

“What did this damn fool get himself into?”

Dr. Morinaga, the head doctor around these parts, took a look at Kirimaru, who had passed out again. Sumie's impression of him was that he was a very tired man—dark, shaggy hair, drawn skin, a generally lethargic manner about him. (He bore little resemblance to his daughter, a paranormal vlogger who Sumie completely coincidentally followed.)

“Got punched,” Vespa said, using her one arm to rub the back of her head. “By the biggest guy I've ever seen. Like, huge.”

“Right,” Dr. Morinaga said with a sigh. “Well, half of his ribs are pulverized. The rest are just normally broken. He's lucky nothing pierced his lungs—just caved them in. Looks like he's also taken some other injuries, but that's the major thing. Blunt force trauma to most of his back, too. From one punch?”

“He was REALLY big,” Sumie said, “and he could jump through concrete floors.”

Dr. Morinaga rubbed his hair for a bit, then said, “I open a *rustic clinic* to get away from the big city and what do I get? I get to be a hotbed for ne'er-do-wells and their associates. You owe me, Markham. What, did he punch you too?”

“No,” Vespa said, “he punched a chair *at* me.”

—Near the border of Shimane and Tottori, nestled away in the countryside, was a town called Manzoku-cho—'Satisfaction Town'. It was so named because its founder believed that this location was blessed, such that any could come and find a satisfying way to live. Its population was under five thousand people. Despite this, it was reasonably well-made for a growing population and not as behind on modern conveniences as many other such towns.

Only one bus line visited Manzoku, but there was a bus service amidst the town's fairly large grounds. Moreover, it was a large enough town to have separate elementary, middle, and high schools. It was not overly far from a river, Lake Shinji, or the ocean coast, so fishing was a viable form of work. The ground was generally well-made for crops, so there was quite a bit of agriculture. One of its primary exports in recent years was tomatoes, after one resident, a Mr. Ooe, became fascinated by tomatoes during high school and opted to spend much of his time optimizing growing conditions for tomatoes.

The town sat in a valley, so while the land around it was mountainous enough that those who desired views could go and see, the town itself was on even ground with only gentle hills. The town featured a few old-fashioned mansions belonging to its oldest families, but much of the residential space was in housing districts with houses that tended to take more conventional modern wisdom. This had been an ongoing process, but an expert construction foreman had moved here in recent years, a Ms. Murasaki, and had managed to whip the construction workers here into even stronger work.

Its green grasses, its trees, the farms, the soft hills, the calm breeze, the chirping of birds—Sumie was stunned. She had lived in Hamura as a child, but this was even smaller, even calmer, than that. This was the country. When she first arrived, driving over the hills with Vespa's navigation

(seeing as Vespa only had one arm and thus could not drive a car), all she could do was stare at the breadth of it.

The air was clean. It was quiet. It was morning now, so she heard schoolchildren laughing and running to school, but that didn't manage to defeat the tranquility. But if there was something that struck Sumie as by far the most shocking, it began when Vespa brought Sumie and Citron to the large mansion that was the closest to the center of the city. The labels read, 'Kikuchi'. It was a genuine old-style manor—it even had a garden with a bamboo-based system of irrigation. To Sumie, who had only seen such things in anime and manga, it was a shock.

Vespa knocked on the door and said, “Yo, Kikuchis! It's ya girl Vespa. I'm here.”

The sliding door at the front opened. “I'm sorry, Mom and Dad have been preparing our guest room.”

At the door was a beautiful young person—really, just stunning. Perfectly round and cute features, a lovely little head of dark black hair with ringlets for sideburns, in a pleasant little Western-style yellow daytime dress. “Vespa, hello!”

“Eiji!” Vespa said, raising her remaining hand. Citron squeaked and bowed, but Sumie just stared.

“Oh my gosh, what happened to your arm?!” Eiji exclaimed, taking a few steps forward to take a look at it. “We need to get Kuromatsu-*san* to take a look at this—are you okay to be walking around?”

With a snort and a grin, as he fussed over her, Vespa turned her head to those two and said, “Eiji Kikuchi. He's the son around here.”

“The...” Sumie blinked. “The son.”

In their frontal tea room, Sumie, who had never been very good at sitting *seiza*, awkwardly sat cross-legged as Eiji served his guests some steaming hot tea. (As it turned out, Vespa was perfectly capable of *drinking*. She refused to elaborate on how.) “When Vespa called to ask if we could take someone 'with unique circumstances' in, we got ready as fast as we could, but I wasn't expecting this. You're Citron, yes?”

Citron nodded. “Um... yes. Hello.”

“Please don't be shy,” said Eiji, who was the only person in this room who could sit *seiza*. He sat on the other side of the table from the rest of them. “You're welcome to stay here as long as you like—Vespa is a good friend of the family, so if she's vouched for you, we know quite well you're trustworthy. Though, frankly, I think my parents might let you in anyway.” He let out a gentle little chuckle with his hand up to his mouth. “Your ears are curious! Are they natural?”

Citron nodded again. “Um, yes. I'm what's called a 'Lucier'. They were, um... a species of people that lived about twelve thousand years ago.”

“I see!” Eiji said with his own nod. “Well, I'm trained as a nurse, so if you have any physical

problems, I can do my best to treat you. Please let me know, even if it's minor. And don't worry about hiding your ears, if you're concerned about that—everyone in town will know sooner than later. We've got a guerrilla reporter *and* an ace detective about these parts, so it's better just to be honest.”

“Yeah,” Vespa said, “Scoops is annoying and never shuts up, and that Himekago guy'll tap-dance around you and pull spotlights from nowhere if you try and hide things. It's why everyone in this damn town knows I'm a robot.” She scoffed.

“I can...” Citron looked down at her hands. “I can really stay in a house this big?”

“Feel free to take a look around,” Eiji said. “If you run into my parents or Saaya, you're sure to get further warm welcomes. We're happy to have you. Welcome to Manzoku!” He turned his head to Sumie. “And you're Miss Sumie, yes? Vespa's mentioned you. You're free to look around as well, and if you need somewhere to stay for the night, please feel free.”

Sumie could only flap her gums like a fish. She felt awkward asking directly, so she asked Vespa once the two walked off the premises. “So... his parents are okay with him dressing like that?”

“Who, Eiji?” Vespa said, cocking an eyebrow. “Yeah, yeah. I heard a story once like, they had a kimono made for his little sister when they were having her, but Eiji put it on one day and he was so cute in it they let him keep it, and he just kept wearing women's clothing after that.”

“...Huh,” Sumie mumbled.

“Anyway,” Vespa said, pointing things out as they walked to her mechanic's, “there's the bathhouse. Corkwell runs it. He's American. Weird guy, always wears sunglasses indoors, kind of a pain in the ass but he's not bad. Oh, there's the Shirayuki house. Single mom, first two kids left for the big cities. The youngest, Shizuka, she's a baker. Bakes like crazy. You know how bad I wish I could eat some of the stuff she makes? It looks delicious. You ever wonder why I'm programmed to understand the sensation of hunger? It's fucked up, Satsuki.”

The local mechanic was a young man named Minato Kuromatsu. He worked out of a garage on the west side of town. From Vespa's description, he was a smug little prick who'd pace around thinking and then never tell you what he was thinking, then turn around and laugh at his own jokes. He was short, dark-skinned, with a bushy head of dark hair with a few blue highlights and a very thoroughly decorated purple jumpsuit.

“Aww, what the hell?!” he exclaimed, when Vespa and Sumie walked into his establishment. He threw his arms out and ran over to Vespa. “You broke the *entire arm* this time?!”

“Biggest guy I've ever seen punched a damn chair at me, what can I say?” Vespa said, throwing her other hand up and shrugging with her one working shoulder. “Tore it clean off. I feel like shit, mind taking a look?”

Minato, who was stained by oil from working on the underside of a car, sighed, but it was the sort of exasperated sigh Sumie knew well meant that he was also a little bit excited. “Okay, okay. Siddown. Can I look further inside this time, see if I can make you run better?”

“Try and I will literally shoot you,” Vespa said.

Minato's workbench, as Sumie saw as she aimlessly looked around, had a number of very couple-y photos between him and another man. “Who's in these?” she asked.

“Oh, those're me and Wataru,” Minato said, as he was scurrying around finding all the tools he'd need to inspect Vespa's arm properly. “He lives down the way. Sweetest guy you've ever met. He likes driving cars, I like fixing cars, it's a match made in hell, right? Who's your friend, Vespa?”

“That's Satsuki, she's my bratty sidekick,” Vespa said. One of the photos happened to have Minato without a top on. He had on a binder.

As Sumie wandered the streets of Manzoku, the morning turning to noon, she pondered. A Korean woman ran the local pawn shop. The aforementioned Murasakis, two sisters, were a Jewish family. There was a lesbian couple with at least six kids, most of whom were adopted. A beloved middle school teacher required the use of a wheelchair, and there were accommodations for such physical disabilities all about town. The high school literature teacher was a Russian woman.

And, for that matter, there was now a catgirl here, which was apparently completely fine, and everyone seemed perfectly understanding of a German android's presence. (As previously mentioned, Dr. Morinaga, the man treating Kirimaru, also happened to have a Romanian apprentice with psychic powers, but Sumie did not end up crossing paths with Pavel during her stay here.)

Sumie collapsed down onto a park bench, to stare up at the trees. A quiet breeze continued to blow past her. Was this town even real? Conventional wisdom implied that such a place could not exist. Not only a country town with people from various races and cultures easily accepted, but various identities, sexualities, and even *species*?

If Sumie looked, she was beginning to be certain she could find far more. The breeze began to take on an almost otherworldly air, to her. This town was genuinely peaceful, and not in a manner that required shutting out the outside. No—by the look of things, this was a town that embraced any and all into its culture. Amidst the countryside of Shimane was a town where one did not need to worry about cultural differences.

Manzoku was like a dream. It felt like the sort of thing Sumie might dream of. Breathing in the clean air was quite a relief, after all of the stress of the previous day. Sumie's body relaxed. She really was alright. Vespa, Kirimaru, and Citron were all going to be alright, too.

*Holy shit, it's another fuckin' day, it's the best day ever again! 'Cause I'm a stupid fucking cat and I don't know shit—*

This was not the sort of thing that should be blaring out in a quiet park in a country town, so Sumie picked up her phone as fast as she could. “Hello?”

“Oh, Sumie!” It was Allie. “Hello, hello~ I thought I should call to see how things are! Everything go alright?”

“Hey, Allie. Yeah, things are okay. I mean, Senpai's got a bunch of broken ribs, Vespa lost an arm, and we're all exhausted, but things are okay now. Those are fixable.” Sumie paused. “Uh, Vespa's a robot, so she can get a new arm.”

“Oh, lovely. That's really lovely. Say, would you like to hear some interesting things I found out?” Allie said.

“Huh?”

“Like I said, I went digging. I'm very good at finding information, you know~ So, that town you're in in Shimane—it does have a veeery slight link to the Lucier,” Allie said. “I know everything's been squared away, but if you're curious—”

“I'm curious, I'm curious!” Sumie said.

“Well, I've heard rumors that a certain someone was born there,” Allie said. “A certain someone who was very interested in the Lucier himself. A man by the name of 'Ryuji Kozakura'. You've heard of him, right?”

~23. The Kozakura Estate~

On the outskirts of Manzoku lay an old mansion that had not been used in some time. The last person to live there, Ryuji Kozakura, had not been there in years—he, apparently, did not think much of his hometown. It had not yet fallen into active disrepair, but it was dusty, dark—nobody had been hired to maintain it. Nobody was going to visit it—nobody, that was, save for Sumie Kazuki.

Walking towards the old mansion, the breeze which continued to blow did little to assuage the foreboding aura she felt. There was a gate that was locked, but that was easy to fix. It was a simple padlock.

The tatami flooring creaked under Sumie's feet as she walked inside the mansion proper. She wasn't certain, entirely, what she was looking for, but knew that she felt a desire to be here. This home belonged to Ryuji Kozakura, former head of the UN Party—despite his death, it was as though she had been battling him. He had lived here, in a town that seemed to Sumie out of a dream, and yet abandoned it?

It was unlikely that she would get an answer, as she paced around the manor, opening up sliding doors that led into empty bedrooms, or tea rooms. She knew that attempting to understand a dead man in such a manner was hopeless, and yet...

How had they been able to resurrect Citron in the first place? Who leaked that footage? It felt to Sumie that there was something unresolved about all this, even if it had had a happy resolution. And, moreover—what was it that she felt when she held that gun?

Much of the furniture had not been moved—old-style cushions and tables that were still far beyond Sumie's lifestyle. A thick layer of dust covered everything inside. Faded windows slightly dampened the sunlight, coating the building in a light just that bit grayer, as though Sumie were passing through an old memory.

Then, from another room—

“Here,” said a woman's voice. “For you, Kozakura-*san*. I no longer need your dogged beliefs to support me. One way or another, I will surpass you the same as I will surpass Homura.”

The sound of a sliding door rang out, and footsteps began to slowly fade away. Sumie caught her breath, and then began to walk through the halls towards the central sanctum of the mansion, where she had heard that voice.

Whoever spoke, she was long gone—however, in this small room, with tatami mats, lit candles, and folding scrolls as partitions, in the center, she had laid a notebook. Sumie knew she needed to read it, and inwardly thanked the woman who had left it here for lighting these candles.

The notebook said quite a bit. Sumie needed to flip through a number of the pages—much of it was the personal accounts of Ryuji Kozakura, a man who despised his own hometown, and desired to return to the power and order of Japan before the Great War. To be blunt, he was not very pleasant to read about. However, he also kept a number of his observations of various forms his party's grasps at power took.

*Heisei 23. Month 5. Day 13.*

*The Hikasas' knowledge has proved useful. By collating information regarding the ancient civilizations mentioned within the database of the woman named Emille, my associates and I have managed to pinpoint an astonishing find—a ruin of the lost civilization of Atlantis. It is a tower, under the sea, just off of the coast of Tottori.*

*For archaeological purposes, we are currently digging a tunnel through the coast to reach it. Based on preliminary research, the sea has not reached the inside of the tower—it is still in perfect condition. I will be overseeing the first expedition myself.*

“It appears I'll need some months of medical care,” Kirimaru said, stuck in his hospital bed. He winced in pain as he spoke. “My apologies.”

“No, no, you're fine,” Sumie said, shaking her head. “You did really great, Senpai. If it weren't for you, I'd be dead.”

“Well then,” Kirimaru said with a little chuckle that seemed to hurt greatly, “if you say so, I'll accept the compliment.” He looked out a window before continuing. “Sumie... there are people who were greatly harmed, and even killed, while I worked for Murakumo. In some part, I am responsible for that. Is it selfish of me to hope that in some way, I've made up for that by helping Citron?”

Sumie shook her head. “Mm-mm. I think that's normal, Senpai. And I think you did great. I mean... even if you were part of some bad things, to me, you're still my super cool Senpai. And to everyone here, you're someone who helped someone in need. That's all you need, I think.”

“To be looked at as a good man through the eyes of those I assist... Perhaps this, too, is the law of heaven,” Kirimaru said.

“I don't even know what that means,” Sumie said.

*Heisei 24. Month 1. Day 18.*

*The sunken tower of Ladyin, home to the Lucier of Atlantis, has been more enlightening than I could have imagined. We have obtained biological evidence of the Lucier—real genetic traces of an ancient race of beastmen who inhabited Earth before any humans. They possessed the ability of metallurgy, manipulating metals in the earth to create incredible weapons.*

*If this power could be harnessed for Japan, we would become unstoppable. I will work tirelessly toward this aim.*

“The Kikuchis are really lovely people!” Citron said, as she and Sumie went out for takoyaki. “And all the food out here is incredible! I'm really excited!”

“That's great,” Sumie said. “I'm really happy for you.”

There was a pause as Citron hungrily devoured a pile of takoyaki, squealing in delight with each one. Then—“Sumie... um, what are you going to do after this?”

“Well...” Sumie stared to the side at a nearby playground. “I donno. I mean... I guess a lot's happened, but...”

“Things are... a bit confusing right now,” Citron said. “I understand. But... w-well, um...”

“I know,” Sumie said. “Give me some time to think, okay?”

*Heisei 26. Month 12. Day 10.*

*After many failures, many who perished before coming to term, a Lucier has been born. The scientists have named it 'Citron'. This child is small now, but its ears are a sure sign of its heritage. The power of metallurgy exists within it.*

*The heavens shall look proudly upon me. I shall take back this world for Japan. This is only the first step. Soon, I shall become Prime Minister, and lead Japan to take back this world from the foreign dogs who have poisoned it with their ideologies of 'modernity'. Even ancient civilizations will bend to the whim of Japan.*

“That place?” Vespa said. The side of her torso had been covered by metal and clothing, now, and bandages were placed atop the stump—much as she didn't actually mind her nature being known, it still looked awkward to have exposed wiring. Sumie had pointed to a small house with no lights on in the southern part of town. “Yeah, I think that family moved out. Nobody's moved in yet. Why?”

About an hour later, Sumie was staring up at a small house amidst a row of small houses. There was a “for sale” sign, yes, but the prices were not high, and supposedly negotiable. She walked up and put her hand on the doorknob, just to feel it.

<SATSUKI> hey. im gonna head out of town for a day. over to tottori. could you let people know?

<Citron> Where are you going?

<SATSUKI> there's... something i've gotta look at. i'll be fine, but there's one last thing i've gotta do before i know what i need to do for myself.

<Citron> Alright. Will you come back?

<SATSUKI> yeah. i'm not in danger. and even if i am... i can get through it.

<Citron> Okay. Good luck.



~24. The Royal Historian~

And now, at last, we have returned to the end. Sumie Kazuki headed to the underground tunnel dug out by the UN Party, which still remained operable—it was hidden, yes, but secrets were hard to hide successfully from her. The tunnel was largely still earth, held up by support beams and infrastructure designed to handle water more than anything. Lights were no longer lit, so she used her cell phone light to walk down, down, down... down below the ocean, down for what felt like hours, before she arrived at a door.

This door was of an unearthly make. It was not a human door—its architecture was of materials, and of a style, that no human society Sumie knew of had ever used. Yet it was a door, and it opened.

Ladyin was its name, and it was the hub for the waterways of Atlantis. It was a sacred place for the highest royalty, deep beneath the royal palace. The instant Sumie walked inside, she knew that. She recognized it, as she walked deeper and deeper down into the ruins of Atlantis.

The soft blue glow along the walls, the glow of the power of the Lucier, lent the place a soft glow that meant Sumie didn't need her phone to see. Water dripped down from above to below as she descended the stairs, going in and out of passageways. It took quite some time, and she spent it in silent contemplation.

Then—the mural.

At the bottom of this tower was the mural, the tribute, to the warriors who defeated Niara, twelve thousand years ago. And there did Sumie hear that whisper on the wind. “Oh, gods,” it says, “oh, gods, please, in some next life, let whoever comes after me be who they are meant to be.”

And so Sumie turned to her reflection.

Sumie turned to SATSUKI.

“What is this... what is this supposed to mean? I thought—weren't you supposed to be... what...”

SATSUKI raised her hand.

“Hold on,” she said. “Slow down. I can explain. You know this, but you're a Lucier.”

“How can that—?!”

“History's a weird thing in a world governed by evolution,” SATSUKI said. “There have always got to be forces that can read it, make note of it. So, ever since the Lucier were born, since Atlantis came to be, there would be a certain Lucier who was born with a special role.”

Sumie trembled. “What...?”

“They were called the Royal Historian. The Royal Historian held this historical force, this 'presence' that oversaw the history of the Lucier, inside of them. You could tell them by their bright green hair—most green-headed Lucier had it much darker. When one died, another one was born,”

SATSUKI said. “The Royal Historian doesn't get a choice in the matter. They had this job, no matter what they wanted. Here, you can see they had to come with these warriors. They had to be present for this fight, the end of the history of Atlantis, the extinction of the Lucier.”

“Then, you—”

SATSUKI nodded. “Ever since the Lucier have existed, so have I. I've clung to so many people in the past, sitting there, watching, observing. Honestly, Sumie... I think you were just unlucky.”

Sumie's arms slumped to her side. “What do you mean?”

“The Lucier are people of the planet just like humans are. This planet tries its best to fight off sicknesses like Niara, by creating people, circumstances, that can battle them. So, if you ask me, based on everything I know... there could've been a Lucier born anywhere in the world. Any child, being born right now, could be a Lucier. But it was you,” SATSUKI said. “And then—”

“Heisei 26,” Sumie said, “Month 12, Day 10.”

SATSUKI nodded. “One lone Lucier isn't enough to monitor... but all of a sudden, there were two. You had to be the Royal Historian, the person who oversees the use of the Code of Atlantis, because Citron couldn't. But... to be honest, Sumie, this is new for me too. I was never supposed to be a person at all. It's thanks to you that I can be, that I can have this conversation. Like I said. I am you—part of me is pieces of your brain that have become a separate core. But I'm also the Royal Historian. I can't deny that.”

“So I was... I was always just...”

Sumie fell to her knees. She could *feel* it, in this place. She was the newest Royal Historian, and down here, the only place where her ancestors still remained on this planet, she could feel the despair of the innocent Lucier forced again and again into this role of observation—of never, really, getting to be themselves, to decide their own history. Time and again, coincidences had piled up to lead her here as well.

“I just...” Sumie sniffled and sobbed. “So... what? You're telling me I've never even been human? That I...” She pounded the ground with her fists. “I was never, ever going to be normal?! That's all I wanted! I just wanted the chance to be a normal girl! I don't want to *have* to be quirky and eccentric and all that stuff to survive! I don't want to *have* to live a life that leads to things like this! I just wanted that chance, SATSUKI! Why?! Why didn't I ever have that chance?!”

“I don't—”

“My mom dies! My dad dies! My aunt locks me out of the house and beats me! I wind up part of a government conspiracy! Now you're telling me I'm an ancient Atlantis person?! How am I supposed to know people won't learn?! That the UN Party won't come for *me*?!” Sumie clutched her head in her hands and shook around violently. “What am I supposed to do?! Why did you show up in my life?! Why did it have to be me?!”

“Sumie—”

“I'm not even a real girl! Right?! I'm not a human girl *or* a Lucier girl! I'm just a freak! I'm just, I'm just—”

Sobbing and weeping into her hands, Sumie continued screaming, wrenching yells of agony out of her throat. “Why? Why me? Why, SATSUKI? Why did it have to be me?”

“I don't know, Sumie,” SATSUKI said. “But... you are a real woman. You know you are.”

Down here, Sumie could stomp around and scream all she wanted, and nobody would hear her. So she screamed, loud, her wails echoing off of the walls. Again, and again, and again, and again, and again, until her throat was hoarse and she'd run out of tears. She punched a stone wall, which hurt her fist, so she started punching the air instead.

“This isn't fair!” Sumie yelled.

“I know,” SATSUKI said. “I'm sorry.”

“I don't... I... I don't want to just *watch things*! I don't wanna just be some unlucky idiot who bumbles into things accidentally! I want my life to be my own, SATSUKI! I don't wanna have to be some cursed child with a big destiny or whatever! I just—”

Her fury finally flying away, Sumie slumped in front of the mirror, and put her hand on it.

“I... I really... I love Sumie Kazuki,” Sumie said. A few more tears she'd thought didn't exist came to her eyes. “Sumie Kazuki is the person I want to be. And I'm just a young lady who likes cats and plays video games and stuff. But it's hard, SATSUKI. It's so hard. Things are scary, and they keep happening. I want to start making memories that don't have to be colored by stuff like this.”

SATSUKI was tearing up a bit, too. “That sounds great, Sumie. I mean it. I want that for you, too.”

Nothing could be truly resolved down here, but it was down here that Sumie Kazuki came to an understanding—with herself, and her 'other'.

~25. My Destiny~

“So you're really going?”

Citron, Vespa, and Kirimaru had all come to the nearest train station to see Sumie off. (Obviously, Citron was wearing a hood.) “I wish you could stay,” Citron said.

“Yeah,” Sumie said, leaning in to give Citron a hug. “I know. But I can't. This isn't a goodbye, it's a 'see you later', okay? Manzoku's a really nice town. There's no way I'd let myself die having only been once.”

“Sooner or later I'll probably see you out there again,” said Vespa, who had covered the right side of her torso to cover the machinery. “You'll be on your own until then, y'know. Make sure I don't catch you slipping.”

“Sumie—”

Kirimaru had come out with a crutch and several painkillers, and he was still a bit pale—but he refused to allow himself to miss this. “Whatever it is you've been searching for in Tokyo... I hope that you find it. I know that it's nothing so simple as that, but—”

Sumie transitioned from hugging Citron to putting her arm around Kirimaru as gently as she could manage with a gentle touch. “You worry too much, Senpai,” she said. “I know I will. I've got a good sense for these things. Sooner or later, in Tokyo, I'm going to find... I guess you'd call it like, my *raison d'être*?”

She let go of him, and turned away, staring toward the morning sun. “I think... I think everyone's looking for that, right? And I haven't found it yet. There has to be a reason that I'm alive... that things happened to me the way they did. I believe that. I don't want it to be for nothing. And I feel like... if I stay here, I would be letting go of that. So, just...”

The train came into the station, wind rushing past Sumie. She turned her head to deliver a smile to her friends.

“Believe in me. Okay?” she said, her teeth glinting in the light. “All of you, just believe in me. I'll be back, and when I'm back, I'll know why I'm alive.”

“You know, you're being really dramatic when you can literally just text us,” Vespa said, raising her eyebrows.

“Please be nice, Miss Vespa. She needs to be suitably dramatic about this, doesn't she?” Citron said, clasping her hands and making a fretful little noise. “If she doesn't, it'll haunt her!”

“Maintaining the proper level of gravitas for a personal declaration is centrally important to the lifestyle of those who live truly!” Kirimaru exclaimed. “You should respect her—oh, oh no, does anyone have any water, I feel a bit woozy.”

With a laugh and a wave, Sumie got back aboard the train. She was heading back to Tokyo—to

the town that had raised her from birth.

Watching the scenery rush past her, without any adrenaline or world-shattering battles, was a calming, almost surreal feeling for Sumie. Everything had changed for her. Nothing had, and yet everything had. She had to be herself, no matter how terrified she was of the future.

“Are you sure?” SATSUKI asked. “It's safe back there. I mean, it's kinda weird how safe it seems. You seem like you could be happy.”

“Yeah,” Sumie said, “but... I donno. If I'm going to be me, then I need to find something of my own. I just stumbled into finding that place. I want... I need to fight for what I'm looking for, for real, not just wander into it accidentally.”

“You fought pretty hard,” SATSUKI said. “You did a great job.”

“I know.” Sumie leaned to stare out the window closer. “I just have to keep going. Sooner or later, I'll find it. I'll... find me. I'm not going to be someone who just stumbles into the most important things that happen to her, you know? I'm not... I don't want to be a bystander.”

“I get it,” SATSUKI said. “I really do.”

The gentle sound of the train rolling along the tracks rang out. There were not many people in this train car as of yet, so Sumie could lay back and let the vibrations run through her body. Sumie Kazuki was alive. That was the truth.

“I'm proud of you, Sumie,” SATSUKI said. “And I believe in you. I'll help you for as long as it takes.”

<Citron> Hi, everyone! I know I haven't been on in a while...

<ToRo> Extenuating circumstances are understandable. Are you settling in alright?

<NDni> I barely got to be involved in such an exciting adventure! I can only hope our dear Satsuki thought what I brought up was interesting~

<SATSUKI> yeah it was real cool anyway wb citron! glad to see you

<NDni> 'Anyway'? Oh, so this is what it feels like to be blown off...

<Citron> If it's okay... I'd like to continue playing ESO2 with you three, like before.

<ToRo> Why wouldn't it be?

<Citron> ...I'm not sure. Everything is so wild and new now, I wasn't certain, but...

<SATSUKI> don't think so much about it! you're a young lady with a new lease on life. how better to spend it than playing video games wwww

<Citron> You're right. Thank you, everyone!

—And so did another snap change in the life of Sumie Kazuki come to an end. This was not the end of her story, however—and she did not want it that way. The heir to the ancient legacy of the Lucier knew that there was still something yet to be found in exploring her reasons for living.

...but did she ever truly have a choice? Or was this lifestyle forced upon her?

Perhaps that is not a question it is worth asking. To bemoan her fate would be giving in to it. Sumie Kazuki wished to be her own person, not defined by the role of the Royal Historian. To grow past her fated circumstances, to simply be more—in the end, that is 'will'. Like any other person on the planet Earth, Sumie Kazuki possessed 'will'.

That was what brought her back to Tokyo—to unwittingly await the return of a scourge from the long past. And that was admirable in its own way.

~26. The Trickster of Unit 13~

It had been fifteen days now since the winged menaces from the skies assaulted Earth, though Sumie had long since lost count. In some ways, she was lucky—she'd managed to move into an abandoned building in Shinjuku with many of the strays she'd taken care of over the years. There was no food or water, but it was a quiet place to stay with at least some defense from the elements.

These were Dragons. There was no doubt about it. The same scourge that had obliterated Atlantis, destroyed the Lucier, had returned to menace Earth once more. Sumie could surmise that, yes, but she also had a personal witness to the disaster inside her head.

“Do you think... is the rest of the world like this?” Sumie asked.

“Probably,” SATSUKI said. She did her best to maintain her usual cheer, but when discussing larger matters, an uncharacteristic seriousness came over her. “The Dragons are terrifying, and there's not really any end to them. Even if another nation could handle them, I don't know how you could even get rid of them. The Lucier only managed to drown them.”

(It is perhaps worth mentioning here that you, of course, know that this is not true. However, SATSUKI's previous incarnation perished before being able to verify that the Dragons had vanished, and as such could not assume that Niara's death in Atlantis would remove the rest of the Dragons. She could only surmise it, and here she erred on the side of caution.)

“Everyone... Senpai, Vespa, Citron, Toro, Allie... I don't...” This situation had sunk in many times for Sumie, but each time it struck her again. “Everyone's... The whole country, it's...”

As far as Sumie looked, as far as she hunted, all she found was ruins. She had, at times, seen other survivors mauled to death by a passing Dragon, and only been able to look on in terror. She was cold, and dirty, and had witnessed horrors no young girl should need to witness.

“I'm, I don't...” Sumie sobbed into her hands, the feeling of the cats curling up around her feet barely able to soothe her at all. “I don't know what to do. Everyone's dead!”

“We don't know that,” SATSUKI said. “Eventually, people may crawl up out of the rubble, try and eke out an existence. Earth is a big planet. I—”

“So many people are dead,” Sumie wept. “They're all dead and I don't know what to do. I don't want to die. I don't want to die! I don't... I can't handle this! I can't handle this!”

—An hour or so later, Sumie realized she was running out of food, so she needed to go out looking. She scurried up and about cracks in the asphalt, places where high-pressure water had burst out from under the ground to create small, uneven hills, and the strange trees and flowers that had overtaken Shinjuku.

There was a heavy blockade by Shinjuku Station, formed of trees, of rubble, and of trains, but Sumie had found a fairly consistent way to crawl under it. The tracks of a specific train had enough let for her to crawl—

All at once, Sumie's body lurched when she heard a crashing sound above her, and the creaking of the metal gave way to the rubble above her coming down. There was a pressure on her back, enough to trap her—not yet enough to crush her, but that was the least of her worries. A roar erupted from above the train.

“No, no no no no no,” Sumie whispered, shivering and shaking. She couldn't escape. She wasn't limber enough to escape this situation with a Dragon having crushed down her only path away. She was trapped, and a Dragon was going to eat her. She was going to die. She was going to die. She was going to die. She was going to die. She was going to—

—what was that?

“One of these damned things. Youka!”

“You got it! Come at me, big guy!”

Voices?

“I'll bolster our defenses! Please, fight as you will!”

“Pow, right in the kisser! Wanna come at me again? Oops, didn't hit me hard enough! *Bam!*”

“You're open, you lumbering beast! *Burn to cinders!*”

The sounds of striking, of typing, of a fire—those were human voices. And they were... They were fighting the Dragon.

“Koron, Youka! It's rearing up for a charge!”

“Hurry up and tear it to shreds, Youka!”

“Alright, fine. I was having fun, geez.”

“R-ripping out its tongue?! Surely that won't—oh, you... you managed it.”

With a wail of pain, there was another crash, but this one was to the ground behind her. The last creaking of the body of a Dragon rang out, as one of the voices cackled. “Surely you didn't believe you could defeat us. What cheek.”

It was only then that Sumie realized that she was having trouble breathing from the compression. She mustered all of her energy to squeak, and managed a single cry of, “H-heeeeelp...”

Then—

“Wait... There's someone under the train! Youka, can you start moving the rubble? I'll assist! Koron, try to pull them out once we have a visual?”

“No promises.”



The pressure on Sumie's body began to subside, as one of the voices—'Youka'—began to heave the rubble off, piece by piece. "I've got visual," another—'Koron'—said. "It's a girl, young adult. Has quite the pants."

"See if you can try to at least put her in a better position," said the third voice, which belonged to a man.

The adrenaline of the sheer terror she'd experienced was rapidly fading, and with it, Sumie's consciousness. As the train was lifted off of her, she barely had the strength to look up at her rescuers. A girl with red hair, a tall and buff older woman, and a visibly foreign man. What a ragtag bunch, she thought to herself, though not exactly in those words.

—"You mean to tell us you actively evaded the Dragons in the heart of Shinjuku for two straight weeks?" said a man named Kirino Ayafumi, a member of a certain organization that Satsuki had been quiet about her prior knowledge of.

"Yeah, I mean, NBD, right?" Satsuki said, putting her legs up on a table. "Isn't anyone?"

"There's a difference between staying put in one place and actively sneaking by them like that. You were pinned under a train, lady. Who's crawling under trains now?" Kirino's glasses drooped on his face.

"To be fair, sir," said the foreign man, whose name was Richter, "I wouldn't think crawling under trains was *ever* wise."

President of Murakumo, Natsume Hikasa, had spent this discussion giving Satsuki an appraising look. Part of Satsuki jolted in terror, but she managed to keep it down. "I've got an odd feeling about this one. Run some aptitude tests."

As it turned out, this largely involved borrowing some SDF gear and firing with it. Considering that Satsuki was capable of using her metallurgy to will bullets to follow her exact desired trajectory, she would have had to try to mess up. A very odd scientist by the name of Masaki started losing his mind in the background over this, but Richter was more even-handed. "Wow, that was incredible!" he said, politely clapping.

"Thanks much," Satsuki said, twirling the pistol on her finger. "Comes easy. I'm pretty great."

The other two members of 'Unit 13' had also been present to watch, and the red-haired pyrokinetic, Koron, snorted and said, "Well, aren't we self-aggrandizing. It's a bit early to congratulate yourself, isn't it?"

"Oh, like you aren't?" said the older woman, Youka, rolling her eyes and smile. "You're a complete egotist."

"Well, yes, but everyone here is well aware that I'm fully deserving of it," Koron said with a smug grin. "Got anything better than a good shot, kid?"

"uh excuse you" Satsuki said, "i'm pretty sure i'm older than you"

Koron looked as though she was about to stand up, her face twisting into an angry snarl, before Richter chimed in with, “Actually, she's correct. She turned twenty-two last October, based on her records. She is two years and ten months or so older than you, Koron.”

“I don't care if she's technically correct, I saw that smug grin,” Koron said, baring her teeth. “Or I heard it. Whatever the hell that was, it was mocking me.”

“ehehehehe,” said Satsuki. “oh am i now”

After more tests, it was determined that Sumie Kazuki, a girl from Shinjuku who preferred to be called by her online handle 'Satsuki', possessed a number of talents—great physical agility, aptitude with knives and guns, the ability to locate treasure and missing people... Perhaps her most stunning achievement was when she stayed in with the dev team and managed to, in short order, develop toxins for use with her knives.

“You come in like a dead rat like three days ago and you're already doing this?” said Keima, of Unit 4, staring at his lack of a workbench. “You're killing me here. I feel dead inside.”

“You've gotta have more spirit, Keima~!” said Reimi, also of Unit 4, pumping her fists in a very pop and cute manner behind him. “Satsuki's just a girl after my own heart.”

“Don't listen to them,” said Waji, who was, shockingly, also of Unit 4. “Good to see someone around here has a head on their shoulders.”

As Satsuki made use of her many pockets to store her new supplies, she said, “No worries! You guys are a good bunch, so I'm sure I'll be seeing more of you.”

—A tactical meeting was held three weeks after the appearance of the Dragons. “I doubt,” said Natsume Hikasa, “that we will find any other similarly talented individuals about. I must admit, Kirino, that your new assistant has exceeded my expectations.”

“I know, right?” chirped Kirino, typing away at a console in the back of the meeting room. “Three whole S-Classes!”

“Ahahaha. Please, no, don't needlessly praise me,” said Richter, raising his hands. “I've only done my job to the best of my ability.”

“You, Kazuki,” said Hikasa.

“?”

“...Satsuki,” Hikasa specified.

“Yo. What's good, boss lady?” Satsuki said, leaning back in her seat and giving a salute.

“You have, of course, been briefed on the situation regarding your captain, Chisa Inomiko?” Hikasa asked.

“Sleeping Beauty, right? Mio's ladyfriend. Yeah, I went and paid my respects and all,” Satsuki

said. “Long time to be out, but I'm not gonna complain about more pretty folks in my unit.”

“Once Chisa wakes up, the five of you will begin operation as Unit 13,” Hikasa said. “I recommend preparing. She could, after all, wake up at any moment.”

“I don't envy her,” said Youka, hunched over at her seat. “Having to wake up to this after a month out?”

“We all must wake and face the music eventually,” said Koron.

So it was that Unit 13 was properly formed. Samurai Chisa Inomiko, Hacker Richter Esslinger, Psychic Koron Nagataka, Destroyer Youka Fudoji, Trickster Sumie Kazuki, and Archivist Mio Akeno, who would later become an Idol—these six people would become the heroes who would beat back the Dragons.

At the time, though, Sumie Kazuki was deeply afraid. Once again, terror had submerged her deep into the abyss of her own mind. She would come to feel her own identity again soon, sooner than she might expect—but for the time being, the Royal Historian of the Lucier would help her.

“Come out when you're ready, Sumie,” SATSUKI said within her heart, knowing that her other half—her beloved 'other self'—would hear. “I'll call you when it's safe. Maybe these people can be...”

A beast from beyond the stars, in the guise of a human, torn between her instincts and the acts she hid behind—

A runaway from foreign lands who desperately desired a place to feel his talents were worthwhile—

A doomed girl resigned to her fate as a weapon, her fate to be burnt to death by the flames of her own heart—

A ghostly woman who had suffered two deaths, hiding a bone-deep fatigue and a soul-deep grief—

An unwitting catalyst to great change who wanted nothing more than to prove her own positive impact on the world—

—and the last remnant of an ancient race, a child fated for the spotlight who had only ever wished to be normal—

“Maybe these people can be the family you need, Sumie. I hope so.”

*-Fin.*

~The End of Reminiscence~

*Omote-ura* is a dualism by which Japanese culture operates. 'Omote' is the public face, a version of the self constructed of the self as well as myth and kind lies—'ura' is the true self, that which others are not meant to see. Degrees of *Omote-ura* permeate not just society, but the culture itself. *Omote-ura* cannot be avoided.

The girl named Mio Akaneno has spoken at enough length about her problems. It would be belaboring the point to go into detail on her suffering—mundane, yet otherworldly, small, yet vast. Yet, her *omote* and *ura* intertwine—*ura* is an incomplete picture of a person, just as *omote* is.

Perhaps through reminiscence, one might understand both. You might understand both.

*I* may understand both.

To understand humans, which my good friend put so much faith in, I too must reminisce. I too must come to understand what I did not before. No—I wish to. That is, in some fashion, my 'will'. Perhaps you, too, were enriched by it—by coming to know them as you have through reminiscence.

One's story never seems to have so clean an ending as it appears. Happy endings face further setbacks—tragedies lead to further joy. Within these reminiscences are those who had no idea of the horrors that would face the planet Earth, and yet many of them would feel all new joys in battling back those horrors.

That is my belief. So, too, will I continue to believe in the *ura* of this grand tale of dragons and men, in one final hidden truth.

My role in this tale is not quite over. Please, wait until the end—and after I have passed from the stage of history once more, perhaps those who knew me shall reminisce about me anew.

Tyrant, my old friend—I believe in your dream. I believe in you.

-Iod