karin. You really did," Maki consoled her.

"Maki!" Karin sobbed.

Maki put her arm around Karin, stroking her back and comforting her. But Chika and Yukari couldn't quite contain their disappointment.

"Man, eliminated in the first stages! So much for the cake buffet!" Chika lamented.

"Your answers to those questions were totally out of sync, despite the fact that you've been dating a long time!" Yukari said grouchily.

"N-no, we haven't!" Karin defended herself as best she could against the moaning Chika and Yukari. In fact, Karin and Kenta had only officially become a couple a week earlier.

Regardless, Chika and Yukari were having none of Karin's excuses.

"What? But Karin, you've been acting weird ever since Kenta first transferred to our school!" declared Chika.

"Yeah, yeah—especially after summer break!" Yukari agreed.

"You were totally self-conscious around each other, and you were always blushing and looking away and stuff," mocked Chika. "You were *so* obvious!"

Yukari giggled. "Maybe you weren't dating, but you might as well have been!"

With the exception of a muffled "Ack!" Karin found herself speechless as she was bombarded by Chika and Yukari's double-onslaught of accusations.

As Karin bit her lip and hid her head in her arms, Maki patted Karin's shoulder. "Oh, come on. What does it matter? You're together now—*huh?*" Karin felt Maki's body tremble slightly.

As Karin followed Maki's gaze to the opposite side of the plaza, she spotted a young guy with brown hair staring at them. A moment later, Maki sighed. "Phew! It wasn't him."

"What's wrong, Maki?" Karin probed.

"Huh? Oh, nothing! There was just a guy over there that looked a lot like this older guy in the badminton club, but it isn't him after all. It's nothing, really." Maki gave Karin a forced smile, shaking her head dismissively. From the sound of it, it wasn't someone Maki relished running into. She seemed relieved that it had been someone else.

Maybe he's a veteran player who's hard on the newbies, Karin theorized. *I know sports teams can be that way sometimes, even out here in the suburbs. Must be rough, playing sports.*

Meanwhile, Chika and Yukari had turned their attention to Kenta.

"Kenta, you acted weird around Karin the moment you transferred to our school. You were always staring

at her with this intense look on your face. Admit it, you were smitten, weren't you, Kenta?" Yukari demanded.

Kenta didn't reply. He seemed oblivious to the girls' chatter, clenching the handrail of the walkway and groaning, "Rice . . . ten pounds . . . brand-name rice, no less! Not the budget rice we always eat! Uonuma premium short-grain rice . . . Man, that would've tasted good . . . rice . . . riiiice . . ." Disappointment radiated from his hunched shoulders, deflating Chika and Yukari's accusations. In fact, it seemed wisest not to say anything to him for a while.

"Well, you did your best. That's just how it goes," Chika offered.

"Yeah. Nice try, both of you," said Yukari.

With forced smiles, the girls backed away.

After all, Kenta did have a terrifying glare. He was fundamentally a nice guy, but everyone knew how intimidating he could be when he got angry.

"Well, we'll be going now so you two can have some time together. Come on, Maki," Yukari called.

Maki regarded Yukari confusedly. "Huh? But—"

"Come on, you don't want to be a third wheel, do you?" asked Yukari.

"I guess not . . ." Maki replied.

"Yeah! Okay, see you later, Karin and Kenta!" Yukari said.

"See you at school next week!" said Chika with a wave of her hand.

Having bid their adieus, Chika and Yukari made their exit, dragging Maki with them. Karin was left behind with Kenta, who was still grumbling. "Whatever. Suit yourselves," he muttered.

After saying goodbye to her friends, Karin turned back toward Kenta. "Come on, Kenta. It's not so bad. We got a prize for participating, right? Let's go home. If it gets too late, Fumio will be worried about you."

"Yeah, you're right." With a long sigh, Kenta straightened up and looked into Karin's eyes. "Sorry, Maaka. When we lost, I had this vision of our rice canister going from full to empty, and all the strength went out of my body. I was off in my own world."

"It's okay. At least it got Chika and Yukari off our backs," Karin said consolingly.

"Anyway, that was a close one. On that last question, I nearly wrote 'nosebleed' on my answer board," Kenta said, glancing back at the stage.

Karin looked back. Several more couples had been eliminated, and now only five remained. The quiz segment was over, and now they were playing games that were supposed to show off the couples' hot passion for one another.

"In the next game, you'll be holding toothpicks in your mouth and passing a rubber band back and forth," the emcee announced. "First, the guy passes it to the girl, and the girl passes it back. Who'll be the first pair to pass it back and forth ten times?"

Karin recoiled in horror. It was an act that required the couples' lips to come so close they were almost kissing. *Yikes! I can't imagine doing something like that with Kenta in front of all these people. How embarrassing!* she thought in horror.

Kenta, too, seemed to be imagining himself in the other couples' shoes. His face flushed red, as he averted his eyes and grunted, "Maybe it's best we were eliminated early on."

"Yeah," Karin agreed.

To change the subject, Karin held up the prize they'd been given, dangling it at eye level. It was a pouch sewn from a plain pink fabric. "Looks like there's all kinds of stuff in here. Maki said the prize for participating was candy."

"Oh, yeah?" Kenta's face brightened.

Karin felt a rush of happiness. *With games like that, we never would've won anyway. Might as well let it go. We didn't win the rice, but I'll make Kenta an extra-delicious lunch tomorrow. That'll cheer him up.*

Karin smiled at Kenta. "I think there are some benches over there. Let's go sit down and see what's inside the pouch."

The plaza was full of people and Karin was too embarrassed to hang around for the remainder of the couples contest. Karin turned quickly, urging Kenta along. The bag of prizes swung behind her, hitting a passerby squarely in the stomach.

"Eek! I-I'm so sorry," Karin blabbered.

The person she'd hit was a foreigner in her early twenties. At first, Karin almost mistook her for a man, but then she noticed the delicate curve of the woman's neck and her soft lips. It was a woman in masculine clothing. An earring shaped like a cross glimmered in the woman's left ear.

"I-I'm really sorry! Er, wait, I mean . . . " Karin struggled to express herself in English.

The woman smiled warmly at the flustered Karin, bowing ever so slightly. "Pardon me. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Oh, uh . . . no, really, it was my fault," Karin stammered, taken aback by the woman's flawless Japanese. She'd gone blank for a minute, paralyzed by the notion that she had to speak English because the woman was a foreigner.

The woman excused herself once again, smiled, and walked off. Karin watched her go, her coat slung over her shoulders. Suddenly, Karin clapped her hands together. "I remember now! It's '*I am sorry!*'"

Kenta gave a wry laugh. "Karin, you always think of things a moment late." He pointed at a bench up ahead. "That seat's open. Want to sit down and check out the prizes?"

"Sure. Looks like sweets. We can divvy them up." Karin loosened the pouch, peeking at the small

packages of treats within. Together, they approached the bench and sat down side by side.

"Potato chips, gum, caramels, and two chocolate bars. Not bad for a consolation prize," Kenta remarked.

"Kenta, which do you prefer, the potato chips or the chewing gum?" asked Karin.

"The chips. Gum doesn't fill you up," Kenta asserted.

"Okay, I'll take the gum. You take the chips. Wait a sec' . . . what's this?" said Karin. Something glinted in the bottom of the pouch. She pulled it out. It was a ring—with a red stone. It was a bit flashy, with ornamentation resembling the wings of bats on either side of the stone, but its dark silver patina gave it an antique feel, and the overall effect was quite fetching.

"Look at this, Kenta. Isn't it pretty?" asked Karin.

"Yeah? Why don't you have it then, Maaka?"

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yep. What do I want with a ring, anyway? Now, there are two chocolate bars, so we can each have one. That leaves . . ." Kenta gave the ring only a cursory glance before returning his attention to the candy. With the chocolate bars divided between them, they were left with a single box of caramels.

Kenta stared long and hard at the box, thinking. Then he mumbled, "Why don't we open it and each take half?"

Karin shook her head, grinning, as she stopped Kenta from tearing open the plastic bag.

"Nah. You take the caramels, Kenta."

Kenta was so hard up for calories that he'd chosen potato chips over gum. Fumio, Kenta's mother, had finally landed a job, and their financial situation seemed to have stabilized a bit. But it sounded as if they were far from out of the woods. It was no wonder Kenta was always hungry—he was a teenager, after all, and he was constantly working after-school jobs.

In actuality, Karin would've preferred to let Kenta have all of the candy, but he was so fair, she knew he'd insist that it belonged to both of them.

"But that isn't fair. You should have some, too," Kenta protested, as predicted.

Karin held up the ring. "This was in the pouch, too. You have the caramels, and I'll have this. That makes everything even, doesn't it?"

"Are you sure? It was in a bag of candy, so I'm sure it isn't anything fancy. And don't rings have to be the right size? Does it fit you?"

Karin gently slid the ring over her middle finger. "Yep, I think so. And look how sparkly it is!" Karin removed the ring and passed it to Kenta. He held it up to the light and had a look, but ultimately, Kenta was a guy, and he wasn't that interested jewelry.

"Okay, it's a deal. Here," he said lightly, handing the ring back.

For a brief second, the ring grazed Karin's palm, and her heart skipped a beat. *Does this count as Kenta giving me a ring?* she wondered. Karin knew that was stretching things a bit. Kenta hadn't bought it for her, after all. He'd only let her have it as part of the prize they'd won together. Still, it was a special thing for a girl to be given a ring. As a young girl in love, it was only natural that Karin wanted to think of the ring as a gift from Kenta.

"Thank you," Karin said. "I'll treasure it," she added bashfully, softly enough that Kenta wouldn't hear.

Noel watched the exchange, heaving a mixed sigh of disappointment and bewilderment. She'd slipped the ring into the bag when Karin had hit her in the stomach. Then, she'd pretended to leave, only to double back and follow the couple. But Karin's reaction wasn't at all what she'd expected.

"She took it. She put it on without hesitating! Perhaps she's an ordinary human after all, who just happens to look like Elda," said Noel.

A vampire never would've taken the ring, much less put it on. Not after Noel had used the girl named Chika to convey her story about the ring to Karin.

Then again, maybe it's too soon to be sure, Noel thought.

Noel had communicated the information about the ring in a convoluted way, framing it as an urban legend. If Karin Maaka were an ordinary vampire, especially a timid one, the ring would horrify her. But if she were a bold, clear-headed type, she might simply discount the urban legend as bogus.

There's one other possibility, Noel realized. If Karin was an invincible vampire impervious even to the sun—a Day Walker—she might be indifferent toward something as trivial as a ring. *As long as she has the ring, I can make contact from a distance now. I'll just keep an eye on her a bit longer.*

Her mind made up, Noel left the plaza. Even if Karin didn't notice her, there was the possibility that bats were watching. Since Noel didn't know the extent of Karin's abilities, she couldn't be too careful.

Now that Karin had the ring, it would be easy for Noel to monitor her. There was no need to take any risks.

CHIBI VAMPIRE AND THE RING THAT WOULDN'T COME OFF

Karin lay on her bed, holding up her ring so that it sparkled in the florescent light from the fixture overhead. "It doesn't look like plastic. Glass, maybe? It's so pretty; it's like a marble, the way the light shines through it."

After dividing up the candy with Kenta, Karin had immediately returned home. Up until they'd said goodbye, Karin and Kenta had held hands, and now Karin was glowing with happiness. She'd run into her little sister Anju in the front entryway, and Karin had worried that she might be blushing. Anju didn't tease her, however. She merely said, with her characteristic expressionless gaze, "Welcome back. Another uneventful day?"

Lately, Anju was fairly amenable to Karin's requests not to send her bats out to monitor Karin. *I know Anju sends her bats to watch me for my own sake, but it's embarrassing to be watched when Kenta and I are spending time together,* thought Karin. Besides, when Karin's blood wasn't increasing, there was no need to find someone and inject him or her with blood. Until it was time to inject someone, Karin wouldn't need Anju's help erasing anyone's memories.

"Another uneventful day," Karin assured her sister, giving her a chocolate bar.

After bathing, eating dinner, and doing her homework, Karin didn't retire to her bedroom until around eleven o'clock at night. She changed into her pajamas, and just as she was climbing into bed, she caught sight of the ring resting atop her desk and had an urge to take a nice long look at it.

The ring Kenta gave me . . . Karin thought longingly. She knew she was exaggerating, but a girl could dream a little, couldn't she?

The stone in the ring was a deep red, like a ruby or garnet, and it went perfectly with the tarnished silver setting. Normally, rubies were cut with dozens of facets to reflect the light, but this gem was polished into a round globe, like a pearl. *A cabochon cut,* Karin thought. The setting was decorated, but the simple round cut captured the light in such a way that the overall effect wasn't garish.

Karin slid the ring onto her left ring finger—her engagement ring finger.

"Tee-hee-hee . . ." she chuckled playfully.

"Why don't you have it then, Karin," she remembered Kenta say. She recalled the weight of the ring in her palm . . . the brief instant when their fingers touched. *It would've been even better if Kenta had put it on my finger. That's okay. Maybe he still will one day . . .* Just the thought of it made Karin's heart pound.

Maybe when they'd finished school, and Kenta had found a good job, it would happen. He would be dressed in a nice suit, and he would offer her a little box bound in velvet or leather. *"Karin, I want you to have this,"* he would say.

Engagement rings were usually diamonds, but diamonds were expensive so Karin wouldn't mind a different type of stone. *My birthday's October, so my birthstone is . . . um . . . a sapphire? No, an opal? I don't care what it is, as long as Kenta gives it to me!* She wouldn't care if it were made of plastic or glass. In fact, the metal ring from a set of index cards would be fine. Even if Kenta said, *"I want this to be our engagement ring. Marry me"*—if it came from the heart, Karin didn't care what the ring was made of.

"Thank you, Kenta. I'm so happy. It's too good to be true . . . Tee-hee! Eeek!" Merely the thought of it made Karin blush. She rolled on her bed, hugging her pillow.

"Kenta . . ." Basking in happiness, Karin murmured Kenta's name as she played out the fantasy in her mind. *He gave me a ring . . . I'm so happy. I'm sure it was no big deal to Kenta, but I'm happy all the same.* Still lying on her bed, Karin gazed at the ring on her left ring finger. *Kenta . . .*

All of a sudden a voice asked, "You honestly like that boy *that* much?"

"Huh?" Karin exclaimed, jumping into an upright position. Seated on her bed, she scanned the room to find the source of the voice.

A rather masculine woman with short blonde hair appeared in Karin's room, but Karin had no memory of letting her in. Not only that, but the woman was sitting on a chair, hovering in mid-air!

"Eeeeeek! A ghost!" Karin screamed.

The woman pitched forward, nearly falling out of her chair. "A ghost?" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Well, you're floating in mid-air! Eeek! Stay away!" hollered Karin.

"You think I'm a ghost? Well, in any case, calm down. This is only a dream," the woman reassured the girl.

"Huh?" Karin looked around once again. A moment ago, she'd been in her own room, but the next thing she knew, her surroundings were pitch black. The floor, the walls, even the bed had vanished. She and the blonde woman were peering at each other across empty space. It would explain a lot if this really were a dream.

"Oh, I see now. I'm dreaming," Karin mumbled, letting out a long sigh of relief. She must have dozed off without realizing it. *It was nice of this person in my dream to let me know I'm dreaming,* Karin thought, glancing once more toward the blonde woman. The woman's location was particularly dark, and the way

her head tilted downward made it difficult to see her face. Only her smile and her glistening blonde hair were clearly visible. "Er . . . who *are* you?" Karin asked.

"Ah, yes. Let's say I'm affiliated with your ring."

Karin glanced at her left hand. "What? You mean this?" Even in her dream, the ring with the red stone remained on her left ring finger.

"Yes. I've come to grant you a wish and bring you happiness, to thank you for wearing the ring."

"A wish?" Was the woman a genie of the ring?

"Yes. What will it be? Something to do with that boy, perhaps?" The woman gave an amused chuckle as she read Karin's mind.

Karin began to panic; her heart was pounding so hard it was nearly audible. But when she thought about it, she remembered she was only dreaming. *It's all right. This is a dream. It doesn't matter if she knows how I feel about Kenta. Yeah . . . this is only a dream.*

Considering it was only a dream, it couldn't hurt to be a bit bold, Karin realized with relief. "Well, it does have something to do with Kenta, I guess. Hee-hee-hee!"

"What is it? You want me to turn this into a real engagement ring?"

"An *engagement* ring? Oh, not that! I couldn't possibly . . ."

Karin and Kenta were still in their first year of high school. Very recently, on their first date, they'd decided together to pursue a normal teenage relationship. It was much too soon to get engaged. Karin shook her head vigorously; her hair whipped from side to side.

The woman shrugged. "Really? Such self-restraint! Don't tell me there's nothing you want of him?"

"Well, I wouldn't say 'nothing,'" Karin replied. She pondered the notion again. This was a dream. It didn't matter if she wished for something a bit lavish . . . a bit embarrassing. The first thing that popped into her mind was: "I'd like to go on another date with Kenta. I had so much fun on Valentine's Day, but I'd be even happier if Kenta asked me out himself. The other day, Maki was the one who set it all up . . . so I was a little worried about whether or not Kenta was really into it."

"A date? Why, that's nothing!" the woman laughed. "Very well. If you have any other wishes, I'll do my best to make them come true."

"But why?" Karin inquired.

"In return for your wearing of the ring. I want you to be happy. But there's one thing: Wishes aren't free. Will you give me your . . . in exchange?"

"Er, sorry? I couldn't quite hear you," Karin replied.

The woman smiled, the corners of her mouth twisting upward devilishly. Karin still couldn't see the

woman's eyes in the darkness, but she saw the woman's fangs glint in her mouth.

"Will you give me your blood?" the woman reiterated.

Karin gasped. "Blood? You want my blood?"

Under normal circumstances, it would've been a horrifying question. But somehow, Karin wasn't scared. Perhaps it was because of the way the woman had fallen out of her chair when Karin had called her a ghost, or perhaps it was because Karin understood she was dreaming. Besides, the idea of giving her blood to someone was hardly terrifying to Karin.

Wait—don't dreams sometimes arise from a person's deepest yearnings? Karin said to herself. *Come to think of it, it would be a huge relief if someone would relieve me of my blood when it increases too much.*

If Karin's blood were indistinguishable from human blood, she would be thrilled to donate it to a blood bank each month. It would be a much better use for it than simply having it spurt out of her nose and go to waste. But Karin's blood wasn't human blood, so she couldn't donate it.

Karin was surprised to realize that she was so troubled by her blood issues as to have them come up in a dream like this. With a bitter laugh, she replied, "No problem. You'd be doing me a favor."

The woman fell silent. Obviously profoundly confused, she pressed her hand to her forehead.

"What's wrong, genie of the ring?" Karin asked.

"Karin Maaka, who on Earth are you?" the woman inquired as she raised her head. Now Karin could finally see the woman's face and eyes. It was a countenance she'd seen somewhere before.

As the woman stared at Karin with ice blue eyes, Karin felt a chill run down her spine, as if a cold wind were gusting past. Karin stepped backward in confusion. "Wh-what do you mean, what am I?"

"Your answer makes no sense. If you're a . . ."

HA-CHOOO! Karin couldn't hear the woman's final words. Her own loud sneeze woke her up.

"Oh . . ." Karin blinked. Once again, her surroundings were familiar—the white walls, the checkered floor, the tall window. The dream was over. She was back in reality, in her own room. The quilt had fallen away, exposing Karin's upper body. "What a weird dream!" Perhaps her dream was so bizarre because she'd fallen asleep wearing the ring. She gently tugged at it, but it didn't come off—maybe her finger had swollen a bit. *Well, never mind,* Karin thought to herself. *I'll get it off in the morning.* Karin was unusually sleepy—maybe because she'd awoken in the middle of a dream. She pulled up the covers, rolled over once or twice, and drifted off once again.

"Shoot, she woke up," said Noel Ambrose with a click of her tongue.

Seated comfortably in an easy chair in a hotel room across from Shiihaba station, she had been linking to Karin's mind through the ring. "Too bad the ring doesn't give me direct control over her mind. How annoying. And seriously, what's the story with that girl?" Were Karin's resemblance to Elda Maaka, her similar name, and her prominent canines all meaningless coincidences? Was Karin an ordinary human being?

Since when do vampires startle at the mere sight of someone hovering in space? Noel pondered. A vampire's physical abilities were far superior to those of a human being. It was a matter of course to jump dozens of feet into the air without a running start, or to balance on an electrical wire as it swayed in the wind. Normally, if a vampire saw someone hovering in space, she would take a second look to try to spot what was aiding that person's suspension. But not Karin. *And would a normal vampire—never mind a powerful Day Walker—scream 'Eeek! A ghost!'? No . . .* Noel decided.

Karin's reaction to the mention of blood was strangest of all. Vampires sustained themselves by drinking human blood. It was only natural that they had a violent aversion to the idea of anyone sapping their own blood. A terror, even. But Karin had calmly agreed to the suggestion that Noel take her blood. It wasn't the reaction of a vampire.

Should I have asked her straight out in her dream if she's a vampire? Noel wondered to herself. *The way she woke up so suddenly worries me. I may not have been able to hypnotize her into forgetting the whole thing when she wakes up. No, I'd better not . . . That's enough contact for one night.*

If Noel spent too much time in contact with the dreaming Karin, Karin might start reading Noel's thoughts instead, and she might find out where Noel was hiding. Until Noel knew the extent of Karin's mysterious, daylight-abiding powers, she had to exercise extreme caution.

Had Noel not been cautious, she never would've survived for so long without adhering to the Assembly's rules. Her lifestyle might appear happy-go-lucky and carefree, but, in fact, it took a lot more work to live independently than it would have to abide by the rules of the group.

But is Karin really a Day Walker? She simply doesn't seem like the type . . . Noel frowned. In certain circles, Noel, herself, was considered something of a legend. That, however, was nothing but inflated rumors, born of other vampires' resentment of her self-sufficiency. In terms of ability, Noel was well aware that she was no different from any other vampire.

A Day Walker was another matter all together, though. Even normal vampires had senses far sharper than a human's, superior physical abilities, and the

ability to manipulate bats and human memories. With immunity to sunlight—the vampire's greatest weakness—Day Walkers would be practically invincible. Day Walkers were supreme beings. At least, they were supposed to be.

Noel couldn't work out in her mind how Karin could possibly be a Day Walker. *This girl seems so wimpy . . . so much like an ordinary human! She trips on the sidewalk, she screams at the sight of what she thinks is a ghost, and she has a sappy relationship with a human boy . . . What's the deal?* Noel didn't get it. *Is there some other type of vampire other than a Day Walker that's immune to sunlight? Come to think of it, a long time ago—no, it's no use, I just don't remember . . .*

Noel decided she'd better go outside and get some air and a fresh perspective. Before showing up at the plaza, she'd found two victims who suited her palette and had enjoyed a light dinner, but the unusual exertion of interfering in someone's dream had drained her energy. A little midnight snack would really hit the spot. *If possible, a snack and some fun, too,* Noel said to herself. *That is, if I happen to come across the right kind of girl.* Noel arose from the easy chair and donned her coat.

The morning sun slowly seeped through the white curtains and brightened the room. An alarm clock

rang, and the lump under the covers of Karin's bed began to stir. Karin let out a long sigh as she reached out to shut off the alarm. As she sat up and stretched, she murmured to herself, "What a strange dream . . ." She'd awoken once, only to fall deeply asleep once again. Still, she recalled snapshots of the dream she'd had before awakening. *I met the genie of the ring, I think,* she remembered. *She was a blonde woman . . . and she said she'd grant me a wish.*

It had been a bizarre dream—embarrassing, actually. Karin recalled wishing for Kenta to ask her out on a date. *Until recently, I was satisfied being friends with Kenta. And when Maki arranged it so that I could go to the zoo with him, all I wanted was to give him some Valentine's chocolate. I never expected him to confess his feelings to me,* Karin mused.

Karin was on cloud nine and couldn't really ask for anything more. However, as the days had gone by and life had settled down a bit, somehow, she'd come to harbor a new longing. Of course, Kenta had limited free time with his work schedule, and she knew she couldn't expect him to be available for frequent dates. *But if we did get to go on one more date, where should we go? Nowhere that costs money—and it's too cold to go hiking or to the ocean. Then again, spring break is coming up . . . Oh, listen to me! I'm actually thinking about this in all seriousness now!* After all, it had only been a dream.

Besides, that woman—the genie of the ring—wanted something from me in return for granting my wish, didn't she? Now, what was it? Karin could only vaguely recall the latter part of her dream. She seemed to remember the woman wanting something from her, and asking her something, too. *Well, what does it matter? It was only a dream. I should be getting up,* Karin told herself. She needed to make breakfast for herself and Anju, and lunches for herself and Kenta.

The ring was still on Karin's finger. When she'd woken in the night, she'd tried to remove it, but when it hadn't come off easily, she'd simply gone back to sleep. Now, once again, she attempted to slip it off. "Huh?" It wouldn't come off. Perhaps her finger had swollen as she'd slept. No matter how hard she tugged, Karin couldn't get it off. "Oh, no . . . this is bad . . ."

The ring would get in the way of cooking and washing up, and if Karin wore such an obvious accessory to school, the teachers were bound to notice and reprimand her. Worst of all, it was stuck on her left ring finger. All the girls in class knew that she and Kenta had entered the Hot Couples Contest yesterday. Karin could imagine how they'd tease her if she wore a ring to school on that finger the very next day.

But why is this happening? Karin wondered. *It didn't feel this tight last night. I have to get it off! If Chika and Yukari see it, I know they'll ask me if Kenta gave it to me!* It was bad enough to imagine herself being

teased, but the thought of Kenta also being teased was absolutely unbearable. Karin tugged at the ring once again, but it wouldn't budge a hair. It almost felt as if it were stuck to her skin. "Ack! It won't come off!" The minutes ticked by. Karin couldn't spend all morning wrestling with the ring. "N-now what?" she said as she gazed helplessly at her left hand.

The bell signaling the start of first period echoed through Shiihaba High School. At that exact moment, Karin raced up the staircase, sprinted down the hall, and burst through the back door of her classroom.

First period was homeroom, and the teacher wasn't there yet. *Oh, good. I made it* . . . Karin said to herself. Clutching her heart, which was pounding as if it would split open from the exertion, Karin weaved through the desks toward her seat. Before she reached it, someone grabbed her right hand.

"Good morning, Karin. Too bad about yesterday, huh?" Maki said with a mischievous smile.

"Morning, Maki. No, I was actually glad we were eliminated in the first phase," Karin replied. "It was so humiliating being asked all those questions in front of all those people!"

"Ha-ha! Well, one day it'll be a fond memory. Hey, what happened to your left hand?" Maki asked.

Here we go, Karin thought. But she had her answer ready. "Oh, ha-ha-ha! I burned myself when I was making breakfast." Karin's left hand was wrapped in a long cloth bandage. It was a lie, of course. She hadn't been able to get the ring off, so she'd bandaged her hand to hide it.

Maki wrinkled her brow. "Are you okay? Did you go to the hospital? Wait, you just burned yourself this morning? Why don't you go to the infirmary and have the nurse put some medicine on it?"

"Oh, no, I can't do that," Karin protested.

"Huh?" Maki was confused.

"Oh, uh . . . nothing. I'm fine," Karin assured her. "I put some medicine on it at home. It isn't that bad, really. Don't worry."

"Well, it looks pretty bad, by the looks of that huge bandage," said Maki.

Karin had to wrap up her hand until the bandage became very thick to keep the shape of the ring from showing. Embarrassed that it was stuck on her left ring finger, Karin hadn't wanted Anju to find out about the ring, either. Luckily, it was a sunny day, so Anju had stayed in bed, and Karin hadn't had to face her. But without the use of her left hand, cooking and getting ready had been a challenge, which was why Karin was almost late.

"It really isn't a big deal. Thanks for your concern, though." The moment Karin finished speaking, the

door at the front of the classroom opened and the teacher entered. "Eek! The teacher's here! Talk to you later."

Karin quickly glanced over her shoulder as she took her seat. Her gaze met Kenta's. With his narrow eyes, Kenta's expressions were hard for most people to read, but not for Karin. She could see the worry in his face. He must've overheard her talking with Maki about burning her hand.

Ack! I'm sorry for lying to you both! Karin apologized silently. There was simply no way Karin could tell anyone she'd put the ring on her engagement ring finger, lost herself in her fantasies, and found herself unable to get it off the next day. It was far too embarrassing!

A while ago, when Yukari or someone had a stuck ring, I think I remember Fuku knew a trick for getting it off. Fukumi didn't wear earrings or rings, but she was knowledgeable about all kinds of things. At break, Karin would ask her about it, and say that her mother had a ring that wouldn't come off, or something to that effect.

Up on the podium, Mr. Shirai began to address the class: "Do you all realize we're coming up on final exams for the term? Everyone's grades were mediocre first term, but you've brought them up this term. I hope you'll all keep up the good work during the upcoming term, too."

With her head full of ideas about how to get the ring off without anyone finding out, Karin barely heard a word the teacher said.

After fourth period chemistry was over, Karin stayed behind in the lab, pretending to tidy up. She wanted to try the ring-loosening trick Fuku had shared with her during break.

"Gah! It won't go through!" Karin said, frowning. She was supposed to wind a strong piece of thread around the finger above the ring, compressing the finger. It would cut off her blood circulation, but that was okay because it was only for a brief period. After that, she was supposed to squeeze her finger to create a space between the finger and the ring, and poke the end of the thread under the ring. Last, she would get her finger and the ring slippery with liquid soap, and work off the ring by pulling on the thread. That was Fukumi's trick for loosening a tight ring. Fukumi had also said that if that didn't work, you could go to a fire station and they would cut it off for you with a metal cutter. If at all possible, Karin didn't want to involve the authorities. As undocumented residents—not to mention vampires—Karin's family steered clear of the police, hospitals, and the local government. The slightest slip-up could give them away.

Karin tried her best to remove the ring using Fuku's technique, but it wasn't working. No matter how she squeezed her finger, she couldn't seem to make a gap to get the thread through. It simply wouldn't dislodge, almost as if the ring were welded to her finger. "This is no good," Karin said, "and my finger's starting to go numb." It was time to give up, so she unwound the thread from her finger. Besides, she couldn't stay in the lab forever. It was better to go home and try again there.

Karin wound the bandage around her hand again to hide the ring. She couldn't use her right hand, so she had to use her right hand and her teeth to tie the end of the bandage. All of a sudden, she heard the classroom door open. "Yikes!"

"Oops, sorry. Did I scare you?"

It was Kenta. *Thank goodness I already finished re-bandaging my hand!* Karin thought, laughing loudly to cover her panic. "Oh, you just startled me. Sorry for screaming. What's wrong—did you forget something?"

"No, I just thought we could eat lunch together, but you didn't come back to the classroom, so I came to check on you," Kenta replied.

Karin's heart pounded. Her cheeks grew hot. "O-oh, thank you! That's so nice . . ."

"Well, you know how clumsy you are. I thought you could have accidentally knocked over some

chemicals and started a fire, so I was starting to worry," said Kenta.

Karin wasn't sure how to respond. She appreciated Kenta's concern for her welfare, but she had mixed feelings about his thinking she was *that* clumsy. Then again, given her record, she could hardly argue that it wasn't true.

"If you're done cleaning up, want to go eat lunch?" Kenta asked.

Karin had given him his lunch in the morning, so if Kenta wanted to, he could go ahead and eat it on his own. The fact that he'd gone to the trouble of coming to look for her was flattering. Karin was so happy that her heart fluttered and her vision blurred.

"Hey, Maaka, are you okay?" Kenta inquired.

"Huh?" Karin asked quizzically.

"You looked a bit wobbly there for a moment," replied Kenta.

Karin paused before saying, "Come to think of it, I feel a bit woozy. Maybe I'm anemic?" Her last nosebleed had been a week ago, so she should've recovered by now. But maybe she wasn't quite there yet.

"All the more reason to eat some lunch and regain your energy," Kenta declared. "Come on."

It was a cold day, so Karin and Kenta sat together in the stairwell instead of going out on the roof. Picking up a salad roll with his chopsticks, Kenta said,

"You know how the teacher was telling us we should study hard because finals are coming up?"

"Oh, was he?" Karin had been too busy thinking about the ring to pay attention. How depressing.

"I was thinking . . . what if, starting today, we studied together during lunch?" proposed Kenta. "If we don't pass, we'll have to stay after school for makeup sessions, and we won't be able to work and stuff."

"But Kenta, you're not worried about failing, are you?" asked Karin.

"I'll probably get by. But you're still struggling in physics and math, right? So I was thinking, if we studied together . . ." Kenta paused.

It was a generous offer. Kenta presented it as studying together, but really he'd be helping Karin prepare for the tests.

"Are you sure? Isn't that a waste of your time?" Karin asked. "I know you don't need any help preparing."

"It wouldn't be a waste," Kenta vowed. "Teaching someone else is a great way of making sure I know my stuff. Besides, you're always doing stuff for me. I'd be really glad to be of help to you, even a little bit . . ." Kenta looked away, blushing slightly. It wasn't like Kenta to mumble, and Karin could tell he was embarrassed.

Karin's heartbeat went from a flutter to a thump. *Wow, I never expected Kenta to invite me to study!* she thought to

herself. In the past, Kenta had never been interested in anything but getting good grades, landing a good job, and making a stable living. He'd even complained about class time being cut short for the students to prepare for the school festival. But now, he was offering to sacrifice his own study time to help Karin. She was thrilled by the kind gesture, and she was happy, too, that Kenta seemed a bit more relaxed these days. *Recently, when I'm close to him, it doesn't make my blood increase. Maybe he's really managed to break free of his unhappiness. Oh, I'm so glad!*

Then, suddenly, everything went black. Karin experienced a vertigo-like sensation, as if she were going up in a high-speed elevator. The lid of the lunchbox on her lap fell to the ground.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. The dizziness lasted only a moment. By the time the plastic lid clattered to the ground, Karin had recovered.

"What's wrong, Karin?" Kenta asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just a little anemic, I guess." Between the dizziness and the wobbliness, Karin was sure it was anemia. No mistake. She experienced it a lot, so she knew what it felt like.

"Again? You nearly fell back there in the lab, too," said Kenta.

"Well, I had a nosebleed the other day, right? I guess I haven't totally recovered yet," Karin replied.

"Man, that's rough. A burnt hand . . . anemia. You should be worrying about nourishing yourself, not

about making me lunch. Why don't you take a break from bringing me lunches until your hand gets better? It must be hard to cook like that," said Kenta.

"Ooh . . . no, I mean . . ." Karin's heart ached at Kenta's concern. Really, her hand was fine, except for the ring that was stuck on it. She fingered the ring softly through the bandages. It gave no indication that it would budge any time soon.

I can't believe I was dumb enough to fall asleep with that ring on, Karin said to herself. *Then I had that weird dream . . . Wait . . . this is almost like . . .* Karin remembered the dream. She was pretty sure she'd told the genie of the ring she wanted to go on a date with Kenta. *It isn't a date, exactly, but Kenta definitely invited me to do something together. Then again, if you factor in how serious Kenta is, studying together probably counts as a kind of date.* Did that mean the ring had made her wish come true? *No, it's probably merely a coincidence.*

As Kenta gazed worriedly at her left hand, Karin forced a smile and shook her head. "It's really not a bad burn. Besides, I have to cook for Anju and me anyway, and I'm already in the habit of making our lunches. Besides, it's rewarding to cook for you, since you always seem to enjoy my cooking."

"Well, if you insist. But don't go to any trouble," Kenta insisted.

"Don't worry. It's fine," Karin reassured him.

When they finished their lunches, Karin and Kenta decided to head over to the library and get started right away studying for exams. But first, they had to stop back at the classroom, put away their lunchboxes, and get their books and notebooks.

"Maaka, will you go on ahead and find us a spot?" Kenta said, gesturing down the hall. "I'll be right there."

"Sure thing," Karin nodded. Figuring he probably had to go to the bathroom, Karin went on ahead to the library. As she was making her way down the hallway, she crossed paths with Maki coming the other way.

"Oh, hi, Karin. Where are you going?" Maki asked.

"To the library, to study for the physics exam," Karin said, smiling.

"Wow, already?" said Maki.

"Well, if I have to do retakes, it'll mess up my work schedule. It's almost March, and I want to buy some spring clothes . . . so I really don't want to cut back on my hours," Karin explained.

"So you're studying early for that reason? Wow, you're so responsible. With all the cooking and housework you do, and an after-school job . . . Oh, I know! Can I come study with you?" Maki's eyes sparkled with happiness at her bright idea.

Karin hesitated. "Oh, um . . . well, erm . . ."

"What's wrong, Karin?"

"Well, actually . . . I'm studying with Kenta, but you're welcome to join us," Karin offered.

Maki's jaw dropped. She scratched her head and smiled. "I get it! Why didn't you say so? I should've known, though—you'd be lost trying to study for physics on your own. You definitely need someone's help."

Karin scowled. "Hey, that's not true. I—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Maki chuckled. "Anyway, if that's how it is, I don't want to intrude. Enjoy your time alone with Kenta!"

"It isn't like that, Maki. We're only studying for exams!" declared Karin.

"Okay, okay. Boy, seeing you these days makes me wish I had a boyfriend, too! Seen any awesome guys around?" With a bright smile, Maki strode off down the hallway.

Karin watched her go with an inexpressible mixture of sorrow and regret. She felt so lucky that it was almost painful. *Maki's so cheerful, fair-minded, and thoughtful . . . she's really a great girl,* Karin thought. *She deserves a super-nice, great-looking boyfriend. I wonder if there's a guy like that around.*

Karin was so shy she'd hardly spoken to any boys before Kenta had transferred to their school. She didn't know any guys she could introduce to Maki. Aside from Kenta, the only other guy Karin knew well was her older brother Ren, and he was a good-for-nothing player. Not exactly a guy she wanted her friends to meet.

When they'd talked about Valentine's chocolate the other day, Maki had suddenly grown reticent. It sounded as though someone had been sending Maki annoying texts, and when she'd spotted someone who resembled some guy in the badminton club, her face had turned sour. What had happened with that Valentine's chocolate, anyway?

If something's troubling her, I wish she'd talk to me about it. We're best friends, after all, Karin said to herself. Then again, Karin couldn't really point fingers, since she hadn't told Maki about being a vampire, or about her ring problem. *I guess I'll follow Kenta's advice and wait for Maki to decide to talk to me about it.* With that, Karin made her way to the library.

Karin wanted to hurry home and get the ring off, but, of course, she had to work that day. She couldn't call in sick. She and Maki had promised each other they'd save their pocket money and go to Angel Moon together. And it was almost spring, and Karin wanted to buy some new clothes. *When Kenta and I went to the zoo together, I had a terrible time coming up with what to wear. If we end up going somewhere together again—yes, I really do want some new cute clothes for spring.* She needed to work all the hours she could get.

"Take this to table five, Maaka. It's heavy. Is your hand all right?" The manager eyed Karin's bandaged left hand as he handed her a tray loaded with two rice bowl dinners and a gratin.

Argh . . . sorry, boss! Karin thought. She was relieved there weren't a lot of customers that evening. If it had been crowded and she was causing her coworkers to worry about her bogus injury, Karin's guilt would've been intolerable.

Karin crossed paths with Yuriya, who was taking out some dishes.

"Hello, Maaka. Alone today? Usui's not with you tonight?" Yuriya whispered.

"Yes. He works his delivery job tonight," Karin replied.

"Oh . . . yes, that's fine. You're the one who needs to know, after all," Yuriya said, as if talking to herself.

Karin cocked her head inquisitively.

"There's something I want to warn you about," Yuriya continued, her face sober. "What time do you get off tonight?"

"Eight," replied Karin.

"I see. I finish at ten o'clock, but we're not too busy tonight, so I can probably duck out for a bit. I'll meet you in the girls' locker room when you're finished," Yuriya proclaimed before she strode quickly away.

What was that all about? Karin wondered. *Well, anyway, it's nice that Tachibana wants to talk to me for a change.*

There were several things Karin wished she could ask Yuriya, given that Karin was in love with Kenta, a human, and Yuriya was half-vampire, half-human. But Yuriya's mixed heritage seemed to have caused her considerable suffering, and she'd warned Karin that such a relationship would lead to nothing but misery. She even seemed irked by Karin's hope that Karin and Kenta could be happy together as long as they loved each other.

However, a moment ago, Yuriya said she wanted to warn Karin about something. The fact that Yuriya would even bother with such a thing suggested that she didn't totally hate Karin. *I wonder if it's about Yuirya's mother and father,* Karin thought. *She said herself that they loved each other—I wonder why she's so opposed to mixed-species relationships? What could it be?*

That was what Karin imagined Yuriya wanted to talk about, but, in fact, it was something all together different. Yuriya met Karin in the girls' locker room when it was time for Karin to go home. Yuriya closed the door firmly behind them. She was still for a moment, listening carefully. "It's okay. There's nobody nearby," she said in a hushed tone before turning to Karin. "Maaka, have you ever heard of Noel the Outlaw?"

Karin tilted her head. The name was completely unfamiliar.

Yuriya nodded, as if she'd expected as much. "Noel Ambrose, commonly known as Noel the Outlaw. Her name is taboo among proper vampires, so it's no wonder you've never heard of her."

"Taboo? Is she an unusual type of vampire?" Karin asked, wondering if this had something to do with her being a blood-increasing vampire, and Yuriya's being a half-vampire.

Yuriya had characterized herself as an embarrassment to the vampire race, and Ren and Boogie were always picking on Karin for being a mutant vampire. Whenever Elda, Karin's grandmother, awoke from her coffin in the basement, Karin had to hide her secret, claiming she hadn't yet awakened as a vampire. So when Yuriya said the word "taboo," the first thing that popped into Karin's head was that it had something to do with Karin and Yuriya being substandard vampires.

Yuriya shook her head. "Noel's vampire pedigree is sterling. She's a survivor from the generation that first crossed over to Japan."

"Then she's more than two hundred years old?" asked Karin.

"They say she's more than three hundred. They call her an outlaw because of her tendencies. She never attends the Assembly and never follows the agreed-

upon vampire laws. She doesn't mind picking fights with other vampires . . . that's why everyone pretends she doesn't exist. They don't want young vampires to follow her example and start flaunting the authority of the Elder and the Assembly. Even her name goes against vampire norms. It seems the Ambrose family has been somewhat nonconformist for generations."

Yuriya explained that the name "Noel" signified the day when the Christian savior was born. Clearly, it wasn't the kind of name most vampire parents would choose for their child.

"Tachibana, you sure are well informed," Karin marveled. "I'd never heard of her before."

"Well, my un—" Yuriya interrupted herself, coughing. "My late father told me about her," she said. Then, furrowing her brow, she added, "My father was in love with a human, so maybe he admired Noel in a sense, for being able to ignore the Assembly's rules."

Karin fell silent, her chest tightening. Her grandmother Elda had once warned her that when vampires fall in love with humans, it always ends tragically. She and Kenta were in love. Thanks to Maki, they'd gone on a date to the zoo, and they'd even entered a couples contest together. And although it was only studying for exams, today Kenta had invited Karin to spend time together. But it went against vampire law. *Human beings and vampires . . . it isn't like I didn't know. Maybe having this ring stuck on my finger*

is punishment for getting carried away over the fact that Kenta gave me a ring . . .

"Maaka, are you listening? Maaka!" Yuriya said anxiously.

"Oh! Sorry . . ." Karin mumbled. She had obviously gotten lost in her thoughts.

Yuriya crossed her arms and sighed. "In any case, I saw someone in town who looks a lot like Noel the Outlaw. Maybe it isn't really her. But if it is . . . we don't know why she's in Shiihaba, and you should be very careful."

"Oh . . . thanks. So, what does she look like, anyway?" Karin asked.

"She has short blonde hair and blue eyes, and she always wears masculine-looking clothes, like pants or jeans. She also wears a trademark cross-shaped earring in her left ear."

"A cross? That's an unusual motif for a vampire! Oh, right—she's a rule breaker," Karin remembered.

"Yes, her behavior, her name, her dress . . . and one other thing." Yuriya was already speaking so softly it was hard to hear her, but now she lowered her voice even more.

"Wait, what? I can't hear you, Tachibana," said Karin.

"You have terrible hearing, Maaka. Are you sure you're actually a vampire?" Yuriya muttered in exasperation. Then, she whispered in Karin's ear, "She's gay . . . Noel's a lesbian."

"Whaaat?" Karin shrieked in surprise, but Yuriya clamped her hand over Karin's mouth.

"Quiet! I told you to be discreet! What if someone catches me back here when I'm supposed to be working?" scolded Yuriya.

"I-I'm sorry!" Karin replied. "In any case, now you know about Noel Ambrose. I can't be sure if the person I saw was her or not, but I thought I should warn you." Yuriya seemed in a hurry to conclude the conversation and get back to work.

After Yuriya rushed out of the locker room, Karin found herself alone and sighed. *There sure are all kinds of vampires . . . but if the person Yuriya saw really was Noel the Outlaw, what is she doing in our town?*

Karin didn't know that her family's unusual fertility had caused a stir at the Assembly that Christmas, so she had no idea why another vampire would come to Shiihaba. She had more pressing troubles to think about than some vampire she'd never met. There was the stuck ring, Maki's mysterious problem, and her future with Kenta.

Karin took another deep breath. *What should I do?*

CHIBI VAMPIRE AND MAKI'S LOVE LIFE

The weather the next day was so mild and sunny, it felt as if spring might have come early. In spite of the warm rays of sun, Karin remained melancholy as she walked to school. The bandage on her left hand was the reason for her dismay.

I still couldn't get it off yesterday, Karin moaned silently. *There's something strange about this ring. It's as if it's glued to my finger!*

After returning home from work, Karin had holed up in her room and tried everything she could think of, but the ring simply wouldn't budge. She'd stayed up until midnight trying to get it off before finally giving up and going to bed. If the genie of the ring came to her in a dream, Karin had resolved to ask her how to remove the ring. As luck would have it, though, Karin didn't have a single dream that night.

I have to think of a solution. I can't go on hiding behind a bandage forever! Karin worried.

She didn't run into Kenta on the way to school that morning—their timing must have been off. However, as Karin approached the front gate, she noticed a girl with a ponytail walking a several feet ahead. *Oh,*

it's Maki. I wonder what's wrong, she thought. Karin hadn't been in the greatest spirits herself, but Maki's slumped shoulders indicated an even darker mood than Karin's.

Karin quickened her pace and called out to her friend, "Good morning!"

"Oh, Karin. Morning." Maki smiled as she turned toward

Karin, but it was clear she wasn't her usual self.

"What's wrong, Maki? You seem blue," said Karin.

Maki's eyes darted indecisively. "You think so?"

"Yeah. You aren't sick, are you? It seems as though something's been weighing on you ever since that night you accidentally sent me that weird message. Am I wrong?" asked Karin.

"Oh, it's that obvious, huh?" Maki paused to think for a moment, staring at the ground, before raising her head decisively. "I'm going to clear it all up today, so don't worry." She gave Karin a cheerful smile. Then, she glanced at Karin's left hand and quickly changed the subject. "I'm more worried about your burn. Is it still very bad? Not that I expected it to heal in a day, but . . ."

"Oh . . . yeah. It doesn't really hurt now," Karin answered, quietly panicking inside. *After I get the ring off, I'd better continue to wear the bandage around for a few more days. I can't tell people the burn just disappeared*

overnight. Not that it mattered until she managed to remove the ring. So far, nobody seemed to suspect anything, but Karin would feel awful if Kenta or Maki found out she'd lied about burning her hand. She had to get it off soon!

Maybe going to a fire station to have them cut it off for her really was a possibility. *If I get Anju to come with me, and she erases their memories right after they cut it off for me, I guess it would be okay,* Karin plotted. Her sister was pretty sharp, so she'd probably know exactly what Karin had been fantasizing about when she saw the ring stuck on Karin's left ring finger. How could Karin keep her from noticing?

Karin sighed deeply. She heard someone next to her sigh in sync with her. It was Maki.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha . . ."

"Heh-heh-heh . . ."

The two friends laughed self-consciously as their eyes met. Both were unable to share their troubles with the other.

"Oh, drat. I didn't wake up," Noel muttered, noticing the bright daylight seeping through the thick curtains of her hotel room.

The ring only allowed Noel to connect to its wearer while the wearer was sleeping. Noel wasn't

powerful enough to penetrate Karin's mind while she was awake. As planned, Noel had entered Karin's dream the night before last, but Karin's sudden awakening had prevented her from disclosing the information Noel needed. Noel had given up in favor of searching for dinner and perhaps a tryst, but dawn had come without her finding an appropriate target, and she'd returned to her hotel hungry. Because of her bad luck that night, she'd headed out as soon as the sun set last night to find some suitable prey.

Dinner was one thing, but love was even more difficult to find. There were more straight girls out there than gay ones. Noel could use her hypnotic skills to seduce as many girls as she wanted, but what was the fun in that? After Noel had been on the prowl a mere thirty minutes, she'd happened upon a girl who was exactly her type. The girl had liked Noel, too. And now . . .

Shoot. I got carried away, Noel sighed. *I completely forgot about Karin Maaka.* She grinned with satisfaction as she glanced at the young girl asleep next to her. There were two black marks on the girl's white neck. The girl's eyes opened. Perhaps Noel's sigh had awakened her.

"What's wrong, Noley? Oh, it's already morning!" the girl exclaimed.

"Yes. Let's keep the curtains closed, okay? I'm still sleepy. What about you? Do you have to go?" asked Noel.

"Yeah, I have work at noon," the girl replied. "Oooh, that was so fun. I really like you, Noley! We're great together, aren't we? Text me, okay?"

"Yes, of course . . . there," Noel nodded, smiling at the girl with both arms wrapped around her neck.

Noel added something in a whisper that caused the girl's body to twitch. The girl got up out of bed and went into the bathroom. *Hypnosis complete,* Noel said to herself with a smirk. When the girl left the room, she would forget everything that had happened between last night and this morning.

The maverick vampire had brought her catch back to her hotel room, had some fun with her, imbibed her fill of blood, and had fallen asleep. The next thing she knew, it was morning. She was still sleepy. Just as cats often slumber through rainy days, barely moving, Noel's body seemed to grow listless on sunny days. She felt exhausted.

So I wasted a night . . . Oh, well, Noel shrugged. *I'll deal with Karin Maaka again when the sun sets.* There was no sense in beating herself up about it, so Noel decided to let it go. She would rest up during the day and continue figuring out who Karin was when dark fell. She could only use the ring to make contact when Karin was asleep, but she could always observe Karin from a distance.

So sleepy . . . Noel said to herself as she pulled the covers over her head.

There was no way Karin could have known the genie of the ring had failed to appear in her dream for such a trivial reason. She spent the morning worrying about what to tell Anju. *Yesterday, when Anju asked me about the bandage, I lied and told her I burnt my hand. Now she'll want to know why I didn't tell her the truth,* Karin fretted. Never mind Anju—Karin was sure Boogey the doll would never let her hear the end of it. *Argh!*

After her morning classes were finished and after eating lunch with Kenta and chatting with Maki and Fukumi during lunch break, Karin still hadn't come up with a good story. During fifth period physics, the teacher had suffered a sudden stomachache and had cut the class short by more than ten minutes. As her classmates rejoiced at the extra break time, Karin sat listlessly in her chair, staring off into space. Glancing up, she noticed that Maki had cleanup duty. Maki was sticking the blackboard erasers into the eraser cleaner to suck out the chalk dust, but from the weak sounds it was making, the machine didn't seem to be working very well.

"Oh, shoot!" Exasperated, Maki turned off the eraser cleaner and walked over to the window holding the erasers. There, she resorted to the old-fashioned

method of leaning out the window and slapping the erasers together, sending the chalk dust flying.

Noticing that Maki was suffering a fit of coughing, Karin got up and walked over to her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. That eraser cleaner is busted. I'll have to report it to Mr. Shirai." With a grimace, Maki glanced out the window. Suddenly, her face went sour. "Oh, great. There he is."

"Huh?" Perplexed, Karin followed Maki's gaze.

Out on the field, a P.E. class was doing hurdles. The students had green stripes on their gym clothes, which meant they were seniors. One of the boys standing in line was staring at sophomore Classroom D—Maki and Karin's class—as he smiled and waved. He was tall, with brown hair and rather handsome features, but Karin had no idea who he was, or why he was waving to them.

"Ugh! He saw me," Maki muttered, heaving an extended sigh. She bowed ever so slightly, returning the boy's greeting in a way that was polite but cursory, before walking away.

Karin was confused. "Where are you going, Maki?"

"To the bathroom," Maki said curtly as she set down the erasers and left the classroom.

Karin rushed to catch up with her friend. As they walked down the hallway, Karin asked, "Who was that? Do you know him, Maki?"

"Yeah. He's in the badminton club. He's a senior, and his name is Nagahata."

"Oh! So that's why he was waving to you. Seems like a friendly guy."

"To girls, anyway," Maki replied irately. Once again, a look of indecision crossed her face. "Maybe I should just tell you," she muttered.

"What is it?" Karin asked. "You've been acting weird lately, Maki. I sense that something's weighing on you. What's the matter?"

"See, now I'm making you worry. I'm going to clear up this whole mess today after school," Maki promised Karin. "I was going to tell you about it after that, but I might as well tell you now. Looks like nobody's around . . ."

As they entered the girls' bathroom, Maki made sure all the stalls were empty and their doors were open. Then, so softly that Karin could barely hear, she began to explain. "Yesterday, that boy back there asked me out."

Karin let out a screech of surprise. "Whaaaaaat? You mean, he likes you?"

"Don't shout!" Maki barked, clamping a hand over Karin's mouth. "I'm trying to make sure nobody overhears us, so keep it down, will you? If Chika or Yukari hears about this, it'll be all over school!"

"I-I'm sorry, Maki," Karin said. She recalled the face of the senior boy they'd seen from the window.

He'd been far away, but from what Karin had seen—and by normal teenage girl standards—he qualified as a total stud. She'd only caught a quick glimpse, so she didn't know what his personality was like, but if Maki had chosen him as her boyfriend he must be a nice guy. Maki was always worrying about Karin's relationship with Kenta and making a concerted effort to help, but she was a closed book when it came to her own love life.

"Wow, Maki, that's great!" Karin exclaimed. "You made all those chocolates for your friends on Valentine's Day, but really, you had a special someone in mind! If you like him, he must be a great guy, huh?" Karin was sincerely thrilled. Maki was always so supportive, and now Maki's own love life was going well. What could be better?

"No, Karin—you're jumping to conclusions! He asked me to go out with him, but I never said I accepted!" Maki insisted.

"Huh? What do you mean?" asked Karin innocently.

"We shouldn't talk here. Let's go over by the vending machines. We still have time. I'll buy you a drink." With that, Maki ducked into a stall.

Karin cocked her head, confused. Maki didn't seem very fond of this Nagahata guy. When they got to the vending machines, Maki confirmed Karin's suspicions.

"Sure, Nagahata's attractive, but that's it. He's totally conceited—it's like he's always calculating what angle he looks best from. Ugh!" Maki shook her head in disgust as she took her paper cup out of the drink machine. "He started texting me and calling me a little while ago. I've been giving him the brush-off, but that only seems to make him more determined. He can't take a hint to save his life."

"You really don't like him?" Karin asked.

"Honestly, I don't. He's always nice to the girls, but when other guys screw up during a match, he yells at them in front of everybody," explained Maki. "One time, when we all went out to eat after a meet, there was a little piece of plastic wrap or something like that in his food. He made a huge deal out of it to the waiter, demanding to talk to the manager and saying that the food should be free. It totally ruined everyone's evening."

"Oh . . . that does sound lame," Karin groaned. She worked at a restaurant, and she knew how horrible it was dealing with customers like that. Accepting the hot chocolate Maki had bought, Karin sat down on the edge of a planter next to her friend. "It sounds as though he has good taste in girls, though. I mean, he asked you out, didn't he?"

"I have no idea what made him take an interest in me. There are lots of girls who like him, but unless he does something about that personality of his, he

can forget it," Maki said crisply, taking a sip of her hot lemon tea. "Nagahata used to be in the tennis club, but last year he punched an underclassman and injured him. I guess they didn't want him in the tennis club any longer, so he joined the badminton club."

"But you heard that from someone else, didn't you? I know you don't like him, Maki, but I don't think you should believe something that could be a rumor," Karin warned.

"It isn't a rumor. He told me himself!" said Maki. "He was bragging about it, talking about how he's wilder than he looks."

Karin raised her eyebrows. "R-really?"

"He *is* really good at badminton, but I can't understand how anyone could brag about injuring an underclassman!" Maki scoffed.

Nagahata had asked Maki out after badminton practice the day before. Maki had declined, but Nagahata hadn't taken her seriously.

"When I turned him down, he said I was probably just too surprised to think clearly, and told me to take some time to consider," Maki recounted. "While we were talking, someone else came along, so we had to cut the conversation short. I thought it would be harsh to embarrass him by rejecting him in front of friends, so I told him I'd take a day to think about it. We're supposed to meet after school so I can give him my answer." Naturally, it wasn't the sort of thing they

could discuss around other people. They'd agreed to meet behind the portable classrooms.

Karin was worried. "Are you sure about this, Maki? If he's the kind of guy who punches underclassmen, what if he gets mad and does something to you?"

"If I feel like I'm in danger, I'll hightail it out of there," Maki assured her. "Don't worry. We should be getting back now. We've got modern lit next—that teacher always shows up the second the bell rings."

Karin and Maki returned to the classroom together, but the more Karin contemplated her friend's situation, the more she worried. Last summer, Maki had gotten the idea in her head that Karin had a crush on Kenta. In fact, she'd tuned in to Karin's true feelings before Karin had admitted them to herself—and had taken great pains to help move their relationship along. But Karin had felt more bewildered than grateful. She appreciated Maki's energy and enthusiasm exuded on her behalf, but she also wished Maki would let her be. Now that the shoe was on the other foot, Karin finally understood. It was almost unbearable! Her best friend's love life weighed on her even more than her own.

When Maki was watching Kenta and me, this is how she must have felt, Karin thought. *Oh, Maki, I'm sorry. I never realized.*

On the other hand, Maki wasn't in love; she was simply the object of someone else's affections. Maki was planning to turn Nagahata down, but that was

precisely what concerned Karin. Considering the text Maki had accidentally sent to Karin's phone, it was clear Maki had been pretty assertive in fending off Nagahata's advances. If he'd gone ahead and asked her out anyway, he was clearly a pretty aggressive guy.

At first glance, he appears to be a friendly, attractive guy . . . but, apparently, he's the type who punches underclassmen and yells at waiters. What if he does something to Maki to get back at her for rejecting him? Karin pondered.

Nagahata and Maki were in the badminton club together. He was a senior and she was a freshman. There were all sorts of things he could do to pick on her. What if he became violent with her when she turned him down? Maki wasn't the type to sugarcoat things. Along with her strict code of ethics, she possessed a strong aversion to falsehood.

One misstep, and their encounter could turn into a disaster, Karin thought. *I'm really worried . . . it's starting to make my stomach hurt!* Luckily, Karin didn't have work; she was free after school. *Maybe I'll follow Maki, just to make sure she's okay. She might get mad at me for butting in, but if I don't go, and something happens . . . They agreed to meet behind the portable classrooms, didn't they?*

The dark, narrow passageway between the buildings and the cement wall wasn't a popular hangout, which was precisely why students went there

when they needed to talk privately. Karin had once held secret negotiations there with a woman in the purchasing department. It was definitely an apt place to deal with matters of the heart.

Yes, I'll follow her and make sure she's okay, Karin decided silently. She stole a glance at Maki, sitting three seats behind her. Maki was listening to the lecture with much more composure than Karin. Her mind was already made up, and she seemed at peace with her decision to decline Nagahata's offer.

Karin spotted Kenta in the seat behind Maki's. *If I could tell Kenta and have him come with me, I'd feel a lot better—but no . . . I can't do that!* It would be one thing if this was Karin's own problem, but she couldn't tell anyone Maki's private business without her permission—not even Kenta.

Suddenly, Karin's thoughts were interrupted. "Maaka! What are you looking at?" the teacher demanded sharply.

"Uh, what?" mumbled Karin.

"You must have a strong grasp of the material, if you don't need to pay attention. Why don't you come up to the blackboard and solve the first problem for us," the teacher instructed.

"Huh?" Karin exclaimed.

"Don't 'huh' me!" the teacher scolded. "Problem two, Tanaka. Problem three, Nishio."

Karin's inattentiveness had earned her a trip to the blackboard.

Math class wound up running over by five minutes. Karin wanted to think it wasn't her fault for taking so long to solve her problem, but she wasn't so sure. When the class chairperson had finished leading the class in thanking and bowing to the teacher, Maki grabbed her bag and darted out of the classroom. She probably didn't want to have to apologize to Nagahata for being late.

Shoot! I'd better hurry, too! Karin said to herself. Flustered, she quickly gathered up her notebooks and shoved them into her book bag. "Bye, Kenta!" she hollered.

"Oh, Karin, wait—" Kenta began.

"See you tomorrow!" she waved.

Kenta was about to say something, but Karin cut him off as she tore out of the classroom and raced down the hall. As she ran down the stairs, she tripped on the last step and fell forward. "Aiiiiiieeeeee!"

"Watch out!" Mr. Shirai, Karin's homeroom teacher, shouted. He happened to be passing by at the exact moment of her unfortunate slip and caught Karin before she fell flat on her face. "Maaka, you know better than to run in the hall! And on the stairs—that's even worse! You trip and fall enough as it is. What if you would've broken something?"

"I-I'm sorry . . ." Karin muttered.

Other students turned to watch as the concerned teacher delivered a sharp tongue-lashing. *Oh, no. And here I was trying not to attract attention,* Karin thought, mortified. *If Chika or Yukari notices, they'll grill me with questions. They love hearing about other people's love lives!*

Karin knew where Maki and Nagahata were meeting, so she decided it was best to walk there at a normal speed. After changing into her outdoor shoes, she made her way down the pathway between the school and concrete wall, behind the portable classrooms. Cautiously, she hid in the shadow of the building and peeked into the alleyway.

There they are! Karin said to herself victoriously. Sure enough, Maki was standing face to face with the senior boy they'd seen from the window at lunch. Judging from their voices and expressions, Maki had already delivered her answer. Nagahata's face was rigid.

"Do you really mean that?" he demanded.

"Yes. I thought about it for a day, and I decided I can't go out with you. I'm sorry," Maki said tersely. With that, she bowed and said, "Now, please excuse me."

"Wait!" Nagahata demanded.

Karin's eyes widened as she remained in her hiding place behind the building. Maki had tried to leave, but Nagahata grabbed Maki by the arm.

"Don't just blow me off like that! I mean, are you really sure about this? If you change your mind and come back later, I might've already found some other girl, you know?" he said.

"Don't worry, I won't change my mind," Maki assured him. "Now, let go, please."

"Do you actually think you're all that? Take a good look at yourself. You may not get another opportunity to date a guy like me," Nagahata warned.

Karin's grip on the wall of the school building tightened as she grew increasingly furious. *Who does he think he is? How dare he talk down to Maki like that!* It was clear Nagahata thought highly of himself, and that he considered Maki beneath him. He obviously felt he was doing Maki a favor by asking her out, and now he was pissed off that she was rejecting him. Earlier, when Karin had seen Nagahata's smiling face, he'd seemed pretty handsome. But when he gave full vent to his temper, his looks instantly became artificial.

Maki has good judgment. She didn't allow herself to be taken in by his appearance, Karin thought. But this was no time to be marveling at Maki's wisdom. It felt as though something horrible was about to happen.

"That's enough, Nagahata! I said no already!" Fed up with the argument, Maki shook herself free of the boy's grip on her wrist. In the process, her fingertips grazed his face.

Nagahata reeled as if he'd been slapped. He grabbed Maki and sneered, "Why, you little—"

"Argh! Stop that!" Maki shrieked.

Karin gasped. Maki was plucky, but there was no way a sophomore girl stood a chance in a brawl with a senior guy. Maki shook free of Nagahata's grasp and tried to run away, but she stumbled on a rock and fell, landing on her butt.

"Maki!" Without considering the consequences, Karin rushed out from the shadow of the building toward her friend. "Violence isn't the answer!" she shouted, jumping between Maki and Nagahata. Her voice trembled with fear, and her heart was pounding, but she couldn't leave her best friend in danger.

"Karin?! What're you doing here?" Maki asked, her mouth agape.

"Where did you come from? Don't tell me you were listening this whole time!" Nagahata shouted. Instead of calming Nagahata down, the arrival of a third party seemed to enrage him even more. He grabbed Karin's neck.

Eeek! Is he going to hit me? Karin wondered.

Nagahata glared at Karin with eyes bloodshot with rage. Her body turned to ice and a strangled scream escaped from her throat. "N-noooooo! Save me, Kenta!"

Several minutes earlier . . .

Kenta was wandering through the school, searching for Karin. He'd left the classroom quickly with the intention of hurrying off to work at Julian, but when he reached the shoe cubbies he realized he'd forgotten to return his lunchbox to Karin. If he didn't get it back to her, she wouldn't be able to make him lunch tomorrow. Kenta had hurried back to the classroom, but Karin was already gone, and her bag was gone, too. Thinking he'd just missed her, Kenta dashed back to the shoe cubbies, but Karin wasn't there, either.

If someone sees me looking at the girls' shoe cubbies, what'll they say? Kenta thought as he checked to see if anyone was watching before peeking in Karin's cubby. Her outdoor shoes were gone—she must have already left the building. Had she gone out through the front entrance or the side one? Kenta decided to check the front first.

Throngs of students with no after-school activities poured out of the front gates, heading home. Kenta scanned the area, but he didn't see a petite girl in a double-breasted caramel-colored coat among them. *Maybe she's already gone. If she left through the side door, I won't catch up to her now. I guess I should give up.*

Before Kenta could complete his thought, he heard a voice.

"What's up, Usui? Looking for someone?"

Kenta turned. Eleventh-grader Ayaha Ougimachi was sitting on the edge of a flower planter near the front entrance. Ayaha was a strong-willed girl, and Kenta's past encounters with her had left a bad taste in his mouth. Still, he wasn't about to ignore her greeting.

"I might ask you the same thing. What are you doing here, Ougimachi?"

"A girl in my class wanted to observe my ballet class, so I'm taking her along. But she forgot something in the classroom, so I told her I'd wait here," Ayaha explained.

"Oh . . ." murmured Kenta.

"What about you, Usui? You seem like you're in a hurry. Is something wrong?"

If Ayaha had been waiting a while, she might have seen Karin. If it had been a while since she'd left, Kenta would give up, he decided. "Have you seen Maaka? I think she may have already left."

From her perch on the flower planter, Ayaha gave Kenta a once-over, from his head to his toes. "Maaka? What's the matter—did you two have a fight? And now you're running after her? Tsk, tsk! You'd better treat that girl right, Usui! No wonder you guys lost the Hot Couples Contest!"

The fact that Ayaha knew about the contest was more distressing to Kenta than her presumptuous conclusions. "H-how did you know about that?" he stuttered.

"Well, it was opening night at Angel Moon. I had Shino treat me to the cake buffet!" Ayaya proclaimed.

Ayaha's cousin, Shinobu Kirioka was in a different class than Kenta, but they were in the same grade, and Kenta knew him. Once Shino had foisted a love-hotel coupon on Kenta, suggesting mockingly that Kenta use it with Karin. Before Kenta had a chance to get rid of it, Karin's father had discovered it and there was hell to pay. Shinobu had a sarcastic, unpleasant personality, and Kenta kept his distance as much as possible.

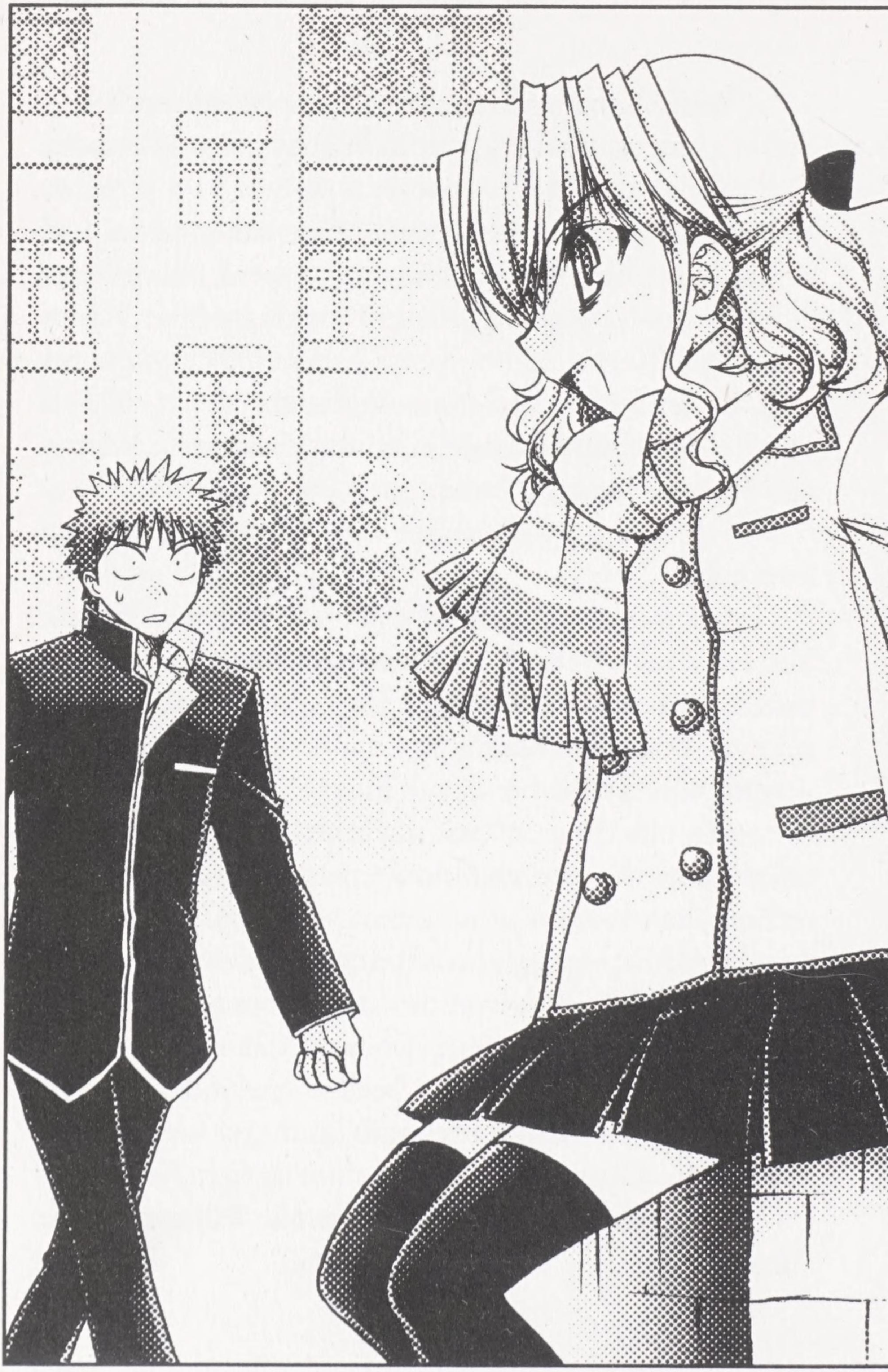
"Oh, you were on a date with Kirioka . . ." Kenta asserted.

"Oh, no, don't be silly! I was only there with Shino, like I said! If I went there with a guy I liked, I couldn't eat more than two desserts, right? Otherwise I'd come off as a total pig! That's why I went with Shino. Oh, it was *so* good. I had the orange mousse, the chiffon cake, the apple pie, the pear tart, the chestnut tart, the baked cheesecake, the rare cheesecake, and the sachertorte—let's see, ten desserts!" Ayaha recounted rapturously.

Kenta looked aghast. Women could be scary!

"There are still seven deserts I haven't tried, so I'll have to go back. Oh yeah, we were talking about the contest, weren't we? I had a peek at the stage as I was leaving, and you and Karin were up there. Anyway, get it together, Usui! You're her boyfriend, right?"

Kenta wasn't sure why Ayaha was lecturing him. "Yeah, but—"



"You're fighting, aren't you? I saw Maaka earlier—she was sneaking after a twelfth grader—that Nagahata guy," said Ayaha.

"Nagahata? Who's that?" Ayaha's information took Kenta completely by surprise.

"A senior guy. In a word, he's a player," said Ayaha.

"A player?" Kenta repeated confusedly.

"When I first started school here, he asked me out," Ayaha began. "I went out with him only once, but it was enough to realize that he's all looks, no substance. Right away, he was trying to put his arms around me and walk arm-in-arm and stuff. All he thinks about is himself. On a street with no guardrail, he had me walking on the side with the cars! Shino would never do anything like that!"

Kenta frowned. "Oh . . ."

"Don't let that flimsy kitchen-sponge of a guy pull a fast one on you, Usui! Hang on to Maaka! Honestly, what's wrong with you? Don't you realize what I sacrificed giving up on you?" Ayaha asked.

"Huh? Giving up on me?" Kenta asked.

"N-no! You heard me wrong. I didn't say 'giving up' on you! I said 'getting tired' of you! Oh, please, what are you, hard of hearing?" Ayaha corrected Kenta angrily, her face bright red.

Kenta wasn't sure how to react. He bowed in apology. "Uh, sorry. So, about Maaka?"

"She went back behind the portables. She was acting unusually sneaky, all hunched over, as if she didn't want anyone to see her. But it only made her stand out," said Ayaha.

Kenta sighed. That sounded just like Karin.

With a hint of irritation, Ayaha added, "I saw Nagahata go the same way a little bit earlier. Usui, you know about that alley, right? It isn't very romantic, but it *is* private, so it's like the third most popular secret rendezvous spot on campus."

With a gasp, Kenta said, "What? You aren't suggesting Maaka—"

"It's your fault for not keeping a strong hold on her, Usui. Oh, there she is—finally!" As her classmate emerged from the building, Ayaha stood up. "Okay, I'm going now. Hurry up and go after Maaka, Usui!"

"Right . . . thank you." Kenta didn't want to make things worse by arguing. Besides, Ayaha's information had been exactly what he needed. So he thanked her sincerely and headed off toward the portable buildings. *The third most popular secret rendezvous spot? Come to think of it, when that woman from the purchasing department wanted to meet secretly with Karin, that was where they went.*

Karin had been deeply distressed at the time, terrified that the woman had found out about Karin's being a vampire and had meant to threaten her. Instead of coming to Kenta for help, she'd tried to resolve it on

her own, which had resulted in even more problems. It was simply a misunderstanding on Karin's part—the woman didn't know her secret. But Karin sure was accident-prone. It wouldn't be surprising if someone had started to suspect her secret.

Kenta had agreed to help cover for Karin during the day, but it wasn't as though he could be right by her side twenty-four-seven. Guys and girls had separate gym classes, and during breaks they actually were apart more than they were together. Karin might chat with her friends, or need to talk to a teacher about tuition or school trips or things.

If someone suspected Karin's secret, the sooner she and Kenta dealt with it, the better. They had to throw the person off Karin's scent before they learned too much. *But sometimes Karin has some weird notion that she shouldn't trouble me,* Kenta remembered. When that happened, it always made things more complicated, and they ended up with a much bigger mess to clean up.

Kenta and Karin had finally made the leap to being more than friends, and Kenta had made up his mind to protect Karin because he wanted to, not only because she made him lunches, or because her family had threatened him. So Karin should quit worrying about troubling him already and learn to depend on him more. *But that's how Karin is,* Kenta told himself. *I wonder what's going on this time? I've never heard Karin mention Nagahata's name.*

Kenta didn't buy that it was a secret romantic rendezvous for a minute. On Valentine's Day, when Kenta had confessed his feelings to Karin, she'd clung to him and sobbed. Her thin shoulders had quivered as her hot tears had moistened his clothes, and she'd thanked him hoarsely as she wept. He couldn't imagine her having a sudden change of heart.

Wait. Maybe this Nagahata guy asked her to meet him, and it's completely one-sided? Kenta theorized. Karin did attract an unusual amount of male attention. *There was that Jumonji guy who transferred to our school. And during summer break, Kishima asked her out. And that American guy, Jake, was kind of all over her, too . . .* Kenta began to worry. Nagahata might suspect Karin's secret, or he might just have a crush on her. Either way, Kenta needed to intervene.

He was almost at the portable buildings now. Perhaps he was imagining it, but he thought he could hear voices fighting in the alley. Kenta began to run. As he peered into the alley, he let out a surprised screech. "Maaka! And . . . Tokitou?"

Maki Tokitou was on the ground, flat on her rear, and Karin was standing in front of her, as if to defend her friend. But an unfamiliar guy was gripping Karin's thin wrists, drawing one hand in the air as if he were about to strike her.

So this was the Nagahata guy Ayaha had mentioned.

"What's going on? Stop that!" Kenta bellowed, running toward them. The guy turned, starting to say something, but the moment his gaze met Kenta's, his expression turned fearful and he let go of Karin's wrists, sending her flying.

"Eeek!" Karin shrieked as she tumbled to the ground. The guy ran off in the opposite direction.

"Wait! Hey, you!" Kenta called after Nagahata, but Kenta had no intention of chasing him. He was more concerned about Karin and Maki. He ran over to Karin, but Maki had beaten him there, and was already helping Karin up.

Maki seemed beside herself with worry. Her usual boldness was absent, and her face was so tense that it appeared as if she might burst into tears at any moment. "Karin! Karin, are you okay?"

"Owowow . . ." Karin wailed.

Better late than never. Kenta approached Karin and crouched down, peering into her face. "Are you okay? Should we take you to the nurse?"

"No, I'm okay. I just landed on my butt." Karin forced a smile, but she seemed pretty shaken. Her face was bright red, and her eyes welled with tears.

"What happened?" Kenta asked, his focus traversing between Maki and Karin. From what Ayaha had told him, Kenta had assumed Nagahata had asked Karin to meet him, but it appeared as though that wasn't the case.

Maki's countenance revealed her annoyance. "You saw that guy who sprinted out of here, didn't you?" she asked disgustedly. "He's a senior in the badminton club. Nagahata. He asked me out, but I turned him down. Then, he got mad and grabbed me. I never expected he would do something that lame! And he tried to hit Karin, when she isn't even involved! I'm so sorry, Karin! Here you were trying to stand up for me, and look what happened . . ."

"It's fine—I'm not hurt. Besides, Kenta came and rescued me," Karin replied.

"I was looking for you because I forgot to give you back my lunchbox. And I still had a little time before I needed to get to work," explained Kenta. He was a bit embarrassed by being thanked for rescuing Karin. Rubbing his upper lip with his finger, he added, "I'm glad I came looking for you, anyway. Nagahata, huh? He seems rather violent."

"Yeah, but one glance at your intimidating face sent him running," Maki remarked pointedly. She sat on the ground and focused her attention once again on Karin, who was clutching her forehead with her hand. "Are you really okay? Did you hit your head?"

"No. I just feel a little woozy," Karin said with a half smile. "You know I get anemic a lot, right? That's all it is . . ."

Suddenly, it occurred to Kenta that the other day, Karin's nose had spurted blood all over Yuriya

Tachibana. No wonder she was still feeling anemic. *If only there were an unhappy person nearby, her blood would increase again,* Kenta said silently. *But it isn't as if we can go snag one somewhere.*

In a spacey voice, Karin murmured, "My wish came true when you came and rescued us, Kenta. What a relief . . ."

"Your wish?" Kenta asked, raising his brow.

"Yeah. I was sure that guy was going to hit Maki, and me, too. So I wished for you to come . . . Oh, I'm so glad you . . ." Suddenly, Karin's voice trailed off and she slumped forward.

Maki leapt forward, catching Karin. "Yikes! Karin?! Karin! Oh, no, she passed out! She must've been really scared!" Karin's eyes were closed, as if she were having another one of her anemic spells. "I'm so sorry I got you caught up in this, Karin," Maki apologized.

Just then, the buckle on Maki's watch snagged the bandage on Karin's left hand. Perhaps it was already loose, because it fell right off. "Oh, no, her bandage came off!" Maki yelped. "Hey, wait a minute . . . Karin's hand isn't burned!"

Kenta leaned in closer to examine Karin's hand. "Really? But I remember Maaka saying she burned it."

"That's bizarre. I wonder why she lied," Maki puzzled.

Maki noticed that the base of Karin's ring finger was swollen, and that something was shimmering behind the unraveled bandage. It was a ring.

Maki drew in her breath sharply. "That ring!"

"Oh, that? It was in the bag of prizes from the other day," said Kenta. "I wonder why Karin's wearing it . . ."

Maki seemed taken aback. "The bag of prizes?"

Kenta nodded. "Yeah—from the couples contest. One of the staff there gave it to us for participating. The other prizes were little packets of gum and potato chips and stuff. I figured it was just a toy ring, since it was in a bag of snacks."

"No, Kenta! My dad's the caretaker of the shopping street, and he showed me a sample of the prize bags. They were only supposed to have candy and snacks in them!" Maki yelped.

"Huh? Then where did the ring come from? We'd better report it to the police," replied Kenta.

"But this ring—" Maki paused. "No, first we'd better get Karin to the infirmary!"

Kenta wasn't so sure. Karin had probably collapsed because of her usual blood issues. Her blood was always increasing and decreasing, and she fainted pretty frequently. *It would probably be quicker to take her home,* thought Kenta, *but we can't have Maki following us there. I guess we'd better go to the infirmary.* If it really were only one of Karin's standard anemic episodes, she would be fine after a short rest.

Kenta hoisted Karin onto his back and they made their way to the infirmary. She regained consciousness on the way, to everyone's relief. The nurse was out, and the infirmary was empty. Kenta laid Karin down on one of the beds. "Rest a bit, Karin. Are you okay, Maki? You look like you're about to pass out, too." Something strange seemed to have come over Maki Tokitou ever since she'd noticed the ring on Karin's finger.

Maki pulled a chair next to Karin's bed and sat down, her face still ashen. "Well, about that ring . . . Karin, how long have you been wearing it? And why did you wear it to school?"

Obviously mortified, Karin tugged the blanket up to her eyes, hiding her beet-red face. "Um, since the night before last, just after the contest. I fell asleep with the ring on, and when I woke up the next day, it was stuck. I didn't want to get busted by the teachers, so I hid it with this bandage. I'm sorry for lying to you guys about burning my hand."

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Kenta inquired, pulling up a chair next to Maki. "Isn't it dangerous to have a ring stuck on your finger? I'm no expert, but I mean, in terms of your circulation and nerves and stuff?"

Karin's face grew redder still. "I was too embarrassed. I mean, it was stuck on my left ring finger and all . . ."

"Why is that embarrassing?" Kenta asked innocently.

Maki and Karin stared at Kenta, exchanged glances, and sighed.

"Kenta, you're really dense when it comes to stuff like this. That must be rough, Karin," Maki observed.

"Yeah, sometimes it is," said Karin. "Then again, I'm not one to talk."

"What's going on? I don't get it!" Kenta was becoming discomfited by the girls' looks of pity and resignation, but neither bothered to explain her expression. With a grimace, Kenta changed the subject. "Okay fine. Anyway, Tokitou, what about the ring? So, it wasn't supposed to be in the prize package?"

"I thought it was strange from the moment I saw it. Why would an expensive-looking ring like that be in a prize bag just for participating? And Karin, you heard what—oh, wait—you didn't hear the end of the story. I made Chika stop before she . . ." Maki's face grew gloomier by the minute.

"What's the big deal about the ring?" Kenta asked again.

"Well, it looks exactly like the cursed ring in Chika's story!" Maki exclaimed.

"Cursed ring?" repeated Kenta.

"Maki, do you mean that story Chika was telling but you made her stop because I was scared? The one about a teenage girl who found a ring in an abandoned house?" Karin asked.

"Yes. I heard the whole story from Chika before you got there. It was a tarnished silver ring with a ruby-like stone, decorated with a bat wing pattern—precisely like the one stuck on your finger, Karin!" Maki gasped.

Karin sat upright. "W-wait a minute, Maki! Why are you staring at me like that? How does the story end?"

"Karin, how much of the story did you hear? Did Chika get to the part where the girl takes the ring home? And the part where the voice on the video says, 'Give me back my ring?'" Maki asked.

"Um, could you tell me without making it too scary?" Karin entreated.

Karin and Maki were engaged in an earnest conversation that Kenta found difficult to take seriously. A cursed ring sounded pretty ridiculous to him, like something that would be sold in the back of a magazine. But for some reason, teenage girls were always suckers for that kind of story. *Come to think of it,* Kenta thought, *if vampires really exist, I suppose a cursed ring could exist, too. Nah, it still sounds bogus to me.*

Maki was telling a story about a group of high-school girls who went exploring in an old abandoned mansion. One of the girls had secretly taken home a ring set with a ruby. But what the girls didn't know was that the foreign family who'd once dwelled in the mansion

had been murdered by robbers. When the girls replayed the video they'd shot, they heard a ghost's voice.

As far as Kenta was concerned, it was a stereotypical ghost story. Because of his part-time jobs, Kenta didn't have excess time these days, but when he was a kid, he'd read a lot of books. His mother sometimes snuck him some pocket money without his grandmother's finding out, but Kenta wasn't interested in sweets and video games like the other kids. More than anything, he wanted to be a "good kid" so that his mother wouldn't worry about him and his grandmother would like him. There was one place where he could pass his time that didn't cost money and earned him a reputation as a good kid—the school library.

Kenta's grandmother loathed him, and called him a mistake his mother had made, which gave Kenta the impression that romance was a bad thing. So he avoided books that made any reference to love. Other than that, he read everything he could get his hands on. Of course, that included a lot of ghost stories.

A video or photograph picks up something that the characters didn't hear or see themselves, and the scary part happens when they've returned home safely—a classic pattern, Kenta said to himself. It was so trite, there was no way it could be true.

But Maki hadn't finished her story. After viewing the video, the girl was too scared to take the ring back to the house where she'd found it. That night, the

ring's owner appeared to the girl in a dream and said, "If you like the ring that much, it's yours. I've been so lonesome all this time—it made me so happy when you came to visit."

When the girl woke up, the ring was suddenly on her finger, and she couldn't get it off. She was terrified, but the next day and the day after that, she experienced a string of mysteriously lucky events. Her parents bought her the bag she'd been yearning for, the boy she had a crush on asked her to a movie, and her friends paid her all kinds of compliments about how beautiful and fair her skin had become.

All the while, the ruby glistened enchantingly in the girl's ring. *Maybe it is a lucky ring after all. Perhaps the woman had been so glad to have a visitor, she was granting her good fortune in return*, the girl thought optimistically. But on the third night . . .

"The woman appeared in her dream again and said, 'You've had a wonderful three days, so now you'll have no regrets!'" Maki continued. "The next morning, her family found her dead in her bed, her skin as white as snow! Her skin had grown fair not because her skin care regimen was working, but because the ring had been drinking her blood!"

"Nooo!" shrieked Karin.

"With her fingers thin and drained of blood, the ring slipped off and rolled away . . ." Maki said, taking a deep breath, ". . . to hunt for its next victim."

"You don't think it's *this* ring, do you?" Karin asked. "Come to think of it, ever since I put it on the day before yesterday, I've been having dizzy spells and feeling faint. Oh, and there was a blonde woman in my dream!"

Maki covered her mouth in horror. "No!"

"I thought she was the genie of the ring, but actually all she said was that she was affiliated with the ring. And she said she'd grant me a wish, because she wanted to make me happy! And every time my wishes came true, both yesterday and today, I've had anemic spells. Oh my gosh, it's a carbon copy of the ghost story!" Karin cried.

"I'm so sorry, Karin! I shouldn't have stopped Chika—I should've let her tell you the whole story! Then none of this would've happened!"

"No, Maki! You were only trying to protect me!"

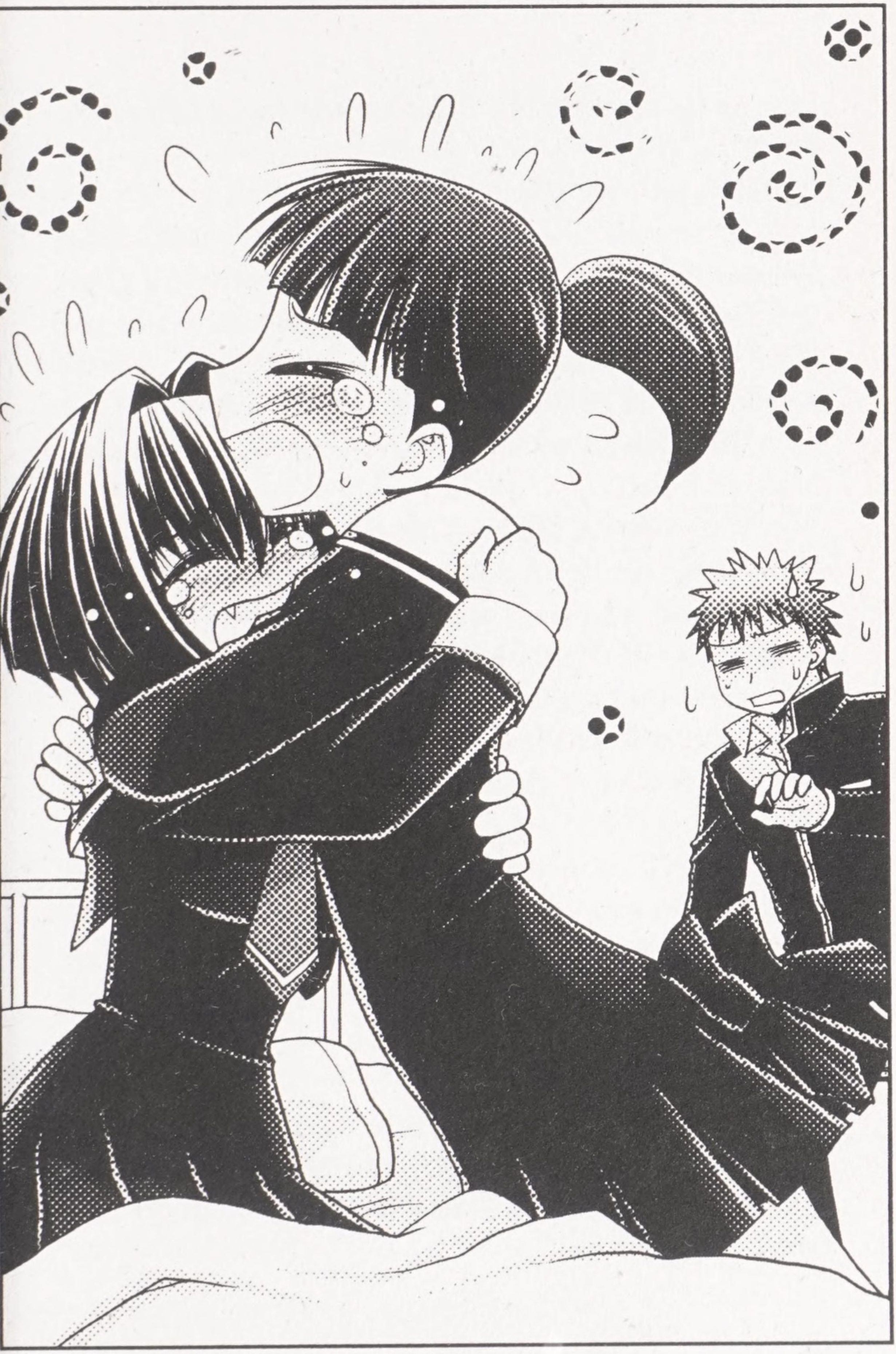
"Oh, Karin . . ."

"Maki!"

The two girls hugged each other tightly, repeating each other's names and reaffirming their friendship while Kenta looked on uncomfortably. "Um, listen, I hate to interrupt, but . . ."

The girls turned toward Kenta, tears still welling in their eyes.

Kenta scratched his head. "No matter how you spin it, that story doesn't make sense. The girl's family found her dead that morning, right? Then how could



anyone know what she dreamed the night before she died?"

The girls fell silent.

"It sounds like two run-of-the-mill ghost stories awkwardly stitched together—the kind where a ghost appears in a picture or video after the fact, and the kind where a mysterious item kills someone. I don't buy it," Kenta contended.

"But Karin actually passed out from anemia!" Maki objected.

"Calm down, Tokitou. Maaka, have you forgotten? You've been prone to anemic spells long before you put on that ring. You even passed out the day I transferred to this school!" Kenta reminded her.

Karin blushed at the memory.

Maki still wasn't convinced. "Scoff all you want, Kenta, but what if that ring really is drinking Karin's blood?"

"What do you mean, 'what if'?" Kenta countered. Come to think of it, it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. After all, Karin was a blood-increasing vampire, and unless she found someone to inject her blood into, she suffered explosive nosebleeds every month.

Karin seemed to be thinking the same thing. The tragic expression that had been on her face a moment ago had vanished. "So . . . what do you think I should do?"

"The ring's really stuck?" asked Kenta.

"Yeah. Fuku told me a trick to get it off with soap and thread, but it didn't work. It's like it's welded to my finger."

"It really is a cursed ring!" Maki howled.

Kenta scratched his head, making his short hair bristle. There were some eerie coincidences, like Karin's dream and her anemic spells when her wishes came true, but Kenta wasn't as easily drawn in to occult stories as Karin and Maki.

"Well, first of all, we have to get that ring off," Kenta said. "I've heard you can go to the police or a fire station for that sort of thing."

"Fuku said they have metal cutters at fire stations. I was planning to try that if I couldn't get it off tonight. I was going to have my sister come with me—Oh!" Karin glanced up suddenly, her face glowing with inspiration. "My little sister Anju knows a lot about occult stuff. I could show her the ring and see what she thinks!"

Kenta had met Anju. He'd only spoken to her a few times, so he didn't know what she was into, but she was always carrying a spooky doll and wearing a black dress, and her face and voice were always deadpan. Come to think of it, she seemed like exactly the type to be well versed in matters of the occult.

"Why didn't you ask her in the first place?" Kenta wanted to know.

"Well, I was too embarrassed!" Karin mumbled, touching her fingertips together bashfully.

Kenta still didn't grasp what Karin was so embarrassed about, but at least they had a plan now. "All right, why not go back to your place and ask your sister, and if she can't get it off, you can go to the fire department and have them cut it off, okay? Just resting here won't get the ring off."

"Yes, I'll do that . . . Woah!" Karin started to get up, but her legs were still unsteady.

"Yikes! Don't get up too quickly, Karin! You're anemic, after all!" Maki said as she caught Karin and held her up. "Are you okay? I'd better go with you. You're worrying me."

"I'll go with her," Kenta interceded. "If you're still feeling woozy, I can carry you on my back, Karin."

"Whaaaaaat? At s-school? Wh-what if someone saw us?" Karin stammered.

"But I carried you to the infirmary just now, didn't I?" reasoned Kenta.

"I was unconscious! It would be humiliating to have you carry me awake! It's okay . . . I can walk!" Karin insisted, her face and neck turning crimson.

Ultimately, they left with Maki supporting Karin and Kenta carrying both of the girls' bags. None of them noticed that they were being followed.

CHIBI VAMPIRE AND FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

Karin, Maki, and Kenta left Shiihaba High School Number One and cut through a residential neighborhood, emerging onto a main road. It was close to dusk, and the setting sun shone brightly on their faces from the west.

Karin was annoyed with herself for feeling faint. *I didn't realize how much time had passed. There was that whole debacle behind the portable classrooms, and then I had to rest in the infirmary,* she thought.

It would be sundown by the time the trio arrived home. Anju wasn't awakened as a vampire yet, but the sun gave her headaches, so she passed the time holed up in her room on clear days like today, only emerging after dark. Karin's sister was crabby when awakened, perhaps due to low blood pressure, so the timing couldn't have been more perfect.

When I get home, I'll ask Anju of she can remove the ring, Karin said to herself. *I really hope she can.*

Tomorrow was Saturday, so there was no school, but Karin was scheduled to work all day at Julian. She'd intended to prep Anju's meals for tomorrow this evening, so she hadn't made any other plans.

I'm glad I didn't schedule work for tonight—oh, no! Karin glanced back at Kenta, who was carrying all of their book bags. "Kenta, you were supposed to work at Julian tonight, weren't you?" Karin asked. "The schedule said you were taking over for Tachibana at five-thirty!"

Kenta turned his head, frowning. "Well, yeah . . . but I'm sure they'll manage without me for a little while." He didn't seem at all alarmed, so he must have already realized that it was almost time for him to be at work. He would've had to separate from Karin and Maki at the last corner to head toward Julian.

"No, Kenta!" Karin looked down at her watch. It was seventeen minutes past five. If Kenta ran, he would barely make it to Julian in time.

Still supporting Karin, Maki turned toward Kenta and reached out an arm. "Why didn't you say so sooner, Kenta? Give me our bags. I'll take Karin the rest of the way. Let's see, Karin, the school directory says you live in Nishi-ku. So we should cut through the Nature Park, right?"

Kenta remained rooted to the spot, his expression indecisive. "But—"

"Kenta, don't worry," Karin interjected. "I'm used to having anemic spells. If you don't hurry, you'll be late."

"Well, yeah, I know, but . . . Okay, but are you sure you want to have Maki walk you home?"

Kenta was concerned about Maki finding out where Karin lived. In fact, Karin kept her home's location a secret from the human community—everyone but Kenta—using the family's bats to create a barrier so that nobody could come near. Regardless of whether Karin was having an anemic spell, she couldn't let Maki walk her home.

If she sees our house, we'll have to erase her memory again—like in junior high, Karin recalled. Maki didn't remember it, but she'd actually visited Karin's house once. Karin's family had erased Maki's memory, and Maki's dog's memory, too. They'd also hypnotized her to make her less inclined to visit Karin again, and so far, it'd worked. It was as if there was an unconscious barrier in Maki's mind that prevented her from asking to come over to Karin's house. Now, Maki's concern for Karin was overriding that mental barrier.

What if we walk only to the foot of the hill and I tell her I can go the rest of the way by myself? Karin plotted. *Will she go home? No, probably not, under the circumstances. I know, I can call home and have someone come meet me.* If a member of Karin's family came to meet her, Maki would feel satisfied that Karin was fine and go home.

Karin sighed. *I'm so sorry, Maki. I'm always hiding things from you . . . but I live in a house of vampires! I can't let you see that! And it's probably not good for you to get your memory erased too many times.*

Smiling in an attempt to put both Maki and Kenta at ease, Karin proclaimed, "I'm going to call home and ask my dad to come meet me. It's almost dusk, so he'll be able to come out."

"Huh? He'll be able to come out?" Maki said with surprise. "Your dad can't come out during the day, Karin?"

"Oops! That isn't what I meant to say! I meant that it's nearly time for him to be done with work, so he should be able to come meet me." Karin had almost slipped up and revealed that her father had to stay locked up in the house during daylight hours.

Kenta appeared tense, as if he were suffering from a headache. "Are you sure you're okay, Maaka?"

Karin understood Kenta's concern, but she didn't want to take up more of his time. She couldn't bear the thought of him being late to work and having his pay docked because of her.

Luckily, Maki didn't seem fazed by Karin's mistake. "Well, if your dad comes to meet you, I'm sure you'll be fine. Let's cross the street and go to the Nature Park. There are benches there, so you can sit down and make your call. You still look weak, Karin. I think you should rest a bit."

Maki was right. Karin's whole body felt heavy. *That's weird. Usually when I'm anemic, my blood begins to increase bit by bit until I feel better. After all, I've been sticking to Maki like glue,* thought Karin. Her vampire

instincts told her that the typically cheerful and brash Maki was feeling pretty despondent right now. She was probably feeling bad about getting Karin involved in her clash with Nagahata, and about preventing Karin from hearing the whole story about the cursed ring. If Karin had heard how the story ended, she never would've put on the ring. *But it isn't Maki's fault! I wish she didn't feel bad about it.*

Still, there was nothing Karin could say. Maki didn't know Karin was a blood-increasing vampire who was hypersensitive to unhappy people. Maki assumed Karin was human.

Oh, Maki, I'm sorry for lying to you even though you're my best friend! Karin thought woefully.

But why wasn't Karin feeling better when her blood was increasing? Was her anemia so severe that a small blood increase wasn't enough?

While Karin pondered, Kenta and Maki came to an agreement.

"Okay, Maaka. Feel better," Kenta said. "And thanks for taking care of her, Tokitou."

"Leave it to me," Maki replied. "I'll stay with her until her dad comes. And thanks for all that you've done, Kenta."

"Thanks, Kenta. See you tomorrow," Karin added.

Kenta turned and backtracked, heading toward Julian.

Karin and Maki crossed the street and entered the Nature Park. They walked down the path searching for a vacant bench, but each bench they happened upon was occupied by a flirting couple or a sleeping old man.

"Oh, shoot! I forgot to get Kenta's lunchbox from him," Karin remembered suddenly.

"It's okay. Tomorrow's Saturday," Maki reminded her.

"You're right. I'll see him at Julian—I can get it back from him then," Karin agreed.

"I didn't realize Kenta was so forgetful. Didn't he come looking for you behind the school to give you his lunchbox? And then he forgot it again!" Maki pointed out.

"Yeah, but I think I distracted him by passing out and stuff," noted Karin in Kenta's defense.

"Right, good point," said Maki. "Listen, Karin . . . no more wishing on your ring, okay? Kenta thinks the curse is just a story, but I don't think we should completely dismiss the possibility of a curse."

"Yeah, okay," Karin said, nodding as she glanced at the ring on her left finger. To her surprise, she spotted a movement in the round red gemstone.

"Eeek!" Karin shrieked.

"What's wrong, Karin?" asked Maki.

"Just now, it looked like there was an eye in the stone of my ring!"

"What?!" Maki grabbed Karin's left hand and stared intently at stone in the ring. Karin examined it, too, but nothing happened. Maki sighed, shaking her head. "It looks like an ordinary stone right now. I still believe a cursed ring could exist, though. Remember the school cultural festival? Your doppelganger showed up, and a bunch of students fainted. Everyone said it was the curse of the haunted house," Maki intoned earnestly.

Once again, Karin apologized silently. *Sorry, Maki! That commotion at the haunted house wasn't a curse—it was my grandmother.* Karin's grandmother and look-alike had gone around the school collecting blood from the students and creating pandemonium. But Karin couldn't tell Maki that, of course.

"I know you've always been anemic, Karin, but you had a dream exactly like the one in Chika's story, didn't you? It isn't normal to pass out from anemia after having a wish granted!" said Maki.

"Y-yeah. Well, my little sister knows a lot about the occult, so I think it'll be okay once I get home," Karin assured her.

"Are you sure? I've never met your sister, Karin, but isn't she still in grade school?"

Karin sensed that Maki was concerned about leaving the matter in a small child's hands. "My sister's only in fifth grade, but she's super smart," Karin contended. "She knows a ton of stuff, and she's very reserved and level-headed."

"Wow. Does she at least resemble you?" asked Maki.

"Nope. I take after my grandmother on my dad's side, but my sister seems to favor my mother. She's pretty, and she has platinum blonde hair—wait a minute, Maki," Karin said before pausing. "'Does she at least resemble' me? What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Oh, uh, ha-ha-ha!" Maki giggled nervously. "Well . . . you said she was reserved and level-headed, so it sounds as though she doesn't take after her klutzy big sister!"

"Maki! Oops—whoa!" Karin screeched, flailing.

"Karin, you almost fell again! Be careful—and quit waving your arms around, will you?" Maki pleaded. About thirty feet ahead, there was a bench at the fork where their path intersected with another one. "Oh, good, there's an empty one. You can sit down there and make your phone call. Don't worry—I'll stay with you until your dad gets here . . ." Maki said, trailing off mid-sentence.

Someone was walking down the path toward the girls.

Maki and Karin couldn't see the person through the bushes, but they heard the footsteps of whoever it was. In the evening, a lot of people walked through the park on the way home from work or school. Joggers and dog-walkers frequented the paths, too, so Karin and Maki hadn't thought anything of it at first.

Maki's expression went rigid. "Nagahata . . . what are you doing here?"

On the contrary, Nagahata was wearing a cocky smile as if he'd forgotten the events of that afternoon. He stood in the middle of the path, blocking the girls' way. "Hey there, Maki," he called.

"What do you want, Nagahata?" Maki asked brusquely. "You don't live in this area, do you? And I never told you I was going to see Karin home. Did you follow us here?"

He must have. And he'd waited until Kenta was gone to approach them. Perhaps he'd grown tired of waiting to catch Maki alone and had doubled back to approach them from the other direction, ignoring the anemic Karin's unthreatening presence.

"Don't play me like I'm a stalker or something!" Nagahata chided. "I decided to forgive you for what happened earlier and give you another chance. You've got me all wrong, babe."

"Don't call me 'babe,'" Maki replied with a sneer. "I have nothing to say to you. Let's go, Karin." Pulling Karin by the arm, Maki tried to brush past Nagahata.

Blocking Maki's way, Nagahata continued, "Come on, don't be shy. You've never gone out with a guy before, have you, babe? That's why you're so nervous, isn't it?"

"None of your business. Now, leave me alone!" Maki shouted.

Nagahata cackled. "I love how you're pretending to be mad, but your face is bright red! It's totally obvious you're into me!"

Karin began to feel short of breath as she watched the encounter. Her heart raced with fear. After being friends with Maki for ten years, Karin could read her friend's emotions pretty well. Maki's face was crimson with fury, but Nagahata thought she was merely blushing.

"Stop being ridiculous and let us through. Karin isn't feeling well, and I need to get her home so she can rest," pleaded Maki.

"So let her go home alone. She was going to call her dad to come get her, right?" Nagahata said, still oblivious to the fact that Maki was genuinely angry. He glanced at Karin. "Come on, girly, you don't want to horn in on a friend's date, do you? Get lost!" As he spoke, Nagahata reached out a hand to give Karin a little shove backward.

Maki slapped Nagahata's hand away, stepping in front of Karin defensively. "What are you *doing?* I told you, Karin isn't feeling well!"

"Ow!" Nagahata's grin vanished. He clutched his hand, glaring at Maki with open hostility. "Hey, watch it, girl. I'm doing you a favor here by asking you out. Don't spoil it."

Karin clung to Maki's arm, alarmed by Nagahata's threatening tone. The older boy's handsome features

twisted into an ugly mask displaying his annoyance. "I told you I'd let the stuff from this afternoon go. You should be grateful. There are plenty of girls like you out there—don't get the wrong idea. You should apologize now, while I'm still in a good mood. You know you want to be my girl—"

Nagahata never got a chance to finish his sentence. Maki exploded with rage: "DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH!" Maki shouted so loudly Karin had to cover her ears with both hands. "I was trying to keep this from getting ugly since we're in the badminton club together, but I'd rather *die* than go out with you! Go jump in the pond and cool your conceited head, you clueless, stuck-up idiot!" As a general rule, Maki was cheerful, quick to smile, honest, and considerate. But when her temper blew, it wasn't like slow-smoldering coals—it ignited like the pure, hot flame of a gas burner.

Nagahata's face blanched at Maki's unbridled attack before turning a dark red. His brow knit and his shoulders quaked as he struggled to formulate a reply, but he seemed at a loss for words. His mouth opened and closed like a goldfish deprived of oxygen.

Still overcome with anger, Maki grabbed Karin's arm. "Come on, Karin." She brushed pashed Nagahata as if he didn't exist.

Suddenly, Nagahata recovered. "Hold it right there. You really think you can get away with talking to me like that?"

"Ow! What are you doing? Let me go!" Maki gasped.

Maki's words had wounded Nagahata's pride quite a bit. He grabbed Maki's arm, his face livid, and tried to drag her along. Maki attempted to break free, but her strength was no match for the senior boy's.

"Shut up! How dare you speak to me like that. Come here a minute!" Nagahata roared.What if Nagahata hurt Maki? Karin sprang between them and tried to pry Maki away from him. "Stop! Please, calm down! Both of you, be reasonable . . ."

But Karin's earnest attempt to mediate only infuriated Nagahata more. "Shut up! You stay out of this!" he barked, shoving her with his free hand.

"Yikes!" In her already lightheaded state, the forceful push sent Karin flying. She fell butt-first in the grass by the pathway and collapsed flat on her back.

"Karin!?" Maki shrieked.

Oh, no. I have to pull myself together, or else . . . Karin worried. She was afraid Nagahata would take Maki away and do something terrible to her. Frantically, Karin sat up.

"What have you done to Karin?" With a cry of outrage, Maki's dazzling right hook intersected squarely with the side of Nagahata's face.

"*Blerg!*" Nagahata croaked like a frog as he fell.

Without so much as a glance in his direction, Maki rushed to Karin's side. "Karin! Karin, are you all right?"

"Maki . . . did you take boxing lessons?" Karin muttered.

"Of course not!" Apparently, Maki's perfect punch was merely a fluke. "Come on, let's go. Let's ditch this scumbag."

Maki tried to help Karin up, but Karin's head swam, perhaps due to the combination of her already unsteady condition and her dramatic fall. Her legs buckled, and she couldn't quite find her balance.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry, Karin. It's all my fault you got involved in all this." Tears pooled in Maki's eyes.

Suddenly, Karin unwittingly found her gaze drawn to Maki's throat. *Wh-why am I . . . ?* Karin's heart pounded. She could almost hear her blood vessels screaming. She knew the sensation well. It was her blood rush. *But that doesn't make sense! Not after I just passed out from anemia!*

The waves of energy emanating from Maki were overwhelmingly sorrowful. Maki felt terrible for getting Karin mixed up in her conflict with Nagahata, which sent her psyche plunging into a state of distress. At the moment, that distress was stronger than ever.

Maki's unhappiness is causing my blood rush? Karin wondered. *Could it be that my blood's been increasing this whole time—and I thought it was anemia?*

It was unusual that Karin thought she was anemic, considering dizziness and vertigo were symptoms of

her blood rush. Her blood had continued to increase this whole time without her realizing it, and now her veins were almost strained to their limit. She felt a tickle deep in her nose.

But it's only been a few days since I sprayed blood all over Tachibana! Come to think of it, though, Tachibana said she's been alone all this time, with nobody to turn to, ever since she came to this city. Given the lonely life Tachibana had led as a half-vampire, she was probably pretty depressed. And Karin hadn't just been near her—they'd embraced tightly and cried their eyes out.

On top of that, Karin had spent almost the entire day with Maki, who was also steeped in unhappiness. Of course her blood was increasing! "N-no . . . Maki, get away from . . . me . . ." Karin stammered as she strained to push Maki away.

"What is it, Karin? Do you feel sick? Or . . . are you mad at me for getting you involved in this?" Maki's voice trembled. Her aura of unhappiness grew even darker.

"N-no . . ." Karin tried to explain, but the overwhelming pressure in her nostrils made it difficult to talk. On the other hand, she didn't have the energy to push Maki away and flee, either.

What'll I do? What'll I do? Karin panicked. *Oh!* Karin's eyes widened. Nagahata was getting up—he hadn't been knocked out by Maki's punch after all. Not only was his left cheek swollen from the blow, his face was twisted with anger.

Maki turned to follow Karin's gaze, and she, too, let out a gasp. But it was too late. Nagahata grabbed hold of Maki.

"Argh! Let me go!" Maki begged. When she saw Nagahata's expression, even the brave girl with the powerful punch grew fearful.

"Shut up!" Nagahata commanded.

Karin watched the struggle unfold right in front of her, unable to move. *Oh, no . . . more unhappiness!*

Nagahata didn't come off as the type to have ever known unhappiness, but he, too, was radiating blood-increasing sadness. Maybe it was his disappointment about being rejected by Maki, or the pain caused by his bruised ego.

Maki was a tough girl, but she was no match for a twelfth-grade guy who meant business. Nagahata grabbed Maki by both arms and started to drag her away from the path.

"O-owww! Let go, you idiot!" Maki screamed.

"I'll teach you to talk to me like that!" Nagahata shouted. "You're coming with me!"

"H-hey! That's enough! Stop!" pleaded Maki.

"Maki!" Karin gasped, her voice stifled. If she didn't do something, Nagahata would drag Maki off and do who-knows-what to her. "Somebody!" Karin scanned the area, hoping there was someone around who could help. But as bad luck would have it, there was nobody near. A moment later, Karin thought she

might have spotted someone on the other side of the bushes. "Somebody, help! Please, save Maki!"

As Nagahata pulled her against her will, Maki squirmed and jerked in effort to face Karin. "No!" she screamed to her friend. "Karin, no more wishes! The ring . . !" The sun had just set, and Maki's cries resounded through the purple sky.

As Maki struggled, an overwhelmingly intense wave of sadness washed over Karin. Karin's heart swelled, her entire body throbbed like it would explode—and she heard the blood vessels in her nose rupture with a splattering sound. She tried to contain the blood with her hands, but it was impossible. She couldn't even cry out. The blood gushed out of her nose, streaming like a fountain.

"Ugh! What the heck?" Nagahata screeched.

"Karin!"

Karin could hear both Nagahata and Maki's cries as she fell flat on her back, her consciousness dimming.

Amid the chaos, Karin heard a familiar voice.

"Maaka? And Tokitou? Are you there?"

It was Kenta. Sensing the urgency in Maki's screams, he came running toward them at top speed.

"Kenta! Karin—" Maki began.

"Maaka!" Kenta yelled, nearly breathless. Then, his voice turned deep with anger. "You're that senior from this afternoon. Didn't you learn your lesson?"

"Sh-shut up! This is none of your bu—"

Nagahata had begun to say "business," but he stopped short. Kenta must have glared at him. Once, when a shady character had tried to mess with Karin, Kenta had simply stared at him with his narrow eyes and the man had fled in terror.

Nagahata's voice turned fearful. "Wh-what's the big idea? No need to get all worked up. We were only having a little disagreement."

"Get out of here," Kenta growled, interrupting Nagahata's protests. "I don't ever want to see you anywhere near Maaka or Tokitou! If you ever bother them again, you'll be sorry!"

Still on her back, Karin couldn't see Kenta's face. And after gushing blood, she really was anemic now, and her vision was starting to blur. From the sound of Kenta's voice, Karin knew how furious he was—and Kenta was petrifying when he was mad.

Nagahata made a clucking sound and turned on his heels. Karin could hear his footsteps as he ran off.

"Karin! Karin, hang in there!" Maki was saying as she pulled her friend upright and shook her.

"Ugh . . ." Karin muttered, trembling. Her heart fluttered. The waves of energy Maki was emitting were triggering her vampire instincts. *Maki's so unhappy right now* . . . Karin said to herself. The reason was obvious. Maki felt awful for what had happened to Karin because of her.

"I'm so sorry, Karin. Hang in there. I'll call an ambulance right now!" Maki promised.

Gulp! That would be bad—really bad. If Kenta and Maki took Karin to the hospital, everyone would find out she was a vampire. Karin wanted to object, but her lack of blood had left her too weak to speak.

"Oops, that's not the right number! Ack! I have to hurry, or Karin might . . . die!" The sight of Karin hemorrhaging from the nose had sent Maki into a panic.

"W-wait, Tokitou!" Karin heard Kenta cut in.

"Hey, what are you doing? Give my cell back, Kenta!" insisted Maki.

"Um, sorry, but she can't go to the hospital. I mean, she doesn't need to," Kenta clarified. "If we just let her rest—"

"What are you talking about? Look how much blood she's lost! You don't know this, but the same thing happened in junior high, and Karin had to go to the hospital in an ambulance!" Maki cried earnestly.

Karin felt horrible. *I'm sorry, Maki . . .*

Maki didn't know the truth about Karin's constitution. All she knew was that Karin had lost a lot of blood that time, and hadn't come to school for a while afterward. Now she was associating that memory with Karin's loss of blood, so, naturally, she assumed that Karin's condition was serious.

"Karin missed an entire week of school that time!" Maki explained, growing increasingly flustered. "Besides, it might not be a standard nosebleed—it might be the curse of the ring! Karin might—oh, god! No, please! Please, don't let Karin die!"

Warm tears fell on Karin's face as Maki cried.

Little by little, Karin could feel her severe anemia receding as Maki's misery stimulated her vampire instincts.

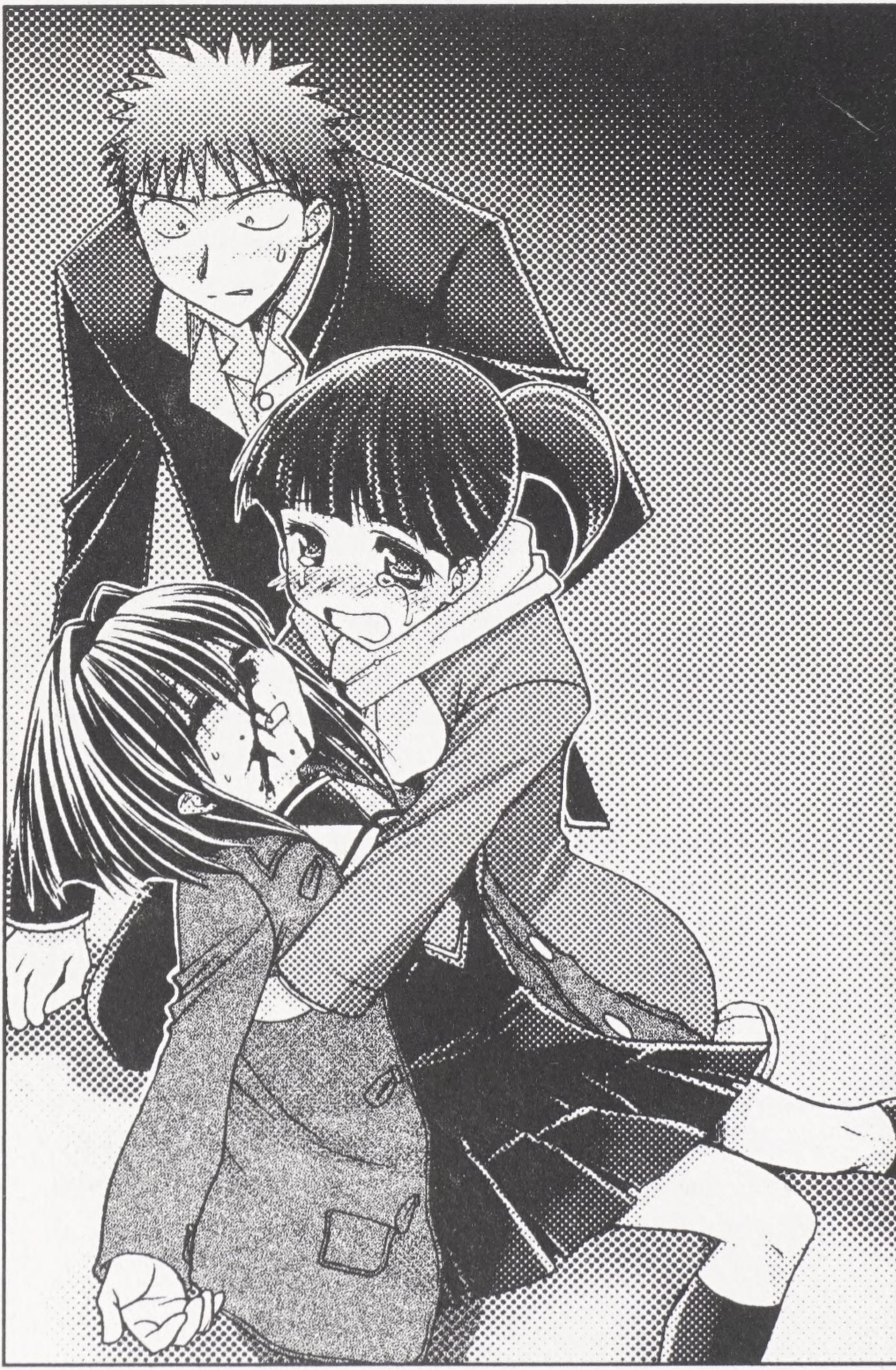
Maki, I didn't realize you worried about me so much, Karin said to herself. She was touched. They'd been best friends for ten years. Once, in junior high, Karin had been afraid that she would have to end their friendship because she was about to awaken as a vampire. At the time, she'd tried to distance herself from Maki, but other than that, they'd never even had a real fight.

Even if Maki found out I'm not human, she wouldn't hate me. Not Maki, Karin thought confidently.

Maki was freaked out by Karin's profuse loss of blood because she didn't know Karin was a vampire—let alone a freakish blood-increasing vampire. If Karin told her the truth and explained that she'd be as good as new as soon as she cleaned herself up a bit, Maki wouldn't have to worry.

"Ma . . . ki . . ." Karin murmered.

Maki gasped. "Karin, you're awake! Are you all right?"



"Um, Maki? Don't be mad . . . There's something I want to tell you. There's something I've been hiding from you . . . for a long time," Karin began.

"Maaka?!" Kenta exclaimed. Judging from the surprise in his eyes, he had a pretty good idea what Karin was about to reveal.

Karin glanced up at Kenta and gave him a small nod. "It's all right, Kenta. Maki's . . . okay."

Kenta shook his head disapprovingly. "But—"

"Maki won't tell anyone my secret. She's my best friend. And besides, I don't want to make her worry anymore."

Maki listened, confused, to their cryptic exchange. She could tell Karin was about to reveal to her a grave secret. She took Karin's hand, looked her in the eyes, and nodded. "I don't know what it is, Karin, but if you don't want people to know, I'll never tell a soul. Don't worry. We promised, right? That we'll always be friends? You're my very closest friend!"

"Thank you, Maki," Karin's replied, her eyes beginning to glisten. Her heart raced in anticipation of disclosing her secret. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves before beginning to speak. "I don't want to shock you, Maki. But the truth is . . ."

Before Karin could finish her sentence, a small, dark shape whizzed through the air like an arrow, right into Maki's face.

Karin gulped. "Maki?"

"What the—" Kenta blurted.

As Karin and Kenta looked on, aghast, Maki shuddered and fell to the ground. The bat detached itself from her face and flew up into the air.

Karin shook. If there was a bat, then that meant . . .

"No, Karin," a voice said softly.

"Anju!" proclaimed Karin.

Karin's younger sister wafted lightly to the ground from a branch above their heads, her black dress rippling in the breeze. Her delicate, expressionless features were reminiscent of an antique doll, and she gazed fixedly at Karin with her garnet eyes. "Karin, you were about to tell Maki Tokitou your true identity. You know no humans can know about us."

Karin sat up and shook her head. "But . . . but . . . Maki's different!"

Boogey, the doll in Anju's arms inhabited by the soul of a serial killer—opened his huge mouth and squawked, "Hey! How 'bout a little gratitude! Anju did that for you, you know!"

Karin knew very well that Anju always had Karin's best interests at heart. But as much as she cherished her little sister, her friendship with Maki was precious to her, too. "I know!" Karin started, "but Maki—"

"Karin, you know why we've kept our existence secret all this time, don't you?" Anju asked as she twisted Boogey's mouth shut.

"But Maki would never tell anyone," Karin protested, her voice trembling.

Maki remained face down on the ground. Karin clasped Maki's shoulder and gently rolled her over, but she showed no sign of waking up. "She's been my best friend all this time! She was so worried about me that she was crying . . ."

"So you didn't want to keep lying to her," Anju finished, gazing into Karin's eyes. To a stranger, Anju's deadpan stare would've seemed cold. But Karin could detect a glimmer of sadness deep in her sister's eyes. Anju frequently monitored Karin with her bats, so Anju was well aware of how close the two friends were.

"But you can't tell her, Karin," Anju reminded her sister. "If you do, Maki Tokitou will have a secret she can never share with her friends and family, or with her future husband."

Karin fell silent. Bewildered, her gaze vacillated between Maki's face and her sister's.

Anju was right. By revealing her secret, Karin would place a tremendous burden on Maki. Right now, Maki knew nothing. If Karin got anemic and fainted, she would simply worry along with the rest of Karin's classmates about her friend's delicate constitution. She had no idea what Karin's parents did, or why she couldn't visit Karin's house.

The moment Maki found out about Karin's secret, she would be responsible for helping to protect it. She

would have to take on the issues Karin dealt with constantly—whether or not her blood increase was due soon, making sure nobody saw her fangs grow, and so forth. Those things would inevitably cause concern for Maki, too. Even if Karin told her not to, she knew Maki well enough to know that Maki would agonize over Karin's problems as if they were her own.

"It's better that she doesn't know. This way, you won't burden her. Don't think of it as lying to her. Think of it as decision made for Maki Tokitou's own protection," said Anju.

Unable to speak, Karin sat on the ground and sobbed, tears streaming down her face.

Anju approached her, placing her small hand on her sister's shoulder. "It's all right. I had my bat erase her memory back to before your nosebleed. And I erased the memory of that older boy who was running away, too. The only person who remembers the last ten minutes is Kenta. As always."

Karin drew her breath in sharply, peering up at Kenta. He was watching silently, unwilling to interrupt the sisters' conversation, but Karin could see how concerned he was. Their eyes met.

The things Anju had said applied to Kenta, too. By revealing her secret to Kenta, Karen had caused Kenta to feel the need to help protect her secret at school and at work.

"Kenta, have I—" Karin began.

"You're not a burden to me. I don't feel that way at all, Maaka!" Kenta interjected.

Karin dropped her head. "Kenta . . ."

"It's different with me than it is with Maki. I was trying to find out about you. You had no choice but to tell me. Besides . . ." Kenta glanced at Anju. He was probably remembering that, in fact, it had been Anju who had revealed Karin's secret to him. But when he saw the bats perched on Anju's shoulders and arms, he simply grimaced and shifted his gaze back toward Karin. "You do so much for me, Maaka. I don't consider it a burden at all. When Iizuka—when my dad came to town, I caused you a ton of worry, remember? We both worry about each other. And I think you actually did my mom and me some good by biting us. I'm grateful to you. So please don't worry, okay?"

Anju regarded Kenta, offering a small nod, as if to convey her approval. But when she faced her sister once more, Anju's countenance grew serious. "I'm sorry you're upset that I erased Maki Tokitou's memory without talking to you first. But I did it for her sake as well as yours. I apologize, Karin."

"No . . . you don't need to apologize, Anju," Karin replied, her tears falling on Maki's head as it rested in her lap. "You're absolutely right. I can't tell Maki. If something were to happen to her because of me, I couldn't do anything to save her. I can't even control bats or erase humans' memories. . . ."

"Well, shoot—you're practically human, aren't you?" an alto voice said, interrupting Karin's monologue.

Karin, Kenta, and Anju all jumped in shock as they spun around to see who it was. A young man—no, a young woman—with blonde hair stood only a few feet from them.

Kenta spoke first. "Haven't I seen you somewhere . . . Oh! At the contest, right?"

His words jogged Karin's memory. It was the woman she'd bumped into after the Hot Couples Contest at the Shiihaba Shopping District.

"Bingo." The woman's ice blue eyes sparkled. "I'm glad you liked my ring, Karin Maaka."

"What? So, you were the one who . . ."

". . . slipped it into your bag, yes," the woman finished. "I even went out of my way to tell your friend that silly, fictitious ghost story. Well . . . did it amuse you?"

"O-of course not!" Karin exclaimed. "Wait—the story wasn't real?"

"Nope. Utter garbage. I just wanted to frighten you a bit. But I'm done now. Shall I remove the ring?" The woman muttered something under her breath, and then without warning, the ring flew off Karin's finger.

"Yipes!" As Karin screamed, the ring skimmed her face, transforming as it flew into a body and wings, like a snippet of darkness with ruby red eyes. It was a

bat. The stone of the ring had been the bat's eye; the setting was its head, body and wings; and the band was its legs. The bat arced through the air and alighted on the blonde woman's shoulder.

"It's a specially trained bat I've had for quite a long time, and it does something of an unusual trick. It can turn into a ring, and when it senses its wearer is experiencing joy, it can provoke sensations of anemia," the woman explained. "Good fortune rarely takes people completely by surprise. Most people harbor a secret hope or two . . . and are more than happy to attribute their good fortune to a lucky ring."

"You're a vampire!" Karin cried out.

"That I am. The name's Noel Ambrose. I was going to take off without saying a thing, but then this cutie showed up, so I thought I'd stop and introduce myself. So, good evening. Nice to meet you," Noel introduced herself flippantly. She regarded Kenta and snickered, "I'd heard the Maakas were pro-human, but revealing one's identity to a human? That surprised me. If the Assembly catches wind of this, they'll be more than surprised—they'll be panicked!"

"You're a spy from the Assembly?" Anju's eyes flashed with anger. She raised a hand, and instantly a cloud of bats surged forth from the branches of trees, under the bench, and from the shadows of the plants. There were so many, it was hard to imagine how they'd remained hidden until now.

The black cloud descended upon Noel, completely enveloping her.

"Anju!" Karin screamed.

The bats vampires wielded were magical creatures, different from the type that live on insects or fruit juice. They were capable of devouring a large animal if ordered to do so by their masters.

Anju watched the cloud of bats, her gaze cold. "It's a major breach of the rules to trespass on another vampire's territory. We have the right to destroy her, and she knows it."

"D-destroy?!" Karin repeated, quivering.

"In theory. I don't intend to actually do it," Anju clarified. "But I want to know why she came to this town. I'm just going to sap her powers of resistance and tie her up."

"Whoa, Anju! You're really pissed off, aren't you? Talk about—" Boogie the doll began to chime in, but when Anju glowered at him, he clamped his mouth shut. He seemed to sense that she was in no mood to be mocked. Boogie slumped listlessly in Anju's arms like a rag doll.

"And don't tell us you were here only to sightsee. You trapped my sister!" Deep rage resonated in Anju's voice. Karin, too, held her tongue, and Kenta gazed at the cloud of bats with astonishment. "I'm having my bats contact mom and dad. They'll be here soon."

"Oh, I'm afraid I can't have that." The relaxed, playful reply came not from Karin or Kenta, but from within the swarm of bats. Suddenly, as if a grenade had exploded, the bats went flying in all directions. Completely unscathed, Noel chuckled and shrugged, glancing at Anju. "For such a pretty little thing, you're awfully feisty, aren't you? I don't see your fangs, either. You're still a child, aren't you? Very few vampires can control bats like that before awakening. But if I let a child defeat me at the ripe old age of three hundred, I'd be a real laughingstock, wouldn't I?"

"Three hundred?" Karin echoed in amazement. Then, suddenly, she remembered. "Don't tell me you're Noel the Outlaw, the vampire Tachibana warned me about!" Karin exclaimed without thinking.

"Well, well!" Noel exclaimed. "So there are vampires of the younger generation who know about me? I thought the Assembly had made me a taboo subject. Well, what have you heard?" she asked.

"Um, I don't really know much, except that . . . you don't attend the Assemblies or obey the agreed-upon vampire rules, that you do whatever you want, are totally unpredictable and self-centered, and . . . oops!" Without thinking, Karin found herself reciting everything she remembered Yuriya telling her. Then she suddenly realized what she was doing and clasped both hands over her mouth. Given the way Noel had repelled Anju's bats, the part about her being a terribly

powerful vampire was clearly true. Who knew what she might do if provoked?

Noel let out a peal of laughter, as if delighted. "That sounds more or less on the mark. But who's this 'Tachibana' you mentioned?

"Um, she's—"

"Karin, that's enough. There's no need to provide a spy with more information," Anju cut in.

Visibly offended, Noel shrugged. "Ah, yes, you called me a spy of the Assembly, didn't you? Didn't you hear what your sister said? I have nothing to do with the Assembly. I despise being part of a big herd."

"Then why did you come here?" Blocking Karin defensively with her small body, Anju glared menacingly at Noel, her garnet eyes flashing. But Noel seemed completely unfazed. At the age of three hundred, Karin and Anju were mere children to her—babies, in fact.

"Because I was fascinated—utterly fascinated. When I saw a girl with Elda's face walking around in the daylight, I thought she was a Day Walker, the most powerful of all vampires," said Noel.

"A Day Walker?" Karin repeated the unfamiliar term.

"A vampire who's immune to sunlight," Anju explained crisply.

Noel grinned. "That's right. Aren't you clever! But it seems I was mistaken. She can't control bats or erase

memories, and she spurts blood! I mean, what the heck? I've never heard of a vampire with excess blood. Now that's weird. Bizarre, in fact."

Karin felt her body grow hot. Boogie and her older brother had often mocked Karin, calling her a mutant and a freak, but they seemed to have tired of taunting her recently. Anju had always defended her, and now she had Kenta on her side. She'd even met Yuriya Tachibana, a half-vampire. Still, Noel's words stung. Karin was a blood-increasing vampire, and that meant she was defective. Karin's head drooped.

"Weird and bizarre?" Kenta's voice trembled with indignation. "You can't go around messing up people's lives out of curiosity! Did you ever think about how Maaka would feel?"

"Whoa, now! Are you really angry? You'll get wrinkles, not to mention high blood pressure. Shouldn't you be careful? You're life span's only a hundred years, human!" Noel taunted.

"Who asked you?" Kenta shot back

"Ah-ha-ha! Not afraid of me, eh? But watch your step, boy," Noel warned. "I dislike men who don't realize when they're dangerously outmatched." Noel's blue eyes flashed with a menacing gleam, and Kenta inhaled sharply, taking a step backward. It was an automatic reaction, born of the natural terror humans feel toward vampires.

Karin screamed. She was still sitting on the ground, unable to get up because of Maki's head in her lap. "Don't you dare do anything to Kenta!"

"Well, isn't this something—two lovebirds leaping to each other's defense! It's a love that transcends the boundaries of the species, is it? Should I stay tuned for the next breathtaking episode?" Noel teased.

Anju shot the woman a frosty glare. "So you trespassed on another vampire clan's territory simply out of curiosity?" she challenged.

"Yes. To me, you were a bit of a diversion. To me, I repeat. Do you understand what I mean?" Noel asked, raising her brow.

Anju's eyebrows twitched ever so slightly. "You're implying that someone else might not be as entertained by Karin's idiosyncrasies?"

"Correct. I like smart little girls," Noel affirmed. "Anju, was it? In French your name would be Ange, which means angel. A bat-wielding angel in a black dress—I like that. How old are you?"

Karin cringed at the way Noel was smiling at her sister, suddenly remembering what Yuriya had disclosed about Noel's sexual orientation. She couldn't stand up with Maki's head in her lap, but luckily, Anju was right next to her. She put her arms around Anju and drew her close, as if to protect her from Noel's gaze. "Don't look at my sister that way!" Karin shouted. "Anju's still in grade school!"

"Yes, I thought she looked a bit too young. Well, in three or four years, after you're awakened, how about a date, sweetie?" Noel smirked.

From within Karin's embrace, Anju replied smugly, "I hate anyone who's against my sister."

Noel whistled. "Well, well . . . already a skilled negotiator at your tender age. I haven't yet decided whether I'm for her or against her, have I? It all depends on your attitude, I suppose."

"I don't trust you. You tricked Karin with that strange ring of yours!" Anju spat.

"True enough," Noel chuckled as she bounded into the air, landing on a tree branch.

"Running away?" Anju sneered.

"You said earlier you'd called your parents, didn't you? If I hang around too long, Henry or Calera will show up. I don't like the idea of being outnumbered, so I'll be going now. And to make up for the ring business, I'll leave you with a bit of information." Noel grinned, leaping off into another tree farther away. "A vampire who attended the Assembly told me there might be something interesting going on with you Maakas. In other words, the Assembly already has you on their radar, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of them were thinking of doing a little investigating on their own. For all we know, perhaps they already are. You should be on your guard."

Karin gasped. Just as Noel had pointed out, if there was something unusual about the Maaka family, it was Karin. "Th-the Assembly has us on their radar? But why would they investigate us?" Karin murmured, confused.

"Don't ask me. In any case, you should probably keep it under wraps that you've got a mutant vampire who spews blood among you. I think I remember hearing something similar, long ago—something about an un-vampire-like vampire . . . and it wasn't a good story. Then again, I'm not sure. Perhaps I'm mistaken."

"An 'un-vampire-like' vampire?" Karin repeated.

"In any case, I think you should be extremely careful. And I'll do a bit of poking around on my own in the relevant areas. I need something to do, anyway. See you later." With a farewell that implied they hadn't seen the last of her—hardly welcome news to Karin—Noel gave a little wave before vanishing into the night sky.

Karin, Anju, Kenta, and even Boogie the doll remained silent for several seconds. But when the fallen Maki moaned softly in Karin's lap, they were jolted back into the moment.

"Oooh . . ." Maki groaned.

"Oh, Maki! Are you all right?" Karin let go of Anju and leaned over Maki. "Hang in there, Maki. I'm so sorry!"

"My being here will only confuse things, so I'll go for now," said Anju, finally free of Karin's tight embrace. "Don't worry, she won't remember your nosebleed. Give me that scarf, please."

Quickly tugging Karin's scarf loose, Anju leaped into the trees before anyone could intervene. As she bounded from branch to branch, the sound of rustling leaves quickly receded into the distance.

Kenta looked around, bewildered. "She even cleaned up the blood," he marveled.

Karin noticed that the blood that had spattered all over the ground and nearby plants had vanished. Anju had ordered her bats to lick it up, to the point where it was hardly noticeable. This wasn't the first time Anju had used that trick to cover for one of Karin's nosebleeds.

There were some small droplets of blood on Karin's coat, but her scarf had absorbed the brunt of the flow. With it gone, the blood was hardly obvious given the dusky light and the fact that Karin's clothes were already dirty from falling down.

"Oooh . . . Ka . . . rin . . ?" Maki murmured, opening her eyes slightly.

Karin turned her full attention to her best friend. "Maki, are you okay?"

"Huh? Karin, what happened . . . Oh!" Maki sprang up like a jack-in-the-box as she suddenly remembered the situation. She grabbed Karin by the coat and began to bombard her with questions.

"Karin, you aren't hurt, are you? Where's Nagahata, that clueless, narcissistic idiot? He pushed you, didn't he? Are you all right?" Maki had clearly abandoned any shred of civility she'd tried to sustain toward Nagahata as a badminton teammate.

Karin waved her hands, trying to stave off Maki's unrelenting stream of questions. "Slow down. I'm okay. Kenta showed up and chased Nagahata away."

"I realized I'd forgotten to give my lunchbox back to Maaka," Kenta explained. "I figured I could catch up if I ran, so I came back. Nagahata ran off. I told him he'd regret it if he ever messed with you or Maaka again. He seemed pretty freaked out, so I don't think he'll be bothering you in the future."

"Really? I wonder why I don't remember," Maki muttered.

"Oh, uh . . . well, Nagahata shoved you and you fell. I think you might have hit your head. Are you okay?" Kenta improvised.

Maki seemed to buy Kenta's twist to the story. She pressed her hand against her forehead. "Come to think of it, I think I do feel a bit dizzy . . . but it doesn't hurt, so I don't think it's a big deal. Maybe I just passed out for a moment? Anyway, thanks, Kenta."

With that, Maki turned from Kenta to Karin and let out a gasp. She was staring at Karin's left hand. "The ring! What happened to the ring?"

"Oh . . ." Karin faltered. The ring had actually been a vampire's bat, and Noel had retrieved it while Maki was unconscious. To top it off, Noel had fabricated the whole ghost story in the first place. *Chika was the one who told us that story. She didn't have fang marks in her neck, so I don't think Noel drank her blood,* Karin thought. Still, Noel must have hypnotized her into passing on her spooky story—but Karin couldn't tell Maki that. She couldn't tell Maki about Noel the Vampire without revealing her own identity, as well.

"The ring . . . um, when I fell down, it hit a rock and broke," said Karin, biting her lip.

"R-really?" Maki asked.

"Yeah. See? It's gone." Even Karin thought it was a pretty far-fetched story, but she showed Maki her naked ring finger as proof, holding it up high in front of Maki's face.

"O-oh, that's good . . . what a relief, Karin! Then everything's solved—the ring, and that business with that thick-headed, violent Nagahata jerk!" Maki exclaimed, gazing at Karin. Her eyes glistened, then began streaming tears. "I'm so sorry, Karin! It was all my fault!"

"What are you talking about? That isn't true!" insisted Karin.

"But—"

"It wasn't your fault, Maki," said Karin. "Really! If you want to put it in those terms, you've come to my

rescue countless times, and gone to all sorts of trouble for me. And you've never acted like I owed you!"

"Well, of course! Besides, you're always helping me out, Karin."

"And you're always helping *me* out. We're even, Maki!"

As they continued to weigh their generous natures, Karin grasped Maki's hands tightly in her own. Karin and Kenta had had a misunderstanding over winter break, and Karin had cried her eyes out, afraid she would never see Kenta again. But Maki had been there to comfort her. When Karin had asked that they always remain friends, Maki had promised that they would.

"Maki, you're my best friend!" Karin cried.

All of a sudden . . .

Oh! Maki's unhappiness! Karin proclaimed silently. The rays of sadness that had been emanating from Maki suddenly disappeared. With both the Nagahata issue and the ring issue solved, Maki was finally freed of the remorse she felt for having caused Karin strife.

"Karin!" Sobbing, Maki threw her arms around Karin, and Karin returned the embrace.

"Makiii!"

As the two girls squeezed each other tightly, Kenta turned the other way, scratching his cheek uncomfortably. The girls failed to notice his embarrassment. Wailing loudly, they clung passionately to each other.

"You two are okay now?" Kenta asked.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure Karin gets home safely," Maki replied. "You need to get to work, don't you, Kenta?"

"Well, it *is* Friday night. The restaurant might get crowded. I should probably hurry." At the girls' urging, Kenta raced toward the park's exit, glancing worriedly back at the girls periodically as he ran.

Karin leaned on Maki's shoulder as they headed for the opposite exit. She was still too wobbly to walk on her own. Maki didn't realize it, of course, since Anju had erased her memory, but unlike earlier when Karin had mistaken her blood rush for anemia, now Karin was actually anemic.

"Are you feeling okay, Karin? You work tomorrow, don't you? You should eat a good dinner and go to bed early tonight," urged Maki.

"Yeah. Thanks, Maki," Karin answered.

"It must be rough being anemic. Shouldn't you take iron supplements or something?" Maki inquired.

"Yeah, I will, when I can afford them . . . Oh!" Karin exclaimed suddenly. Anju was walking toward the girls from up ahead, and Karin's father, Henry, was also with Anju. Henry was dressed in normal attire, with his cape folded over his arm. He was a striking figure with fierce-looking eyes, thick eyebrows, a moustache and goatee, and a towering physique that belied his gentle, tender personality. When he wore his

cape, there was no mistaking him for anything but a vampire. He'd probably chosen to carry it in order to avoid arousing Maki's suspicions.

Anju spoke first. "I got your text, Sis. You had an anemic spell and passed out at school? Are you okay? I asked Daddy to come with me to meet you."

The young vampire knew exactly what had gone down in the park, but she put on an act for Maki's sake. Anju's face was the picture of innocence as she rattled off her false explanation. Henry got in on the act, too.

"Are you a friend of Karin's? Good evening. I'm Karin's father. Thank you for being so good to her," said Henry.

"Oh, good evening! Pleased to meet you. My name is Maki Tokitou."

Maki had met Anju and Karin's father in junior high when she'd visited Karin's house, but Maki didn't realize it since they'd erased her memory. Her eyes displayed nothing but the normal curiosity and vague goodwill of a girl meeting her best friend's family for the first time, mixed with the nervousness of wanting to make a good impression.

Maki whispered to Karin, "You already texted them, huh? While I was passed out, I guess? In any case, I'm glad your father's here, Karin."

As Maki passed the shaky Karin into Henry's care, she explained, "Karin collapsed at school from her anemia today. And not only that, an older boy pushed

her down, too . . .” Maki hesitated, trailing off, but then she added, “Karin got involved in a conflict that should’ve been between him and me. I’m really sorry.”

“No, it wasn’t Maki’s fault!” Karin jumped in quickly, but Maki smiled and shook her head slightly. Then, she turned to Henry and bowed in apology. “Kenta drove him away, so I don’t think he’ll bother Karin again . . . but I’m terribly sorry about what happened.”

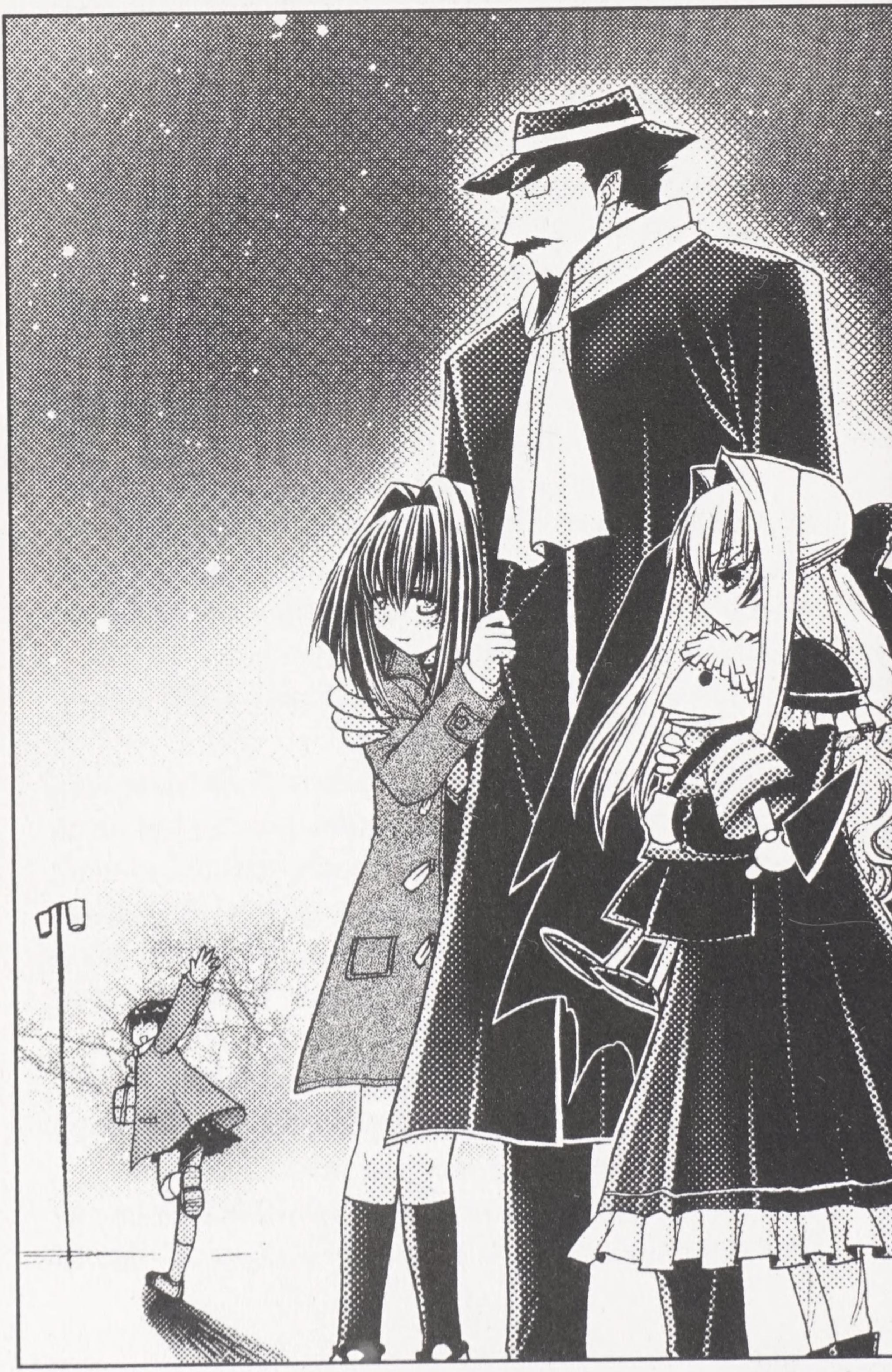
With one arm holding up his daughter, Henry stroked his goatee with his free hand as he listened to Maki. When she was finished, he said, “I haven’t heard what my daughter has to say about the incident, so it’s difficult for me to judge, but—”

“Dad, I told you, it wasn’t Maki’s fault!” Karin interjected.

“Hold on, Karin,” Henry silenced his daughter, peering down at Maki as he continued. “I’ve been hearing about you from Karin for a long time, so that’s all I need to know. I’m extremely grateful to you for always being such a good friend to her. Nothing could make a father happier. I hope you’ll continue to be good friends.”

“Y-yes, sir!” Henry’s words seemed to clear Maki’s conscience. She grinned from ear to ear as she nodded in agreement.

Relieved that Karin’s father was taking care of her, Maki headed home.



"What a wonderful friend, Karin," Henry said warmly.

"Yes," Karin agreed.

In Anju's arms, Boogie the doll laughed derisively. "Sure makes it easier when your daughter's friend's a girl, don't it? You were like a raging bull when Kenta Usui started hanging around her! But guess what, old man? You can't be too sure these days, even with the girls!"

"Wh-what's *that* supposed to mean?" Henry bellowed. "Don't tell me that girl . . ."

Anju glanced at her agitated father and sighed. "Hush, Boogie," she said, twisting the doll's mouth so hard it scrunched up his whole face. She looked up at her father and said, "Don't worry about Maki Tokitou, Daddy. She's just Karin's best friend."

"I-is that so?" he asked.

"Noel was a lesbian, but she wasn't interested in Karin, so you don't have to worry about her, either," Anju said smoothly, omitting the fact that Noel had hit on Anju. "But we'll have to increase our bat security. I'm shocked that another vampire came into our territory and messed with Karin without our noticing. From the sound of it, I don't think Noel will be coming back soon, but . . . if we aren't careful, there's no telling what could happen."

"You're right. I'll speak to your mother about it. I'll talk to Ren, too, when he comes home. Come to

think of it, he hasn't been back for about a week. I wonder where he's sowing his oats now . . ."

"One of my bats saw him the other night," Anju replied. "He was out shopping with a girl. She bought him some new clothes and they went into a hotel together."

"Why, that little . . . Where did we go wrong with that boy?" Henry grimaced. It was hard for a parent to know how to react to his son behaving more or less like a pimp. "Well, Ren's an adult. Unless he does something completely immoral, it's best not to interfere. Now, let's go home. Hmm . . . it's tough to get my cape on while I'm holding Karin up. Do I just put it on over her head . . . or do I pick her up and then put it on?"

"Hey, Daddy?" Karin began as her father spread his cape.

"Yes? What is it?" he asked.

"Noel said she was more than three hundred years old."

"That's what I hear. I haven't met her myself, Karin, but I heard about her long ago."

"She said she'd never heard of a blood-increasing vampire, but that she had heard of an un-vampire-like vampire . . . and she said we shouldn't let anyone find out about me. She said it wasn't a pleasant story." Karin's voice grew morose. She hung her head, muttering, "I wonder what's wrong with me, anyway . . ."

If Karin had been a half-vampire, half-human like Yuriya Tachibana, it would explain her un-vampire-like qualities, like being okay in the daylight and being unable to control bats. But both of Karin's parents were full-blooded vampires. Why was she such a freak?

"Karin . . . you . . ." Her father's voice sounded troubled.

He had good reason to be disturbed. When Karin had first awakened, her parents had been baffled by the fact that she produced excess blood, and they'd been so upset they'd had terrible fights. Even now, they had no idea why she was different.

I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble, Karin wanted to say. But just then, Anju cut in.

"You're just you, Karin," Anju said plainly.

Karin turned quickly in astonishment. At first glance, Anju's face was as stern as ever, but Karin spied a faint glimmer of kindness deep in Anju's pupils.

"Whether you're vampire-like or not, you're the only sister I've got . . . and nothing can ever change that," declared Anju.

"She's right." Henry's large hand clamped Karin's shoulder. Compared to a human, vampires were cold-blooded. Still, for some reason, her father's hand felt warm to Karin. "I don't know why your blood increases either, Karin. I'm sorry. But as Anju says, whether you're vampire-like or not, it doesn't change the fact that you're my precious daughter."

"Daddy . . ." said Karin sweetly.

"Now, let's go home. Your mother's probably worried." Donning his bat cape, Karin's father swept Karin up in his arms and sprang into the air. His cape swelled with wind as his body shot upward, soaring off through the rose-hued sky.

Karin craned her neck, peering over her father's shoulder. Anju didn't have a bat cape, so she couldn't fly like her father. Instead, she took advantage of her vampiric agility to travel in huge bounds, traversing tree branches, streetlights, and rooftops, with Boogie in her arms the entire time.

As she turned back around, Karin whispered softly, "Thank you, Daddy . . . and Anju, too."

Housing was sparse between the Nature Park and Karin's home in Akamagaoka, so there weren't many lights below. But that only made the few lights they did fly over appear all the more warm and beautiful.

EPILOGUE

Usually when Karin had a nosebleed, it was followed by such severe anemia that she couldn't get up for a full day afterward. But this time, her embrace with the unhappy Maki seemed to have increased her blood. After returning home and heating up some leftover stew to eat with Anju, Karin was already able to move about without support.

When she checked her cell phone, she had a text. It was from Maki.

"Is your anemia better? If you're still too weak, do you want me to fill in for you at work tomorrow? I've never waitressed before, but I think I could manage if someone showed me the ropes. It sounds like Nagahata won't bother us again. Before, he was constantly pestering me with texts, but he's completely stopped now—thanks to Kenta! Sorry again for getting you mixed up in all that. When exams are over, let's go somewhere fun together, okay? Promise!"

As Karin read Maki's text, she felt her face split into a grin. *Thank you, Maki!*

She was reading Maki's text over and over when her phone rang, and the name "Kenta Usui" popped

up on the screen. Quickly, Karin pressed the receive button, answering the call. "Hello?"

"Maaka? How's your anemia? Did your sister come back for you right away?" Kenta must have called her the minute he got home from work.

"She arrived right after you left . . . and my dad came, too, so Maki went home knowing I was okay," said Karin.

"That's good—she didn't find out where you live, then. I was worried that I should've called in sick and taken you home myself," Kenta replied.

"Don't worry. I was fine. And I feel much better already. Maki was worried and texted me, offering to sub for me tomorrow, but I'm okay already. I'll be at Julian tomorrow."

"Is that so? Well, good. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Yep! See you at Julian. Goodnight!"

After hanging up, Karin was typing a text to Maki when she realized she was still smiling. In junior high, when Maki had searched out Karin's house, she'd told Karin that she didn't care what kind of family Karin came from. No matter what, she would always be Karin's friend. And on Valentine's Day, during their date, Kenta had insisted that it didn't matter that they weren't the same species—Karin was the only girl for him.

And it wasn't only Maki and Kenta. In addition to Anju and Karin's father coming to her rescue, Karin's mother had been watching everything that happened

at the park with her bats. "Learn the difference between anemia and your blood rush, dummy!" she'd scolded when Karin got home, but afterward, she immediately clammed up and embraced Karin tightly.

The absent Ren was always hard on her, but Karin sometimes sensed that there was something else behind his harsh words. It was as if he were trying to prevent Karin from being deeply hurt in the future by the barrier between vampires and humans by convincing her not to get too attached now. The same went for Karin's grandmother, Elda. Karin could sense her grandmother's affection even through her teasing.

I'm not a human, and I'm not a normal vampire. I'm a blood-increasing vampire. But even so . . . Karin's thought trailed off.

Everyone was so good to her.

Noel had warned about the Assembly's possible intentions. She'd mentioned an unpleasant story she'd heard long ago about a blood-increasing vampire. At first, the news had terrified Karin, but now she felt much calmer. *I'm not alone, after all.* The notion made Karin feel elated. She was so lucky.

Karin hit the send button, set down her phone, and stretched. She would go to bed early tonight, so that she would have plenty of energy for work tomorrow.

All that texting and talking on the phone made me thirsty, Karin said to herself. She decided to go into

the kitchen and grab a glass of water before going to bed. As she walked to the door and pulled it open, her father tumbled into the room, carrying Boogie in one hand.

"Oh, uh . . . I heard Kenta Usui's name, and I was just worried that he might be calling about something . . . well . . ." her father mumbled.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh!" Boogie cackled. "Like pretending to call about work and asking Karin out on a date instead? You know, with today's high-school girls, that's the least of your worries, pops!"

After Anju had silenced him at the park by twisting his neck, Boogie was getting his revenge by messing with Karin's dad, filling his head with all kinds of paranoid ideas. Henry had taken the bait, stopping at Karin's door once again to listen in.

Naturally, Karin's father would've heard everything Karin said, and perhaps he'd even overheard Kenta's voice on the other end. The thought made Karin's whole head from the neck up burn.

"Daddy, you creep! How could you eavesdrop on your own daughter? We've already talked about this!" Karin griped.

Cowering, her father said, "I-I'm sorry, Karin! But I—"

"Get out. Get out, now! You, too, Boogie!" Karin shoved her father and Boogie out the door and pushed it shut, plunged into bead, and burrowed under the quilt.

EPILOGUE

"Forgive me, Karin. I didn't mean anything by it! Try to understand . . . Don't hate me, Karin!" her father pleaded desperately.

All of a sudden, Karin heard the sound of Anju's platform shoes, and her sister's voice admonishing her father. Karin giggled under the covers. *I don't hate you, Daddy. But I don't want you listening in on my phone calls, so I'd better pretend to be angry a bit longer!*

She would be her usual self with him tomorrow. That was the longest Karin could manage to give her father the cold shoulder. She might be angry, but she could never hate him.

I love you all. She cherished her father, mother, sister, brother, and grandmother—and Maki and Kenta, too.

"Good night," Karin whispered as she drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Chibi Vampire: The Novel, Volume 7.*

Because of your support, this is now the seventh volume of the *Chibi Vampire Novel* series, based on the wildly popular manga series *Chibi Vampire,* serialized in *Dragon Edge.* It's actually the ninth book, if you count the *Diary of Embarrassment* volumes.

In the time period between Volume Six and Volume Seven of the novels, a groundbreaking development occurs in the manga series. With a little help from Maki, Karin and Kenta go out on their first date, Kenta confesses his love to Karin, and their longstanding friendship finally develops into a romance. But the fact that they're different species remains an undeniable hurdle. And Yuriya Tachibana, a half-vampire, half-human, shows up on the scene to investigate the secrets of the Maaka family. What's to become of Karin and Kenta's love?

In Volume Seven of the novel, in which Karin and Kenta's relationship is finally getting somewhere, it's Maki's turn to deal with romantic issues. And Noel, a vampire character unique to the novel, comes snooping

around in an attempt to get to the bottom of the Maaka family's secret—namely Karin. I plan to have Noel show up again in the future, so I hope you all liked her.

So, a little about my life . . .

My editor always tells me to write about myself in the Afterword. The trouble is, I spend all of my time at work or at home, and when I'm at home, all I do is sit in front of my computer. So what am I supposed to write about?

Hmmm . . . I seem to keep writing about my pet cat, so this time I'd like to talk about my parents' pet dog, Gon.

During the summer, we call him Katherine Gon—not because he has any French blood—but because he's good at catching mosquitoes. *Ka-tori-inu* means "mosquito-catching dog" in Japanese, thus the nickname Katherine. Super cheesy, I know.

When middle-aged strangers pass by the house, Gon barks his head off, but when teenage girls walk by, he doesn't make a peep. He just ogles them until they disappear into the distance with a blissful expression on his face.

Also, when my parents take him to the vet, he puts up a huge fight when they try to drag him into the exam room. But if a nurse (a young female nurse, specifically) calls out to him sweetly, he scampers right in.

Gon gives me an enthusiastic welcome whenever I visit. This has nothing to do with age. He simply recognizes me as someone who gives him treats and plays with him. He runs toward me with so much speed that if I don't watch out, he'll knock me flat. He's equally energetic in the winter and the summer. He loves treats. My cat turns up her nose at dairy products and most cat foods, so when I see Gon gobble down whatever he's offered, he seems like a model pet.

Now, if we could only get him to stop humping our legs . . . What will the neighbors think, Gon? And if he would quit dribbling pee from being overjoyed when we pick him up . . .

As always, I'd like to finish with some words of thanks.

I'm truly grateful to Yuna Kagesaki, who does the illustrations for the novels and also authors the original manga. I'm also grateful to Y-san, my editor, to Fujimi Mystery Bunko, all of the editors at *Dragon Edge,* and everyone else whose hard work made the publication and sale of this book possible.

And to everyone who read the book, you have my sincerest gratitude.

—Tohru Kai

http://www.occn.zaq.ne.jp/kai-tohru/

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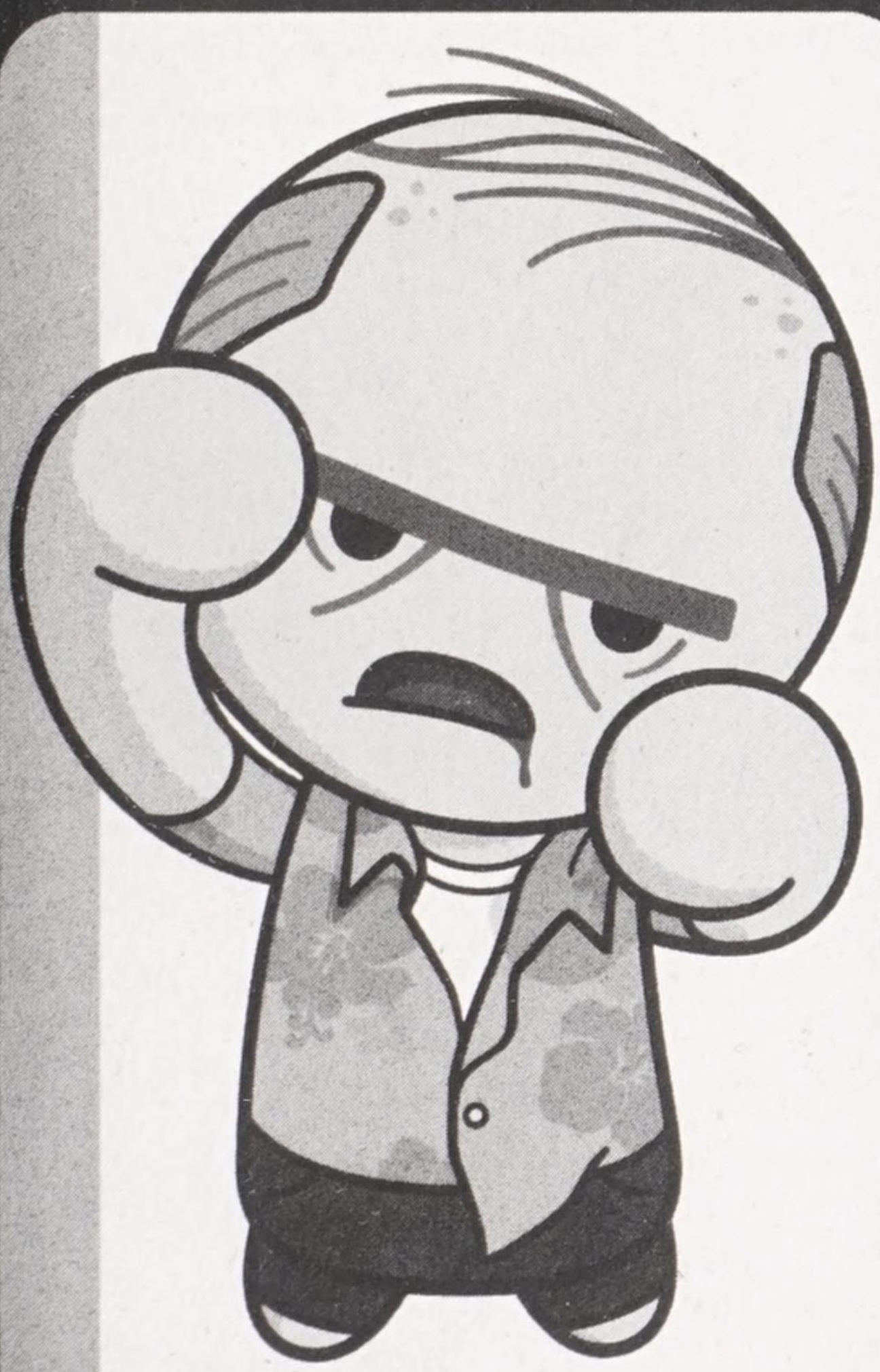

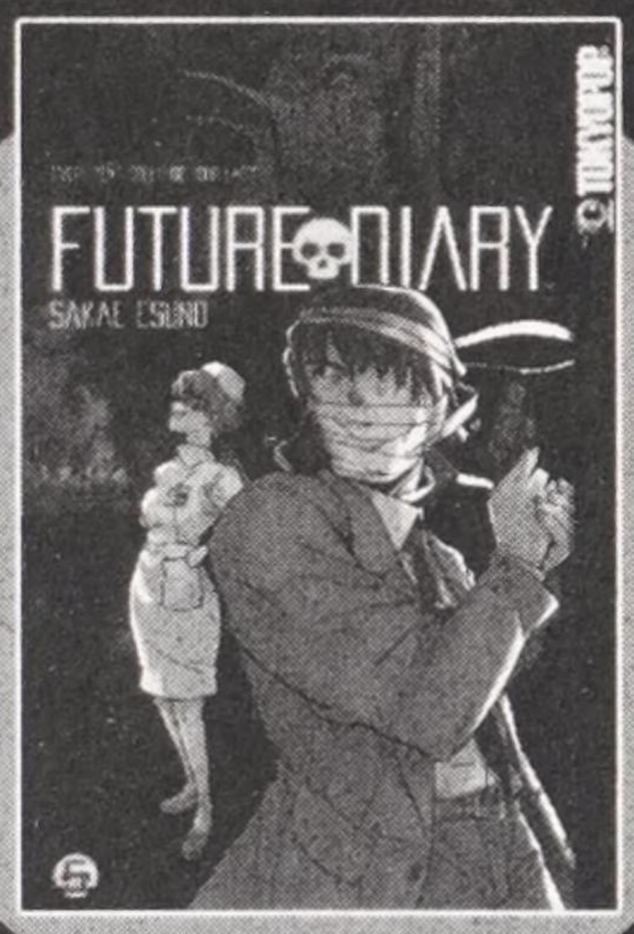

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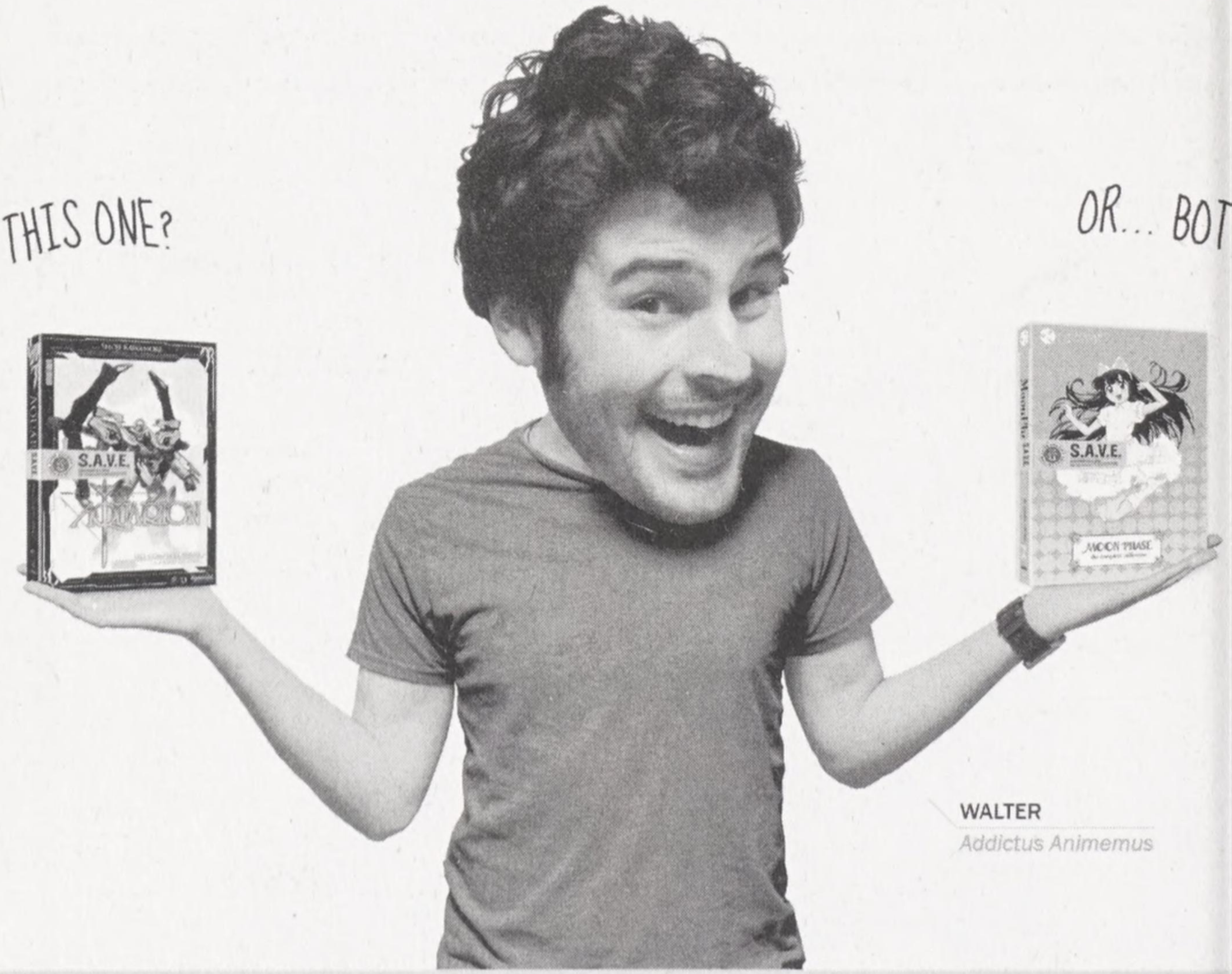
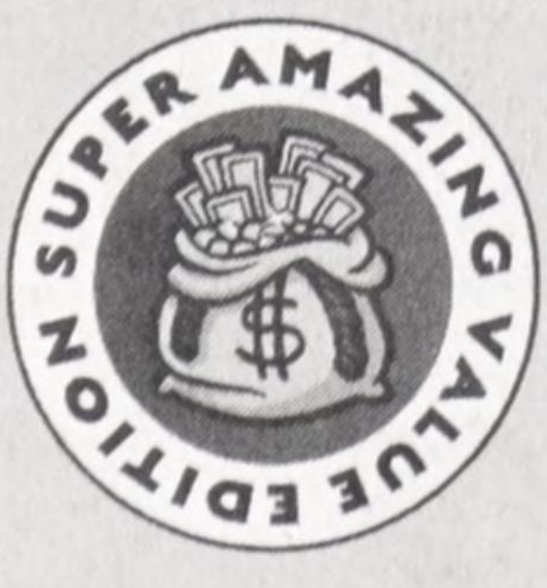


WALTER
Addictus Animemus



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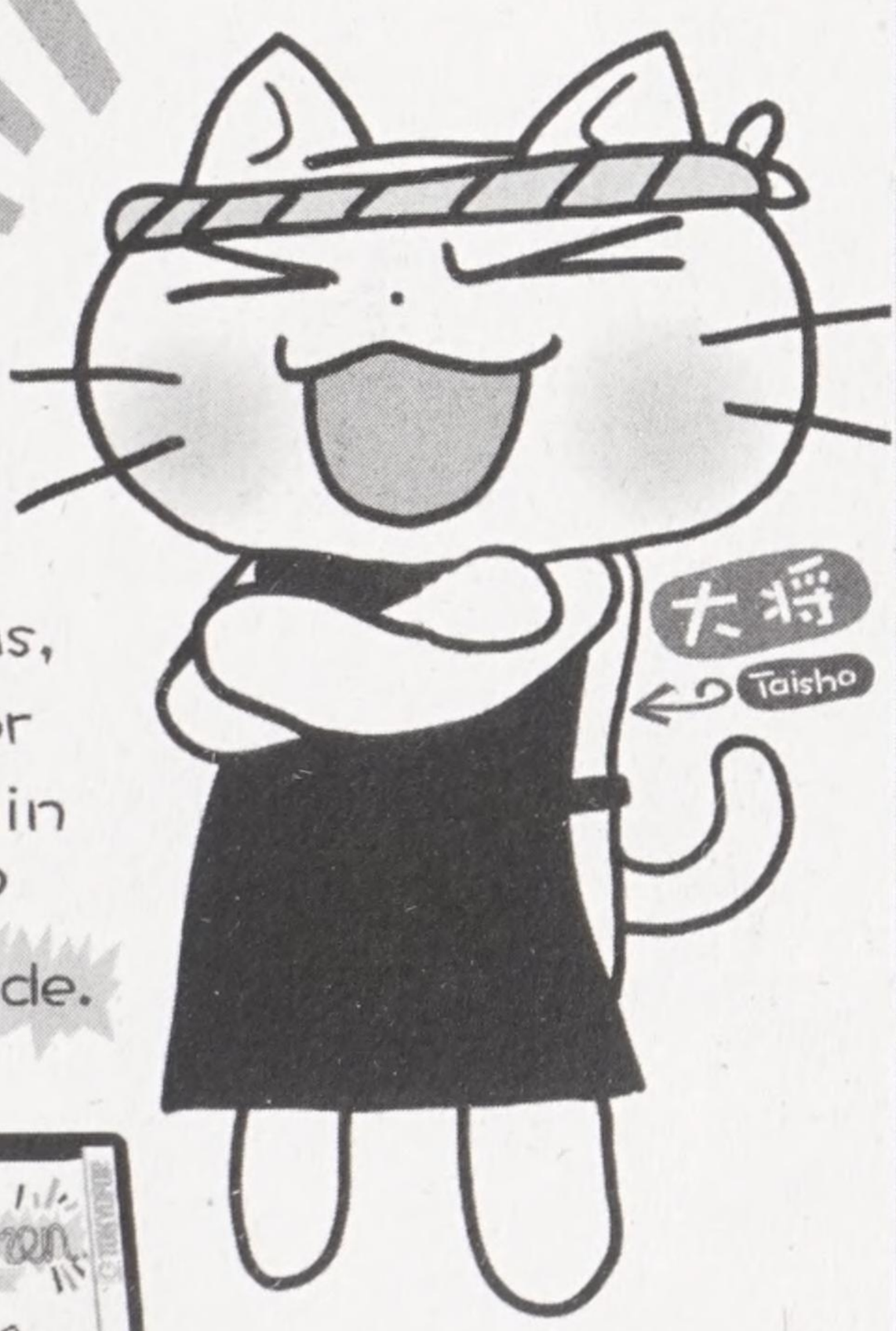
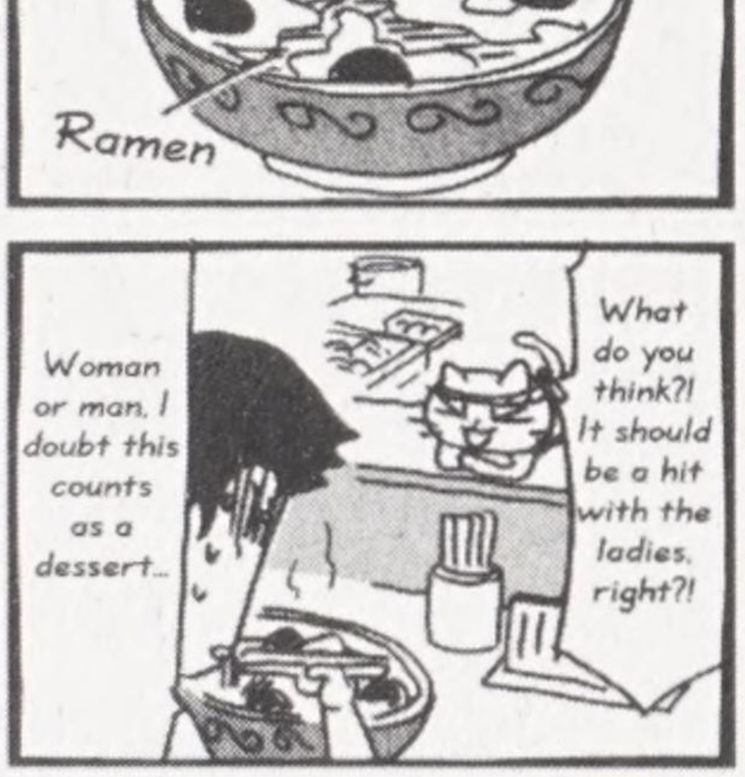


Delcious, cute, or just plain weird? You decide.



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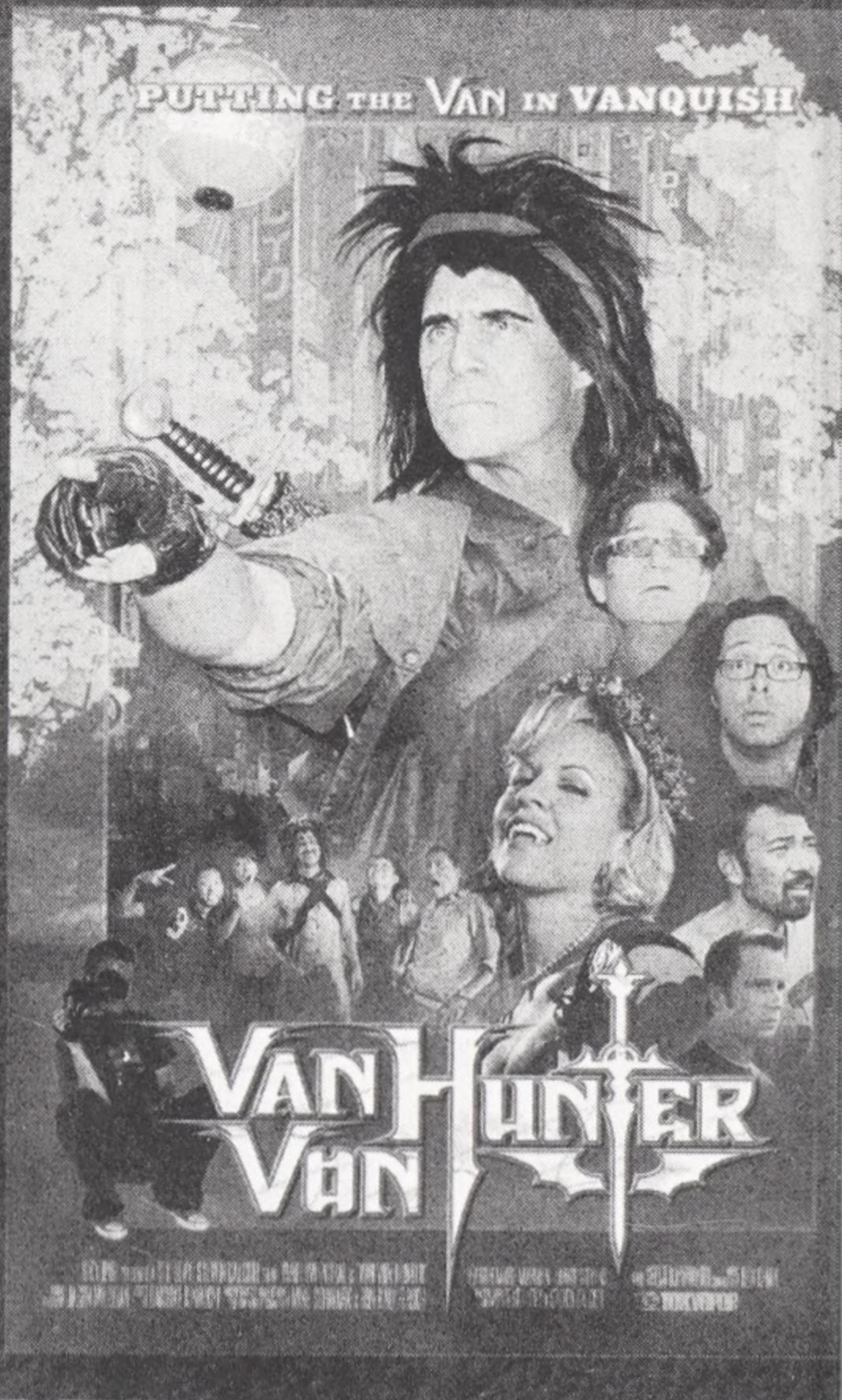

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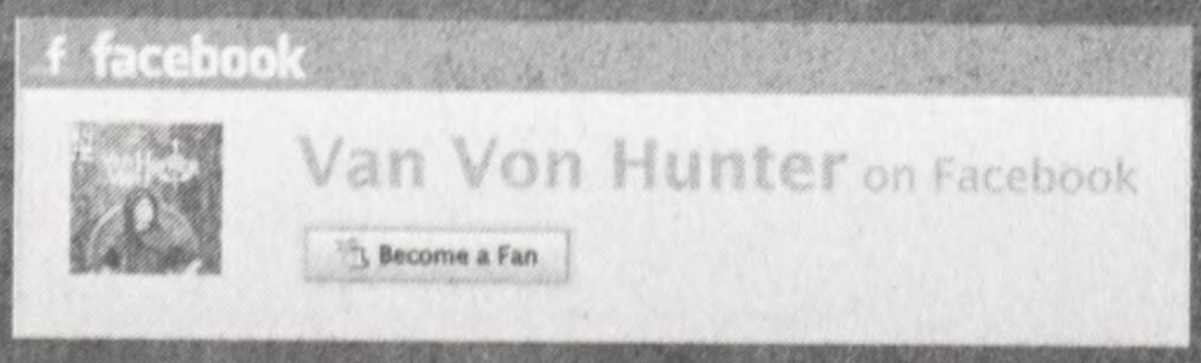

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