

Author
**Kota
Nozomi**
Illustrator
**029
Hideki
Nakagawa**
(TRIGGER)

**When
supernatural
Battles 11
Became
Commonplace**



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CHARACTERS

ILLUSTRATOR: 029



The wielder of *Closed Clock*, a supernatural power that lets her manipulate time. A closet nerd with the rare ability to keep up with Andou's delusional ramblings.

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**Kushikawa
Hatoko**

A childhood friend of Andou's, whose power, *Over Element*, gives her absolute control over the forces of nature. She never understands a single word that comes out of Andou's mouth.

**OVER
ELEMENT**

**Takanashi
Sayumi**

The mild-mannered and erudite president of the literary club. She's all but mastered her power, *Route of Origin*, which allows her to return anything and everything to the way it's meant to be. She mostly just uses it to mess with Andou, though.



**ROUTE OF
ORIGIN**

**DARK
AND DARK**



**Andou
Jurai**

A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.

A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.

**WORLD
CREATE**



**Himeki
Chifuyu**

Prologue: **stART**



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Prologue: stART

By the way, have you ever thought about the difference between main stories and spinoffs?

Main stories and spinoffs. Main plots and side stories. The mainstream and the copycat. The original and the derivative. The numbered entry and the Gaiden digression. For better or for worse, it feels like after a work of fiction gains a certain degree of popularity, it getting a spinoff in some form or another is something of an inevitability.

I don't mean that in the mixed-media production sense—it's slightly distinct. The so-called spinoffs that I'm talking about tend to be focused on depicting scenes that didn't get directly shown in the original work, or shining a spotlight on popular side characters' pasts or futures, or leaving all the characters the same but majorly shaking up the setting, or putting the whole thing into a four-panel gag manga format where the characters only *barely* resemble their original selves. There are all sorts of ways to go about it, really, but the core of their identity is that they always depict the story in a distinctly different manner from that of its original work. *Those* are the pieces of media that society at large refers to as spinoffs.

Do publishing houses or collaborating companies request that the creator of a piece of media make a spinoff once the original work takes off? Or do creators themselves ask to make them, hoping to use up concepts and ideas they couldn't work into the originals, and the publishing houses only green-light their ideas if the series is a hit? That, I can't say for sure—probably both happen and it's a case-by-case thing—but regardless, it wouldn't change the point I'm building up to.

I, speaking as a reader who's experienced countless stories of all shapes and sizes—speaking as the human being named Sagami Shizumu—believe from the bottom of my heart that in this world, there is no such thing as a spinoff. Or rather, looking at it from the opposite perspective, I believe that in this world,

there are nothing *but* spinoffs.

Okay, yes, I appreciate that I'm coming across as frustratingly indecisive, but the fact of the matter is that all of the experiences that have led me to this point have instilled a certain set of values within me, and all the other people I've taken the time to observe have led me to this impression. I simply can't help it. It's not a very easy feeling to put into words, but I'll do my absolute best to explain it in the simplest terms possible. In return, I just ask that you stick with me all the way to the end of this excessively long-winded prologue.

Now then—what *is* a main story? What *is* a spinoff? What are manga, and novels, and anime, and TV dramas, and movies, and works of fiction of all kinds? In my view—my purely subjective personal opinion—they're works of *selection*. They're just scenes, settings, states of affairs, et cetera, et cetera, all cropped to size and strung together—in other words, they're the cumulative form of that which was selected to be shown to an audience.

The selected. The appointed. The chosen ones. The product of a strict and scrupulous screening process. That is the identity of the stories we so very much love to consume.

This is such a given it's probably going to sound insipid, but not every aspect of a story's world is depicted in the story itself. There will, without fail, be aspects of the story that aren't included. Take, for instance, a hypothetical baseball manga: no series would depict each and every pitch thrown in each inning, top and bottom, that occurs over the course of a whole match (for the sake of argument, let's just call *Big Windup!* an outlier). Instead, many innings are summed up in digest form. Some batters strike out offscreen while the protagonist is arguing with one of their teammates. Sometimes, when the protagonist's team is up against a lackluster opponent, the whole match will be summed up in a piece of narration to the tune of "And then they won without much difficulty" and unceremoniously cut from the story.

Given the protagonist's team's activities are subjected to that sort of abridgment, I'm sure you can imagine how much more all of this applies when it comes to the opposing teams. There *are* some cases where the ultimate rival team gets its matches depicted in a reasonable level of detail, but there are far, far more teams filled with noncharacters who most readers won't remember at

all the second they leave the page. And that's not even the half of it—after all, while the protagonist and their team are pouring their hearts and souls into baseball, their school's soccer club's also pouring their hearts and souls into *their* chosen game. It's just not depicted particularly carefully, because why *would* a baseball manga put time and effort into portraying people who play some other sport? The soccer club probably has their own fair share of soccer club drama, but since their drama wasn't *selected*, it's excluded from the limelight.

This doesn't apply exclusively to baseball manga. There's no such thing as a work of fiction that depicts *all* of its characters to an equal degree—there will always be a certain hierarchy. That, in part, is how the main characters are separated from the extras. It goes even deeper than that, though, since not even the protagonists—the characters who serve as the linchpins of their works—have their lives depicted in full. It's just unthinkable to portray every minute of their day-to-day life, from morning to night—to portray when they talk, act, eat, sleep, excrete, *et cetera et cetera*—in minute detail. There will *always* be factors that get trimmed or omitted.

Let's say the story opens with the protagonist's first day in high school. That, by extension, means the first fifteen-ish years of their life were cut right out of the plot, just like that. Even protagonists who self-identify as “perfectly average high school students” should have a perfectly average high school student's worth of history and past experiences, but all of them get chopped, simply and dispassionately.

It goes without saying, by the way, that I'm not talking about the sort of traumatic pasts that will end up being featured in a big, elaborate backstory arc somewhere along the way. I'm talking about the mundane stuff—the plain, inconsequential aspects of their pasts that don't feel worth depicting at all. In short: if something in a story doesn't feel like it needs to be shown, it will be omitted. It will be excluded, abridged, alluded to, summarized, or simplified. After all, depicting all of those little details—depicting every single time in every single day that the protagonist eats, sleeps, and shits—would make for a terrible story.

Every once in a while (typically when a production's exhausted all its

resources), TV anime will resort to summarizing the previous events in the series in episodes people call “recaps” or “clip shows.” When you really think about it, though, isn’t fiction itself *always* a sort of summary? More specifically, it’s the sort of summary that homes in on all the good bits, showing the audience only the parts that they want to see. Out of the whole wide world the characters live in, only the aspects that either the readers want to read about or that the author wants to write about are chosen—*selected*—and those aspects are what become the final work.

Now then, this is the important part: whenever something is chosen, that means, by definition, that something else *wasn’t* chosen. The panels in manga, the frames in anime, and the text in novels were all chosen to be adapted in a selective process, and it goes without saying that there are plenty of all of the above that *weren’t* chosen as well. Scenes that were cut, sequences that didn’t get depiction, moments that were left to the readers’ imagination... These *will*, inevitably, exist, due simply to the fact that a work of fiction cannot exist in full within a piece of media.

Media is media, nothing more and nothing less. It’s simply a means of transmitting information at its core. Manga, anime, novels...they’re all just methods of communicating descriptions of worlds and the lives of the characters who live in them to readers—*not* transmitting the worlds themselves in full. Thus, it’s inevitable that the scenes depicted in media won’t be the *whole* story. It’s inevitable that there will be some situations and information not included.

Here’s an example: it’s pretty common for shonen manga to cover up a heroine’s nipples or p—y with steam, or just draw them as flat and featureless patches of skin. That doesn’t mean that the heroines don’t *have* nipples and p—s, though. They do! Their nipples and p—s are very much there. Not just in manga that draw the nipples in for the volume releases or anime that omit the steam for the Blu-rays either—every heroine in every work of fiction has nipples and a p—y. The same goes for seinen manga and R-rated doujinshi—beneath the mosaic or the black censor bar, the real deal does, in fact, exist.

It’s a given, really. Those heroines, after all, are alive. They’re living beings, which means they have the same set of genitalia that any other living being

does. They eat, breathe, and even excrete—all the natural metabolic processes you'd expect from a living human. The excretion scenes get cut, of course, unless you're reading a work created for readers with a very particular fetish, but the fact that the scenes are cut doesn't change the fact that, offscreen, all of those characters *do* use the bathroom.

There was a popular cliché among idols of a previous generation—and *Death Note*'s Misa Misa—that went something to the tune of "Idols don't poop." It was always sort of hard to tell just how serious anyone was about the whole thing, but when it all comes down to it, if idols *actually* didn't pass waste at all, that would be gross in its own right. It would make them either terminally constipated, or otherwise literal aliens.

Humans poop. No matter how pretty someone may be—no matter how beautiful a girl is—they still poop. It's nothing to be ashamed of. We're not grade-schoolers who kick up a fuss every time a classmate steps into a toilet stall. In fact, you'd have to have a screw loose to make a big deal out of something as banal as pooping.

Let's illustrate this with a hypothetical: imagine, if you will, that the world I live in is a series of light novels starring Andou Jurai as its protagonist. I can think of a number of lovely young ladies who would probably be that novel's heroines, and needless to say, every one of them poops. Even Kanzaki Tomoyo, even Kushikawa Hatoko, even Himeki Chifuyu, even Takanashi Sayumi, even Kudou Mirei, even Kuki Madoka, even Andou Machi, even Satomi Shiharu—all of them poop, without exception. You wouldn't see it described in the text or pictured in the illustrations, though, because the text and illustrations of a light novel do *not* represent its world in its totality. Aspects of the world that aren't directly depicted still exist, even including actions the characters take that common sense would dictate *shouldn't* be depicted.

They poop. They piss. Once a month, the girls get their periods. They pick their noses, and they probably pass gas too. They might groom their underarm and pubic hair. They masturbate— Well, actually, that one's sort of in question. They say that unlike guys, there are a surprising number of girls who don't masturbate at all. A survey I saw once concluded that about thirty percent of high school girls haven't tried it even once, after all...but if you look at that from

the opposite perspective, it means that *seventy* percent of high school girls *have*. That, in short, means that out of the four high school girls in the picture—Kanzaki Tomoyo, Kushikawa Hatoko, Takanashi Sayumi, and Kudou Mirei—three of them, statistically speaking, have probably masturbated at least once. I think it's safe to assume that Himeki Chifuyu and Kuki Madoka haven't yet, but... Oh. Actually, come to think of it, I wonder if those two have started getting their periods? Considering most girls have their first somewhere between the ages of ten and sixteen, it's *probably* still a little early for them, but —

Okay. I should probably stop now. I might've let myself get a little too worked up in a slightly unfortunate manner. People call me a pervert all the time, but even *I* know perfectly well that the line of thought I was traveling down a second ago was beyond the pale. My bad, won't happen again.

So anyway, I've gotten quite a fair distance off track by now, but the point that I'm really trying to get at here is that the totality of a piece of fiction is *not* contained within that piece of fiction. Manga aren't just drawings, novels aren't just prose, and anime aren't just video and voice acting. I believe that... How to put this into words...? I believe that within those innumerable works of media, deep down, the worlds that all those characters live in really do exist. The fictional worlds that the characters live in existed *before* the work comes about, and said work is created by picking and choosing the parts of the story that should be depicted in digest form—hence, fiction is a work of selection.

That's the way I see it. No—it's the way I *want* to see it. It's what I want to believe. What I want to have blind faith in. After all...the alternative is to believe that the characters and stories I love so much are nothing more than flights of imagination, and that's something that I *don't* want, by any means.

Behind the words and images that make up a work, behind the mind of the author who created it, I want to believe that a completely different dimension and timeline exist where all the characters I love live. I want to believe that, rather than the product of simple fantasy, fiction is a truthful account of a world and its characters brought into being by one's will. I want to believe that they're works of purest *nonfiction*—unembellished documentaries that present nothing but the unvarnished truth to their viewers.

Now then. After that long, long explanation, I'd bet you can take a guess as to what my seemingly contradictory words way back in the beginning of all this truly meant. There is no such thing in this world as a spinoff—or rather, from the opposite perspective, this world contains nothing *but* spinoffs. In other words, in this world, main stories and spinoffs are one and the same. Trying to differentiate them would be an outlandish thing to do.

It just makes sense, doesn't it? The only difference between a main story and a spinoff is when, where, or upon whom a spotlight is shined in the fictional world. It's as petty as a distinction could get. I think there's something sort of messed up about putting some stories on a pedestal just because they chose particular pieces of a preexisting fictional world to present in abridged form. Everyone is the main character of their own life and a supporting character in the lives of those around them. That's why I feel so strongly that it's just plain absurd that some people's stories should be the main ones and others' stories the spinoffs.

Let's say once again, for example's sake, that the world around me is part of a single light novel series. Volume one would portray the relationships within the literary club, with Andou Jurai at its center. The rom-com that revolves around him would probably count as the series's main story. Then, around volume five or so, the spotlight would shine upon Kiryuu Hajime and the supernatural battles that surround him. That might very well end up being called the spinoff of the rom-com main story.

But—and this is a big but—is there really that much of a difference between their two stories? All that the two of them are doing is living in their own worlds. Andou Jurai has been living his main story, and Kiryuu Hajime has been living his. That's all there is to it—they each live their lives to the best of their abilities, and nothing else. Sorting them into main story and spinoff, main and side plots, numbered entry and Gaiden chapter, would merely be a matter of convenience—or business—at most. A work of fiction is a carefully selected summary of events that occurred in the preexisting world of a story, adapted and depicted through media, nothing more—and there is no actual pecking order or hierarchical structure among them.

But, well... I've dragged this conversation on for quite a long time now—*too*

long—and I've honestly lost track of what it was all really supposed to be about, so to sum up: everything I've said so far is what fiction means to me. I'm not interested in forcing my viewpoint onto other people, and I'm not looking for people to identify with it either. All I want is for that to remain my personal impression as I enjoy all the stories the world has to offer.

And with all of that established...I think it's finally time for our story to begin. Not a main story or a spinoff. Just a *story*, plain and simple. A story of the world I live in, portrayed through the perspective I see it from—*my* story.

A bit of advance warning: I make no guarantee that it's going to be amusing. I'm all about *being* amused by other people, not amusing people myself. I'm not cut out to be a protagonist or a narrator—I'm more of a comic relief sort of character who throws the story for a loop every once in a while. In other words, I'm hopeless, and I take pride in that.

If you're all right with all that, though, then let's get started. It's time to begin a tale that's neither a beginning nor an end—just one story among many.

Chapter 1: Sagamicizm of the One-Ten-Three



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Chapter 1: Sagamicizm of the One-Ten-Three

“...AAAAAAUUUUUUUGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!”

I let out a deathly scream—a wail of purest, irrepressible despondency. The time: after school. The place: my own home, in my own room. I simply lay there on my bed, paying no regard to how much I was annoying my neighbors as I shrieked and lamented, a waterfall of tears pouring down my cheeks.

Despair: the complete loss of all hope. There couldn't have been a better word to sum up my current state of mind. A wish far greater than any other had been severed—a truly once-in-a-millennium stroke of luck the likes of which I would never see again had been wasted—and now I was tormented by regret and hopelessness that defied description.

“I-It's back!” I choked out between heaving sobs. “It's baaack...”

It was like a foreign body situation—or rather, a foreign member situation. I'd even go so far as to call it a sense of defilement. The almost nostalgic presence between my legs—one that I'd known very well since the moment I was born—gave me no choice but to scream to the high heavens.

“I-I'm... I'm... *I'm a guy agaaaaaain!*”

For those of you who might not have a solid grasp on the situation, a quick summary of the sequence of events that led to this point:

Summer vacation was long gone, the cultural festival had passed, and the second semester was well underway when, one day, the first love of a girl with painfully limited romantic experience triggered a large-scale incident. The girl in question was Takanashi Sayumi, a third-year student at Senkou High. She had just stepped down from her position as president of the literary club the day before, and, having been relieved of the obligations and restrictions that came with that position, she'd resolved to tell the boy she'd set her sights on how she felt about him. In other words, she'd committed to confessing her love to Andou Jurai.

In the end, however, when the moment loomed large, she hesitated. This was (I assume) her very first time telling a boy she loved him, and she just couldn't bring herself to take that final, fateful step forward. She couldn't work up the courage on her own...and so she sought to obtain it in a manner that was probably not in the spirit of the rules. *Route of Origin*, Takanashi Sayumi's supernatural power, gave her the ability to return anything to the way it was meant to be, and its definition of "anything," it seemed, extended beyond the boundaries of physical, three-dimensional objects. It could act upon concepts just as easily, and on that day, she used it on her own feelings of love, of all things.

Now then, what *is* the way that a feeling of love is meant to be? That's simple enough: there is no one correct answer, because the answer is different for everyone. As Kaneko Misuzu put it, "Everyone's different, and that's just fine." That's just how it goes with love. In other words, you could say that *not* having a way one's feelings of love are meant to be *is* the way they're meant to be...but I guess I'd be wading a little too deep into the rhetoric swamp if I tried to make that argument.

In any case, *Route of Origin* was given a challenge that would make even the most vaunted of philosophers shrug, and in response, it defied its wielder's will and went on a rampage. As a result, everyone who held feelings of love for Andou Jurai was caught up in its effects. Kanzaki Tomoyo was stricken with a case of chuunibyou, Kushikawa Hatoko turned into a yandere, Himeki Chifuyu became a high schooler, Takanashi Sayumi started wearing glasses, Kudou Mirei went mad with love—and I, Sagami Shizumu, turned into a girl.

Working backward from how the phenomenon manifested, it seemed most likely that the hidden desires within all of our hearts had been brought to the surface. That was just conjecture, of course, but in my case, at least I could say with absolute confidence that it was perfectly on the mark. I had, after all, always wanted to get turned into a girl.

For as long as I could remember, I'd dreamed of becoming a beautiful young maiden. No real surprise that I was super into gender benders—that is, stories in which the protagonist gets their gender swapped (guy to girl, in my case) for whatever reason. Andou had made it clear in the past that he wasn't into the

genre at all, and to be fair, I could understand why it would weird some people out, but personally? I loved the stuff.

Watching a story's protagonist freak out after waking up with a girl's body one morning was indescribably arousing to me. I mean that very literally—*indescribably* arousing. There were simply no words that could do justice to the unique sort of excitement it brought me. The thought of a protagonist getting to experience a woman's body, a woman's erogenous zones, a woman's arousal—all sensations that a guy could never possibly hope to savor—filled me with a guilty sort of ebullient pleasure like no other.

Did I, as a guy, want to have my way with the transformed protagonist? Or did I want to be the one getting transformed and letting a guy have his way with me? I couldn't say—trying to explain it was a hopeless effort—but whatever the case, the budding excitement in my heart and loins was without question the real deal.

The fact of the matter, however, was that in reality, inexplicable overnight gender-bending just wasn't a thing. It was a fantasy on the same level of realism as getting transmigrated to another world or getting caught up in a death game. To be fair, the fact that it was a scenario that *wasn't* realistic was probably why it had such a profound, taboo-tinged appeal that drew so many people to it so intensely, but the point is that it was something that could never, ever happen in real life. I knew that very well, so my desire to be turned into a girl was nothing more to me than a fantasy that crossed my mind on occasion. I had *no* expectations whatsoever that it would ever actually happen...but then...

But then, it actually did.

Somehow, my dream had been granted. I woke up one morning and found that I'd turned into a girl. And—though it might be weird to say this about myself—I was a pretty darn cute girl, at that. I was a self-admitted sleazebag of a guy, and widely acknowledged as such, but I'd still never lacked for girls attempting to court me, thanks mostly to the good looks I'd inherited from my mother.

I'm no narcissist, to be clear. My feelings on my own appearance didn't go any further than an objective "Yup, I'm pretty handsome, all right" every once in a

while when I looked in a mirror, and I wasn't particularly attached to my own good looks. The moment I saw the female version of me in the mirror, however, my heart began pounding like a drum. *Huh? Who the hell is that hottie?* I thought. I fell for her in an instant. It was literal love at first sight.

The word "narcissist," by the way, is derived from Narcissus, a figure in Greek mythology. Narcissus was a beautiful young man who fell in love with the image of his own face reflected in a spring—and in that moment, I suddenly understood how he'd felt at the time *very well*. *I'm so glad I was born handsome*, I thought. If I'd finally gotten gender-swapped only to come out on the other side as an uggo, all that joy I was feeling would've been replaced with pure revulsion.

Anyway, the point is that the excitement I felt from turning into a girl was genuinely beyond description for me. The circumstances being what they were, there was only one thing that I could possibly do next: masturbate. Drop everything, pants included, and just *go* at it. Explore every one of my new body's forbidden nooks and crannies—bushwhack through the untamed thicket to brave the terrible crevasse beneath, blazing a valiant trail with but a single finger. Savor every drop of pleasure that a woman's body, supposedly many times more sensitive than a man's, had to offer—

Actually, no, wait a minute. This will be my first time getting off in a girl's body—a momentous occasion. This doesn't exactly feel like a situation where "Haste makes waste" applies, but on the other hand, there's no way that taking it too lightly would be a good idea. I should get as prepared as I possibly can and make sure I have no regrets by the time I'm done!

So I did a little shopping. The moment school was over, I went out and bought a bunch of...well, let's just call them toys. Not even *I'm* enough of a degenerate to put the specific details of my purchase down in writing here, so let's just say I was well stocked on items in the "lubricating" and "vibrating" categories. I'd prepared everything I could need to make sure that my first self-pleasure experience as a girl would be the best it could possibly be.

And so, I stepped into my house, fully armed and ready to rumble. I locked the front door, went to my room, locked *that* door as well, and was just about to drop my underwear and set forth into a world of unfathomable

pleasure...when I noticed that said underwear had, somewhere along the way, turned from the pure-white panties I'd been expecting into one of my usual pairs of boxer shorts. And that wasn't all—I realized that a valley had become a mountain as well, if you catch my drift.

"I was so close... I was so *close*!" I groaned in mourning, kicking my legs with impotent frustration. *Ahh, dammit all! If I'd known this would happen, I would've come right home without stopping by the smut shop! I should've just rubbed one out with my fingers as quickly as possible! There's probably a cucumber or an eggplant in the fridge that would've done the job just fine!*

I'd been thrown for too much of a loop to do anything at all that morning, and all I'd had time to do at school was conduct a survey of the girls' restroom and locker room. As a result, my time as a girl had ended without me having ever so much as prodded the actual goods.

"This can't be happening... I turned into a girl and didn't get to do *anything* sexy at all?!" *I mean, like...am I in a shonen magazine or something?! What is this, Ranma 1/2?!*

I spent a moment longer groaning and sniffing, then finally let out a heavy sigh. I hadn't recovered from the state of shock I'd been thrown into yet, but I also knew that blubbering about it wasn't going to accomplish anything. I sat up, then took a look into the bag of adult toys that I'd bought on the way home.

"Ugh... What am I supposed to do with these now? It seemed like such a good idea to buy three sizes back *then*, since I didn't know how tight I'd be down there..."

Actually, now that I'm thinking about this with a clearer head, was I really planning on taking my own virginity with a factory-made lump of rubber? It seemed almost tragic when I thought about it in those terms...tragic, or horrifying. The excitement of turning into a girl had clearly robbed me of all composure.

Looking at my situation from a more objective point of view had helped me calm down a little, so I took the chance to inspect myself and my surroundings a little more closely. My body had completely returned to its male form, and my uniform had been swapped from a girl's to a guy's as well. My skirt was now a

pair of slacks, my panties were boxers, and the C-cup bra I'd been wearing had been wiped from existence entirely. It wasn't just that my body had gone through a transformation. My clothing and possessions—all of my character-defining accessories—had been returned to their former state.

“Everything about the world's alterations—or, really, our characters' alterations—has gone back to normal... I guess that probably means that Takanashi finally told him,” I muttered to myself. It was the only explanation I could think of for why the changes that *Route of Origin's* rampage had made to the world would have been undone. “Sheesh. You could've taken your time, Takanashi! Then all these sex toys might not have gone to waste.”

Upon reflection, it struck me that I'd said something along the lines of “I'll simply stand back and watch, like the reader I am. I'd like nothing more than to observe how Takanashi Sayumi's time as a heroine comes to a close”—a pretty cool line, all around—then totally ignored her actual confession-of-love event after school in favor of running home to get myself off. Even *I* was starting to think I was beyond help.

“I wonder how it went, though. Did it work out well for her?” I mumbled...but to be honest, I already knew the answer. Takanashi had most assuredly failed. I felt confident in saying that the two of them were definitely *not* an item now. I didn't have any proof to back that claim up, but I could still make it with certainty.

Andou's feelings—his capacity for love, if you will—were frozen. They'd been that way ever since we were in the eighth grade. He just didn't have what it took to decide to go out with any one specific individual, and unless he found some way to work past his eighth-grade trauma...

“Well, I guess I can just ask her how it all went tomorrow. For now, I have to figure out a way to work off all this frustration,” I said to myself. I'd been just one step away from the main event, only for it to be postponed—indefinitely. It probably goes without saying that I was dealing with a *lot* of pent-up lust.

“My clothes and underwear changed into stuff a guy would wear, so you'd think *those* would change into stuff for a guy too,” I grumbled bitterly as my gaze dropped to the bag once more. Everything I'd been wearing had

transformed right along with me when I'd turned back into a boy, but the bag of obscenities had remained completely unchanged.

Dammit, Route of Origin! You couldn't have been just a little more flexible? If you had to change my sex back, you could've had the decency to swap out all those women's sex toys for a bunch of TENGAs or something! What's a guy even supposed to do with all these vibrating...

"...I *guess* I could just shove one up my—" I began, but just before my frustration drove me in a risky—actually, make that straight up out-of-bounds—direction, I was forced to put my business on hold yet again, this time by a sudden phone call.

"By the way, Saitou, do you ever use toys when you masturbate?"

"Pfff!"

I'd been called over to a certain chain restaurant, where I found myself sitting directly across from a crusty, Kitaro-haired hag...or rather, from Saitou Hitomi, who had just spewed a whole mouthful of water across the table. Fortunately, I managed to dodge the spray just in time.

Ugh, nasty. I wouldn't have bothered dodging if it had been a little girl's saliva-infused water—in fact, I would've dodged *into* the blast if that'd been the case—but getting covered in a twenty-whatever-year-old's drink was no better than getting covered in sewage. I wasn't about to let *that* happen.

Saitou spent a moment coughing and spluttering, then looked back up at me. "Huh? Wha... *Excuse me?!'*"

"Oh, don't worry! You can rest assured that I'm not even slightly interested on a personal level in how you go about doing your business," I said placidly as she started wiping off the table with her napkin, eye still wide open with shock. "I just happen to be in a bit of a situation at the moment. I've come into possession of a number of women's sex toys, and I don't have anything to do with them."

Saitou gave me a look. "What sort of *situation* would end like *that?*" she asked.

“I was just thinking that I could pass them off to you if you wanted them,” I said, waving her question aside.

“I-I do *not* want them!”

“No need to be shy!”

“That’s really not the problem here!”

“Are you sure? I’ll cut you quite the deal if you take them here and now.”

“You were planning on charging me?!”

“Here, take a look at this one! See how it’s ribbed for your—”

“Wha— *No!* Do *not* pull that crap out here!” Saitou shouted, her face flushing bright red as I brought out one of the vibrating thingies I’d obtained as an example. Judging by how genuinely put off she looked, it struck me that she probably *wasn’t* just being awkward about it—she really wasn’t interested at all.

Hmm. Shame. That’s a very rare instance of me trying to do something nice for someone, wasted.

“Look...Sagami?” Saitou sighed.

“Yes?”

“Let me set something straight. We’re not, you know...we’re not *that* close, are we? We barely know each other, actually. We’re friends of friends at best, right?”

“That sounds about right.”

“Okay. So...shouldn’t you be a *little* less overfamiliar with me?” she said with a look of pure and earnest distaste. I had apparently gotten way on her bad side. Not that getting on a twenty-something woman’s bad side was a problem at all, in my mind.

“So it’s a familiarity problem, huh...? That’s a tough one,” I said. “I mean, I’m the sort of person who says whatever he thinks, *especially* when I’m talking with people I’m not particularly close to. I always end up thinking that it doesn’t matter whether or not they like me, so I may as well just say whatever I feel like

saying.”

“So what you’re saying is you’ve got issues.”

“But the thing is, looking at myself from an objective point of view, I’m not particularly close to *most* people. That means I end up treating pretty much *everyone* without any real sort of restraint or consideration.”

“...So what you’re saying is you’re an asshole.”

“Oh. But now that I think about it...that might actually have something to do with why I’m so popular,” I said, mostly to myself, as the idea sprung to mind.

Saitou looked puzzled. “How’s that? You mean people find your frankness charming, or something?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort. Let me ask you this, Saitou: what are the typical characteristics of a man who’s nice but unpopular, physical appearance aside?”

“Who knows?”

“The way I see it, there’s one big factor that unites them: they’re all scared of making girls hate them.”

Saitou fell silent, so I carried on.

“They’re scared of making girls hate them, so they don’t strike up conversations with them, or ask for their contact info, or ever contradict or disagree with them, or invite them on dates, or choose any of the destinations and activities if they *do* end up on a date, or do anything that doesn’t match the girl’s preferences in every situation. They’re completely unassertive, always paying obsessive attention to girls’ reactions to each and every little thing—and guys like that, on the whole, are never particularly popular at all.”

“You...may have a point, I suppose. Having someone be *too* accommodating is tiring in its own right,” Saitou admitted in a slightly condescending tone. I got the sense that she had next to no experience with romance, so I chalked her putting on an experienced act up to her pride as an elder.

“As for me? I’m not scared of making girls hate me at all. I can look someone in the eye without noticing or caring about how they feel about me in the slightest. I’ll live my life the way I want to, and whether that makes people like

me or hate me doesn't matter to me one bit."

"You might be a little like Akutagawa, in that sense," Saitou said after a pause.

"Akutagawa'?" I repeated.

"He's one of our members," said Saitou. "He'd be a pretty cute kid, if it weren't for the fact that he's a bratty little know-it-all. It's like he's completely incapable of being considerate. I get the sense he's just not interested in other people...or that he's not interested in the world at all, really."

"Oh? In that case, we're not alike at all," I said. "If anything, we're exact opposites. I couldn't possibly be *more* interested in people and the world. I like trying out all sorts of things *because* I'm so interested. It's just that I don't care whether or not I end up being liked or hated as a result of all that."

Saitou gave me an appraising look. "If you like someone, I think it's pretty normal for you to want them to like you as well. You don't get that at all?"

"Hmm. No, I can't say I understand the feeling," I said.

I liked plenty of girls—but I didn't have any girls whom I wanted to like me. I'd been attracted to people too, but I'd never felt the need for someone to be attracted to me. I'd wanted to fall for them, even, but I had never wanted them to fall for me.

According to John Lennon, apparently "Love is wanting to be loved." Assuming he was right about that, it struck me as possible that I was a man who would never know love. All I wanted was to admire the people I liked, as much as I possibly could, just like I admired the characters in the manga and anime I consumed. It was a complete one-way street, in my mind—a one-sided feeling I forced on them. That was what being a reader meant to me, and it was how a reader *should* be, the way I saw it.

"Of course, this whole 'guys who aren't afraid of making girls hate them get popular' theory only applies to the *popularity* stage of the equation," I said. "When it comes to dating or marriage, considerate guys do way better than self-centered ones. Just look at me! I'm pretty darn popular all around, but my relationships never last long."

"I don't think that's something you should be bragging about," Saitou said in a

reproachful tone before letting out a quiet sigh. “You know, the way you talk about yourself almost makes it sound like you’re talking about a stranger.”

That actually struck home with me, to a surprising degree.

“All right, Saitou. I think it’s time we moved on to the actual topic at hand, shall we?” I said as the drinks we’d ordered arrived. “I assume you didn’t call me out here just to chat, did you?”

“Ah, right. I didn’t, no,” Saitou replied. She took a sip of her coffee, which she’d added milk and sugar to, then looked me in the eye. “It may be a secret, and it may be in name only, but you *are* technically still a member of *Fallen Black*. I thought that I should check in with you, just for formality’s sake.”

Saitou paused for just a moment.

“Tell me, Sagami—whose side are you on?”

“Thought so,” I said with a nod. That single question was enough to let me guess, broadly, what I’d been called out for. “So it’s finally started. *Fallen Black* is falling apart.”

I’d had a fairly clear idea that this would happen for quite some time.

Fallen Black was an organization founded and led by Kiryuu Hajime, made up of his so-called twelve wings of sable darkness. There weren’t actually even close to twelve people in the organization, of course, but apparently he’d rolled the idea that the fallen angel Lucifer had twelve wings into his personal mythological headcanon somewhere along the way, so he’d named the group with that fact in mind. I really couldn’t have come up with a more disgustingly chuuni-riffic explanation if I’d tried. While we’re on the subject, he’d unilaterally appointed me to be the secret *thirteenth* wing of the organization a while back. Can’t say I was particularly happy about that.

Anyway, partly as a result of the fact that *Fallen Black* was a collection of idiosyncratic and self-assertive weirdos, and partly because Kiryuu didn’t have even the tiniest trace of leadership ability, there was barely any sense of camaraderie to speak of among the crew. Solidarity was nonexistent, and it felt like everyone was moments away from ripping out each other’s throats at any given instant...and now, it seemed they’d finally devolved into actual infighting.

“I guess this was pretty much inevitable,” I said. “Actually, I’m rather surprised it took this long.”

The usual progression for this sort of thing was for the group to start out at odds but gradually find a sense of unity and respect for one another as they overcame trial after trial, eventually forming bonds of trust so great they could never be broken—and from the very start, I’d put the odds of *Fallen Black* following that classic structure at next to nothing. Considering their boss’s overall nature, I think anyone could’ve seen this coming a mile away...and that was doubly true considering the *true reason* Kiryuu had chosen to assemble a team to fight alongside in the first place.

“How much has Hajime told you so far, Sagami?” asked Saitou.

“Very little. He only tells me about events that have already wrapped up. He barely ever clues me in on what he’s thinking or planning, and I never make any effort to drag that sort of information out of him. I’m not into spoilers,” I replied. “That said, I’m pretty sure I already know what you’re about to tell me,” I added as an afterthought. “By that, I mean I’m already aware that Kiryuu Hajime was the winner of the Fourth Spirit War.”

Saitou’s unhidden eye widened with shock. “You knew...?”

“I knew. Or, really, I’d heard all about it from him back when he was still fighting in that Fourth War,” I explained. It goes without saying that I hadn’t fought alongside him or anything of the sort. I’d taken the same stance then that I did now—my involvement was limited solely to enjoying his stories every once in a while.

“So, then... You’re telling me that you knew everything this whole time and you’ve just been feigning ignorance so you could keep watching us for kicks?” said Saitou. She sounded exasperated, but not at all angry with me. I got the sense she thought that getting mad wouldn’t be worth the effort.

“That’s just how I am,” I admitted. Feigning ignorance so I could keep watching for kicks was, after all, a reader’s specialty.

“As for me...I learned about the truth behind the current Spirit War from a spirit named Zeon,” said Saitou.

“Zeon...wasn’t that the spirit who decided to rebel against the War Management Committee? The one who’s more or less Umeko’s creator?” I asked.

Saitou nodded. “Zeon defied the committee and created Umeko as part of his plot to try to bring an end to the Fifth Spirit War—but it turns out he only did all of that out of a mixture of pride and love for his work.”

“How do you figure?”

“From what I can tell, he just couldn’t put up with how this War happened. He couldn’t stand the idea of a Spirit War being turned into a mere *human’s* plaything.”

Ahh, yes. That would do it. It was easy to imagine how vexing and intolerable the situation would feel if I were in his shoes.

The current Fifth Spirit War’s origins were vastly different from those of the four Wars that preceded it. Everything about it, after all, had been orchestrated to suit the whims of a single man. That was true of the War’s governing rules, of course, but it went further than that. Even the spirits that oversaw the event—entities that, under ordinary circumstances, would stand far above the human participants—were at his beck and call. When all was said and done, the current War’s *true* manager was none other than Kiryuu Hajime himself.

“Heh! When you put it that way, it’s no wonder Zeon snapped. A spirit like him probably sees this whole deal as nothing more than a humiliating farce. I’d bet the other spirits aren’t particularly happy with the situation either, deep down. Their whole committee’s more or less serving as Kiryuu’s slaves right now, after all.”

“I guess Hajime’s just as unpredictable for the spirits as he is for us,” said Saitou.

“That’s a given. Who would ever imagine asking someone what wish they’d like granted for being the last man standing in a battle royal and having them answer, ‘I wanna do it again’? No sane person would ever make that choice.”

The stated prize for winning the War was the right to have any one wish granted. Just how literally the phrase “*any* wish” should be taken, however,

struck me as an open question. If you wished for a hundred million yen, or a harem, or to be turned into the hottest guy (or girl) around, or for the panties off a hot babe—you know, normal wishes—the spirits would probably grant it, no problem. I couldn't see them having an issue with ethically dubious wishes like asking for someone to be killed or brought back to life either. They were entirely nonhuman entities, and I couldn't imagine that they would understand or care about the common sense or standards of good and evil that human society valued.

Let's think about it from the other way around, then: what sort of wishes *wouldn't* the spirits be willing to grant? Off the top of my head, I assumed that making like Hiei in the Dark Tournament arc and wishing for the bloody deaths of everyone who had played a part in organizing the War would be rejected outright. I just couldn't see any of the spirits in charge being willing to grant a wish that would directly harm them. But that said—how would they react if you wished for *another* Spirit War? That seemed...tough to call. *Really* tough to call.

A wish like that wouldn't directly harm any spirits, sure, but you certainly couldn't say that it wouldn't *affect* them. It was just as easy to imagine them saying "How *dare* a lowly human such as you stick your nose into the management of our sacred rite?" as it was to imagine them saying "Yeah, sure! We made a killing off the betting this time around, so running another one right away suits us just fine." We didn't even know what sort of event the Spirit War *was* from the spirits' perspective, so the best we could do was groundlessly speculate, but if I'd had to hazard my own guess, I'd have said that opinions among the spirits were split. The presence of a traitor like Zeon seemed proof enough of that.

One way or another, we knew how it'd turned out: the spirits had, as a collective, decided to accept the wish. No sooner had the Fourth Spirit War ended than the Fifth Spirit War had kicked off, just like Kiryuu Hajime had wanted it to. Against all odds, he had managed to send waves throughout a whole nonhuman world—all thanks to an unprecedented wish that one would never imagine a human thinking to make.

That brought a sudden thought to mind: it struck me that Kiryuu had always been the sort of person who'd *liked* it when *Jump* extended its popular series

past their intended endings. In a sense, he'd done the same thing—he'd extended the Spirit War, dragging out the time he could spend in his beloved world of supernatural battles as long as he could. As far as he was concerned, the situation the War put him in was as fun as anything had ever been. *Maybe from his perspective, this Fifth Spirit War is just The Spirit War: Part 2.*

"You know...around this time last year, Hajime showed up at my place out of nowhere. He looked like he'd been through hell, and he ended up asking me to join the Spirit War that same night. Thinking back on it...I'm pretty sure that was right after the Fourth War had ended and when the Fifth was just starting up. He was hurt because he'd just fought Fan...I mean, he'd just fought Yusano Genre," Saitou said, almost as if she was talking to herself. "He said something back then: 'I've gotten sick of running single-player.' I never imagined he'd meant it *that* literally."

"He got his fill of single-player during the Fourth War," I said, "so this time, he decided to go with multiplayer instead..."

In the Fifth Spirit War, the battle would continue until the field was pared down to eight remaining Players, the *Final Eight*, all of whom would have their wishes granted. In previous Spirit Wars, however, only the *last* remaining Player got a wish. The battle royal would continue until only one superpowered contestant remained.

The *Final Eight* setup had been added to the Fifth Spirit War's rules at Kiryuu's request. I didn't even have to pause to think to figure out why he'd done so: it'd raised the odds of Players forming factions and working together. It was always likely that some participants would choose to form teams even in a true battle royal, but when eight individuals could all have their wishes granted, the odds of factions developing skyrocketed.

When all was said and done, Kiryuu had gotten what he'd wanted. The Players who'd chosen to go it alone in the Fifth Spirit War had quickly been weeded out, while those who'd gathered allies survived. The whole event had turned into a de facto team competition, and Kiryuu had gotten to enjoy the multiplayer session he'd planned out to the fullest. He'd written the script *and* played the leading role, exulting in every moment of the show he'd staged.

In spite of myself, I couldn't help but let a chuckle slip out. *Honestly. You really are just the absolute best, Kiryuu Hajime—no, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. I couldn't ask for a more interesting character to follow.*

I knew for a fact I'd never get tired of watching him. We'd known each other for quite a long time, yet I still never had the foggiest idea what he was thinking, nor could I ever begin to imagine what he would do next. I mean, really—who would fight their way to the end of a battle royal, earn the right to have a wish granted, then ask to do it all over again? No ordinary human could come up with an idea like that—it was a thought that only a truly terminal case of chuunibyou could bring about in someone.

“So, I'm guessing *Fallen Black's* infighting started thanks to the truth coming out?” I speculated.

Everyone had believed the battle royal had been orchestrated by nonhuman entities, but in truth, it was a charade set up by a single man. In effect, Kiryuu had deceived all of his teammates—and, for that matter, every single Player in the Spirit War. It was easy to imagine him and his allies having a falling-out once that piece of information got leaked.

“Oh...yeah. Well, that was part of it, but there was a bit more to it than that, I think. A lot's happened lately...” said Saitou. A distant expression came across her face as her words trailed off. That look told me that when she said “a lot” had happened lately, most of it had probably not been good.

The last time I'd met up with Kiryuu and Saitou was during summer vacation, when the two of them had come to give me a ride home after Takanashi and Andou's date at the pool. I hadn't been in touch with either of them since then, and apparently, I'd missed quite a lot in the intervening period. While the people of the literary club and I had been completely absorbed in the cultural festival and other school events, the world of supernatural battles had been going through its own series of striking developments. Their world had still been moving along, even while I wasn't reading their story—just like the characters in manga and anime are alive, even when they're not on-screen.

“To make a long story short, a bunch of stuff happened that caused *Fallen Black* to completely fall apart,” said Saitou. “We're a hundred percent opposed

to each other now, and I'm pretty sure there's no chance that the team will get back together again, so I thought that I should at least check in and see how you feel about it for good measure. Whose side is the secret thirteenth wing of *Fallen Black* going to join?"

Finally, we'd returned to the core of the matter. I crossed my arms and paused to think.

"Whose side am I on, huh...? Frankly, I didn't even know that the team had split up until just now," I said. "I don't know what the fight was all about or who's on whose side."

"Oh. Fair enough—sorry."

"Oh, no, I don't mind at all! And for that matter, knowing who's fighting who won't change my answer. Regardless of the particulars, I'm not on anyone's side, and I'm not opposed to anyone. I'm simply a reader—nothing more, nothing less. I'll casually poke my head in from time to time, just like always, but you can feel free to act as if I'm not a factor in the slightest."

"Figures," Saitou said with a tired nod. It seemed she'd anticipated that my answer would be something along those lines. Clearly she hadn't been kidding when she'd said she'd come to talk with me "just for good measure." She was a very conscientious person like that—I'd known it since the moment we'd first met.

"So then, Miss Saitou—just out of personal curiosity, who *is* on whose side? Who's fighting who?" I asked, urging the conversation along. I wasn't planning on backing anyone, but speaking as a reader, I *was* rather interested in how exactly the falling-out had transpired.

"Hajime and I..."

Of course. Just as I—

"...are on opposite sides."

...thought? Huh? Wait. Hm? Scratch that—this is rather out of left field. If I'd tried to predict how exactly *Fallen Black* had fragmented into factions, I would have said that Saitou, at least, would remain by Kiryuu's side. She was his devoted follower in the most cultlike sense of the phrase, and I'd expected her

to stay blindly obedient to the bitter end.

“Come to think of it, you already stood up to him once before, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, I did. Back when we were first dealing with Umeko,” said Saitou.

“The whole rest of the team sided with you, but in the end, your rebellion sort of just fizzled out, or something to that effect.”

“It sure did. We failed back then, so I guess you could say this time’s a grudge match.”

“A grudge match?”

“That’s right. A grudge-driven rebellion,” said Saitou. There was something astonishingly bright about her expression. She didn’t look cheerful, by any means, but it was the face of a woman whose mind was unclouded by doubt or hesitation.

I paused for a moment to think. “You mentioned that you heard about the truth of the Fifth Spirit War from a spirit named Zeon, yes? Are you opposing Kiryuu because Zeon told you to?” I asked.

“No, no, not at all—though this *might* be exactly what Zeon wanted me to do, when you put it that way. He seemed to want me to help bring an end to the War Hajime’s been controlling, and as soon as possible,” said Saitou. “But the rebellion? That’s all by my own free will. I’m not doing anyone’s bidding.”

She spoke quietly, and once again, her lack of any sort of hesitation struck me. I knew very well that she wasn’t being driven by an emotional outburst—this was a path that she’d chosen after careful and serious consideration.

“So, then...is it that you couldn’t forgive Kiryuu for lying to you for so long?” I asked.

“Hmm. I’m not so sure,” Saitou said, cocking her head and smiling slightly. “I can’t say I don’t feel that way at least a little, but the truth is I’m not all that mad or resentful about it. Hajime’s *never* bothered filling me in on any of the plots he dreams up, after all.”

“Well then, what *is* driving you?”

“I guess you could say...that this was inevitable.”

“Inevitable? Really?”

“Yeah. The way I see it, what I should be doing right now isn’t following Hajime blindly—it’s opposing him in any and every way I possibly can. I’ve felt that way ever since Umeko died,” said Saitou.

I didn’t say anything. For a moment, I *couldn’t* say anything. I was overwhelmed by a pure, impossibly vast sense of tragedy.

“She...died? Y-You’re lying, right? Umeko’s not *really* dead, is she...?”

“I’m not lying. Umeko died. I was holding her in my arms when she vanished. I can’t believe you’d think for a second I’d lie about something like... W-Wait, Sagami?” said Saitou, her eye widening with shock once more—presumably on account of the fact that I’d started weeping uncontrollably. “Wh-Why are you *crying*?”

“O-Of *course* I’m crying,” I said through heaving sobs. “Umeko... My little Umeko’s *dead*?!”

“She...*really* wasn’t yours,” said Saitou. There I was, so grief-stricken I couldn’t hold back my tears, yet for some reason, she seemed more dumbfounded by me than she’d ever seemed before, to a degree I’d not imagined possible.

“What...?” I sniffled. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It’s nothing, really. Just...I had no idea it was possible for someone to cry in a way that’s so completely impossible to sympathize with,” said Saitou.

“That’s so rude... How could you say that to me when I’m this torn up over Umeko’s death?”

“That’s the thing, actually. You met her *once*, and now you’re bawling over her like you’d known her your whole life.”

I really *was* quite sad, by my standards, but apparently when someone like me broke down in tears, it came across as hollow no matter how genuine it actually was. I’d brought that upon myself, sure, but it was still sort of tragic.

“I just can’t believe it... How could she have died?” I asked.

Umeko—the girl formerly known as *System*—had been born for the sole purpose of achieving victory. It was her destiny from the moment she'd been brought into this world, so how had she ended up getting killed? It was doubly inexplicable since it wasn't supposed to be possible for losing in the Spirit War to cause a Player's death. It was supposed to be a no-risk, high-reward sort of event for its human participants, after all—that was, in fact, its biggest draw.

“Her time was up, that's all,” Saitou answered. “Umeko wasn't a human or a spirit. Her existence was something unique and ambiguous...which is why she wasn't made to live for long from the start, apparently.”

“So...she died because her lifespan was up? Poor Umeko.”

“Stop. Don't pity her,” Saitou said in a firm, unyielding tone. “Umeko told me something once: ‘To feel pity for the seven-day lifespan of a locust is nothing more than the arrogance of humanity.’”

I didn't reply.

“Hajime started the Fifth Spirit War for fun, and as a result, Umeko was born. Then, just a little while afterward, her life came to an end. It wasn't anyone's fault, and it doesn't make anyone pitiable. Umeko lived her life to the fullest. She lived a life that no one would ever be ashamed of. I know that...but,” Saitou added, a frail smile coming across her face, “knowing it doesn't mean I can accept it. I just can't bring myself to, and I know that I won't be satisfied until I've given Hajime a *really* good punch or two.”

I could tell she'd found herself in a truly difficult, downright unsolvable labyrinth of an internal conflict. Since Tanaka Umeko—*System*—had been created by the spirit rebel Zeon to put an end to Kiryuu Hajime's Spirit War, one might argue that Kiryuu Hajime's brain-dead scheme to drag the War out was the reason she'd been born in the first place, and by extension, the reason she'd had to die.

It would have been easy to denounce Kiryuu for his actions, if it weren't for the fact that doing so would equate to denouncing Tanaka Umeko's very existence. It would be tantamount to viewing her as a poor, pathetic little girl who hadn't even been able to live for a full year—equivalent to saying that she would have been better off never having been born at all. That, apparently, was

something that Saitou Hitomi couldn't tolerate. She refused to see Umeko as deserving of pity.

That said, she *also* couldn't just roll over and accept things as they were. Some part of her was beyond the control of her sense of reason, and she couldn't stop that part of her from pitying the poor girl and her untimely death in spite of everything. Saitou's kindness, in this instance, had turned out to be a double-edged sword.

And so, faced with an unresolvable deadlock of an internal conflict, Saitou Hitomi had made a choice: to take a stand against Kiryuu Hajime. It didn't exactly feel like she was being driven by airtight logic, but I also had to admit that I understood where she was coming from. Kiryuu *was* the source of the whole problem, after all. Why *wouldn't* she want to punch the guy right in the kisser?

"So then, Miss Saitou," I said, "I know that *you're* opposing Kiryuu, but what about the others? Have they all sided with you for a coup d'état like last time? Or...don't tell me you're going up against them all on your own? That seems like a tall order, just in terms of pure numbers."

"That's, uh, a little complicated," said Saitou. "To start, Fan actually broke away from *Fallen Black* before all this. She's been doing her own thing for a while now. I decided to take Hajime down a little while afterward, and from there the team split in two."

"Who landed where?"

"Toki and Aki sided with me, and Akutagawa stuck with Hajime."

Hmm. So those are the teams. Not exactly what I was expecting, but not unbelievable either.

"Oh—and Hinoemata's on Hajime's side too."

"Hinoe—? Oh, right...there *was* another guy on your team, wasn't there?" I said. He hadn't really come up much, so I'd actually forgotten about him entirely. Not that I'd put much effort into remembering him, to be fair. I'd never been particularly interested in male characters to begin with.

"Oh, that's not quite right," said Saitou. "I mean, I'd thought she was a boy for

the longest time too, but I learned that she's actually a girl just recently."

"Huh? Wait, for real?" *Hold the phone*—this *changes everything! Some rando dude doesn't interest me in the slightest, but a pretty girl pretending to be a dude? Now you've got my attention!*

"I'd always thought she was just a somewhat slender pretty boy. It'd never crossed my mind that she was *actually* a girl," said Saitou. "I guess her given name *is* androgynous, in retrospect."

"Why, what's her name?" I asked, fantasies of cross-dressing beauties running rampant through my mind. I'd let my curiosity take the wheel—but when I got my answer, my mood took another sharp and abrupt U-turn.

Frankly? I lost all interest in a heartbeat. Her name, after all, was the same as the name of a heroine whose story, in my mind, was already over. Let me put it this way: it felt like starting up an eroge with a main heroine who's *totally* your type, only to realize that she has the same name as your mother or the ugliest girl in your class. Just a total letdown.

Hinoemata Tamaki: the seventh wing of *Fallen Black*. Counting Kiryuu, the zeroth wing, and me, the thirteenth, that made *Fallen Black* a nine-person organization, with her having apparently been the last member to join. She was the newest of newbies—even Umeko had entered the fold before her. The latest member, and the *last* member, in enough senses of the word to easily render it worthy of italicization.

Her supernatural ability: *Lost Regalia*, the power to divert the royal road. In other words: the power of regicide. Before Hinoemata Tamaki, any king, regent, or reigning power would be cast down. It was the one and only power capable of opposing Tanaka Umeko, a girl born specifically to overcome any and all Players with a balance-shattering power that would never allow her to face defeat.

Lost Regalia was, in short, a hard counter to anything absolute. In fact, it had very likely been brought into being specifically to prevent *System*, a power that ran contrary to the very foundational principles of the Spirit War, from bringing said War to a premature end...or, at least, that was Kiryuu's theory, as relayed

to me by Saitou. According to him, it was the Spirit War's equivalent to how the human body creates antibodies to eliminate invading viruses. The War responded to the presence of an irregular element by introducing an irregular element of its own. I didn't know how much that theory held water—and, in fact, I was prepared to call it more of a fantasy than a theory—but Hinoemata's power just happening to be of a nature that could be described that way was, apparently, an undeniable fact.

“Of course, the whole thing ended with the absolute and her hard counter never actually coming into conflict,” I said to myself. “Or...maybe they *did* actually fight, and Saitou just didn't tell me about that part? She said that Umeko died because her lifespan ran out, but maybe that only happened because she used up too much of her power fighting her natural enemy?”

As wild, baseless theories and speculation ran through my mind, I passed through the entryway to my apartment building, returned to my room, dropped off the bag of toys that Saitou had refused to accept, then headed right back out again. I stepped into the elevator and pressed a button—not going down to the first-floor entry hall, but rather, going up this time. Less than ten seconds later, I arrived at the building's rooftop, which was a garden area surrounded by a tall metal fence. It wasn't the most beautiful garden you'd ever seen, or the most plain—just a perfectly average collection of flowerbeds—but I wasn't there for the flowers, anyway. I was there for the boy I found as I advanced through the greenery.

“Hey there. It's been a while,” I casually called out as I approached him. He was sitting on a bench, eyes glued to a handheld gaming console, and he only barely bothered glancing up from his screen to look over at me.

“Oh...you,” the boy said without even removing his headphones as his gloomy gaze fell upon me. The eye contact only lasted an instant before he looked back to his video game. A complete lack of courtesy and friendliness was one of his—that is, Akutagawa Yanagi's—core character traits.

But meh—he's cute, so he gets a pass for it. It's worth noting, by the way, that I still wasn't *quite* ready to give up on my “Akutagawa is secretly a girl” headcanon. “Yanagi” is a unisex name, and when cute boys with potentially feminine names show up in anime and manga, it's standard operating

procedure for folks in the business to assume that there's at least a solid chance they're actually a cross-dressing girl. (For the sake of argument, let's just say Tsugumi Seishiro and her masculine name are an outlier.)

"So, playing a puzzle game today? You certainly are fond of logical genres like that, aren't you?" I said.

"Not particularly..." said Akutagawa. "I'm just killing time."

"I'm a visual novel person, myself. Do you ever play those?"

"...Those aren't real games."

Hmm. Looks like our tastes are as mismatched as ever. Then again, he was also the sort of gaming extremist who would say things like "Games don't need characters or stories" and "Devs should use all the time they spend fussing over graphics to fine-tune the gameplay instead." In other words, he was a gameplay supremacist—the sort of gamer who gets really salty about how rhythm games have largely been turned into a fodder genre for moé freaks lately. I, meanwhile, was the sort of gamer who'd be all "Whatever, get to the good stuff already" when a dating sim introduced even the slightest bit of actual gameplay, so our perspectives really couldn't possibly have been less compatible.

Anyway, as to why Akutagawa Yanagi was hanging out on the rooftop of the apartment building I lived in—the very simple answer was that he lived there too. My place was on the second floor, and his was way up top on the twelfth. It was quite the coincidence, from a certain perspective, but when you factored in how the current Spirit War was centered entirely around the town we lived in, it wasn't really all that surprising that a Player would wind up living in the same apartment as me.

Despite the closeness of our lodgings, we hadn't actually come into contact at all before this whole thing had started. I'd spoken to him for the first time after the Fifth Spirit War had already kicked off, and we'd only seen each other a few times since. I'd only recently learned that he could be found up on the roof once a week, when he'd use one of those bug bomb canisters to smoke out any cockroaches that might've sneaked into his room. Apparently, the kid really couldn't stand bugs.

Oh, while we're on the subject, Saitou had clearly been under the impression that I didn't know about Akutagawa at all, but the truth was that we *had* met and spoken several times beforehand. Actually—to be totally honest—I'd made one-on-one contact with *all* the members of *Fallen Black* who'd been around before Umeko had joined. I'd given the same "I'm the organization's secret member, and you and Kiryuu are the only ones who know that I exist" speech to literally all of them. I hadn't really had a super deep plan in mind with the whole thing—I just hadn't liked the idea of them spreading rumors about me behind my back, so I'd taken a "my existence is a secret" stance to head that off at the pass.

"So, I hear you sided with Kiryuu," I said. It felt like we'd had enough pleasantries, so I cut straight to the heart of the matter. Akutagawa's expression didn't change, and he didn't even bother nodding, but I decided to take the lack of a denial as confirmation and moved right along. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd really like to know—why did you choose him?"

"No real reason," Akutagawa curtly replied. "If I had to give one...I sided with him because he's tough."

"Oh? But if memory serves, back when you were up against *F*, you sided with Saitou and betrayed Kiryuu, didn't you?"

"The point of that rebellion was to get one up on Kiryuu by stealing his prey...but this time, they're trying to *beat* him. I don't think she has any chance of pulling that off," said Akutagawa. He'd made his call from as calculating and logical of a perspective as ever.

"You *are* aware that the whole Fifth Spirit War was orchestrated by Kiryuu himself, yes? Doesn't that irritate you a little? If I were in your position, I'd probably feel like he deceived me," I said.

"Not really... And actually, I don't think that's worth getting angry about in the first place. If getting a wish granted if you made it to the *Final Eight* was a lie, I'd understand being mad...but apparently that part was true. As far as we Players are concerned, it doesn't make any difference whether the spirits set all this up or Kiryuu did."

Ever the pragmatist, this kid, I thought. He kept a perfectly cool head, calmly

assessing the outcomes of Kiryuu's actions and dispassionately determining how they would benefit him. It was like he'd deemed anger and sadness to be unnecessary emotions and cast them aside without a second thought. He didn't have the slightest hint of faith in his allies, and he didn't expect them to have faith in him either—so even though he'd been betrayed, he felt nothing.

I'd thought that the battle against Hearts would have instilled at least the beginnings of a sense of team spirit in him, but apparently, Akutagawa's fundamental nature hadn't changed at all. He was a purely solitary individual. He wasn't making an effort to be that way, per se—he just didn't find anything about being alone unpleasant. He accepted solitude, something that most people feared deeply, without a hint of resistance. You could call it a talent, in a sense, but you could also say it was a sign of something he was lacking.

In that sense, I could sympathize with him at least a little. I'd told Saitou that I wasn't like him at all—that he and I were exact opposites—but *because* we were exact opposites, it felt like the two of us were also rather similar, on a certain level. Both of us preferred to exist on the periphery of society—it's just that he was driven to do so by indifference, while I was driven by an excess of interest.

Around that point, Akutagawa let out a quiet grunt. He looked up from his gaming console and reached a hand out in front of him, holding his middle and index fingers together then spreading them apart, like he was zooming in on a smartphone's screen. That, I knew, was the gesture he used whenever he was putting his power into effect.

"Did you just use your power?" I asked, just to confirm.

"Yeah," Akutagawa grunted offhandedly. "I'm making a town in the space between cities."

Akutagawa's power, *Dead Space*, gave him the ability to manipulate gaps freely. He could wrench open any gap that existed in the world, constructing a space of his own within it. The idea of a power that could let you make a whole new town in between towns was pretty outrageous at first blush...but when I really thought about it, compared to Chifuyu's *World Create*, which could bring alternate dimensions or worlds into being without limitation, *Dead Space*

actually came across as relatively low tier. The literary club's abilities threw off the power curve something fierce.

"Making 'gaps,' huh...? That *is* a pretty unique power," I said. "It's not exactly formulaic, is it? Do you think you ended up with it because you wanted a quiet place where you could always go to be alone, maybe? Or—"

"No... It's nothing like that," said Akutagawa, sounding a little irritated. "My personality and my power have nothing to do with each other."

"Oh? Isn't that how it works, though? I thought Players were supposed to manifest powers that reflect their psyches on a deep, profound level?"

"...Analyzing people's personalities by looking at their powers is no better than doing so by looking at their blood types. If it seems like someone's power reflects their personality, that's just the Barnum effect at work. You can justify anything that way, if you read into things deeply enough."

Ahh, I see now. It sort of felt like he was implicitly shutting down every supernatural battle manga that used "people get powers that reflect their desires or personality" as part of its setup, but still, I could see his point.

Imagine, for instance, someone who has a superpower that lets them make fire. You could interpret that as coming from their burning rage, sure, but you could just as easily say it was their burning jealousy at work. Even if someone ended up with a power that seemed to have nothing to do with their personal traits, you could just say it was the embodiment of the true, hidden essence of their personality, and people would probably swallow it without question.

Did the powers Players manifested *really* have anything to do with their inner psyches? There was no way to say with absolute certainty, but it seemed clear that Akutagawa, at least, didn't believe it at all. That, or he didn't *want* to believe it. Maybe deep down, he just didn't like what it said about him.

"So, why *are* you making a town right now?" I asked. "Did Kiryuu order you to?"

"No... I'm doing it as a favor for Hinoemata," said Akutagawa.

"Hinoemata..."

“She asked me to make a town and trap some guy who goes to a local high school in it.”

“...”

“She just loves using people...but making a whole town and the surrounding landscape is sort of fun, so whatever. It’s like playing *SimCity*...”

“Hey, Akutagawa,” I said. “You said she asked you to trap a high schooler in there? What’s he like?”

“What’s he like...? Not really remarkable. He has dark hair, and he’s a little on the short side... Oh, and now that I think about it, he’s wearing the same uniform as you. I guess Hinoemata knows him.”

“Is that so?”

“...Do you know him too?”

“Yeah. He’s probably an acquaintance of mine,” I said. *Not a friend—an acquaintance.*

I didn’t have any concrete evidence to back up my assumption, but I was still quite certain I was right. It was all just too perfect to be a coincidence. The high schooler whom Akutagawa had trapped was Andou Jurai, and the one who’d set it up, Hinoemata Tamaki...was the same Tamaki whom I’d once gone out with. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind about it.

Come to think of it, didn’t she say her parents were getting a divorce? Maybe that’s why her surname changed. I completely lost interest in her the moment we broke up, so it never even occurred to me to look into that.

“So, what exactly is this Hinoemata person doing in the space you created?” I asked.

“Fighting,” said Akutagawa as he closed his eyes, presumably to sharpen his senses. I got the impression that he could tell what was happening in the spaces he created with his ability, at least to some extent. “It’s not much of a battle, though... Hinoemata’s the only one actually fighting. The high schooler’s just running away. He’s shouting at her—stuff like ‘Cut it out!’ and ‘Why are you doing this?!’ and the like.”

“Oh? And what’s Hinoemata saying in response?”

“Good question... She picked up some weird accent, all of a sudden. I can’t make out anything she’s saying at all.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Anyway...it’s almost funny how desperate the high schooler is. It’s like he’s seriously terrified of getting hurt, and just as terrified of hurting her too. I heard he’s a Player, but...maybe he doesn’t know that we come back to life if we die?”

Fights between Players in the Spirit War posed no risk of death to any of their combatants. The loser would simply have their power and memories of the War stripped from them, allowing them to return to their daily lives entirely unharmed. It was, in short, a no-risk, high-reward competition to participate in—which was exactly why close to a thousand Players had willingly chosen to join in. I had to imagine that if it had been a *real* fight to the death, nowhere near that many people would have signed up. There weren’t that many people who were willing to literally risk their lives for the sake of a wish, and even fewer who would also be willing to kill someone with their own two hands for it.

A Player’s Spirit Handler was supposed to explain as much to them upon their entry into the War...but since Andou and his friends had been isolated from the War in spite of being given powers, he’d had absolutely no way of knowing any of that. No wonder he was running like his life depended on it—he really thought it *did*.

Hinoemata, on the other hand, knew all about the no-death rule, so she had no reason to pull her punches as a result. *She* was operating under “It’s cool, we can just bring him back with the Dragon Balls!” logic, which meant that she didn’t have to worry about the consequences of hurting her foe at all. She could casually stroll right over a line that the vast majority of people would ordinarily balk at crossing.

“You know, Akutagawa, I’m really glad that the Spirit War *isn’t* an honest-to-goodness life-and-death battle royal. Series about death games and battles royal always love to go on about how it’s only when you’re pushed up against the wall in the most extreme way possible that your true nature is revealed, or

how being put in a position where you have to risk your life is what proves your true worth. You see characters in those series say stuff like that all the time, right?”

“...I guess.”

“Well, I’m one of those people who thinks those lines are completely ridiculous. They’re so off base, it’s actually hilarious. If ‘the true essence of your self’ or whatever doesn’t come to the surface unless you’re put in a life-and-death situation, then I figure that’s probably not *really* your true essence at all, is it?”

If you’re put in a situation where you have to kill someone or otherwise die yourself, then does taking that person down make you an unfeeling monster? Does letting them beat you at the cost of your life make you a kind person? Not the way I saw it, that’s for sure. There was something just plain wrong with that logic. Who decided that the way someone acts when driven to an extreme is that person’s true self? Declaring that the way you act in a life-and-death situation is your true nature is no different than declaring that four-panel moé manga are universally shallow and pointless: all it does is display how narrow-minded of a person you are.

“The way I see it, a person’s nature or value—you know, their true self—comes out in more, I don’t know...*casual* settings? I think the commonplace probably exposes people’s true natures more than anything,” I said.

Sure, we wear masks of all sorts in our day-to-day lives, covering up our true natures with thick layers of humility, duplicity, hypocrisy, defensiveness, ostentation, and on and on...but aren’t the masks we choose to wear a component of our true natures in and of themselves?

“And in that sense, the fact that everyone just comes back to life if they die in the War is a *perfect* touch. Knowing that you’ll get bailed out no matter what happens—that you have an unbreakable safety net beneath you—makes the situation *just* flexible enough. It means that the Spirit War is a tale of supernatural battles between humans fighting with their pride on the line while *also* being a completely safe slice of life in which no one will ever die, no matter what.”

Supernatural battles taking place in a mundane, slice-of-life setting—an interval when supernatural battles became commonplace, you might say. A scenario that provides a happy mixture of danger and security in equal measure.

“Nobody has to die, and nobody has to kill anyone—that safety is exactly what allows people to cross the lines that they normally wouldn’t, right?”

“...And getting to see people cross those lines is what makes it fun for spectators like you to watch?”

“Exactly. Is that a problem?”

“No...but it’s tasteless. Watching this War for the sake of pure entertainment is even more tasteless than using it to gamble like the spirits do,” said Akutagawa. There wasn’t a sense of disgust in his tone, but the words he’d chosen were surprisingly scathing. Unfortunately, my feelings weren’t nearly sensitive enough to be hurt by that level of criticism.

“All right! I should be heading on my way,” I said. I’d accomplished what I’d come here for and then some. Not only had I confirmed Hinoemata Tamaki’s identity, I’d also learned where Andou was at the moment as a bonus. It had been a far more fruitful trip than I’d anticipated. “I’ll see you around, Akutagawa. Be sure to give me a call if Hinoemata and that high schooler’s battle takes any interesting turns, okay?”

“...No way. Not my problem.”

“Oh, don’t be like that!”

“It won’t take any interesting turns, anyway. Hinoemata’s power wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Ha! True enough,” I admitted. It was so well put on his part, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

I hadn’t known that Hinoemata was Tamaki until that day, but I’d heard about her power’s nature several times beforehand. *Lost Regalia*: the power to divert the royal road. To put it in *extremely* rough and simple terms, it gave her the ability to overrule anything that she perceived as following in the footsteps of the reigning exemplars—in other words, anything she saw as conventional.

It was a very vague power with a very hard-to-grasp set of abilities, but to give a concrete example of how it worked: no one would ever be able to suddenly awaken to a new ability when she was around. That was as conventional as a plot twist could be, and that meant she could deny it. It was why her power was the hard counter to *System*, a power that allowed its bearer to go through limitless awakenings—with *System*'s stock of unlimited asspull-awakenings sealed, the ultimate player would become nothing more than an ordinary little girl.

Before Tamaki, none could seat themselves upon the throne of convention. The reigning kings of storytelling would be dragged from their places of honor, one by one. Hidden powers wouldn't awaken. Secret bloodlines wouldn't be revealed. Transfer students wouldn't show up at improbable times of the year. Rain wouldn't suddenly begin to fall when something terrible happened to your family or friends. You could shout "Did we get him?!" and find that you did, in fact, *actually* get him. If someone fell off a cliff and their body was never found, they'd still just be plain dead. If you found yourself in a life-and-death dilemma, your allies wouldn't show up at the last second to save you. You would never find yourself up to bat at the bottom of the ninth, three runs behind, with two outs and bases loaded. If you got hit by a truck and died, you wouldn't be reborn in a fantasy world. Any conventional plot development—any of the tropes and clichés that held sovereignty over storytelling—could be rejected at will. Plot armor, contrivances, clichés, foreshadowing, and archetypes were all meaningless before her.

In terms of pure power, I guess you could say it wasn't all that useful of an ability—but to Andou, who had found himself suddenly sealed off in a closed space and assaulted for no explicable reason, there could hardly have been a more threatening or terrifying power for her to have. It meant that no matter what happened, he wouldn't suddenly awaken to a power that could allow him to break free of the space Akutagawa had made, and the other members of the literary club would never come running to save him.

"...Hm?" Akutagawa grunted, cocking his head.

"What is it?" I asked.

"If Hinoemata has her power on...then his friends shouldn't be able to come

help him.”

“That’s my understanding, yes.”

“And it’s not that they can’t come help him physically...it’s more like they can’t even realize that he’s in trouble at all. Or if they already knew he was in trouble when she activated her power, they’d just never be able to find him. If they already knew where he was, then they wouldn’t be able to make it in time... Her power acts on the world itself to make sure of it.”

“It doesn’t just affect people subconsciously—it can even manipulate how luck and coincidences play out. It’s pretty impressive, isn’t it? It sort of reminds me of how the Death Note works when you write the particulars of how someone is supposed to die in it.”

“So, then...why isn’t it working on you?”

“Pardon?”

“You’re that guy’s friend...aren’t you?”

Ahh, I see now. His logic was on point...but my explanation went without saying. “We’re not friends,” I replied. “Just acquaintances.”

Lost Regalia was in effect—of that, I had no doubt. It was already denying the possibility that Andou’s friends would come running to save him from mortal peril, just like they would in a convention-driven story. They probably hadn’t even realized that he was in danger to begin with. Their powers would easily be capable of breaking into the closed space Akutagawa had created, but that was an action they would never be able to take if they didn’t know that any of this was happening. I, however, had managed to gain that piece of information. I’d been allowed to learn where he was and what sort of situation he was in with ease.

Why? It’s incredibly simple: because *Lost Regalia* knew perfectly well that Sagami Shizumu would never, under any circumstances, come running to Andou Jurai’s aid.



**Chapter 2:
Sagamicizm
of the Colorful Bow**

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Chapter 2: Sagamicizm of the Colorful Bow

At the time Takanashi's phone call came in, I was making my way through town, idly considering stopping by my usual arcade.

I'd blocked out the entire afternoon for unveiling the deepest mysteries of the female body, and with that option having been tragically and abruptly swept off the table, I'd more or less ended up with nothing to do. So, following my meetup with Saitou and my chat with Akutagawa, I'd ended up wandering my way into town with no particular objective in mind—and that's when Takanashi made contact. I picked up her call and quickly learned that not only was she out and about as well, she was actually surprisingly nearby. I suggested that we might as well chat in person, so we made the arrangements to do just that.

"A hot oolong tea for me, thank you. What will you have, Sagami?"

"Oh, I'm good. I'm stuffed to bursting right now, thanks."

"I believe it would be rather gauche for two people to claim seats in a restaurant like this with only one of them bothering to place an order."

"Hmm. Well, why not embrace the gauche for once? They say that customers are the gods of the restaurant, after all."

"That expression is only valid when invoked by a business's staff. It's not a customer's place to use it."

Our little debate carried on for some time, and in the end, Takanashi simply ordered two drinks unilaterally, telling me she'd have both of them. She was the sort of person who just wouldn't compromise when it came to manners and etiquette, apparently.

Anyway, that's how I ended up going to a chain restaurant for the second time that day. Not just any chain restaurant either—it was the exact same one that Saitou had called me over to. This particular location had a seat way in the back that was nicely separated from all the other tables, which made it the perfect venue for surreptitious conversation. The drawback, of course, was that

the place's staff were probably starting to think that I was a scummy player who'd scheduled meetups with one girl after another on the same day, but I decided to just turn a blind eye to that possibility. They weren't *entirely* wrong, after all.

"So, Sagami," Takanashi said after her oolong tea and cup of coffee arrived. "You know where Andou is at the moment?"

"Hmm," I grunted indistinctly as I prepared to twist the truth. "Why? Did something happen?"

"No... I don't believe this has reached the level of an incident just yet," Takanashi replied vaguely. Her words carried a distinct lack of confidence. "He just vanished abruptly, without any sort of contact or warning. I've tried calling him several times, but I've never gotten through to him. The rest of the literary club, Kudou, and I are all searching for him at the moment..."

Sounds like Andou's kidnapping was a bit sloppy, then. He hadn't been carefully and cleanly sealed away in a closed space when no one was watching. No, he'd been *yanked* out of his slice-of-life reality, and it had been unnatural enough for his friends to catch on that something was amiss.

That said, the fact that Takanashi felt she had the time to sit down and drink a cup of tea with me hinted that she wasn't taking her search all *that* seriously. Starting a whole search party for a seventeen-year-old guy who'd dropped out of contact for an afternoon was already something of an overreaction, by most standards. None of them, clearly, had come to realize just how dire of a situation Andou was actually in. They couldn't have—convenient excuses to just *know* that something was wrong, like a gut instinct or a sixth sense, couldn't possibly apply as things stood.

"Unfortunately, I haven't the foggiest," I said, lying with a perfectly composed smile. Of course, when I say "perfectly composed," I mean "as perfectly composed as I could make it." I *thought* I was keeping a fantastically straight face, but for all I knew, there was something unnatural about it that could have tipped her off...if it weren't for the fact that *Lost Regalia* was acting upon her subconscious at that very moment, ensuring that any such hints would slip right by her.

"I see," said Takanashi. Just as expected, she'd accepted my claim without betraying any hint of suspicion.

"So, all it takes is Andou vanishing for a minute to make everyone this worried about him? He's one popular guy. I'm actually jealous," I said.

"I seriously doubt that," replied Takanashi.

"How cruel! Believe me, I really am jealous—it's just that being jealous doesn't necessarily mean I want to be in that position myself. I would probably pass on that, if given the choice."

I looked up to fictional heroes, and I was jealous of them, but at the same time, I wanted no part in the disasters and anguish that those heroes were subjected to. That was simply the reader's way.

"No need to worry," said Takanashi. "I assure you that you could never be like Andou, even if you did aspire to it."

"True enough," I agreed. "How could I ever be like a man who has what it takes to make *you* fall for him?"

Takanashi fell silent.

"Speaking of which, how *did* professing your love turn out in the end?" I asked.

Takanashi turned away without a word. The look on her face was *not* that of a girl who had just started a new relationship. *So she got turned down...but, no, that's not quite the right expression for that. She doesn't look sad or frustrated so much as she looks...a little unsatisfied, or confused, almost? Does that mean...she hasn't actually opened up to him yet? But that doesn't make sense—if that's the case, then why did the changes that Route of Origin made to the world go away already?*

"I...didn't finish," Takanashi somewhat sadly replied. She went on to explain that partway through her big moment, *Route of Origin's* effects had been undone, forcibly returning the world to its previous state. Her confession hadn't been a success or a failure, as it had ended before it had had the chance to succeed or fail.

“I don’t know how this came about...but by the time the world had finished returning to normal, Andou was nowhere to be seen,” Takanashi concluded.

Hmm. I think I see now. The most plausible explanation that came to mind was that *Route of Origin’s* forcible deactivation had been Hinoemata Tamaki’s doing. The world going through a sudden and inexplicable transformation caused by a heroine who had *seemed* to be just another victim was a very conventional plot twist, and Hinoemata had rejected it. That logic felt a little strained, by my mark, but I had a feeling that her power’s effects and limitations were based on her perceptions and judgment in much the same way that *Route of Origin’s* were based on Takanashi’s. In other words, if she thought that a development was conventional, her power treated it that way as well.

Presumably, Hinoemata had picked the moment when the world’s alterations were undone to spirit Andou away into the closed-off space she’d had prepared...and I had to say, from Takanashi’s perspective, she couldn’t have picked a more unlucky or inconvenient time to do so. What were the odds that Takanashi’s once-in-a-lifetime, do-or-die moment would happen to overlap with Hinoemata’s ambush? Was it a coincidence? Or was it exactly what Hinoemata had been aiming for? Had she deliberately chosen to obstruct Takanashi’s confession?

I paused to ponder the matter. *Tell me, Tamaki—could you just not swallow it? Was the thought of Andou dating someone impossible for you to accept? I know how much of a cheat and a flirt you are, and I always had the sense you were a little into him too. You led him on with that attitude of yours, and he was hurt so deeply by your self-justifying lies that the wounds in his heart still haven’t healed...and you still have the gall to think that you were the victim after all that? You can’t stand the thought that Andou would take another girl’s hand after he refused to take yours?*

All of that was pure speculation on my part, of course...but if I was right, it was quite the food for thought. It would have been truly selfish and egotistical—and *amusing* as all get out. She was long since finished as a heroine in my mind, but as a plain old character, she was starting to seem rather appealing. My interest was piqued, at least a little.

“You look like you’re enjoying this,” Takanashi said out of the blue, her tone

exasperated and full of distaste.

“Ah! Excuse me. I didn’t mean to let that show on my face.”

“So...you’re not going to bother denying that you were enjoying it. How very typical of you. Is playing the spectator to others’ misfortune really that pleasant?”

“Oh, please, Takanashi. You’re making me out to be some sort of inhuman monster! It’s not like I specifically delight in watching people suffer—I’m no sadist, for the record. I just enjoy watching things that are enjoyable, that’s all.”

As long as a manga is enjoyable, that’s all that matters. As long as a book is enjoyable, that’s all that matters. As long as a light novel is enjoyable, that’s all that matters. As long as an anime is enjoyable, that’s all that matters. Sometimes seeing the characters smile with joy and cry out with delight brings you happiness, and sometimes seeing them fall into seemingly unsolvable dilemmas thrills and excites you. Whether the circumstances are fortunate or unfortunate, as long as the readers enjoy them, then nothing else bears any significance—and by the same logic, if the fortune or misfortune of others *wasn’t* enjoyable to me, then as far as I was concerned, it had no value whatsoever.

“Then again, calling me ‘inhuman’ might actually be rather apt,” I mused.

“How do you mean?” asked Takanashi.

“I mean it in the sense that I really might *not* be human.”

“What else would you be?”

“A god,” I said, probing to see how she would react. The answer, it turned out, was “with an entirely unconcealed cringe.”

“I’m perfectly content having Andou be the only chuunibyou sufferer in my life, thank you very much,” said Takanashi.

“Ha ha ha! Rest assured, I’m not saying that I’m a *literal* god. I just mean... How to put this...? Well, I mean it in the sense of that expression I brought up earlier—‘a restaurant’s customers are its gods’—in the same way, a story’s readers are its gods.”

“Readers as gods...?” Takanashi said thoughtfully. “That’s certainly a novel perspective, I suppose. I’d sooner think that authors would be the gods of their stories.”

Most people probably would have agreed with her. Authors do seem godlike, at a glance—after all, they’re the creator entities who generate stories in their minds and grant them form in reality. I, however, saw it precisely the opposite way around. The *readers*, in my mind, were the true gods.

If the Old Testament is to be believed, God created humanity—but whenever humanity diverged even slightly from God’s will, divine punishment was instant and brutal. Take Noah’s great flood, or the Tower of Babel. In both of those cases, God spectated humanity’s actions in minute detail and flew into a rage when people stepped away from the beaten path. God never paid any mind to the circumstances of the humans who, by all rights, were just doing their best to live, instead choosing to flatly and unapologetically deny their choices. It was that pride—that arrogance—that I saw in readers, and that led me to believe they were far more godlike than your typical author.

“Why do people enjoy stories? Why do they enjoy fiction? Stories themselves have been a part of our civilizations since time immemorial. The oldest story in history was, umm...*The Tale of Genji*, dating back to the Heian Era, I think?”

“Strictly speaking, *The Tale of Genji* is the world’s oldest full-length novel. A great number of poems and works of short-form fiction date back further than that,” said Takanashi.

“Hmm. Well, anyway, from over a thousand years ago all the way up until today, humankind has enjoyed stories. Not just plain prose—we’ve enjoyed *stories*, depicting characters and the fictional worlds those characters live their oh-so-interesting lives in. Why is that, do you think?”

Takanashi seemed to be at a loss for words and didn’t reply.

“It’s simple, really: because stories are entertaining,” I said.

“I...believe that’s a rather unfair answer for you to present,” Takanashi said as she shot me a pointed glare.

She had a point, honestly. What I’d just done was the equivalent of having

someone ask you “Hey, why do you think that series was such a hit?” and you answering “Because it was entertaining” with a pretentious smirk. It was a completely unenlightening and unproductive answer that literally anyone could come up with, yet the fact that it was very hard to say it was strictly *wrong* made it unfair indeed.

“Okay, then let’s try grappling with the question on a slightly deeper level. Why do people like stories? What is it about stories that we find interesting?” I asked rhetorically. There was no one clearly correct answer, of course. Any number of people would give you any number of different replies, I’d think. But in my mind, there was just one answer... “The way I see it, it’s because the times when people experience a story are the only times they can become gods.”

“Reading stories...makes us into gods...?”

“That’s what makes them entertaining. That’s what makes people seek them out. After all, wanting to be a god is just human nature.”

Once again, Takanashi lapsed into silence.

“Of course, I’m talking about gods in the metaphorical sense again. It might be better to say that when we read stories, we have a godlike level of omnipotence,” I added.

Imagine a being who looks down upon humanity from an outside, third-person perspective, viewing our struggles and arrogantly, patronizingly critiquing them as being interesting or boring—a being who sees even matters of life and death as entertainment, who’s allowed to sum up their feelings on those matters with inhumane dispassion, saying things like “That was funny” or “I cried, for real.” A reader’s arrogance knows no bounds, and if that doesn’t make them gods, then what else could they possibly be? When we read stories—when we become readers—we come as close as we ever can to the illusion of genuine godhood.

“The sense of omnipotence granted to readers is brain-meltingly, addictively pleasurable. That’s exactly why people have needed stories since long, long ago, and why they continue to be created up to this very day. Don’t you think that makes sense?”

“I don’t think that’s all there is to it, and it’s a rather difficult theory to bring myself to approve of...but at the very least, I understand what you’re trying to say. Thus, readers are gods...” muttered Takanashi.

“I’m glad to see we’ve reached an understanding.”

“In that case, Sagami—when you claim to be a reader and treat even real, living humans as if they’re characters in a work of fiction, do you do so because you want to indulge in the godlike sense of omnipotence that you’re describing?”

“Maybe I do,” I said, muddying the waters with a vague half affirmation...or maybe “muddying the waters” isn’t the right expression. I was, after all, being completely sincere in my ambiguity. I myself didn’t fully understand it. “Maybe” was the greatest level of certainty on which I could engage with the topic. I considered myself someone who was very good at looking at things from an objective viewpoint, but on the flip side, looking at myself *subjectively*—viewing myself from my own internal perspective—wasn’t my strong suit. I loved watching others more than anything, but when I tried watching *myself*, I suddenly understood nothing at all.

Ahh, if only I were a character in a story. It’d be so easy for me to understand my own inner workings if I were. If I were in a manga, I could just read my own speech bubbles, and if I were in a novel, I could read the descriptive text about me. I’m sure there’d be something written about my inner feelings when I came onto the scene, and if I just read those lines, I could understand it all in an instant. I’d be able to read my own inner voice in plain, simple words, without any lies or pretenses in the way. If I were a character in a work of fiction...

“...Hm,” I grunted as a thought suddenly struck me. “I get the distinct impression that you view my nature—the way I treat real human beings as if they’re fictional characters—as unsettling...but in all practicality, are you *really* sure your perspective is correct to begin with?”

“In what sense?”

“Are you absolutely certain that we are, in fact, real human beings?”

Takanashi gave me a blank stare.

“What if, for instance, all of *us* are just characters in some novel?” I said, pressing onward in spite of her bemusement. “For all we know, Sagami Shizumu, Takanashi Sayumi, Andou Jurai, Kanzaki Tomoyo, Himeki Chifuyu, Kudou Mirei, and on and on—*everyone* we know—could all just be works of fiction, right? Maybe all the events and drama that the literary club has been through so far were just flights of fancy, dreamed up and put down upon a page...the fabricated work of some unknown author.”

I, Sagami Shizumu, was a character who viewed all humans in all their humanity as if *they* were nothing more than characters in a manga or a novel, enjoying and criticizing their actions as my whims drove me. That led me to a theory: somewhere out there, someone else could be observing *me* in much the same way. They could be assessing my character, deciding if they liked me or hated me, if I was obnoxious or fundamentally repulsive, looking down on me and smugly critiquing me from some other dimension.

Just look at the Spirit War. The spirits, beings that existed in a realm above humanity’s, made Players fight one another and gambled on the outcome. They observed and appreciated humans as a spectacle. Learning about their existence might have been what prompted a thought in me: what if it wasn’t *just* the Spirit War that that applied to? What if our daily lives were all being observed and appreciated as well? Observed—*read*—by someone we knew nothing about? By a reader whom we could never, under any circumstances, perceive?

“Maybe as we speak, there’s a reader reading every word that comes out of my mouth. Oh—but if that were true, then maybe me talking about it like this would be a pretty big problem? Characters suddenly spouting meta crap doesn’t really get a good reception most of the time. Maybe the readers who don’t like meta stuff are thinking, ‘Oh, great, the author’s jacking off over how clever he is again!’ right about now.”

Takanashi was deathly silent. Of course, that was probably the natural reaction considering how absurd and unfounded the nonsense I was spouting was. Eventually, however...

“The Late Queen Problem.”

...she spoke up.

“Huh? ‘The late queen’? Excuse me?”

“The Late Queen Problem,” Takanashi repeated. “In simple terms, it’s a structural problem inherent to the mystery genre. A large number of stories attributed to Ellery Queen are structured around it, hence the name.”

“Hmm? This is news to me. I’ve never been a huge mystery person,” I said, though if I were being honest, I would’ve said that I didn’t read mystery novels at all. I read all the big, nationally popular mystery manga, sure, but I preferred to avoid the whole rest of the genre. Frankly, I wasn’t a fan. In fact, I couldn’t stand it.

Maybe I shouldn’t be saying this, and doing so will probably come across as me crapping on the mystery genre as a whole, but I had no interest in reading stories where I didn’t know what was going to happen. Why would I want to read a story where the heroine might die or end up being the villain? No, I was into stories where the main character was an OP AF badass who transferred into an all girls’ academy, or stories where the main character was reincarnated in another world with cheat skills and got a harem. I liked nice, comfortable stories that laid their chosen fantasy on thick.

“So, Takanashi—why bring up this whole late whatever problem?” I asked.

“Your explanation brought it to mind, that’s all,” Takanashi replied. “The scenario you described was rather reminiscent of an aspect of the Late Queen Problem—that is, what people refer to as the First Late Queen Problem.”

“And what sort of problem is that?”

“It may be difficult to explain to someone who doesn’t read mysteries, but to force it into terms you’d understand...the problem boils down to the fact that a master detective can never genuinely arrive at the truth of a crime.”

“Oh?” I cocked my head without even realizing it. *A master detective can never find the truth? Isn’t finding the truth exactly what makes someone a master detective though?*

“In mystery novels, the starring detective gradually assembles clues, working their way toward unraveling a mystery. Once they’ve amassed all the clues they

need, they reason their way to the truth of the mystery and put on a show of explaining their logic to the cast of characters involved in the incident.”

“Hmm.”

“In short, in order for the detective to solve the mystery—to arrive at the truth—they have to find all the hints that point toward that solution...but in truth, there’s no way for anyone to ever possibly tell whether *all* of the evidence in a mystery story has actually been discovered.”

“Huh...? Wait, no, of course you could. You can tell you’re almost at the end just by looking at how many pages are left in the book! And besides, doesn’t the detective starting to explain their logic prove that they’ve found all the clues on its own?”

“That’s something we can only say from a reader’s perspective. The detective *within* the story has no concrete means of proving that they’ve truly found all the clues relating to the mystery they’re trying to solve.”

I paused to mull the idea over, and in the meantime, Takanashi carried on.

“Even if the detective believes that they’ve unraveled the mystery in full—even if the criminal confesses their crimes—there could always be another perpetrator lurking behind the scenes who secretly pulled all the strings. There could be a *true* villain who manipulated the criminal into committing their misdeeds without the criminal having ever even realized it. As readers, we know that there is no true villain—that there can’t be a secret character who never appears at any point in the text of the story—but the *detective* has no such knowledge, and they can’t prove that an overarching undiscovered criminal doesn’t exist.”

“Proving that something *doesn’t* exist... This is starting to veer toward probatio diabolica territory.”

“So long as a mystery novel remains a mystery novel, the work itself can never prove that the solution it presents to its central mystery is, in fact, the complete and genuine truth. After all, the detective can never know whether information that they simply aren’t aware of exists—and *that* is the First Late Queen Problem.”

“Ha ha! Interesting. That’s so meta that it’s almost hilarious,” I said.

To put this whole matter into simple shonen manga terms: when the protagonist beats the final boss of the story, there isn’t *really* any way for them to prove that the character they beat was *truly* the final boss. If they don’t know for sure it’s really over, isn’t it kind of weird for them to act like the problem is totally done and dusted? Or, well, something to that effect, anyway.

Hmm. It’s not that I didn’t understand what she was saying, per se—it just felt like a lot of quibbling no matter how I looked at it. If you posted something like that online, people would probably think you were just an obnoxious hater, out to flame the story for no good reason. They’d probably be all “You could just *not* read manga, y’know?” and stuff.

“What you were describing before, Sagami—the idea that we may all be characters in a work of fiction—strikes me as rather similar to the Late Queen Problem. We ourselves are incapable of conclusively proving that we’re not fictional. Nor, for that matter, could we ever prove that we *are* fictional. We can never exceed the boundaries of our own perceptions, so if, hypothetically, you *were* correct and a reader in another world was observing our every action, there would be no conceivable means for us to perceive them. In short, arguing the point at all is an exercise in futility.”

“...”

“This has all become a little hard to follow, hasn’t it...? In retrospect, I suppose that ‘The Butterfly Dream’ might have been a better example to invoke.”

“Oh! That one, I know. That was Zhuangzi’s idea, wasn’t it?”

“The Butterfly Dream”: one day, Zhuang Zhou (often known as Zhuangzi) dreamed he’d become a butterfly. In that dream, he forgot all about having ever been a human, flying freely wherever his whims took him, until suddenly he awoke with a start, recalling that he was a human named Zhuang Zhou in a flash. In that moment, a thought occurred to him: had he become a butterfly in a dream, or was he a butterfly who was now dreaming of being a human?

That’s the tale, in broad strokes. It was easy enough to laugh off—of *course* he wasn’t a butterfly dreaming of being human—but just like the five-minute

hypothesis, when it came time to actually *prove* the matter one way or another, there was simply no way to manage it. So long as we are human, that proof remains beyond us.

“So, the current me, the human being named Sagami Shizumu, could very well be someone else—maybe even something not human at all—*dreaming* of being Sagami Shizumu, just like I could be a fictional character in a work written by some unknown author? Interesting. You’re right—they are more or less the same assertion, in the end,” I admitted.

“No one could say for sure whether the butterfly or the human was their real self, and no one can prove whether this world is real or a work of fiction. We can’t prove the truth one way or another, and we can’t definitively rule out either possibility. No matter how preposterous the hypothesis may seem, it’s still possible to argue it into a place of potential reality if you’re willing to twist logic enough to do so. In other words, arguing the point—”

“...is an exercise in futility.”

“Quite so,” Takanashi said definitively, then paused to take a sip of her tea.

Hm. How strange. Is it just me, or has she argued me into a corner? If someone said she’d just argued circles around me, I wouldn’t have been able to dispute the idea. Normally, I’d expect to have felt frustrated by that, but strangely enough, her polite and logical refutation of the point I’d tried to make had left me feeling almost refreshed instead.

“You know, you’re incredible, Takanashi,” I said.

“...”

“Could you maybe try to look at least a *little* less openly suspicious?” *Hmmm. I’m starting to notice a pattern: giving compliments to people who know what I’m like gets me nothing but scowls in exchange. Not that I didn’t bring that upon myself, but still.* “I’m really, genuinely impressed, that’s all. Inspired, even. I was perfectly aware that I was coming at you with a nonsensical, downright insane theory, and yet instead of dismissing me, laughing at me, or condescending to me, you *listened* and offered a well-reasoned explanation of your own opinion in exchange.”

I'd been fully prepared for a "What the hell are you talking about, you lunatic?" when I'd brought the subject up, but she'd engaged with my ideas and willingly responded to them. That was beyond my expectations, and honestly, it was rather nice. I believe it's human nature to want others to identify with you—to seek out affirmation—but even when you don't get either of those things, having someone at least hear your ideas out and take them seriously is by no means unpleasant.

"Andou thinks so too, you know? He tells me all the time that he loves that side of you," I said.

"H-He does?"

"No, I just made that up."

Takanashi went red in the face as she took in a sharp breath and shot me a frigid glare. *Ooh, how terrifying!*

I'd been lying about Andou having said that to me, yes, but in all fairness, I *had* gotten the distinct impression that he really felt that way. He might not have used the word "love," but it certainly seemed like he earnestly respected Takanashi's conscientiousness and sincerity.

"I don't believe I've done anything worthy of being complimented today," said Takanashi. "I was simply taught from a young age to listen carefully to people when they speak to me."

"The fact that you actually follow through on all the things they taught you to do when you were little strikes me as plenty praiseworthy on its own," I countered. "It's probably not my place to say this, but listening carefully to someone like *me* must be more than a little stress-inducing."

"You're right. It *isn't* your place to say that," Takanashi said, then she heaved a deep sigh...before suddenly laughing like a person who'd acquiesced to their fate. "In spite of everything, the two of us seem to have reached a point where we can manage a casual chat, haven't we? I'd sooner not have to see you at all, but the thought of running away from you was so vexing that I couldn't bring myself to, and now here I am, speaking with you face-to-face."

"I guess you just buckled to social pressure."

“I’m inclined to agree...but regardless, thanks to that decision, I’ve reached an understanding.”

After saying that, Takanashi looked straight at me. She gazed right into my eyes, silently and intently.

A chill ran down my spine, and I shuddered reflexively. I felt a strange sense of unease. It was like she was staring right through me—*reading* me. Takanashi was trying to view me in my totality. She was assessing who Sagami Shizumu was as a character...or at least, that’s the sense I got. This was a first for me. I liked acting as a third party, viewing those around me from up on high and delivering conceited impressions of their actions unsolicited. Having someone *else* assess me—look at me in that same way—was something new.

“At first, I didn’t know what to make of you as a person. I found you off-putting—severely disquieting on occasion—but that was the extent of it. That said, over the course of our many recent exchanges, I believe I’ve come to understand what drives you, at least to some extent,” said Takanashi. She spoke like a simple reader, sharing her impression of the work she’d just consumed.

“You aren’t a reader, Sagami. You’re—”

I didn’t hear a single word she said after that point. Well, I probably *heard* her in a physical sense, but what she *said* didn’t manage to reach my heart or mind at all. My instincts—my nature—my *character*—rejected her impression of me. I couldn’t hear it. I couldn’t accept it. I couldn’t let it be portrayed as dialogue.

If I heard what she had to say, I would have ceased to be myself—to be a reader. I don’t know why I had that sense, but it was very clear to me.



Chapter 3: Sagamicizm of the Summer Autumn

The next thing I knew, I found that I'd somehow traveled quite a long distance away from the restaurant. I was on the outskirts of town, far enough that you'd have to take a bus or a taxi to get there. How I'd managed it was a mystery—I certainly didn't remember, anyway. It was almost like my subconscious had driven me to run away from the place where I'd had my conversation with Takanashi, and before I knew it, it had carried me here.

"Well...crap. I don't remember a thing," I muttered to myself. I could recall up to the point where I was talking with Takanashi, but when and how we'd said our goodbyes was a complete blank. "Hmm... She must have said something that'd crossed a line—something that could've uprooted the foundations of who I am as a character. My brain must have purged whatever she said from my memory—along with the surrounding period of time—to make sure that my mind and personality didn't break down... Huh. I guess I'm a surprisingly delicate, weak-minded sort of character, when all's said and done."

I spoke with total objectivity, observing myself from an outside perspective, which helped give me the presence of mind to stay calm and get a grasp of my situation. Being able to stay calm in a situation like this was probably a *bad* sign, from a certain perspective, but I decided not to let that bother me.

I took a look around at my surroundings. I was standing on a long, paved road, with no immediately visible cross streets in either direction. Down the road lay a quiet, sleepy townscape, and far up along it were the nearby mountains, covered in trees that had turned striking shades of orange and crimson as fall had set in. A shorter distance up the road, meanwhile, was the large, sturdily built front gate to a school.

"Let's see here... I know this place... Oh, of course—this is right near Sakuragawa Girls' Academy, isn't it?"

Sakuragawa Girls' Academy was a girls' school located in the foothills by our town. It had a long, storied history as being the place where local well-to-do

young ladies were educated, and it was rather famous in the area as a result. It was a good long distance away from the town center, but its grounds were relatively massive in exchange, and its security measures were supposedly airtight. As a result, it had an excellent reputation with students and parents alike.

“So, Takanashi shattered my psyche, and I ended up wandering my way all the way over here in a daze, then?” I said to myself with a nod. It was a nonsensical thing to do on my part, at first blush, but I *did* have a rational explanation in mind for why I’d ended up here in particular. I’d paid this school a number of visits as of late, and the route there had become something of a matter of muscle memory for me. My malfunctioning mind, then, must have replayed that routine.

Why had I been to this school so often recently? Simply put, my ex was a student here—that being, of course, the ex who had dumped me on the day of the cultural festival, on the basis that the way I looked at elementary school girls made me look “like some sort of deviant nutjob.” Up until that point, though, I’d come pick her up at school whenever she called me over. We’d take the bus into town and walk around together, doing the sort of stuff that most ordinary couples did...not that our relationship had lasted particularly long, of course.

“We got together right around when Summer Comiket was going on, so...I guess it lasted about a month?” I said to myself.

That was just about an average-length relationship for me. It was very typical for the girls I dated to break up with me right around the one-month mark, usually on account of my geeky hobbies. My all-time shortest relationship on record, by the way, lasted for just three days in total. I’d suggested that we play an eroge in my room together, and she’d dumped me on the spot. Heroines who were super into eroge were a whole trend in light novels just a little while back, but apparently, it didn’t have any basis in reality after all. My *longest* relationship, on the other hand...

“...I guess that’d be Tamaki, huh?”

When all was said and done, the two of us had stayed together for the better

part of a year. I absolutely never changed my habits or lifestyle, whether or not I had a girlfriend at any given moment, so Tamaki probably deserved the bulk of the credit for having matched my pace and keeping our relationship going. She'd never criticized me for my hobbies and interests, and she'd done her best to meet me halfway in whatever ways she could. She'd buy the books I was reading and read them herself too, despite the fact that I'd never recommend them to her. I'd even tried loaning her an eroge once, just to see what would happen, and she'd cleared every single route. I'm sure she'd thought it was boring—in fact, I'd bet she'd probably thought it was intolerably disgusting—but she'd seen it through to the end anyway just because I'd recommended it to her. And what had she said in the end? "It was a hoot." She'd been lying, of course. That much had been obvious.

Had I been touched by the depths of her consideration? Not really. I'd been more curious about just how far she'd be willing to go, so when I'd picked out a second eroge to lend her, I'd gone with something that, secretly, I hadn't been even the slightest bit into: a scat fetish game. Not just any scat game either—I'd gone and bought one that had been notorious for being so absurdly out-there with its content that even *I* would've been repulsed by it, then I'd lied and told her that I'd been super hooked on it lately.

Shockingly enough? She'd actually played it. She'd pushed through, coming out in a zombielike state of dead-eyed exhaustion after having genuinely completed it from start to finish—including the bad endings that'd had a reputation for dying your entire screen in a repulsive shade of brown.

Had I been moved by her heroic effort? No. In fact, I'd laughed my ass off. I'm pretty sure I cackled harder than I'd ever cackled before.

"That...was probably a dick move, huh?" I reflected. I *did* feel just a little guilty about it, looking back. I was famous for my complete and unflappable shamelessness, so the fact that I felt *any* sort of guilt was, I imagined, a sign that I'd gone altogether too far on that one. I'd put her through something that might well have traumatized her for a lifetime for shits and giggles...but she'd kept going out with me anyway.

I never understood why. To this day, I still didn't get what she'd seen in a guy like me. And yet, no matter what I did...

“Oh?” I grunted, shaking myself out of my momentary stroll down memory lane as I noticed a trio of schoolgirls walking through the Sakuragawa Girls’ Academy front gate.

“It’s gotten ever so late, hasn’t it?” said one of the girls.

“Truly!” said another. “Honestly, Midori, we *told* you not to dawdle.”

“P-Pardon me, Miss Sumire!” said the third—seemingly the youngest.

“Now now, Sumire,” said the first girl, “you mustn’t be so harsh on her. It was only thanks to Midori’s helping hand that our poster turned out so wonderfully, after all.”

Yup—those are some well-to-do young ladies, all right. I don’t even know how to describe it...everything about them just screams it, somehow.

The majority of the students at Sakuragawa Girls’ were more or less your prototypical pure and innocent maidens. My ex had been the same way. They were the sort of girls who could say “Good day to you” and “I beg your pardon” with a straight face and actually *mean* it. Frankly, I was pretty into all that. Most of them were cute, not to mention sheltered—and most importantly of all, the odds of them being virgins were *way* higher than average. I was convinced that a veritable field of lilies was blooming within that school, if you catch my drift.

The three girls who had just stepped through the gate were each high-level specimens in their own right. The one in the middle, who had long hair tied back in a pair of braids and was wearing glasses, was... *Wait, huh? Isn’t that...?*

“I can’t believe how time has flown! There’s only two weeks left before the election now, Aki.”

“You’re right... I must admit, I’m a little apprehensive. Being the student council’s president is such a heavy responsibility—can I truly bear it? Not to mention that all the other candidates are wonderful girls, each qualified in her own right.”

“*Really*, Aki, this is no time to be so timid! Have some confidence in yourself!”

“M-Miss Sumire’s right! I know you’d be a wonderful president, Miss Aki!”

“Tee-hee! I appreciate the sentiment, Sumire—and yours as well, Midori. I

suppose my pessimism got the better of me for a moment. Rest assured, I have no intention of backing down after everything we've done! I'll do my utmost to ensure that neither you nor the others who have supported me have anything to regret, whether or not I... Ah." The girl with the braids grunted, her words trailing off as she finally noticed the pointed stare I was directing at her.

"Is something the matter, Aki?"

"N-No, um... That is... I've just remembered something I have to do. I'm terribly sorry, but I'll have to bid you farewell for the time being."

A series of perfectly rich-girlesque good-day-to-yous later, the girl with the braids split off from her pair of friends...and started making her way directly toward me. She'd been carrying her bag in front of her at first, both hands grasping its handle as she'd walked with a prim and proper gait, but the moment her friends were out of eyeshot, she slung the bag over one shoulder and picked up her pace, making a beeline for me with a bold, purposeful stride. Her *whole* vibe had done a complete one-eighty, so instantly it was downright hilarious.

"Okay, Shizu, what's the deal? What're *you* here for? I'd kinda really rather *not* have to deal with a sleazy creep like you hanging around my school, 'kay?" the girl—Natsu Aki—said with an undisguised scowl as she crossed the road and stepped up to me. Her well-to-do-little-lady persona had vanished so thoroughly, you'd almost think it had been one big hallucination. It was a stunning transformation.

"It's been a while, Aki," I said.

"Think you could not call me by my first name, thanks?"

"How about Nakki, then?"

"Hmph. Sure, that works."

It does? Really? Calling her by a nickname felt more overfamiliar than calling her by her first name, no matter how I looked at it, but apparently, her standards and mine just weren't aligned whatsoever.

Natsu Aki was the third wing of *Fallen Black*, and she had the power *Head Hunting*. She was a second-year in high school, same as me, and while her

braids gave her a plain and pure sort of look, her personality was as bright and uninhibited as the trendiest teen you'd ever meet...or at least, I'd *thought* that was what she was like, anyway.

"So, is that how you try to play yourself off at school, Nakki?" I asked. Stuffy, rich-girl speech mannerisms; an ambition to join the student council; an aura of absolute and immaculate purity—the Aki I'd just witnessed could hardly have been more different from the one I knew.

"More or less," said Aki. "I'm doing the reliable older sister figure thing, basically. I'm not really into the idea of being on the council, but everyone in my class and all the underclassmen in my club kept badgering me until I agreed to go for it."

"You're pretty good at playing the innocent little rich girl, huh?" I said, going out of my way to make it sound like I was mocking her.

Aki, however, didn't get upset at all. "Playing innocent, huh...?" she muttered thoughtfully. "I dunno about that. Could always be the opposite, right?"

"The opposite?"

"You met the Player me first, Shizu, so I take it you think that's the real version—but dontcha think it's possible that *that's* the personality I had to make up? Maybe I've been putting up a front and bluffing my rear off this whole time so that everyone else in the Spirit War won't think I'm easy pickings, and the 'proper little lady at school' version of me's *actually* who I am at heart."

"Oh? Is *that* your game?" It felt like she'd gotten one up on me. I had indeed been caught up in my own preconceptions. I had baselessly concluded that the pure and proper rich girl persona *had* to be the fake one because that's just how it always worked—completely disregarding the fact that a pure and helpless girl putting on a bad-girl persona to stay alive in a world of supernatural battles was *also* a respectable trope in its own right. "So, which one *is* the real Natsu Aki, in the end?"

"Who knows?" said Aki. "Maybe they're both real, or maybe they're both fake. I act totally differently when I'm talking to my parents at home too, by the way."

“Oh? That sounds hard to keep up.”

“Nah, not really. I mean, everyone acts differently from situation to situation, right? It’s pretty normal stuff—especially for girls.”

“Hmm. You might have a point. People *do* have to read the room and keep up a persona pretty much all the time nowadays, even when we’re online.”

As long as people have to communicate with one another, the ability to take a hint and act accordingly will be valued, so knowing how to put on a persona is an absolute necessity as a result. That goes without saying on social media services where people use their real names, but it doesn’t stop there—the ability to take a hint and go with the flow is vital even on anonymous message boards. The whole point of those places is to let all their users raise irresponsible, impulse-driven stinks about whatever they want, sure, and people might compare them to the crazed scribbles you find on bathroom walls sometimes, but even there, communicating with others still requires you to be able to read the situation to some degree.

“I can’t say that I get the ‘especially for girls’ part though,” I noted.

“People say that putting on acts is second nature to girls, don’t they?” Aki somewhat boastfully replied.

When she put it that way, I *had* heard a whole theory about how way back in the day, the men would go out to hunt and the women would be left at home to wait around together. In that case, being ostracized from the social group would effectively be a death sentence for women—according to some people, anyway. Maybe the tendency to prefer acting as a group—and to falsify their personalities and put on acts to fit into that group—was a baked-in habit for girls on a genetic level.

“Girls all put on acts and play innocent—some more so, some less,” said Aki. “I do it, and Fanfan’s basically the living embodiment of it. Who else... Oh, yeah—Hinotama too! She was pretty amazing, actually.”

Hinotama...? Oh, she means Tamaki. Hinoemata Tamaki, thus, Hinotama. Aki’s sense for nicknames was as superbly questionable as ever, clearly.

“Hinotama’s act was so intense, she played a whole different gender!” said

Aki. “Now that was one hell of a persona if I’ve ever seen one.”

“I don’t know...isn’t that a whole different thing?” I countered. “She was just cross-dressing, right?”

“Nah, she wasn’t *just* cross-dressing,” Aki said definitively. The look on her face was hard to read, in a way that was unusual for her. “When she was with us, she *became* a guy. It felt less like she was trying to hide the fact that she was a girl, and more like...like she was trying to *be* a guy with everything she had. I dunno why, though.”

“That...might have been my fault,” I muttered.

Aki blinked. “Huh? Wait, hold the phone! What’s that mean? You know her, Shizu?”

“Well, we *are* exes, so yeah,” I admitted freely. I didn’t see any particular reason to hide that fact. “Some things happened, we broke up, and I said some pretty harsh stuff to her when we split apart in the end. ‘I can’t even see you as a girl anymore,’ or something along those lines. I was thinking she might’ve decided to act like a guy in the world of supernatural battles as a way of getting back at me, maybe.”

I laid out the theory more or less as it came to mind...and only after I finished did I realize how *incredibly* embarrassing it would be if I turned out to have been off the mark. I would end up looking like some sort of *hypernarcissist*, in the worst case.

“Huh! That’s a shock. Your ex, seriously? And she didn’t dress like a guy when you were together? She just acted like a normal girl?” asked Aki.

“Right,” I said. “She liked a sort of rustic style of clothing—big loose dresses and stuff. But, well...I guess she did do an awful lot of acting, come to think of it. I’m sure she wasn’t actually interested in any of my hobbies at all, but she’d always listen to me like they were the most interesting things in the world, and she’d play the games I recommended, and she’d go with me to watch all the anime movies I wanted to see...”

...and she’d cheat on me behind my back, I added internally. Certainly couldn’t say that part out loud. Even *I* had at least that much common decency.

“When I think back on it, she might’ve been *overacting* a little,” I continued. “She was... How to put it...? She was doing her best to act like the ideal girlfriend, essentially. She made herself look cheerful and understanding, she never acted selfishly, she tried to understand my interests... She was pretending to be the sort of girl that guys *wish* they could have.”

That was the persona she’d tried to put on—the persona she’d maintained, however hard she’d had to push herself to do so. When I’d learned that Tamaki had cheated on me, she’d apologized to me over and over again at first. When she’d realized that it wasn’t going to work, though, her personality took a turn—twisting and boiling over as she’d lashed out in a frenzy at me.

Don’t you know how much I’ve been putting up with this whole time?!

I tried so, so hard to be what you wanted me to be!

She’d screamed excuse after excuse at me—though of course, *she’d* done it in a no-holds-barred Fukushima accent. She’d confessed at maximum volume that everything she’d done up to that point had all been an act. She’d held back and pushed herself to put on a persona to the point that she was practically screaming “Compliment me! Praise me!” over and over. At the time, all I’d thought about it was that it was really obnoxious.

“I wonder why she pushed herself so hard to keep the act up? If pushing and pushing was just going to make her explode in the end, then she could’ve just not bothered acting in the first place,” I said quietly.

“*Huh?* Are you even listening to yourself?” Aki replied with a grimace. “You know exactly why she pushed herself. Why would a girl do her best to act like the perfect girlfriend? Because she loves her boyfriend, that’s why! I mean, no crap, right?”

I didn’t say a word.

“When girls put on an act like that...actually, not just girls—when *anyone* puts on an act or builds up a social identity, the reason’s always super simple. It’s because they want people to like them, or at least don’t want people to hate them. That’s all there is to it, isn’t it?”

Again, I said nothing—but I did feel a certain sinking sensation in my gut.

Wanting to be liked? Not wanting to be hated? They were feelings that I'd never experienced and, as such, feelings that I'd never been able to pick up on at all.

Oh—is that how it was? Tamaki had wanted me to like her? She'd wanted me not to hate her?

"Ah, right! Talking about Hinotama just reminded me—I've been wondering how things ended up turning out with her and Andou Jurai. You know anything, Shizu?" Aki abruptly asked.

"Huh?" I grunted. "You know about Andou, Nakki?"

"I mean, yeah. He's supposed to be childhood friends with that apron girl we kidnapped a while back, isn't he? 'Course I know about him. The other day—like, before *Fallen Black* split up—Hinotama asked me to go take a look at him too."

Natsu Aki's supernatural power, *Head Hunting*, gave her the ability to learn everything there was to know about a person's power, from top to bottom, as long as she could get so much as a single glance at them. *If Tamaki asked Aki to look into Andou, then... Hmm. I guess she was trying to get a grasp on Andou's power before she staged her sneak attack?*

"What a letdown of a power, though, seriously. *Dark and Dark*, I think he called it? How could you get any more useless than making black fire that doesn't even burn? Like, seriously, the name's more impressive than the actual power!"

Strictly speaking, Aki's ability let her learn about her target's power by reading said target's mind. That meant that if her target happened to have named their power, she would pick up on that piece of info as well. And not only that...

"And then the other power he awakened to later—*Dark and Dark of the End*? That one's *super* useless too!"

...she could also see aspects of powers that her target was keeping in reserve, revealing their hidden trump cards with ease. Her power had no direct combat capabilities, but when it came to information warfare, it was downright unparalleled.

Huh...? Wait a second. No, seriously, wait. What is this feeling? Why am I

getting chills?

An indescribably acute sense of impending doom had just come over me. It was like...like how it feels to be browsing Twitter and accidentally stumble across spoilers for the last episode of a late-night anime you've recorded, or to follow a manga volume to volume and get spoiled by someone who's up-to-date on the magazine release. And, while that sense of dread was crashing into me...

"It lets him make flames that really do burn super hot, but they burn *him* too? How're you supposed to use *that*?"

She said it so casually. She simply revealed the truth behind Andou's hidden power without the slightest hint of gravitas. The hidden power that had been cloaked in mystery for so, so long...

"..."

Sh-She seriously just said that?! Whaaaaaat?! Now?! Now, really?! Is this seriously when and how that's getting revealed?! All that endlessly dragged-out foreshadowing, for this?!

No, no, this can't be happening. The big reveal of Andou's secret power was something that the readers—that *I*—had been on the edge of our seats waiting for since it was first introduced! I'd had so many chances to look into it, and I'd been so tempted to do so, but I'd held myself back!

I'd been convinced that it wouldn't be revealed until the absolute climax of the final Guiltia Sin Jurai versus Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First battle. I'd been so excited for it...and I'd never even dreamed that it'd get spoiled for me, least of all in such a stupid way. Seriously, what the hell kind of slipshod reveal *was* that? At least...at least give it a bit of emphasis by putting line breaks around it or something!

Like this—opening up space around the line gives it a real "Look! This is the big moment!" feeling, doesn't it?!

Framing that revelation like it was just any other old line was just so *sad* for

poor Andou. Just because the anime preempted the original novels on the reveal doesn't mean it's okay to treat it like an afterthought when the novels *do* get around to it, does it? Anime is anime and novels are novels, aren't they?

"What's wrong, Shizu? You've got this really sad look on your face."

"It's...nothing. I'm fine. I just suddenly remembered all the times I've had new transformations in *Kamen Rider* and *Precure* get spoiled for me by an ad before they were revealed in the actual show..."

"Huh. Weird."

"Hey, Nakki? Is that really how Andou's power works? The whole thing where he can make hot fire, but it burns him too, I mean...?"

"Yup, sure is."

Apparently, she was serious. And, honestly? What a meta sort of power it was, when all's said and done. People with flame-based powers *not* being burned by their own flames was more or less a given in supernatural battle stories, after all. Of *course* bathing your arm in flames would hurt like hell in real life, but in the world of fiction, it gets hand-waved away, easy as that. Quibbling about why flame-wielding characters' clothes don't get burned to cinders is a waste of everyone's time. When I tried to think of characters with powers that had actually addressed that contradiction in-universe, Genthru was the only one I could come up with offhand.

"Oh, there was one more thing, actually," said Aki. "I guess the flames he makes with that power never, ever go out, no matter what happens? Like, not even *he* can put them out, even if he wants to."

Ooh, now that's kinda cool, actually! A technique that can't even be controlled by its own user is chuuniriffic in a really Andou sort of way... Or so I thought for a moment, but the next moment, it hit me that the person who'd be absolutely first in line to get burned to death by said unquenchable flame would be none other than Andou himself. It was a self-destruct skill if I'd ever heard of one. Okay, really, could he have possibly drawn a shorter straw? You didn't have to commit quite this hard to being the comic relief, Andou! You could've stopped ages ago!

“So, how about it, Shizu? Any clue what Hinotama’s up to?” Aki asked, blithely disregarding the fact that she’d just dropped a nuclear-grade spoiler bomb right on my head.

“Oh... Yeah,” I said. “Sounds like she’s mid battle right about now. She had Akutagawa use his power to help her mess with Andou, apparently.”

“Oh? She got Gawanagi’s help...? Guess that means the other side’s short-staffed right about now, huh?”

Whoops. Maybe I should have kept that to myself? Aki’s casual probing had lured me directly into leaking what might very well have been quite relevant information to her.

As a dedicated observer who maintained a strict stance of neutrality, this was as dire of a mistake as I could possibly make...well, no, not really. I wasn’t planning on siding with either Kiryuu or Saitou, but I wasn’t terribly dedicated to staying directly in the middle either. To me, being a reader meant being an observer who didn’t devote himself exclusively to observing. After all, even if my intervention threw the board into a state of chaos, wouldn’t that just make watching the results play out more interesting?

Aki paused to think for a moment, then she pulled her phone out from her bag and started tapping away. She was contacting someone through LINE, best as I could tell.

“Getting in touch with Saitou?” I asked.

“Yup,” said Aki. “Just calling Tomi and Toks together for a quick strategy meeting.”

“You decided to fight back against Kiryuu, didn’t you?”

“Sure did. I’m in the same boat as Tomi, basically—I just wanna give Ryuu one good punch, that’s all,” said Aki.

What a refreshingly simple train of logic.

“Looks like Tomi and Toks are up to get together right away. You wanna come along, Shizu? Bet we could give you a ride to the station.”

“Hmm... No, I think I’ll refrain. I’ve already had a nice, long chat with

Saitou...and I'd prefer not to meet with Toki at all, frankly."

"Hm? Why? Can't stand him?"

"It's less that I can't stand him and more that I can't deal with him," I explained.

There wasn't any particular reason I couldn't handle Toki—although I'd only met him once, frankly, I would've been happy to never meet him again. People like me were just viscerally, instinctually unable to jibe with delinquent bikers like him, and that's a fact.

Chapter 4: Sagamicizm of the Pretty Pigeon



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Chapter 4: Sagamicizm of the Pretty Pigeon

“Oh! Is that you, Sagami?”

I’d caught a bus at the stop right in front of Sakuragawa Girls’ Academy, rode it all the way into town, and had just gotten off at the stop closest to my apartment building when I ran straight into Hatoko.

*Okay... For real, though—*isn’t my encounter rate set just a little too high today? The number of acquaintances I’d bumped into at random so far was getting to a seriously implausible level. It felt like I was stuck in a real-life visual novel, clicking on characters’ faces on a map to view their scenes in sequence. Maybe it was all just a coincidence, sure...but if I had to come up with an explanation that *didn’t* involve random chance at play, one came instantly to mind: there was a very real possibility that this was all being brought about by Hinoemata’s power.

At the moment, *Lost Regalia* was preventing any of Andou’s friends from reaching an understanding of what a terrible dilemma he’d been thrust into. That said, according to Takanashi, all the members of the literary club—plus Kudou—were currently searching for him, on account of him having abruptly dropped off the face of the earth. They didn’t seem to be taking the search especially seriously, to be fair, and it seemed likely that when night fell, they would give up and go home...but in the meantime, I had to wonder if *Lost Regalia* was using me as a means of buying time.

The longer they searched, the more time they’d have to think about the situation, and the more their anxiety and misgivings would build up. Having them bump into an acquaintance as a random encounter, however, would distract them from all those doubts. Maybe at the same time I was running into Hatoko, the rest of their group were all having their own coincidental meetings...though, of course, there *was* still always the chance it really was a coincidence and I was just overthinking things.

“Hey, Hatoko. Fancy meeting you here,” I said.

“Yeah. What a coincidence,” said Hatoko before pausing for a moment. “Oh! Hey, Sagami, have you seen Juu today?”

I’d more or less expected her to jump right to asking about Andou. Once again, I played dumb and lied my ass off, saying I had no clue.

“Oh, okay,” Hatoko said dejectedly after I’d finished giving my spiel. “Where could he have gone off to? I asked Machi, and she said that he hadn’t been home at all yet today...”

“I wouldn’t worry about him too much. Andou’s not a kid, after all,” I said, trying to dispel her concerns as well as I could.

“Yeah...” Hatoko muttered. Clearly, my effort hadn’t borne much fruit.

“Anyway, this kind of takes you back, doesn’t it? It’s been a long time since the two of us talked like this,” I said.

“Huh...? Ah, yeah, you’re right,” Hatoko agreed with a nod. “It really has been a long time, hasn’t it?”

It really did feel a little nostalgic...but at the same time, it felt paradoxically fresh. Most likely, Hatoko was experiencing the same mixed feelings. Back in the eighth grade, the four of us—me, Andou, Tamaki, and Hatoko—had done all sorts of things together, but as far as I could recall, Hatoko and I had never met up without at least one of the other two present. That’s why talking with her felt familiar, but talking with her *alone* felt quite new.

“We hung out a lot in the eighth grade, but I guess we drifted apart from the ninth grade onward, didn’t we?” I said.

“I-I guess we did,” Hatoko replied.

“More precisely, we drifted apart when Tamaki and I broke up. Andou cut ties with me, and you went with him as part of the set. He and I ended up associating with each other again some time later, but the two of us remained estranged.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Of course, the two of us *were* more or less just friends of friends from the very start. We never exactly had much we could talk about without Andou or

Tamaki around. No wonder I don't even know your contact info, even though we go to the same school and everything!"

"Please, Sagami, just stop! This is really, really awkward for me!" shouted Hatoko, nearly in tears.

All right! Now there's the reaction I was hoping for.

"I-I wasn't avoiding you or anything, you know...? It's just that we didn't have any good chances to chat, and... So, umm... L-Let's trade phone numbers, okay?!" Hatoko shouted, frantically pulling out her phone. I'd only been teasing, but apparently she'd taken it all totally seriously. She somewhat awkwardly pulled up the QR code that let her share her contact info, which I scanned.

"You've got a smartphone these days, huh?" I said after the exchange was finished. I distinctly remembered that she'd had a flip phone back before summer break when Kiryuu and his gang had kidnapped her—that is, when I'd surreptitiously lifted her phone from her pocket.

"Yeah," said Hatoko. "I finally took the plunge just a little while ago. Chifuyu's parents bought her a smartphone, so I decided to ask my mom to buy me one at the same time."

"Oh? Chifuyu got one?" I said, a little taken aback. *A grade-schooler with a smartphone? Seems a little early, but maybe that's just normal these days?* "Come to think of it, what's Chifuyu up to right now? Is she searching for Andou with you?"

"No, Chifuyu went home. It's late, after all."

Not much of a surprise that the grade-schooler would be left out of the manhunt, I suppose. There wasn't much risk of her being pulled into trouble, considering she had her power, but her parents would still almost certainly frown on her wandering around the city for too long.

"Hmm. I see," I said, then I paused to ponder. *So, what should I do now? I could always say goodbye here, but that would feel like something of a waste. Maybe I should stick around and chat for a little while longer? Assuming this encounter really was brought about by Lost Regalia, it might be fun to do what I can to play out the role it's bestowed upon me.* "So, Hatoko—not to change the

subject, but are you familiar with the Late Queen Problem?”

On impulse, I decided to use the theory I’d only learned shortly beforehand as small talk fodder. Even though Takanashi had only explained the whole deal to me that very same day, I talked as if it were a school of thought that I was deeply, intimately familiar with...but it wasn’t long at all before I realized that I had made a grave error in my choice of subject matter. Specifically, it took about three minutes in total.

“...So what I’m saying is... I mean, like... Like I explained a minute ago, there’s no way for the detective to know if the ‘truth’ that they come up with is actually the *true* truth, right? Because no matter what they do, there’s always a chance that there’s a mastermind behind the criminal that they found...”

“Um... So, there really *is* another criminal? Do they get revealed in a sequel?”

“No, that’s not— The thing is, we can’t say for sure that there’s not another criminal. We also can’t say for sure that there *is* one, though! That’s the whole point, basically.”

“Okay, so... Okay. Huh... Sorry, but...what does all that mean, in the end?”

“It means... Okay, look. The detective can solve the mystery, but there’s always a chance that the *real* mystery hasn’t been solved at all because them solving the first mystery was the goal of a *real* criminal who’s hiding out there somewhere.”

“But...isn’t that something that the author would decide? If the author says that somebody’s the criminal, then they’re the criminal, right?”

“I mean, if we’re bringing authorial intent into the conversation, then that’s a whole different... You know what? Never mind. Let’s talk about something else. Do you know about The Butterfly Dream, Hatoko? To keep it really simple, it’s a theory that shows how there’s no way to tell whether or not the lives we’re living are actually just one big dream that a butterfly’s having.”

“Huh? Do butterflies dream?”

Agggghhhhhh! This is such a pain in the ass! How far from being on the same page could two people possibly be?! This girl’s totally hopeless!

...*Well, no, not really*. It wasn't that Hatoko was hopeless in general—it was just that trying to have a conversation like *this* with Hatoko was hopeless. It was almost comical how thoroughly I wasn't getting through to her. It was like she didn't understand what I was talking about on the most basic, fundamental level. It probably didn't help that I was working with underdeveloped secondhand knowledge that I was doing a terrible job explaining, of course. All I could do was hope that she'd *finally* reach an intuitive grasp of the concept, and the longer she failed to do so, the more stressful the whole attempt became.

"You know what, Hatoko?" I finally said. "Never mind. Let's just forget we ever had this conversation."

"S-Sure," said Hatoko. "Umm... I'm sorry, Sagami."

"No, it's fine. In fact, I'm sorry too..."

It wasn't her fault. It's not like there was anything *wrong* with her either. Our perspectives were just fatally out of sync. She was a perfectly ordinary girl—nothing even close to being a geek of any sort. It was like she just didn't understand how to go about enjoying this sort of discussion. If you brought up Schrödinger's cat, she'd probably say "Why not just open the box?" and the conversation would drop dead on the floor.

"Do you, you know...have conversations like this with Andou?" I asked. "Like, conversations about weird, obscure, pseudo-philosophical trivia?"

"Yeah, sometimes. Juu talks about sort of complicated stuff an awful lot, really. It usually turns out like it did just now, though—I don't really understand, and the conversation sort of just ends," Hatoko said with a somewhat awkward smile, much to my confusion. Surely this wasn't the sort of thing you'd smile over?

Conversations where one party doesn't understand what the other is talking about are more than a little stressful for both sides of the equation, and I had a distinct feeling that Andou liked talking about this sort of thing even more than I did. Enjoying stories, tales, laws, problems, paradoxes, and aphorisms was a characteristic that every chuuni shared. I shuddered to think how many times Hatoko had been subjected to Andou rambling on and on about something in this general territory, and I was certain that every time, she'd been left with a

massive question mark hovering over her head.

Their interests were just too mismatched. They were *terribly* suited for each other...or maybe it was the opposite way around? Maybe being mismatched with each other for over a decade had made it all circle around, and now they'd become very *well* matched in a counterintuitive sort of way? I was no fortune teller, so I couldn't read their compatibilities with one another, but there was one thing I could say with confidence...

"You really do love Andou, don't you?" I said.

I'd meant it to be a casual comment, but it seemed to hit Hatoko with the force of a freight train. At first she let out a little "Bwuh?" and looked shocked, but then a vivid blush began spreading across her face as she flapped her hands in a flustered panic. "H-H-How'd you know, Sagami...? Ah! No, that's not what I meant! Er, umm..."

"It's *very* obvious." So obvious, in fact, that I wanted to ask how she had ever thought I *wouldn't* notice.

"N-No, it's not what you think! We're childhood friends, so...it's not that I *love* him so much as, umm, well..."

"You don't love him?"

"I didn't say that!"

"So, you *do* love him."

"I... Well... Y-Yeah," Hatoko finally admitted with a powerful nod as she pressed her flaming-red face into her hands. She paused to peek restlessly around the vicinity, then pressed a finger to her lips. "*Shhh!* This is a secret, Sagami! You're not allowed to tell anyone, okay?!"

Gah! It was like I'd been shot straight through the heart. *This* was one area in which Hatoko excelled. She was just so *cute*, in...a *pure* sort of way, I suppose. The way she could be just a little bit ditzy really hit in just the right way, and her simpleminded, innocent affection made my heart pound like crazy. Still, I held myself together well enough to say "Don't worry—I won't say a word" with a smile, then paused to think before speaking up once more.

“Hey, Hatoko,” I said, “you’ve always seemed to really enjoy listening to Andou ramble away. His little chuuni fantasies are so convoluted that not even he really understands them perfectly, though, right?”

“Yup. Juu always does his best to explain everything to me, so I—”

“Do you *really* enjoy all that, though?”

“Huh...?”

“I’m sure that talking with him must be fun on a basic level, of course, but you have no idea what makes the conversations *themselves* interesting at all, do you? Are you sure you’re not just faking it? You’re not just pretending to be interested in whatever he talks about?”

Hatoko didn’t reply.

“Ah, I’m not trying to accuse you of anything, for what it’s worth! I was just wondering if playing along like that was ever hard on you.”

Maybe that was a mean thing for me to ask her. After all, there was just no way it *wasn’t* hard on her. She would feel the gap between their perceptions each and every time they spoke, yet she’d have to keep up a fake smile in spite of it all and play the part of the perfectly understanding girl—how could that be anything other than incredibly stressful? I could confidently say she was under pressure because I knew she had, in truth, already exploded once before. She’d held back, pushing and pushing as her stress had built and built until, finally, the pressure had been too great and everything had burst out all at once—you’d think that if it was bad enough to make her blow up like that, she could’ve just not let it all build up in the first place though.

Judging by what I’d heard about that whole incident, most people involved had reached the conclusion that it had all been Andou’s fault for presuming upon Hatoko’s kindness. Andou himself seemed to have decided the same thing...but I wasn’t so sure. Wasn’t *Andou* the real victim in that whole scenario? All he had done was believe in what she’d told him and taken her smiles at face value, so why had he ended up getting excoriated by everyone around him? Were guys supposed to always understand the hidden meanings behind girls’ words? It’s not like they made it easy—a girl would put on a whole act while *hoping* that the guy involved would see through it, for whatever

reason. It made *no* sense.

Back then, when I'd talked to Andou on Hatoko's phone, I'd been rather harsh with him because I'd wanted to make sure he really understood the nature of the problem he was dealing with. The truth, however, is that deep down, all I'd *really* thought about the situation was "Man, Hatoko's seriously such a pain in the ass." Just like how that was all I'd been able to think when Tamaki had ended up shouting at me...

Suddenly, a thought struck me—one that, frankly, should have struck me quite a long time ago. The moment I had lost any and all interest in Tamaki was the moment that I'd learned she'd cheated on me...but even if that *hadn't* happened, I realized now that, in the long term, our relationship would have collapsed regardless. I could say that with complete certainty. Either I would have gotten bored with Futaba Tamaki as a heroine, or she would have reached her limit and become unable to deal with the stress of playing the perfect girlfriend any longer. One of the two would have broken us up, no matter what we did.

Why? I wondered. *Why is it that girls never stop acting, even when it only brings pain to them and their partners?*

"I'd be lying if I said it's not hard at all...but it really is true that I enjoy it too. It's not like *all* of it's an act," said Hatoko with a smile that I couldn't quite read. "It's a little complicated, isn't it...? I'm not even totally sure just how much of it's an act and how much is me being sincere, to be honest. And it's not like I think, 'Okay, it's time to put on an act' every time I talk to him. It's *never* been like that—not even once. It's more like before I know it, I'm carried in that direction because I'm trying to be considerate or friendly, and it all just builds up together..."

Maybe, I reflected, that's all that building up a persona was, in the end. Aki had seemed to draw a fairly clear line between her various personas, of course...but that didn't necessarily mean that *everyone* was as deliberate about the varying identities they created. Most people, in fact, probably never bothered defining them at all, simply letting themselves passively shift between a mishmash of personality aspects as the situation called for them. And, if I had to guess why that was...

“Let me guess... You do that because you don’t want Andou to hate you? Because you want him to like you?” I asked, making use of the piece of new knowledge I’d gained just a short while beforehand.

Hatoko thought for a moment. “I think I felt that way a little, maybe...but I also don’t think that’s quite right,” she finally said. “I think the biggest reason’s because I was frustrated.”

“Frustrated? About what?”

“About not being the person Juu wanted me to be. It frustrated me to think that I didn’t match up to his ideals.”

“...”

“I think that, really, I just wanted to become Juu’s ideal girl.”

She’d wanted to become the ideal partner for the boy she loved—and so, she’d constructed a persona. She’d built up a false self, then endeavored to become it. She’d put on an act, tailored to her chosen partner’s tastes. Could there be a more beautiful way in this world to tell a lie? Could any other falsehood seem so sublime? In any case, however, none of that brought me any closer to understanding her.

Hatoko looked sad for a moment, but then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and turned her usual cheerful smile toward me once more. “But not anymore,” she said. “I’ve stopped doing all that.”

“You have?”

“Yeah. I’m done. I’m not forcing myself to try to be his perfect girl anymore. I realized that I was only doing it for my own satisfaction in the first place, so I quit cold turkey.”

“...”

“I think...I got this idea in my head that I *had* to think that everything Juu told me was super interesting. I thought he’d abandon me if I didn’t understand each and every little thing he said in a heartbeat—that if I couldn’t be like Tomoyo, he’d never learn to love me...but I was wrong. That whole time, I’d just come up with an idea of who Juu’s ideal girl would be out of nowhere and

forced myself to try and be that way. I'd *thought* that I was thinking about him, but really, he'd barely been part of the equation at all..."

"This...really is complicated, isn't it?" I said. *In other words, even if you try to become someone's ideal, all you can really do is try to become the person you believe would be their ideal.*

"So I decided to just stop pushing myself! I wanted to try really looking Juu in the eye instead."

"So you've stopped putting on an act and started facing him as the real Hatoko?"

"Hmm... Maybe? I'm not *forcing* myself to put on an act anymore, but I don't think that quite means that I've completely stopped, necessarily...? I guess I just play that part by ear, really!"

"You play it by ear?"

"It's like if a comedian comes up with a character to play that's a *huge* hit with the audience. You know you can't just keep dragging that same bit out forever if you don't want to end up as a one-hit wonder, but you also can't just give up on the character your audience wants to see you play, since that's just not how it works when you're a pro performer."

"I...can't say that metaphor made any sense to me at all."


"I'm trying to make an identity for myself that's not too overbearing, that accounts for how he feels, and most of all, that accounts for the person I want to be. I think that if I can keep that up, then eventually, I won't need to put on an act at all anymore!"

To negate the need to put on an act—what could that mean other than that you'd become the person you wanted to be? The idea that you had to obsess over acting out a persona in order to negate the need to do so struck me as a rather clever bit of rhetoric, all around.

Hatoko's expression was as bright and clear as could be. She gave the impression that she wasn't held back by the past at all. She was facing forward—unlike Hinoemata Tamaki. The two of them had both pushed themselves because they wanted the person they loved to love them back. They'd both

suffered from a similar buildup of stress, stemming in both cases from a very similar motive. One of them, however, had moved on, while the other was still trapped in her past.

I had to wonder: Did their different outcomes arise from who they were as people? Or was it something much simpler...the difference between the two boys they had fallen for?



Chapter 5: Sagamicizm of the Countless Genres

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Chapter 5: Sagamicizm of the Countless Genres

I think I've driven this point in more than firmly enough already, but just for good measure: everyone, to a greater or lesser extent, builds up a variety of personas for themselves. Everyone's personalities shift depending on where they are or who they're with. Everyone acts out the character they believe others want them to be, or the character they themselves wish they were.

Take Natsu Aki. Her ability to construct characters to embody was rather exceptional. The personalities she displayed at school and in the world of supernatural battles were impressively distinct, and it seemed plausible that she had even more of them filed away that I just wasn't aware of. She constructed personas on a place-to-place basis, and I believe the same is true of most people. As they go from gathering place to gathering place—from school, to home, to their club, to a nightclub, to cram school, to the company they work at—their personalities shift to match their current environment.

If I were to probe that train of logic further, however—if I were to take it to something of an extreme—I would say that it goes even deeper than a question of place, and that people shift personas based on *who* they're interacting with as well. Even in a single group, like one's family, some people play the perfectly obedient child with their mother and the rebellious little punk with their father. Even in the same classroom, someone could be the incessant motormouth to their peers while also being the taciturn honor student to their teacher.

Consciously or unconsciously, like it or not, people's personalities shift depending on whom they're with. I don't think it would be too much of a stretch to say that we have a single, dedicated persona in stock for every person we interact with...and the ultimate embodiment of that natural human tendency taken to its absolute logical extreme was the girl named Yusano Genre.

She was the apex of persona construction. After all, she made new ones for herself in a *very* literal sense. While normal people simply acted out their

various internal characters, she brought them into being as actual, distinct personalities...

“We meet again, onlooker.”

...and when I found myself face-to-face with her, I hesitated. Who, exactly, was I speaking with? Given her remarkably unconventional appearance—recently, she’d been wearing one of those vividly pink nurses’ uniforms that you didn’t even see in eroge anymore, along with a similarly pink tracksuit jacket—you’d think I’d know who she was at a glance, but in her case...or rather, in *their* case, I had to work by rather different standards.

Which personality am I dealing with this time? I wondered. That said, my hesitation only lasted for a moment, as one look at her expression was all it took to clear things up for me. Her emotionless, empty gaze and the ever so faint curve to her lips were dead giveaways. As far as I knew, only one of her personalities could pull off that downright inhuman archaic smile, somehow conveying even less emotion than a complete lack of expression would have.

“Hey. It’s been a while, Genre.”

Yusano Genre: the original and core personality. She was the basis from which all her other personalities were built—the source that all her characters stemmed from. And, as expected from the core personality, my reply didn’t spark so much as a trace of visible emotion in her. She simply smiled that same empty smile, like she always did.

After splitting up with Hatoko, I had set off toward my apartment...only to find that, before I knew it, all of the passersby around me had vanished, and a middle school girl wearing a nurse’s uniform had appeared before me.

Evening had long since fallen, so we were facing each other down on a darkened, dusky street. I wasn’t particularly surprised about all the other pedestrians vanishing—after all, the individual standing before me was, in truth, somewhere close to a hundred individuals sharing the same body, each of whom possessed their own distinctive power. She was an exception among exceptions, and it wasn’t at all hard to believe that one of her many characters would have the power to drive people away from her.

“Considering you went out of your way to make a meeting place, I’m guessing

you're here to see me?" I asked.

"Correct," said Genre. "I wanted to speak with you."

"Well, I'd be pleased to oblige! I'm always available to chat with cuties like you," I said offhandedly—but to be honest? I actually wasn't a fan of dealing with her at all. I mean, could you blame me? She was *terrifying*. She *never* let that Buddha-like smile drop under *any* circumstances.

I'd nearly had a heart attack the first time I'd met her face-to-face, seriously. I'd been under the impression that I was about to meet up with Fantasia, a superbly cute, timid little middle schooler who looked great in a nurse's outfit and had a fantastic rack, only to end up encountering a whole host of other personalities instead. I'd spoken with quite a few of them during that meeting, Genre included, and frankly, she'd left the least positive impression out of all of them.

You'd think she was *actually* a statue the way that smile of hers never budged. It scared the hell out of me even more than a total lack of expression would've. I mean, at least you can get some major gap moé out of expressionless characters when they finally *do* smile. There's nothing to look forward to with a character who's smiling from the very start. That said, she *was* still a middle school girl physically, at least, so it's not like she had no redeeming factors. She shared a body with my beloved Fantasia and Romansa, so I generally tried to treat her nicely enough.

"All right, then. What did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"Nothing in particular," said Genre.

"I... Huh? So, um...what? I thought you said you wanted to talk with me? Was that just lip service, and you actually ran into me by pure coincidence?"

"No. It's true that I wanted to talk with you—I simply don't have anything to talk about."

Okaaay? So, that means...she doesn't have anything specific to ask me or tell me about, and her only objective is the act of talking to me itself? She just wanted to chat...I guess? Why, though? What's with her? Does she have a thing for me, or something?

“So then, onlooker,” said Genre while I waffled in confusion, her smile as dry as ever. “Tell me something interesting.”

I gaped. *Is she stupid, or what? Everything about her screams “This is no ordinary girl,” but is she actually just a total dumbass deep down?*

“H-Hey, Genre...? You may not know this, but generally speaking, that’s not the sort of conversational prompt that anyone ever uses in actual seriousness.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“I mean, it’d bother you if someone tried it on you, right? Imagine someone telling you to tell them something interesting, apropos of nothing.”

“I wouldn’t mind in the least.”

“Huh?”

“I would be perfectly willing to tell you something interesting, if you so desire.”

“...”

Am I speaking with a living legend? Or am I speaking with a master comedian? The distance between the two is paper-thin in this case!

“Allow me to demonstrate. I will now say something interesting,” said Genre.

She’d just raised the hurdle before her to a truly unfathomable height. I almost had to think I was talking to someone from a society so hyperadvanced it was beyond my comprehension, but her tone of voice was as calm and placid as ever.

“Something interesting.”

“...”

“Well? I said ‘something interesting,’ didn’t I?” said Genre with a shit-eating smirk. Her expression didn’t change in the slightest, to be clear, but it was nevertheless *very* obvious to me that she was smirking.

I took in a sharp, gasping breath. *Holy crap! Hooly crap, holy crap, holy crap! This girl is terrifying!* Whatever I was feeling, it had transcended indignation, disgust, or anything that straightforward—shivers raced down my spine, my

whole body broke out in goose bumps, and I could feel a cold sweat coming on. *Holy crap! I'm freezing, and terrified, and freezing, and terrified!*

Not even grade schoolers would bother with a gag like that in this day and age, yet not only had Genre gone for it, she'd been *proud* she'd done so. There was simply *no* hope of getting close to a person like that. She had an aura that made you think "You know what, on second thought, maybe I *won't* talk to that girl after all" in the blink of an eye. It was an overwhelming unapproachability—an absolute barrier of purest incomprehensibility.

Of course...from a certain perspective, it might have been inevitable that her core personality would end up being this way. By giving birth to her myriad of personalities, she had overcome a barrier in human relations that most people would need a wealth of acting, pretense, lies, and modesty to surpass...or maybe it'd be better to say that she'd circumvented the barrier rather than overcome it? The point is, she'd been granted the ability to take all the friction, strife, quarrels, and quibbles that came part and parcel with human relationships and shove them all off on her alternate personalities instead of dealing with them herself. She could simply swap personalities to take an emotion off her plate in an instant...and the inevitable price she paid for doing so was that her core personality's communication abilities were so thoroughly unpolished, you might as well say they didn't exist at all.

"I would appreciate it if you would say something, bystander. I would like to speak with you, after all," said Genre.

"That's...a taller order than you think it is," I replied.

"Don't you have any questions you'd like to ask me?"

"Uhh... Okay, then how about you tell me your measurements and what sort of underwear you're wearing today?"

"From top to bottom, 86, 57, and 80. I wear an E-cup, and my underwear... Hm. It would be faster just to show you—it's like this," said Genre, pulling up her skirt with one hand while she pulled open her nurse's uniform's top with the other, all without so much as batting an eyelash. A set of frilly, shocking pink, and rather cutesy underwear entered my view.

Oof. She goes full pink even on the undies, huh? Just how much does this girl

like that color?

I heaved an internal sigh. This...didn't do it for me at all. Something was lacking. There was no value in eroticism without a trace of shame to it. Having a girl show me her underwear without displaying any sort of embarrassment or hesitation was no different from seeing that underwear on a mannequin. That went for the measurements question as well—her reaction had been as boring as could be. The actual numbers weren't even the point. The point was seeing the girl's *reaction* as she said them!

“Ugh...”

“You seem remarkably disappointed for someone who's taking pictures as we speak.”

I mean...*those* were for a whole different matter—or rather, for the sake of satisfying a whole different appetite. If you get a chance to take pictures like that, then you *take* it. I couldn't stand Genre's personality, sure, but the body of a middle school girl was still something sacred indeed.

I spent a nice, long time taking about twenty pictures from every possible angle, and when I was finished, Genre asked “Do you have any other questions?” as she readjusted her outfit.

Hmm. I'd gotten my obscene joke quota out of the way, so I figured it was just about time to ask something serious for a change. “Come to think of it, Genre, I heard that you—I mean, all of you—quit *Fallen Black*, didn't you? Would you mind telling me why?”

“Because I remembered,” said Genre.

“Remembered what?”

“The previous—the Fourth—Spirit War. I recovered a fragmented portion of my memories from back then, and in doing so, I recalled that Kiryuu Hajime is an enemy that I must defeat.”

In the Fourth Spirit War's finals—not that “finals” are exactly a concept that applies to a battle royal, I suppose, but I mean at the very end of it all—Kiryuu Hajime and Yusano Genre had ended up opposing one another. They had fought to the death, and when it was all over, Kiryuu had been the last man

standing.

“You remembered that, did you...? Interesting. I didn’t know that could happen. I guess the spirits aren’t as good at erasing memories as they make themselves out to be?”

“My unusual nature is likely to blame. The spirits’ methods are designed to wipe the memories of a single person. Apparently, that wasn’t sufficient to completely eliminate the memories of the close to a hundred personalities that dwell within me.”

“I could see that.”

“That said, I can recall only the slightest of traces. I still have much that I can’t grasp...but I remember very well that at the end of the previous War, I was killed by Kiryuu Hajime.”

“So you want to get back at him? You’re gunning for a rematch?”

“Partially, yes...but more so than that, I’m opposing him out of a sense of duty.”

“*Duty?*”

“Duty, or perhaps righteousness. Someone *must* stop Kiryuu Hajime. Otherwise, he will bring about a Sixth War, then a Seventh, and on and on without cease.”

Considering the sort of person Kiryuu was, that didn’t strike me as an unreasonable prediction at all. He’d already put the War on repeat once, and it wouldn’t be even remotely surprising to see him do it a second or third time. Maybe he was planning on saying “I wanna do it again” every single time he won a War, without fail. He’d prepare one stage for himself after another, dragging out his battle-packed lifestyle forevermore like a shonen manga that just couldn’t go quietly into the night. Unless someone stepped in to wrest victory away from him, his fruitless serialization would never be canceled.

“I will stop Kiryuu Hajime—and I have already obtained the secret weapon I need in order to do so.”

“You have...?”

“Do you recall a girl named Hamai Haneko?”

“Yeah. I never met her, but I heard about her, at least. She was part of Hearts, right? And you beat her, I think.”

“Correct. I defeated her—but before doing so, I spoke to her, personally.”

Hamai Haneko had conversed with Yusano Genre, the core personality. I knew exactly what that meant.

“So, you made her into a new character for yourself?”

“I did. I used Hamai Haneko as fodder to birth a new personality within me—a personality named Yusano Destinia.”

“Yusano Destinia...”

They say that you can see your true nature reflected in the people around you, but in *her* case, it felt more apt to say that she was the one who did all the reflecting. By interacting with others—by communicating with them—her core personality, Genre, could give birth to a new self within her. A character that corresponded to the personality of the person she’d communicated with would generate from nothingness, just like that.

“Destinia is my secret weapon against Kiryuu Hajime,” said Genre.

“Hmm. That’s rather surprising. Hamai Haneko... From what I heard about her, she was a spineless, gloomy pessimist. I didn’t get the sense that she was particularly tough at all—was she? Could a character born from *her* really be a secret weapon that you could use against Kiryuu?”

“Of course,” said Genre. “After all...she gave her own power a name.”

“She... Huh?”

I gawked in confusion, and Genre elaborated. “Although I can only remember fragments of the previous War...there is one thing that I recall clearly. It’s something that Kiryuu Hajime told me: ‘No way in hell would I ever lose to someone who didn’t even give their power a name.’”

“...”

“And he was proved correct. I lost to him. In other words, it is reasonable to

conclude that I lost to Kiryuu Hajime on account of my lack of naming ability. Now, however, I have brought that power under my control. By way of my newest personality, I have made up for the one skill he possesses that I, until now, was lacking. Thus, with that deficit compensated for, I no longer have any weaknesses he can exploit. This time, I *will* finish him.”

“...”

This isn't a bit, is it? Apparently, Genre had taken Kiryuu's haphazard nonsense (though, of course, he'd probably meant every word of it) completely at face value. I actually felt bad for her. She was yet another victim of his remarkable tendency to ruin people's lives with a single offhand remark.

“So...I guess this means that Destinia can give things good names, then?” I asked.

“Yes. She was all too happy to think up names for each and every one of our powers. She put her all into determining their names, and the—I believe she called them ‘titles’?—associated with them.”

Apparently, her new personality has some real chuuni potential lurking within her.

“I took this opportunity to replace my power's name as well,” Genre added.

Yusano Genre's power, *Sex Eclipse*, had received its original name from Kiryuu. It had the word “sex” in it, so needless to say, I was a fan. To be a little more specific, though, *Sex Eclipse* was the name of Genre's power in particular, and it wasn't what granted her alternate personalities. She'd had those from the get-go, and the power she got from joining the Spirit War gave her the ability to *implant* those personalities in other people.

On top of all that, each and every one of the personalities within her had their own entirely separate powers. “One power per person” was usually a fundamental rule of the Spirit War, but Yusano Genre's unique circumstances had caused her to be something of an exception...or perhaps it was more that the rule had applied a little *too* literally to her, with outrageous consequences.

“Destinia granted my power a new name: the Queen of Snowy Oblivion, *Faceless*.”

“Huh,” I grunted. That was the only impression I felt like giving. Frankly, I didn’t give a crap. Actually, the one impression I *did* have to offer was one that I’d already felt back when *System* had joined the team, that being that I really wished people would stop changing names at the drop of a hat. No decent work of fiction would pull that sort of stunt—all it accomplishes is confusing the readers.

“*Faceless*—in other words, expressionless, indicating my natural state of being. The Queen of Snowy Oblivion, meanwhile, alludes to that same sense of nothingness while at the same time emphasizing my regal, immovable spirit, which is as pure as fresh snow. Needless to say, ‘faceless’ also alludes to the blank slate of the environment after a snowfall—”

“O-Okay, that’s enough of that, Genre,” I said, cutting her off. “There’s seriously nothing cringier than explaining the name you thought of for your own power, so please, give it a rest...”

Oh, but wait—I guess, technically, she didn’t think up the name for her own power at all? Destinia came up with it, not Genre. Hmm. Talk about confusing.

If I had to pick between *Faceless* and *Sex Eclipse* for her power name, I wouldn’t, because I didn’t care. If I *really* had to choose one or the other, though, I had to say that I was more a fan of Kiryuu’s naming conventions. *Faceless* felt like it more or less began and ended with its allusion to her expressionlessness. It barely had anything at all to do with her actual power, which lost it a lot of points for me. The part where she’d tried associating snow imagery with her personality seemed pretty strained to me as well.

“Well, anyway, good luck with that, Genre. I hope all your personalities can put their powers together and take Kiryuu down. I’m rooting for you, genuinely,” I lied.

“It goes without saying that we will do just that,” Genre replied.

“And, uhh... Oh, here’s another question: what—”

“That’s enough.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve had enough. I have no intention to speak with you any longer.”

“...”

Surely it'd be okay for me to punch her out at this point? There was only so much capriciousness a person could be expected to tolerate. She was off in her own little world, and she had no interest in so much as glancing into the reality everyone else shared. I appreciated that I wasn't exactly one to talk, but I really did wish she'd put in at least a little effort to learn some social graces and common sense. Again: yes, I *know* I wasn't one to talk.

“It seems this was pointless after all,” said Genre.

“Pointless? What was? Look, Genre—what was all of this about, in the end? Why talk to me at all?” I asked. I wasn't at all satisfied with what little explanation I'd been given.

“I was attempting to create a new personality,” said Genre, making no attempt to mince words.

“A new personality...? You mean, one based on me?”

“Correct. That was the only reason it was necessary for me to speak with you.”

From what I understood, Yusano Genre's personalities were created more or less automatically. Once her core personality had spent a long enough time communicating with someone, they would be used as fuel to spontaneously generate a new self within her.

Hmm. Interesting. If her goal was to make a new character, then her seemingly paradoxical “I came to talk, but don't have anything to talk about” statement from before was suddenly a lot less inexplicable. That said...

“Wait a moment. We've talked before, haven't we? I remember having a pretty long conversation with you the first time we met. I was positive that a personality based on me had already been born back—”

“It was not,” said Genre. “No such personality was born. Speaking with you did not cause a new self to be created within me.”

“W-Well...why not?”

“I don't know. It is a mystery, even to me. This has never happened before.

That's why I decided to speak with you once more today. I wished to trade words with the being known as Sagami Shizumu, both to ensure that the phenomenon remained consistent and also to attempt to determine its cause."

And the result of her experiment...had been failure. Once again, talking with me hadn't given rise to a new personality.

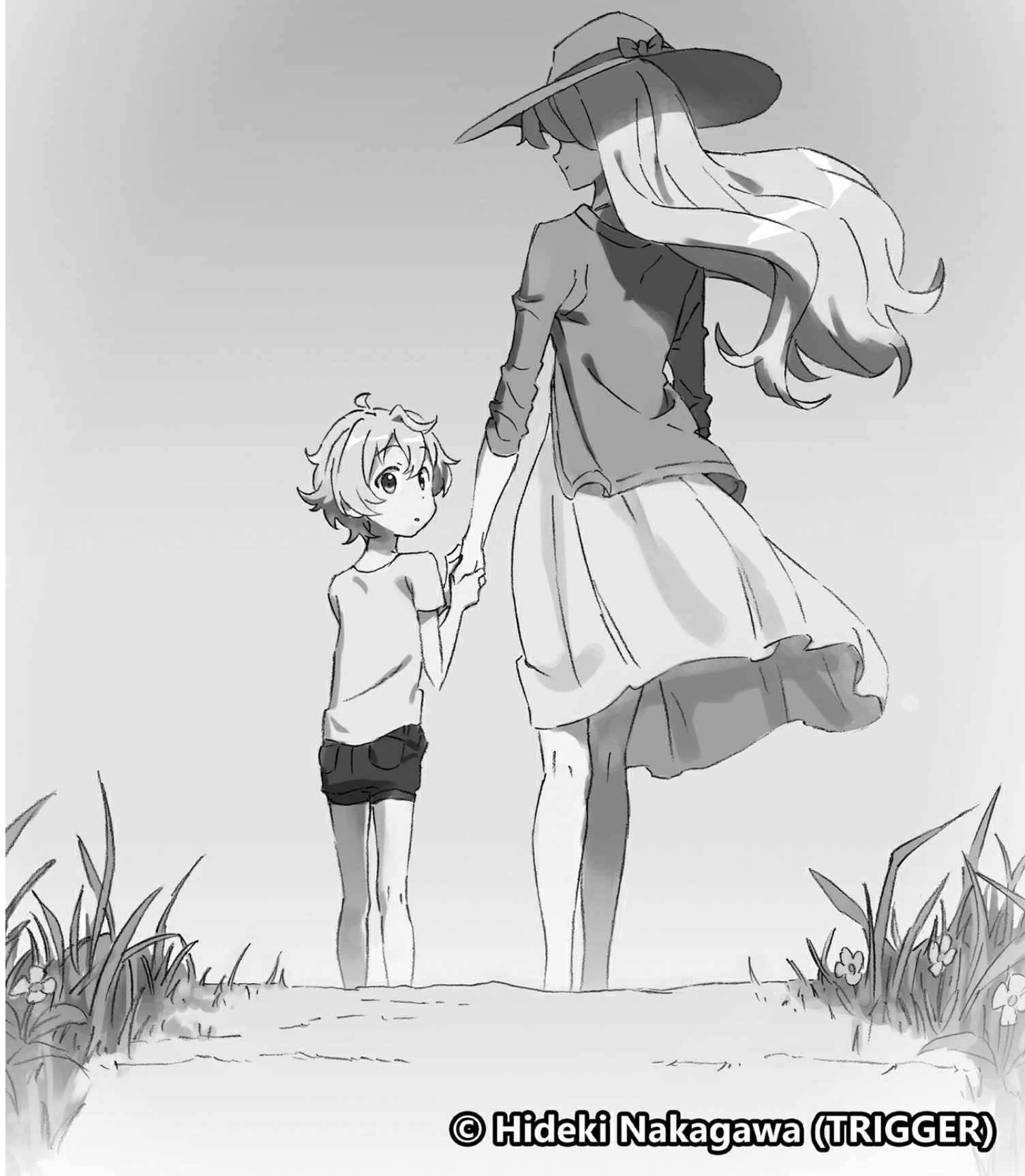
Yusano Genre was effectively a mirror that reflected the personalities of those around her. By facing someone head-on, she was able to generate a reflection of them deep within her own heart...and apparently, when she turned that mirror upon me, for some reason, I just didn't reflect.

"Nothing is born within me when I speak to you. Bystander..."

With the same smile she always wore, more emotionless than no expression at all would've been, she posed a question to me from a place of pure and genuine doubt, neither condescension nor concern sullyng her sincere curiosity:

"...are you truly even alive?"

Chapter 6: Sagamicizm of the Mother and...



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Chapter 6: Sagamicizm of the Mother and...

If you were to ask me whether or not I'm alive, what could I possibly say other than "Yes, I am"?

There's no big twist about me having been a ghost all along coming up, I assure you. I am alive. Alive and well. I breathe, I eat, I excrete, I jack off—I have the same bodily functions and metabolic cycle that every other flesh-and-blood human being does.

I'm alive...but what if? What if, in spite of all the irrefutable proof of my mortality, I were to operate under the assumption that I am, in fact, dead? If I were to do so, then there's one thing I could say with certainty: I would know, without question, the precise day on which I died.

On that day, I experienced death. On that day, I was ejected from this world's *dramatis personae*. On that day, I became the reader I am.

There are a few people out there who know about what happened back then...but there's only one individual in this world whom I personally, deliberately told the truth to. Just him—my former friend and current acquaintance.

"Hey, mom. Been a while. I brought a friend to see you today."

I was in the second ward of the local general hospital—the ward where long-term inpatients were lodged—in an individual room on the third floor. The room was plain and undecorated, its only feature to speak of being a white bed with white sheets where a woman lay sleeping. Though her face was emaciated, there was still something about her—a certain clear, striking beauty—that made it impossible to think she was wasting away. Her name was Sagami Shizuka, and she was my mother.

"Whoops! My mistake. Not a friend—an acquaintance. It's a little complicated, but I'll explain the whole situation some other time," I said as I sat down on the stool by the bed, then turned to look back at the doorway. "Well,

Andou? Don't just stand there. You're blocking the hallway. Come on inside."

Andou didn't say a word, but he stepped inside and silently slid the door shut. I pulled over a second stool for him, which he stiffly sat down on. He looked shaken...or, well, more like he was at a loss for how he should react to the situation he found himself in.

"Let me introduce you, mom. This is Andou Jurai. We go to different middle schools, but things sort of just worked out and we ended up getting to know each other," I said, speaking to her like I always did. My mom, as always, didn't reply. All I could make out from her was the ever so faint sound of her breathing as she slumbered away. You'd almost think she wasn't alive at all.

I gave Andou a look. He still seemed rather nervous, but he said "Nice to meet you" and offered a slight nod in her direction.

It was spring—the start of our third year in middle school. We'd settled into our vague and ambiguous "acquaintances, not friends" relationship, never drawing too close or drifting too far away from one another...and now, I had decided to bring Andou with me to visit my mom. I hadn't had any big reason for doing so—I'd just felt like it. I'd decided to tell him my origin as a reader purely on a whim.

"She looks so peaceful, doesn't she?" I said, my words cutting through the heavy, stifling atmosphere that had fallen over the room. "It's almost hard to believe, right? She really is alive, though. She is."

"..."

"Huh? Andou, that was a *Touch* joke. Isn't this the part where you're supposed to say something like 'This is no time for stupid reference humor'? You're making it look like I bombed my delivery!"

"No...I won't call you out. This really isn't the time for that either," Andou said with an incredibly uncomfortable look on his face.

I snickered. "Let me guess: you're thinking about how awkward this is, right?"

"Not really, no..."

"Ha ha ha! It's fine—no need to be considerate. Though I suppose *not* acting

considerate would be hard in its own right, wouldn't it? It's downright awkward to get thrust into a situation that's *this* heavy. How are you supposed to react to being introduced to some guy's comatose mother?" I said with a cheerful grin.

Andou didn't match my upbeat tone. "Is she sick?" he asked after a pause.

"Not sick, no," I replied. "She got into an accident, that's all. A good long while ago, a truck ran straight into a bus. It was a disaster, really. My mom and I were out shopping, and the truck driver lost control after the collision and flew off the road, straight toward us. I made it out unscathed, miraculously enough, but my mom wasn't so lucky. She survived—barely—but she hasn't woken up at all since."

"Since when...?"

"Oh, coming up on a decade ago, I'd think?"

Andou took in a sharp breath.

"Maybe she got sent off to another world! You never know," I continued. "Have you heard about that trend, Andou? People getting hit by trucks, dying, and getting reincarnated in another world is *the* big thing in web novels these days. Maybe my mom's off in some fantasy world with skills and a status box, living the slow life and enjoying every minute of it!"

I was playing the clown, but Andou still didn't even try to chastise me. The look on his face was grave. It was like he felt he had to say *something*, but he couldn't bring himself to squeeze out anything more than a belated, mumbled "That...must be tough."

"Hmm. Well, it's probably not as bad as you think it is. The hospital staff handles most everything, really, and I've got gobs of money thanks to insurance and the legal settlement. That's the only reason she's been able to spend a decade hospitalized in a single room like this—it's a real luxury."

"I wasn't talking about the money."

"Of course you weren't. You were talking about *feelings*."

Silence fell once more. It was a quiet, peaceful moment, broken only by my mother's faint breathing. Eventually, I spoke up again.

“So, Andou, what do you think?”

“About what...?”

“You know—my circumstances. My backstory.”

“...”

“It’s the sort of background a main character would have, isn’t it?” I said.

“Pretty heroic, right? Makes me look like a protagonist, doesn’t it?”

Andou’s eyes widened. He looked at me like you’d look at a terrifying, man-eating monster.

“Having a relative or a lover who ends up in a coma, not waking up for years on end... That’s a whole trope, isn’t it? It’s all over the place. I can understand why, to be fair—it’s a convenient backstory to give a character for all sorts of reasons. Having a protagonist fight for the sake of an unconscious person makes them look super cool, for one thing, and you’ve got a built-in tearjerker of a happy ending if you just make them wake up again at the end of it all.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Sagami...?”

“Oh, I’m not trying to make fun of sob stories like that or anything! I’m pretty into nakige, after all. I know they’ve sort of fallen out of fashion lately, but I’m hoping the genre will have another boom one of these days.”

“...”

“Of course, I definitely wouldn’t want to see a nakige have the comatose heroine be the protagonist’s *mother*. Mother-son incest stuff really doesn’t do it for me. It’s cool when a battle manga protagonist fights for their mom’s sake, I guess... Hm. But that hasn’t really been in style either recently, has it? It feels like manga and anime mostly just pretend that the protagonist’s parents don’t exist these days. Fighting for a sister, though? Now *that’s* the ticket if you want to fire an audience up, in more ways than one. Having a main character fight to save their mother hasn’t really been a thing since the days of *JoJo’s Part 3* and *Flame of Recca*—”

“*Sagami!*” Andou shouted. He probably just couldn’t take it anymore and *had* to cut me off.

“Andou, please, this is a hospital. Keep your voice down. You’ll wake my mom up at this rate!”

“...”

“Oh, wait—I guess that would be a good thing, wouldn’t it? Ha ha ha!”

Andou’s furious shout hadn’t made so much as a dent in my attitude, and now he just glared at me. There was anger clouding his eyes—anger and terror.

“Why...? Why, Sagami? Why are you always, *always* like this?” asked Andou. “She’s your mother, isn’t she? So...how can you talk about her like she has nothing to do with you? Why are you acting like a third party? Why are you acting like you’re just reading all this in a story?!”

“I can’t help it. I’m a reader to the core. No matter who or what I’m looking at, that’s the only way I’ll ever be able to see things. My own parent’s no exception.”

Andou took another deep breath.

“After all,” I continued, “if I didn’t, I would break down in a heartbeat.”

“Huh...?”

“In order to stay myself, I had no choice but to become a reader,” I said. I said it like I was talking about someone else entirely—like my own nature was something that I’d observed from a detached, outside perspective.

Back then—on that day—the truck had lost control, practically rolling over itself as it barreled in my direction. I still remember exactly how shrill the sound of its body grating against the asphalt was. The instant before it scored a direct hit on me, however, something else slammed into me first, knocking me out of the way. That something was my mom.

The next thing I knew, the truck had sent her flying through the air. After dashing against the ground, she rolled to a stop and lay there, blood pouring from wounds all over her body, not moving a muscle. And me? I just stood there. Watching. Looking on at the scene before me, as if I were seeing it in a movie or an anime.

“My mom protected me, and she ended up in a coma as a result. Back then, I

was too young to handle all the grief and guilt that made me feel...so I became a reader instead. Viewing anything and everything like it had nothing to do with me was the only way I could protect myself,” I said, as if—once again—I were talking about someone else entirely. I described my own history with all the attachment I’d feel reading out a random Wikipedia page, simply summarizing it in objective form. “I wasn’t transmigrated into a fantasy world, but still, on that day, I disappeared from this one. I was expelled from the world, and I’ve existed outside of it ever since.”

I was fully confident that if one read the cast list in the story of this world, my name would be absent. I was out of phase—in a different dimension—a different reality—a different *story* altogether than the one I’d been born in.

“And that, Andou, is why I’m not sad at all, to an almost shocking degree. You can’t make your readers cry by having a character’s parents get caught up in an accident without any foreshadowing these days. That’s more likely to make us laugh, if anything. I mean, really—having her get hit by a truck and end up in a coma out of nowhere? Talk about perfunctory! Couldn’t the setup have at least been a little more elaborate?”

There’s only one sort of being that’s allowed to laugh in the face of people’s deaths and misfortune: the readers. If someone dies without warning, they’ll say “LMAO where’d that come from,” and if someone dies touchingly and emotionally, they’ll say “It’s so obvious that this is the part where we’re supposed to cry.” If a character hesitates for even a moment to take another person’s life, they’ll say “God, this is so obnoxious! Just off him already!” and if a character kills without hesitation, they’ll say “Man, it’s so nice that they don’t make a whole *thing* out of killing people each and every time. This is great.”

And so I, a fellow reader, will say this: if there’s a god, and if that god is the equivalent of this world’s author, then I will make fun of their work to the bitter end. I’ll flame that shit to hell and back again on the message board of my mindscape. My only comment on all of this will be “What sorta asspull plot twist was that?! LMAO!”

“So, Andou? What do you think? That’s what being a reader means to me. I don’t think that anyone particularly cares about the origin story of Sagami Shizumu, but now you know.”

“...”

“Are you disgusted? Or maybe you’re sympathizing with me?”

“...Why?” asked Andou, ignoring my question in favor of posing one of his own. “Why did you tell me all this?”

“Just a whim. No real reason, really,” I said. “If I had to give one, though...I was just curious about how you would react.”

You might think that my relationship with Andou would have changed after that day—but it didn’t. Disclosing the truth of my past didn’t prompt any sort of shift at all. Our peculiar acquaintances-not-friends relationship remained the same as ever, almost as if nothing had happened entirely.

On the other hand, of course, it’s possible that something *did* change in Andou’s state of mind regarding me, and I’d just never noticed. It would be rather shocking, after all, if an event of that magnitude prompted no development whatsoever. Andou might have had his own thoughts about the discussion, and he might have reevaluated what had happened up to that point in any number of ways.

Oh, on a similar subject—there was a bit of a near miss on that day in particular. It was actually a little funny, looking back. It almost felt like fate had intervened to lay down a bit of foreshadowing.

Almost immediately after Andou went home, a man had shown up for a visit as if to take his place. I suppose you could say that he was something akin to a childhood friend of mine. He was the son of the nurse in charge of my mom, specifically, and that association had led to us getting to know each other. I really, *truly* could never even begin to express my regret at the fact that the one childhood friend I had was, in fact, a guy.

The meeting between him and Andou that’d failed to transpire that day would finally occur a few years down the line, in a manner that I certainly had never anticipated. It was like they were meant for each other and the fates had finally brought them together. They were truly alike—two sides of the same coin—and as the former set out a canvas and painted the world he envisioned upon it, the latter was gradually, inevitably, drawn into that image...

“Bwa ha ha!”

Whatever Genre had done to ward people away hadn't been undone the second she'd disappeared, so for some time afterward, I'd wandered along in a lonely state of complete solitude...until, suddenly, that silent world was invaded by a single man. His strikingly silver hair shone like a spotlight in the dark of night, even as his jet-black long coat melted into the inky void and his equally dark, rounded sunglasses gave the impression that he *definitely* couldn't see where he was walking. He was laughing that same dry, peculiar laugh he always did when he appeared before me.

“Looks like I was a moment too late, huh?” said the man with a confident grin.

His was a name I knew very well. “It's been a while, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First.”

“Don't call me Kiryuu. It's Kiryuu Hel—” Kiryuu began, then froze in place midword.

Oh, come on. Really? “Hold on a second, Kiryuu. What was *that*? I try to play along with your little made-up backstory for once, and this is the reception I get?” I said with a sigh.

“...I can't sense anyone in the vicinity, but I can tell I haven't wandered into another world. No, what's really going on is that we've been erased from the perceptions of anyone nearby, and anyone nearby has been erased from our perceptions as well. I know this power... It looks like Yusano Militaria's been out and about lately.”

Oh, so we're just pretending that tragic little slipup didn't happen? I see how it is. I would've felt bad for hounding him too mercilessly for it, so I decided to just play along and ignore it as well.

“Well, good evening to you,” I sighed. “‘A moment too late,’ you said...? Does that mean you were trying to catch up with Genre?”

“That's right,” said Kiryuu. “I was hoping to wrap things up with her nice and early.”

Hmm. So he's just as excited to battle Yusano Genre as she is to take him on. Evidently, *Fallen Black* had segued into a three-way struggle following its dissolution: Kiryuu Hajime's team versus Saitou Hitomi's team versus Yusano Genre and her myriad alternate personalities. Three forces locked in a three-way standoff—though “locked” might have been the wrong word, since two out of those three seemed liable to break out in open fighting at any moment.

“Genre seemed like she was aiming to take you on as well,” I said. “I don't think you need to bother searching for her, actually. She'll be showing up before too long to attack you herself, I'd say.”

“Oh?”

“She seemed like she was chomping at the bit for a rematch. Oh, and she has a secret weapon in store to use against you as well...though personally, I can't say it struck me as much of a weapon at all. I have no idea what she thinks giving powers names, or changing them, or *whatever* could possibly—”

The next thing I knew, I felt Kiryuu grab onto my lapels and wrench me forward. I looked up in shock...and was shocked again when I saw his face. Kiryuu looked more shaken than I'd ever seen him before.

“What was that...? Wh-What are you talking about, Shizumu? Giving powers names? Changing them? Does that mean Genre...did away with *Sex Eclipse*? She got rid of the name I thought up for her power and gave it a new one herself?”

“Y-Yeah. I, uh, guess she got a new personality that's really into all that naming stuff, or something...” I stammered. It might have been bad form to reveal the details of Genre's secret weapon, but the sheer pressure that Kiryuu was exuding in his apparent panic loosened my lips before I knew it.

“So...? What did she call it? What's her power's new name?” asked Kiryuu.

“Um... I believe it was the Queen of Snowy Oblivion, *Faceless*?”

“Wha—?!”

Kiryuu staggered backward and fell to a knee, releasing my lapels and pressing a hand to his face. He looked *powerfully* shaken.

“...N-Not bad. Not a bad name at all,” he said. “I can't believe this... I

completely underestimated her. Who would have thought that Genre of all people could ever drive me into a corner like this...?”

I found myself at a loss for a comment. Contrary to all my expectations, Genre’s secret weapon had, in fact, been *tremendously* effective. Some mysteries simply defied all imagination.

“‘*Faceless*’...referring to her natural state of expressionlessness, with ‘oblivion’ relating to its emptiness and ‘snow’ illustrating the cold impression it gives. Snow—in other words, *snowflakes*, alluding to the countless personalities within her, each like the crystallized form of a shapeless, fluid consciousness? Flakes of snow, drifting through the void that is her mindscape—all under the auspices of she who reigns supreme as queen of that snowy oblivion, an expressionless monarch with no face to call her own... *Damn*, she’s good!”

You’re reading way too deep into this! In fact, he’d come up with a more compelling explanation for the name than its creator had managed. His appreciation for the name had gone so far, it’d looped around and ended up being downright rude to the original artist. *This is like when spinoff novels for manga take it upon themselves to retcon in explanations for inconsistencies in the original work! Stop it, please!*

“Hah, hah... Ugh. We’re evenly matched...”

Oh, “evenly matched,” he says. At what, exactly?!

“Bwa ha ha... I was hoping to dispose of that specter of the Fourth nice and quickly, but it looks like she’s set on playing on my level now. She’s got guts to try to overwrite a name that *I* came up with, that’s for damn sure. You’ve strolled your way onto forbidden ground, Yusano Genre!”

It seemed that the one thing that would upset Kiryuu more than making fun of one of the names he’d come up with was *overwriting* one of the names that he’d come up with. Frankly, I couldn’t keep up with the pace of the conversation at all...

“A ‘specter of the Fourth,’ you say?”

...and so, I decided to turn it in a direction I was more comfortable with.

“Ah...that’s right. The battle between Kiryuu Hajime and Yusano Genre

already came to a conclusion during the Fourth Spirit War,” I observed. “It’s long since over and done with. Having the two of you fight again would be nothing more than a rehash—running through the same plot development all over again. And, well, not to be rude, but...Yusano Genre just isn’t that compelling of a character in the first place. She’s certainly not the sort of character who’d be worth reintroducing to the plot *and* turning into a proper boss all over again. If you’re gonna bring back a boss character, then you should at least have the decency to portray them as a total scrub, like Mecha Frieza in the Cell Saga.” *Let’s just call* Resurrection ‘F’ *an outlier*. “Yusano Genre’s no boss character...or at the very least, you’re not thinking of her as one. So, then...who exactly *is* the final boss of this arc—of the Fifth Spirit War?”

Kiryuu didn’t answer that question—and so, I carried on with my theorizing.

“I’ve finally figured it out. I understand what you’re trying to use our school’s literary club for, Kiryuu.”

In the fall of last year, the literary club’s members had awakened to supernatural powers. When the Fourth Spirit War had concluded and the Fifth Spirit War started immediately afterward, Kiryuu had ordered his Spirit Handler, Leatia, to forcibly awaken them. *And why did he go to the trouble?*

“You’re trying to make the literary club’s members into a group-based final boss fight, aren’t you?”

I’d always thought it was strange. Why had the girls in the literary club ended up with such outrageously powerful abilities? If you compared their powers to those of the other participants in the Spirit War, you’d quickly find that they didn’t even *bear* comparison. They were in such a class of their own that the whole exercise of comparing them felt downright silly. Their powers were in a whole different dimension, and taking them on in a fight would bring you nothing but despair. They were, in short, the sort of powers that a battle manga’s final foe would be given.

“The Fifth Spirit War came about because you wished for it. In other words, this whole War’s dancing to your tune. You added in the rule about the *Final Eight*, and it would be just as easy for you to insert other new rules if you felt like it—as many as you wanted. Say, for instance, you decided that certain

people would be given intentionally overpowered abilities. You could make that happen for sure, right?”

Maybe he’d amped up the capabilities of the powers that they would have awakened to naturally, or maybe he’d specifically dictated that they would get the power to stop time, the power to dominate the elements, and on and on, spelling out the particulars of their god-tier abilities in fine detail. I didn’t know precisely how it had gone down, but considering the administrative authority that Kiryuu had over the War, either was believable.

“As to why you’ve been keeping them at a distance, making sure they stayed isolated from the War... Heh! Well, of course you would. That’s how it goes with final bosses, isn’t it? They don’t show up whatsoever in the early stages of the story. They step in out of absolutely nowhere to steal the stage at the end of it all.”

A final boss not appearing in the beginning is a given. They’re called *final* bosses for a reason. When a story’s serialization has been extended time after time, its popularity has long since peaked, the mixed media blitz has ended, and it *finally* seems ready to start packing up and moving toward the finish line, a character who turns out to have been pulling the puppet strings of the whole scenario from the very start will be retconned into the picture—and *that* is what we call a final boss.

“I’ve been supporting Andou quite a lot lately...or, really, I’ve been empathizing with him. That must be why it took me so long to notice,” I said.

I hadn’t even realized that, subconsciously, I’d started viewing Andou Jurai as the protagonist of the story I was reading. When I looked at it from a new perspective, though—when I thought of Kiryuu Hajime as the main character—the answer became clear as day. There’s no such thing in this world as a distinction between the main story and the spinoffs. Kiryuu Hajime had his own, individual main story, and if he was the protagonist, then the only person who could be suitable to play the part of his final boss would be...

“...Kanzaki Tomoyo,” I said.

I spoke the name of the half sister of the man before me. What could be more conventional than having the final boss be a relative of the protagonist?

“I’d bet that if things had followed your original plan, *Fallen Black* and the literary club’s members would be kicking off an all-out war with each other right about now. That’s what you wanted—why else would you have shaken up the War’s rules to encourage a team-based competition? I guess that plan’s already fallen most of the way apart at this point, but if things had worked out the way you were hoping they would, both teams would’ve put up a hard fight and gradually whittled down each other’s numbers...until, at the end of it all, the Fifth Spirit War would conclude with a battle between siblings: Kiryuu Hajime and Kanzaki Tomoyo. Isn’t that right?”

That would explain why Kanzaki Tomoyo had been given the power she’d received. There could hardly be a more final-boss-like ability than the power to stop time. Final boss powers were generally almighty and sometimes downright unbeatable. It just made sense—after all, the more powerful the foe they take on, the brighter the protagonist shines when they win in the end.

“I’m no expert, but if memory serves, Einstein’s theory of relativity states that there’s a very close relationship between time and the force of gravity. Time isn’t as almighty as we think it is because gravity exerts a constant and inextricable influence over it, or something to that effect.”

The power to rule over time, paired with the power to desecrate gravity. Having the protagonist’s power match that of the final boss was yet another conventional storytelling device.

“At the end of his life-and-death struggle, Kiryuu Hajime faces down Kanzaki Tomoyo’s supremely broken ability and somehow manages to defeat her. That’s the storyline that you had in mind— isn’t it, Kiryuu?”

“Bwa ha ha!” Kiryuu laughed. It wasn’t a laugh that told me I had him dead to rights and he was trying to play it off, though. It was the same dry, peculiar laugh he always favored. “Finished fantasizing, Shizumu? Or, what, were you hoping I’d say ‘That’s right—you figured it all out!’ or something?”

“Perish the thought! Even if I *was* completely right, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t tell me. I’m firmly disinterested in spoilers,” I said with a smirk and a shake of my head. “This is all pure theorycrafting on my part. I’m just airing my wild, delusional speculation. It’s a reader’s nature to guess what’s going to

happen next, after all.”

It was all just speculation—all just fantasy. If I turned out to be wrong, I wouldn’t take any responsibility for my mistake, but if I turned out to be right, I’d be insufferably smug about it. Even if only one in ten of my predictions paid off, I’d still lord that achievement over everyone and act like I was a prophet incarnate.

“I just felt like sharing the theory I’d come up with...and frankly, I’m not particularly confident that I’m right. For one thing, this theory effectively excludes Andou from the scenario entirely.”

Surely, there was no way a character like *him* could ever be kept out of the loop. There was simply no way Kiryuu would choose to disregard him. Even if he hadn’t known that Andou existed as of the start of the Fifth Spirit War, the two of them had met shortly thereafter. The way they’d crossed paths had been a miraculous feat of fate itself. And so, even if all my speculation had been completely on the money, there was every chance that Kiryuu had already drastically rewritten his storyline. He might have chosen to take the plot’s reins and steer it in an altogether different direction.

There was a mountain’s worth of stories that had wound up progressing in an entirely different manner than their author had initially intended, and many of those stories had gone down in history as masterpieces. That fact raised a new question: was the fragmentation of *Fallen Black* and the breakdown of the storyline where they’d come to blows with the literary club all part of a new final plot arc that Kiryuu was now bringing to fruition?

“You’d do well to overestimate me,” said Kiryuu. “Then, and only then, will you finally underestimate me.”

I’d heard that line from him before, and hearing it again, I let out a sigh. “You know that nothing good ever comes from raising expectations like that, right? Just look at manga and anime—the *lower* your expectations are, the more interesting they actually end up seeming. If you go into a series expecting an all-time masterpiece, you’ll be way more disappointed by what you get in the end than you would’ve been if you’d kept a more neutral attitude.”

“Wrong. You’ve got it backward.”

“Backward?”

“*Exactly* backward. The higher your expectations, the better. Everything’s way more fun that way,” said Kiryuu.

An instant later, I was overcome with a sense of déjà vu. I had the clearest feeling that *someone* had said something very similar to me before...but who was it?

Oh. I remember now. It was Andou.

He’d said almost the exact same thing to me once, a long time ago. I’d made the trite and played-out argument that lowering expectations made everything seem more interesting, and he’d pushed back against the theory.

“*Nothing’s interesting if you don’t keep your expectations up,*” he’d said.

“*When you set your expectations as high as possible and convince yourself that whatever you’re reading’s gonna be the best thing ever, then you’ll notice all sorts of great stuff about it that might’ve slipped past you otherwise!*” he’d said.

“You have to overestimate—to push your expectations to their absolute limits,” said Kiryuu. “Whether you’re looking at a manga, an anime, a novel, or even the very world that you live in, if you don’t set your expectations high, you’ll never be able to understand what makes it *really* interesting.”

Overestimate on purpose. Set your expectations as high as possible, for yourself and for the world. I could hardly think of a more perfectly chuuni argument to pose. It was because chuunis had such high expectations for the world and themselves that their sense of self-importance grew so overblown. Then they’d seek to make the world match their ideals, and as a direct result, they’d come to be viewed as cringe by society at large. Perhaps that was the true identity of chuunibyou, in the end: a symptom of those who’d failed to lower their expectations for themselves and their world.

I pondered in silence for a moment, and the next thing I knew, Kiryuu had vanished. That same instant, other people returned to the street around me. It was like a switch had suddenly been flipped, and judging by that fact, Kiryuu had been right—the power that had caused my isolation had impacted my

perceptions rather than actually physically removing people from my vicinity.

That's...terrifying, actually, now that I think about it. Surely the odds of me walking face-first into someone moving the opposite direction had been extremely high? It had all worked out, thankfully, probably on account of the area being sparsely populated to begin with. *How does that work for everyone else, though? If they couldn't perceive me before and that effect suddenly lapsed, then from their perspective, wouldn't it seem like a person had just appeared out of thin air right in—*

"Augh! Wh-Where'd *you* come from?!" a feminine voice screamed from behind me. My fears had been entirely rational—apparently, I'd appeared directly in the path of a woman who was walking along the street.

"Umm, sorry about that. I just had the irresistible urge to practice doing incredibly abrupt side steps, that's all," I said, spouting out the first random excuse that came to mind as I turned around...then froze with shock. That only lasted a moment, though—after all, it all made perfect sense when I really thought about it.

Oh, okay. I see what's happening. I guess it would turn out this way, wouldn't it? Considering how the day's gone so far, you might even say this was bound to happen.

"Wait...huh? Sagami...?"

Of course I would have to talk with her too before the day was done.

"Oh, well, what a coincidence," I said. "I do believe that this is the first time we've spoken like this. Isn't it...Kanzaki Tomoyo?"

Chapter 7: Sagamicizm of the Sister



© Hideki Nakagawa (TRIGGER)

Chapter 7: Sagamicizm of the Sister

For the third time in the same day, I found myself in a chain restaurant. It was, unfortunately, the *same* chain restaurant that I'd been to the first two times, and the same waitress showed us to our table as well. I couldn't help but worry a little about what she thought of the same guy—that is, me—sitting down for a drink with three different women over a very short span of time, but I couldn't devote too much mental attention to that problem. No, I had to focus on the girl in front of me.

I hadn't exactly gone out of my way to avoid her, up until now. It's not like I was *trying* to preserve the status quo. One way or another, though, this would mark the first time that Kanzaki Tomoyo and I had spoken with each other face-to-face.

"H-Hey, Sagami...where's Andou?" asked Tomoyo. "You said he'd meet us at this restaurant, didn't you?"

"Oh, that? I was lying," I casually admitted. Tomoyo's eyes widened with shock. "I made it up because I wanted to have a chat with you, Kanzaki. I had a feeling you'd turn me down if I asked you straight up, so I— No, wait, don't leave! I'm sorry, really! I genuinely apologize for tricking you, and you've already ordered your drink, so why not at least stick around long enough to finish it?! I'll even put it on my tab as an apology, okay?"

Tomoyo had already risen halfway out of her chair, but my desperate begging thankfully got under her skin enough to make her sit back down again. "I'm leaving the second I'm done with my drink," she said with a pointed glare.

Ouch! I guess I didn't make a great first impression. "No need to be so on edge! What's the harm in just hearing me out? It's not like you were being particularly serious about searching for Andou in the first place, were you? Considering you had time to go book shopping, and all," I added, shooting a glance at the bookstore-branded bag she'd placed on the chair beside her.

Tomoyo grabbed the bag and shoved it out of sight without missing a beat.

“N-No, it’s not like that!” she shouted. “I was just going to all the places where I thought Andou might be, and when I ended up in the bookstore I couldn’t help myself...”

In other words, it absolutely is “like that.” Framing it as her getting distracted by her hobbies while she should’ve been searching for a missing person made her come across as a coldhearted monster, but in all fairness, Tomoyo had no idea what sort of predicament Andou was really in. I didn’t have any grounds to blame her for making a quick stop to buy a book.

“Okay, Sagami. What did you want to talk with me about?” asked Tomoyo as she sipped her café au lait, which had just arrived.

That was, indeed, the question. What to talk with her about? I had a wealth of questions to ask her and subjects to pose to her, but I was at something of a loss for where exactly to start probing for info. I thought for a moment, then settled on an option.

“What sort of book did you just buy?” I asked. “Speaking as a reader, I can’t help but be curious. No need to answer if you’d rather not share, of course.”

“What sort...? Just a li— A n-novel, that’s all. A totally normal novel.”

A light novel, then. Interesting. “Hmm. What sort of story is it?”

“It’s, umm...an action-adventure story written for a young adult audience.”

Way to spin it to sound respectable! Why would she be embarrassed about telling me that she bought a light novel? I wondered, but then it struck me that she probably had no idea just how much of a terminal geek I was. If she was afraid that I might come at her with a “What’s a light novel?” in response, then maybe this reaction was only natural.

“Do you read a lot of novels?” I asked.

“Well, y’know, a few...”

“Why?”

Unsurprisingly, she looked pretty befuddled by that question. “I mean, what do I even say to that...?” Tomoyo mumbled.

“Then let me ask you this, Kanzaki. Why do people read novels—or, rather,

why do people consume fiction?" I asked, steering us down the same line of questioning that I'd explored with Takanashi earlier that day.

"Well...because they're entertaining, right?" said Tomoyo. "What other answer even is there?"

"They're not, though," I said. I presented the exact opposite of the argument that I'd made to Takanashi. "They're not entertaining. There's nothing entertaining about them. Manga, novels, anime, light novels, movies, TV shows—nothing whatsoever that falls under the banner of fiction is entertaining in the slightest."

Tomoyo didn't say a word. She looked entirely taken aback.

"I'm lying, of course," I added.

Now Tomoyo's shoulders slumped. "Wh-What are you even trying to say, Sagami?" she sighed.

"I just thought I'd try arguing a logical extreme, that's all. I don't *actually* believe that there aren't any entertaining stories out there. There are plenty of them. *But*," I continued, "there are just as many...no, *far more* boring stories out there than there are entertaining ones. Wouldn't you agree?"

Once again, Tomoyo didn't reply.

"Tell me, Kanzaki—if you were to read ten novels, about how many on average do you think would turn out to be entertaining?"

"On average...?"

"There's basically no chance that *all* of them would suit your fancy, right? No matter how much someone loves books, reading ten and liking all of them just doesn't happen. The opposite, though? *That's* plausible. Reading ten books and thinking that all of them were boring is a completely believable situation for any dedicated bookworm."

She didn't deny that. I had a feeling she'd finally caught on to what I was getting at.

"Now, when you've only just started reading novels, it's not *totally* unthinkable that you could miraculously go through ten in a row and find them

all entertaining. Once you've consumed a certain number of stories, though, that miracle becomes unattainable. There *will* be stories that bore you. That's the thing about novels: the more of them you read, the less they entertain you."

That wasn't just limited to novels. It applied to manga, anime, movies, and TV shows as well. It applied to all forms of fiction. The more you got into them—the more well-versed in the field you became—the more of them you would find uninteresting.

"But...that doesn't follow, does it?" said Tomoyo. "The more you read, the less interesting they get...? That's not how it works—reading a ton of books is what lets you really start to understand them on a deeper level."

"That's how you see things because you're already an avid reader—and I'll admit, there *is* some connection between being an experienced reader and finding books interesting. The connection between being experienced and finding them *boring*, however, is a far stronger one."

As you continue to consume stories, a number of things become apparent to you, whether you like it or not. You start to notice their shortcuts, shortcomings, flaws, inconsistencies, retcons, and derivative elements. The bad elements of stories start to stand out to you far more than the good ones do. You start criticizing them far more freely than you praise them. You become better at listing out stories' failings than you are at acknowledging their strengths.

"Apparently, an editor somewhere once posed the theory that if you ask someone what the most interesting story they'd ever read was, the vast majority of people will reply with the name of a manga or anime they were hooked on in middle school. When all's said and done, the content of the story is way less important than the age you were when you read it. The older and older we grow, and the more and more stories we consume...the more and more they begin to lose that element that makes them entertaining."

There's no big mystery why there will always be people who say "That series has been really lame lately" or "That series used to be so much better" when it comes to weekly shonen manga magazines. The explanation's as simple as

could be: the people who say those things just got old.

The fact that the readers are the ones who get to decide whether or not a work is entertaining is a truth that spans all eras. There are, as such, no works of fiction in this world that are inherently entertaining—only works of fiction that readers are entertained *by*. Entertainment is determined by the readers, not the works themselves. There's one more tragic fact underlying it all, though: the readers themselves have no control over what actually makes a work entertaining to them.

"You and I are high schoolers right now, Kanzaki. We're in the era of our lives when fiction is at its most enjoyable—the interval when we'll determine our all-time favorite work. If you look at that from another perspective, though...this is the peak. Stories will only be getting more and more boring from here on out."

"You...can't say that for sure," said Tomoyo.

"Of course I can't. I *can* say that the odds are highly stacked in favor of it, though. I believe that from now on, the ratio of entertaining to boring stories you experience will become smaller and smaller."

"..."

"It's strange, isn't it? I adore fiction with all my heart and soul, so why do I have to be subjected to that tragic progression? And not just me. Deep down, everyone—and I do mean *everyone*—loves fiction. We all read manga and novels and watch anime and TV shows because we *want* to...so why do we have to end up feeling like they're all trite and uninteresting?"

The more you love it, the more you come to hate it. How could something that irrational possibly be allowed?

"You know...I've been preoccupied by a question for a very long time now. It's always been there, somewhere in a corner of my mind: Why did I lose the ability to praise stories unreservedly? Why is it that I have to be such a nitpicky pedant? It took me until very recently to find the answer," I explained. "You see...it's all the authors' fault."

That's right. Not my fault—not the readers' fault. The *authors* were to blame for everything.

“The...authors?” Tomoyo repeated disbelievingly.

“The more people grow up, the less they enjoy stories. Why? Simple: because they come to understand the truth. They come to understand that the authors who write those stories...are people. They’re the same as you and me. Nothing more.”

When I was little, I thought that authors were gods. To me, cartoonists, novelists, editors, screenwriters, directors—*everyone* who worked in a creative field was a perfect, unimpeachable genius. I was convinced that their powers of insight and intellect were leagues beyond those of the common masses, and I thought that their stories were the work of an abundance of knowledge and talent. That perspective allowed me to believe that each and every one of those stories was a work of perfect wonder.

The older I grew, though, the more reality was thrust into my face. I learned the plain, simple, undeniable, and profoundly boring truth: that there *was* no such thing as a perfect human, and that by extension, none of those authors were perfect geniuses at all. To be totally frank? I came to look down on them.

“Tragically enough, many authors decide to *flaunt* their own imperfection to their readers. ‘I wanted to do more with this story, honestly, but unfortunately, I wasn’t capable enough to see it through.’ ‘I always end up running up against the deadline, so my stories never turn out the way I want them to.’ ‘This series is on the chopping block if we don’t get the response we need, so please buy the next volume on the day it releases!’ ‘We’re living in an era where people just don’t buy books anymore’... More often than not, it ends up being hard to tell whether they’re being humble or just making excuses for themselves. It’s like they’re trying to beg for their readers’ forgiveness—to beg their readers to love them.”

The core problem wasn’t the question of whether or not authors were geniuses—no, the core problem was that readers lost the ability to see authors as geniuses.

“Once you come to see an author as just another ordinary person, your expectations for them just...die. When you pick up on little contradictions in their stories, you stop wondering whether details could be foreshadowing and

start bashing the author for being pointlessly cryptic instead. When authors introduce a sudden new plot element, your first instinct ends up being to roll your eyes and laugh at the audacity to pull something like *that* out of nowhere. When they publish a new work that inserts all the popular tropes of the day, you can't stop yourself from thinking that they're pandering to the mainstream because the stories they *wanted* to write just didn't sell..."

...and when you have no expectations for a story, that story will never be entertaining. Now, at long last, I understood the point that Kiryuu Hajime and Andou Jurai had tried to make to me. The commonly accepted belief was that it was better to lower your expectations when approaching a piece of fiction—and while that belief wasn't wrong, it *was* incomplete.

In a perfect world, expectations should be raised as high as they can go. We don't find stories to be boring because our expectations for them are too high. Rather, we lose the ability to see what's interesting about them because we *can't* raise our expectations for them high *enough*.

If you start reading a series because you're sure it'll be a work of highest art—if you follow an author's work out of blind faith that they're a god of their craft—then you're sure to find something to enjoy in *any* story, no matter what it is. Children can do that with ease. Chuunis can too. The moment you become an adult, though? That's when you lose it for good.

"Once you hit a certain age, or once you've consumed a certain number of stories, your reverence for authors will inevitably wear thin. Even if you can still respect them as people, you can't worship them as gods anymore. It'd be wonderful if we could extol them as perfect idols forever...but unfortunately, the authors themselves always end up butting in to ruin any chance of that. Being *way* too self-assertive for their own good is in their nature, every last one of them. I mean, honestly...the authors aren't the protagonists or the main heroines of their works—so why is *their* name on the cover of *every single* volume, *every single* time?"

Stop writing afterwords. Stop posting photos of yourself. Get the hell off Twitter. Don't schedule autograph sessions. Don't take interviews. Don't come up with a catchy pen name. Authors belong behind the scenes and should stay there. Don't let the readers see you. Don't flaunt the fact that you're an author

for the world to see. Please, for the love of god, leave us and our dreams unspoiled. All that we readers want is to bask in our illusions, so just stop getting in the way and leave us alone!

“If only authors could just disappear altogether,” I muttered. I couldn’t quite tell what sort of expression I was making, but judging by how shaken *Tomoyo* looked, I had to imagine I was wearing quite the unsettling scowl. “It would be so, so much easier to enjoy stories if the authors just went away...”

“Well...if there weren’t any authors, we wouldn’t *get* any stories. You know that, right?” said Tomoyo.

It was a very valid point—so valid there wasn’t any way to argue with it, so all I could do was reply, “True enough,” with a tired sigh. “That’s unfortunately, tragically, *brutally* true indeed. The existence of authors robs stories of their entertainment value, and yet without authors, stories wouldn’t exist at all. I suppose you could call that yet another endless paradox, couldn’t you?”

“Wait—”

“Oh, no, don’t mind me. I just thought it’d be fun to say. It’s really more of a dilemma than a paradox in this case, after all. Let’s call it the ‘Author’s Dilemma’—that has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Tomoyo raised a skeptical eyebrow as she drained the rest of her café au lait. She’d more or less promised to leave the moment she was done with her drink, but she showed no sign of vacating her seat. Apparently, she was up for chatting with me at least a little longer.

“It’s not like I don’t *get* your perspective...or, well, what you’re trying to say, anyway,” said Tomoyo.

“Oh? I’m glad to hear it.”

“I don’t agree with it, though.”

“Oh?”

“Actually... It really pisses me off.”

“...Huh?”

My gaze had drifted away from her, but now I looked back reflexively.

Tomoyo...seemed to be furious. She was outright seething, from what I could tell.

“People who go on and on about *authors* this and *creatives* that, spouting off their pretentious BS even though they’ve never even *tried* to write a novel themselves...just piss me the hell off.”

I paused. *Wait— Hmm? Did I touch a nerve, perhaps?*

“But wait, Kanzaki,” I said, “isn’t being selfish and pretentious a reader’s right? You can’t possibly be saying that only people who write novels have the right to critique them? That would be *incredibly* boring, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s true, and that’s why I’m not saying that you’re wrong. The readers can say whatever they want...but personally, I can’t stand people like that. People who think that they can mouth off about anything and everything just because they’re readers... I hate their guts, plain and simple.”

“Y-You hate us, huh...?”

In an odd sort of way, this was almost refreshing. A lot of people’s first instinct when I started talking openly about my unvarnished opinions was to either get creeped out or distance themselves from me, so it was surprisingly rare to find someone willing to tell me to my face that they hated me. It was such straightforward animosity, it actually felt nice.

Tomoyo was glaring daggers at me as a storm-cloudlike aura of stifling irritation formed around her. There was a darkness that I couldn’t quite identify deep within her gaze. It was like she’d recalled something deeply unpleasant to her...but what? Was she an aspiring author, perhaps? Was I dealing with a wannabe? The part about people who had “never even tried to write a novel themselves” certainly felt like something that a prospective writer would say. Maybe she’d been subjected to that sort of pretentious evaluation in the past? If so, it had almost certainly happened online.

“We *need* authors,” said Tomoyo. “That’s so obvious, I can’t believe I have to say it. After all, stories only have meaning when you have both an author to create them and a reader to consume them.”

I paused, and Tomoyo carried on.

“Sagami, you see things in, well...a really *unique* sort of way, don’t you? It’s like you’re trying to totally separate stories and their authors, or like you see stories as sacred and authors as a disgrace. It’s almost like you can’t stand the fact that stories belong to their authors.”

Tomoyo’s speculation was right on the mark. She was precisely correct: I found the idea that stories belonged to their authors intolerable. The argument that the *truth* about a piece of fiction could only be found in its author’s mind sickened me. I *despised* it when people said “The author said this” or “But this is canon” in an effort to dictate what a story was all about. Stories belonged to the readers—to *us*—and I wasn’t about to hand them off to anyone.

“People say that stories don’t belong to their authors...and, well, I actually agree with that,” said Tomoyo. “But that doesn’t mean they belong to the readers either.”

“It doesn’t...? Well then, who *do* they belong to?”

“Nobody. You have writers and readers—creators and consumers—and stories are born between those two sides. Doesn’t that just make sense?”

Stories are born? They happen between writers and readers?

“Let’s say the world really did follow your ideals—so, authors would be perfect geniuses who weren’t even slightly self-assertive, didn’t seek out money or fame, and just silently churned out fiction like living assembly lines. Do you really think that would make their stories any more interesting than they are now? Because I sure as hell don’t,” said Tomoyo. “Authors being like gods? That wouldn’t make stories more interesting at all. After all, if authors were perfect geniuses, then they wouldn’t need readers to begin with.”

What? They...wouldn’t need readers?

“Readers don’t only exist to give authors their money. They’re an essential part of the equation that lets authors make fiction, period. Just like the authors themselves.”

“...”

“Sometimes when a story goes super hard on the popular trends of the day, people will make fun of it for pandering to the readers, right? Well, honestly? I

really, really, *really* can't stand that," Tomoyo said with an especially bitter scowl. It seemed that the darkness that dwelled within the heart of an author on this particular subject was deep indeed. "I mean, come on—what's so *bad* about pandering to your readers?"

I didn't have an answer for that.

"I mean, sure, it'd be awesome if you could get super popular just by writing whatever you wanted to...but authors aren't perfect, so it's never that easy. You *have* to think about trends and analyze popular stories. Sometimes you have to hold back your individuality, and sometimes you have to bring it to the forefront. You have to rack your brain over and over about what the readers want from you...and that's supposed to be a *bad* thing? What's so wrong with putting effort into making the readers appreciate you? Isn't that desperate desire for appreciation what drives authors to write more and more entertaining stories in the first place?"

Putting in effort for the sake of appreciation... Pushing yourself to your limit to live up to someone else's expectations... Somehow...all of this rang a bell for me. The concept she was describing felt deeply similar to that certain something that was so very essential for interpersonal relations...

"...It's like putting on a persona," I muttered.

"Hm?" Tomoyo grunted, cocking her head.

"I was just thinking...it's sort of similar to how people put on personas," I explained. "Authors put on an act because they want to be loved—to be accepted. They lie to themselves and the people around them in the hopes it'll earn them appreciation. In that sense, it really does feel a little similar to how people play out different characters to fit in with different social scenarios."

"Huh...yeah. That really might be sort of similar," said Tomoyo. All of a sudden, her harsh expression softened into a faint smile. "That reminds me...back during the cultural festival, Andou said something kinda related to all this. He said that it's totally normal for people to put on personas."

"Andou did?"

"Yeah. According to him, 'everyone has an idea about how they want the

people around them to see them.’ He’s got a way of really cutting to the core of this sort of thing, every once in a while.”

How very like Andou to put it that way, I thought. It was the sort of notion that could only come from someone who’d given up their chuunibyou, then deliberately, knowingly, succumbed to it once more. Chuunis acted out preposterous stories and scenarios of their own invention out of a desire for others to see them as cool, after all—and I was quite certain that they weren’t the only ones who engaged in that sort of behavior.

“I *try* to write the stories that I want to write in my own sort of way, more or less,” Tomoyo explained, “but if you asked me whether just writing them down is enough to satisfy me...I probably wouldn’t be able to bring myself to say yes. What I really want is for someone to read them—for my readers to say that they enjoyed my story. I guess it feels like that desire’s an inherent part of what drives me to write.”

“How very greedy of you.”

“So what? Let authors be greedy. They’re not gods, after all. They’re just human.”

Authors aren’t gods...and so, surely, readers aren’t gods either. Authors and readers alike are only human. They’re human—and so, they can reach an understanding. As living beings that share a common language, they can communicate. Thus, the desire for love and acceptance is born.

That’s why we construct personas. It’s why we create stories. It’s why we tell lies, and why we write fiction. We lie because we want to be loved by our partners—and we write fiction because we want to be loved by our readers. All of that, surely, was true. There was nothing insincere or unjust about it. It was simply a natural, inevitable desire born of our very human natures...

“Heh... Ha ha ha ha ha! You’ve got me! I’m completely bested, and I know it. I guess this is how it feels to be at a total loss for words,” I said. I just couldn’t stop myself from cracking up. “I get it now. I was being a little narrow-minded, apparently. I was so single-mindedly focused on the readers’ perspective that the *authors’* perspective never entered my thought process at all. I haven’t the foggiest idea how authors feel, after all. I’ve never done any sort of creative

work since the day I was born, so how could I?”

“I think you’re probably being pretty stiff about how you define ‘creative work,’ aren’t you? I mean, I’m pretty sure that *everyone’s* got a bit of an author in them somewhere.”

“Oh, are you?”

“Everyone’s the author of their own life story, after all... Okay, no, sorry. Forget I said that, please. Oh my *god*, that was so pretentious it *burns*,” said Tomoyo, shrinking in on herself as a blush spread across her face.

She hadn’t meant much by it, I’m sure. It was just a line that had come to her off the cuff, and she’d said it because she’d thought it would sound nice...and yet those words of hers shook me. They hit *hard*, piercing straight to the core of my personality—my very *being*—and throwing it for a loop, leaving me reeling in the aftermath.

Those words were the trigger that finally brought a memory from a few hours prior—a memory that I’d sealed in the depths of my heart—surging back up to the surface...

“You aren’t a reader, Sagami. You’re just *not* a writer, that’s all,” said Takanashi. She spoke like she was laying out exactly what made me tick as a character—like a reader, describing a work of fiction.

“What...do you mean by that?” I asked.

“I suppose this is rather conceptual...or perhaps I should say metaphorical? Regardless—don’t you think, Sagami, that everyone has both a reader *and* an author somewhere within them?”

A reader...and an author? Both of them?

“As creators—as actors—we carefully consider the plot and direction of our own lives, then act out our role in a manner that we hope will prove appealing to those around us. At times, however, we also act as the viewer, observing the world and our place within it as a form of entertainment. Everyone is the author of their own life story, and at the same time, everyone is their own life’s story’s reader as well. We, as humans, carry both of those natures within us.”

“...”

“That being said, Sagami, when I look at you, I can’t help but think that you *lack* one of those components—the authorial one.”

I was *lacking*. I’d lost the author within me and been left with only my reader self.

“I believe that your tendency to view everything—from yourself to the world around you—from an excessively objective viewpoint stems from your lack of expressive ability. Your lack of a creative side has left the reader within you to run rampant, driving you to seek out entertainment to an irrational degree, all while never sparing so much as a thought for the entertainment that *you* could bring to others.”

“That’s...just how readers are, isn’t it? We can’t make anything ourselves, but we’re still perfectly willing to offer our own arrogant tirades about other people’s work. In that sense, we’re terrible by our very nature.”

“Not at all. Normal readers—readers *other* than you—tend to be quite expressive, if anything,” said Takanashi. She looked me straight in the eye as she harshly critiqued *me*. Not me by way of readers, but me, *myself*, as an individual. “Take reviews that people post online, or the impressions of media that people write on Twitter. The purpose of those writings is to express how a work moved them, or perhaps how it displeased them, sharing that sentiment with people far and wide. It allows people to assert the fact that they’re reviewers, so they’ll choose their words with the utmost care, expressing themselves as well as they can—and, in doing so, they transition from reader to author in their own right.”

“From reader...to author...”

“It’s often said that you can tell who someone truly is by taking a look at their bookshelves. In other words, you can evaluate what sort of a person someone is by looking at the books that they read. That, in turn, leads us to think, ‘I want people to think I’m the sort of person who reads books like this,’ or ‘I don’t want people to think I’d read *these* books’... Before we know it, we begin unconsciously building a persona for ourselves revolving around our preferences. It’s a perfectly normal and perfectly healthy behavior, by my

measure.”

“ ... ”

“A reader may desire to be a certain *type* of reader. They may develop the desire to be perceived in a certain way by the people around them. Take, for instance, a young man with a case of chuunibyou. He may go out of his way to read and praise relatively unknown works, while at the same time insisting that he was aware of the major hits before society at large caught on to them. He may insist that he preferred the earlier works of a now-major author—the ones which were canceled before said author’s big break—on the basis that he felt more of their individuality in them. He may act as if he’s well-versed in the works of Nietzsche and Shakespeare, loudly declare that he only watches Western films subbed, not dubbed, and immediately jump to conclusions regarding the inspiration for each and every story he consumes, playing the critic at the slightest provocation.”

“That...was a very long hypothetical,” I observed. *Very long, and extremely specific.* She had probably—no, *definitely* been using Andou as the model for that mental image.

“If I were to boil my point down into a single phrase, then perhaps I’d put it like this: even readers want to be read,” Takanashi concluded.

Even readers want to be read. In other words, they want people to pay attention to them. It was a feeling that I’d never experienced...but not a feeling I was incapable of understanding. I hadn’t quite reached an acceptance of it on an intuitive level, but intellectually, I was finally beginning to grasp it.

“So...you know how idols and voice actors have events where you can get a ticket to shake their hand?” I said. “I go to those every once in a while. I’m fairly dedicated to two-dimensional girls, on the whole, but that doesn’t mean I *hate* 3D ones, and voice actresses are only 2.5D anyway.”

I would go to those events to see my favorite voice actresses up close and personal, and I’d always thought that everyone else was there for the same reason. They’d pay through the nose for the opportunity to see their favorite actresses or idols, buying dozens of the same CD to get as many tickets as possible—as many chances as they could to see the subject of their worship in

the flesh.

After attending a few of those events, though, I'd started to get a feeling that something was off—or, rather, I'd started feeling a strange sense of alienation. It'd dawned on me that there was a distinct gap between how I experienced the events and how the people around me did.

"All the other people who go to those handshake events will say stuff like 'Did you hear that? She remembered my name!' or 'She noticed that I was cheering from the front row,' or 'I managed to tell her that I bought her limited-edition poster.' I guess what I'm saying is that a lot of them are just happy that the person they came to see *knew them*."

In complete honesty, I'd never understood people like that at all. I'd found such tendencies downright mystifying. *What?* I'd think. *What on earth are they talking about? They came here to see an idol, so why are they getting worked up over being seen?*

"To me, handshake events are all about getting the chance to see an idol—but to a bunch of the other people who go to them, they're a chance to *meet* an idol, apparently."

Not to see, but to meet. To them, the interaction was a two-way street—digital, not analog. The moment I'd realized that, the way that certain groups advertised themselves as "idols you can meet in real life" had suddenly made a lot more sense.

"It's strange, isn't it? I mean, sure, those events are all for the fans, but doesn't it seem like making it *about* the fans is taking it a step too far?"

"There's nothing strange about it whatsoever, Sagami," said Takanashi. "After all, modern handshake events serve a dual purpose: they're events where you can both see an idol and know an idol will see *you*."

The desire to be seen—to know that your idol will witness what sort of fan you are. To know they'll perceive what sort of consumer you are.

"Everyone has someone they want to be seen by. That's precisely why people express themselves in the first place—to share with others the *self* that they have authored," said Takanashi.

Within every reader is a writer. Within every consumer is a creator. But within me...was neither of those things.

Oh...I see now.

On that day—the day my mom was hit by a truck, right in front of me—I became a reader. For all this time, I'd felt that in that moment, I had been reborn, or remade...but now, it seemed clear that I'd been mistaken. The truth was that, on that day, the writer within me had died. I hadn't become a reader—I had just lost the part of me that was a writer.

"I don't know what might have happened to you in the past," said Takanashi. She spoke with an air of authority—like a reader, presumptuously and pretentiously under the impression she knew it all. "But, Sagami, you lack the authorial desire to express yourself. You don't feel the need to put yourself out there in the hope that someone will love you, or to have anyone else express their approval of you."

"I can't deny that," I replied. "Frankly, I've never felt any desire to be loved by anyone."

"Is that really true?" Takanashi asked, looking me squarely in the eye. It almost felt like she was looking straight through me. "Are you certain that, in truth, you're not just afraid? Afraid that even if you *were* to construct a persona in an effort to endear yourself to others, you'd just be rejected? Perhaps all you're really doing is defending yourself from the terrible possibility that you *wouldn't* be loved, even if you did make an effort."

"..."

"Don't you think it's possible that, in growing so dominant and massive in scale, the reader within you has obstructed the growth of the *writer* within you?"

What...? What is she saying?

I had spent so, so long looking down on others. I'd played the role of the reader, arrogantly judging the fruits of their labor...so how, after all that, could I ever presume to be an author and write out my own story? It was unthinkable. There was just no way. It would be humiliating. Farcical. Downright terrifying...

“I’d really prefer if you wouldn’t presume so much about me,” I said. “Stop talking like you know me, please.”

“Oh? I was under the impression that presuming freely and acting like you know it all is a reader’s privilege?”

My words caught in my throat. I couldn’t say a thing. I’d brought all of this upon myself. I’d hoisted myself by my own petard. It felt like I’d suddenly been paid back for everything I’d ever done wrong, all in a single instant.

“It’s all right, Sagami,” Takanashi said, speaking slowly and softly as I was tormented by an indescribable sense of shame.

I looked up to find that the piercing look in her eyes—the reader’s look that I so favored—was gone. Now, she was just a perfectly ordinary high school girl, looking at me the way she’d look at a perfectly ordinary high school boy.

“There’s no need for you to be scared. I’m quite certain that you’ll be just fine,” she said. “After all—every writer was born from within a reader.”

Born. Writers were *born*—and from readers. Every author who had left their mark on history had, without exception, started out as a reader. Did that mean, then, that the writer within me who had long since perished could be reborn from the reader within me who had thrived? Could my own inner writer be reincarnated as an altogether new entity?

“Hey, Kanzaki,” I said. I’d remembered something that I shouldn’t have...and now, I spoke once more to the girl sitting before me. “Think you could teach me how to write a novel sometime soon?”

“Huh?”

“I just, well... This is a little embarrassing to admit, but I have the sudden urge to try writing something.”

I wanted to write my story—a story that was mine and mine alone. To write a story that *only* I could write. I wanted to write it...and to have someone—someone other than me—give it a read.

“H-How to write a novel...?” said Tomoyo. “I mean, I don’t even know how I’d

start teaching that... A-And, like, I'm still just a beginner too. I'm nowhere near the sort of level where I could *teach* anyone how— Wait...*huh*?! H-How'd *you* know I write novels, Sagami?!"

"You said it yourself just a minute ago, didn't you? Something about writing the stories you want to?"

"Agh! I... U-Ugggh..."

"It's no problem if you're that against it. I'm not planning on pressuring you, or anything."

"It's not that I'm against it, exactly...but I'm really not sure there's anything I could teach you..."

"Even just the easy stuff would be fine. Like, what word processor you use, or what the difference between first and third person is. I'd be more than happy if you'd teach me the most basic of the basics. I've talked myself up for a very long time, sure, but the truth is that when it comes to being a writer, I really am as much of an amateur as you could possibly be."

"Well..." Tomoyo said, then shrugged. "If that's really all you want, then sure."

"Thanks," I replied with a grateful nod. Then I stood up from my seat, pulled a thousand-yen bill from my wallet, and set it on the table.

Tomoyo looked taken aback. "Huh...? A-Are you leaving?" she asked.

"Yup. Sorry, but this should cover the check. You can keep the change," I said as I stowed my wallet in my pocket. "It turns out there's somewhere I have to go right now."

Chapter 8: July and the Wheel of Fortune



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Chapter 8: July and the Wheel of Fortune

“...And that, Tamaki, is how I know that your power, *Lost Regalia*, is able to reject anything that you perceive as adhering to conventional storytelling patterns, ensuring that it can’t become a reality!”

“Wha?!”

“By the way, you said you have other people you’re working with, didn’t you? In that case, one of them—that is, one of the other members of *Fallen Black*—must have used their power to make this abandoned city we’re in right now. In terms of type and scale, that power is probably pretty similar to Chifuyu’s ability...but if their only goal had been to get the two of us alone, then there’d have been no need to make a whole *city* in the space they created. That means they *had* to do it this way, and their power must not be quite as flexible as *World Create* is.”

“...”

“And while I’m at it...there’s never been any real chance that either of us could *actually* die in this battle, right? Considering how little you’ve been hesitating to attack me for real, and the fact that you don’t seem scared of dying *yourself* at all, it’s the only reasonable conclusion. I don’t know if attacks that would be lethal are automatically nullified, or if we’d just come back to life after dying...but one way or another, the point is that the way you’ve been acting has dropped *just* enough hints for me to figure out that you know very well you’re playing with a safety net.”

“H-How in the heck...?” Tamaki stammered. By all rights, she had me driven into a corner, but now, for the first time since our battle had begun, a look of genuine shock came across her face. “Jurai...were you eyeing me like a hawk the whole time you were skittering round town? Was all that blubbering about not wanting this just an act to get me to drop my guard and skim me for information? The begging for your life, the telling me to lay it off—you didn’t mean *any* of it?!”

“Nah...I meant every word of that. All the begging and pleading was completely for real—and the fact that I didn’t want any of this is genuinely true. I *really* didn’t want to fight you, Tamaki. I still don’t...*but*,” I continued, “that doesn’t mean I’m just gonna lie down and let you do me in!”

Our long, meandering game of tag had led us from one end of the town to the other and back again, finally coming to an end on a floodplain by the river. My back was up against a concrete wall, and if I hadn’t had it to lean against, I probably wouldn’t have been standing at all. Despite how dire things looked, though, I kept a defiant glare firmly fixed on Tamaki. My spirits were, in fact, as high as they could be.

This was the moment the whole situation would be turned on its head...or so I’d have *liked* to believe, but, well, I knew it wouldn’t be that easy. I was covered in scrapes and injuries, while Tamaki was entirely unharmed. Nothing had happened to put me at an advantage, and I hadn’t *actually* pulled any clever tricks to turn the tide.

At the absolute least, though, it felt like I was finally standing on even footing with her—psychologically speaking, anyway. Up until now I’d been running around like a terrified rabbit, unable to do anything but desperately flee for my life...but *now*, I’d wheeled about and bared my fangs at the hunter who’d been chasing me! We were back to square one. It was *on*.

Now—the time has come for me to begin my counterattack!

“...”

...

Okay, but actually, hold the phone for a second. Why does this all feel so abrupt? What’s with the short-form recap vibe we have going on right now?

All of that pathetically awkward running around that I’d done had been a ruse. In truth, I’d just been *pretending* to flee for my life, tempting my opponent into letting her guard down while keeping a watchful eye out for opportunities to counterattack. Finally, after fleeing for what felt like an age, all the little tricks and traps I’d used to dredge up info had paid off all at once, and in a moment of spectacular success that had been foreshadowed all throughout the battle, I’d managed to deduce the nature of my enemy’s power!

It should have been a moment of truly spectacular, cathartic release. It should have been the single most exciting, climactic scene imaginable. Instead, though, it was...kinda just *there*. Didn't really do much for me at all. It was like the climax had happened right at the very beginning of the scene, or had been dumped at some random, awkward place in the middle.

Ugh... Well, I guess I'll just tell myself that I'm imagining it. The excitement of figuring out her power's probably just doing weird things to my state of mind. Time to calm down, collect myself, and analyze the situation again!

Futaba Tamaki—nay, *Hinoemata* Tamaki—had assaulted me out of nowhere, and I'd run like the dickens in a single-minded effort to escape her. I'd led her on a chase all across the abandoned city. If this had been a straight up one-on-one fight, I figured that my being a guy would have given me the advantage, but unfortunately, it wasn't quite that simple. The city we were in had been made by someone's supernatural power, and it had clearly been built specifically to give her an edge in every way possible.

One obvious example: apparently, I wasn't allowed to possess anything that could be used as a weapon while I was in that space. That meant blades and bats were out, of course, but it also covered wooden poles, stones, and other improvised weaponry. If there was any chance I could use something to defend myself, it would instantly disintegrate the moment I tried to pick it up. Armor seemed to fall under the "weaponry" banner, as well—I'd tried grabbing a helmet to wear and a sign to use as an improvised shield, and they'd crumbled away as well.

Tamaki, on the other hand, was permitted to use anything and everything as a weapon without any sort of restrictions. I could only assume that whoever had made the city had put that rule in place, and it wasn't the only one. There were all sorts of restrictions and limitations that gave her the advantage, and as a result, the edge that I should've had in physical strength thanks to our respective sexes was rendered meaningless. In other words, running the hell away was my only choice.

And, like...honestly? Tamaki had *always* been a quick-tempered, heavy-fisted brawler. She'd had the sheer brute force to knock me out with a single punch back in middle school, and I *still* couldn't forget what that had felt like. Even if

we'd been fighting on completely even ground, it's entirely possible that I wouldn't have stood a chance against her.

"Hmph... Don't go hooting and hollering just yet," said Tamaki. She looked chagrined, but the strength of her tone hadn't lessened.

"Don't go hooting and hollering"... I think that means "don't get carried away," right?

"Sure, you know how my power shakes out—what's that change? I know all about *your* power too! You can make a teeny little fire that either doesn't burn a lick or burns *you* as much as anyone!"

"Agh!"

Indeed—every last detail of my power had been leaked to Tamaki. She knew about its basic form, *Dark and Dark*, as well as its evolved second stage, *Dark and Dark of the End*.

*But how?! Don't tell me she watched the anime?! I'd thought for a moment...but no, obviously, the actual reason was nothing even close to that. The truth, apparently, was that one of her allies had a power that could analyze other people's powers. That person could even see what people's powers were named, it seemed, which was how Tamaki had been able to roast the hell out of me for mine—in her words, "'The end'? More like *your* end!" So...yeah. That was kinda humiliating.*

I'd decided that *Dark and Dark of the End* would be the name of my power's second stage long before I'd actually awakened to it...and to be honest, I hadn't even considered the possibility that it would end up being *that* apt, least of all in that sort of manner. It seemed that what people said about names being reflected by reality was not only true, but also applied to more than just *people's* names.

But seriously, though...couldn't it have been, I dunno, just a little more user-friendly? Fire that burns you just as well as it burns everything else? Really? How's a supernatural battle supposed to carry on after you use a power like that? I'm all for self-damaging skills, but that's an outright self-destruct! I can't think of any characters whose powers address the "Your own skill can't harm you" inconsistency other than Genthru and Feitan—this stuff's supposed to get

hand-waved!

In retrospect, the fact that *Dark and Dark* had felt lukewarm—in other words, the fact that I, its user, was just as capable of feeling its slight warmth as everyone else—kinda foreshadowed that this was how things would turn out if it ever got *really* hot...but honestly? That was a running gag that I wanted no part of. Actually, it felt less like a running gag and more like a one-shot punch line—a punch line that you could literally only use once, because a single use would mean The End, just like that. It was a single-use suicide skill that brought a terminal conclusion to me, myself, and I.

This wasn't a hypothetical, by the way. The very first time I'd used the ability, I'd come very close to doing myself in. The jet-black flames that'd burst forth from my arm had completely disregarded my commands and gone on a rampage, burning my arm to cinders from the inside out. It'd been agonizing beyond anything I'd ever imagined, and all attempts to control it failed miserably. Hatoko had doused my arm in water and even encased it in ice, but to no avail. The sinister fiendish flame had just kept on burning, no matter what we did. I realize that describing it that way makes it sound pretty darn cool, but considering that its user would be the very first person those flames burned to death, it was less "cool" and more "too pathetic to even be funny."

In the end, all that had saved me from the inescapable, hellish pit of flames I'd been flung into was a combined effort between Sayumi and Chifuyu—or rather, between *World Create* and *Route of Origin*. I'd quickly realized that the only way to rid myself of the flames was to do so surgically, and I'd asked Chifuyu to make a guillotine for that purpose. I'd known that was a seriously messed-up thing to ask an elementary schooler to do, but I just hadn't had the time or the presence of mind to come up with any other options. It was like how sometimes the only way to treat a cancer patient was to get rid of all the afflicted cells by removing a part of their body—only in my case, the cancer was unquenchable fire, and the only choice was to lop it off, arm and all.

Needless to say, I hadn't resolved myself to living the rest of my life one-armed. I never would've been able to bring myself to go through with an out-there solution like that if Sayumi hadn't been on the scene. She *was* there, though, so I'd had her use *Route of Origin* the very instant the guillotine's blade

fell, returning my arm to the way it was meant to be the moment it was severed at the elbow. Thanks to her swift action, the pain had only lasted for a split second...but that split second was so devastatingly agonizing, I knew I'd remember it for as long as I lived. The severed arm, meanwhile, was quickly sealed away in another dimension thanks to Chifuyu, bringing the story of the day I'd awakened anew to its conclusion.

"Your power can't do a lick to deal with mine, can it, Jurai?" asked Tamaki. I didn't reply. "But why not give it a pull? Use your power and hope you awaken again! You never know—maybe you'll amble right on into a one-in-a-hundred-million miracle and get a crazy new power to pummel me with!" she added with a mocking smirk.

There was, however, no chance that any such miracle could occur. If I was understanding *Lost Regalia* correctly, then no one would ever go through a supernatural awakening while they were subject to it. That would be a truly conventional plot twist, after all, which meant her power would overrule it.

In short, I would not awaken to a new power while battling Tamaki, no matter what. I couldn't expect backup to turn up and save me at the last second either, nor would I be struck by a genius idea to pull me out of the fire at the eleventh hour. It seemed like a very nitpicky ability with pretty limited utility at a glance, but under the right circumstances, its effects could be devastating.

But, all that being said, there was something else I was more focused on. Assuming—going out on a limb and *assuming*—that the powers we awakened to were reflections of our innermost desires and urges...then what did Tamaki's say about hers?

Tamaki...are you really that opposed to the conventional? Do you really hate the idea that the protagonist will come out ahead at the end of the day? Can you not stand to see the hero and the heroine overcome countless trials and hardships that ultimately bring the two of them together? It's a trite, played-out pattern that's as boilerplate as could be...but do you really despise it that much?

Are you still that fixated on not having been able to become a heroine yourself?

"Better focus, Jurai!" Tamaki shouted. I'd been lost in my thoughts, and she

raised an arm above her head, snapping her fingers as if to snap me out of my daze.

An instant later, the air above her began to swirl. It was like the atmosphere had been compressed, forming a visibly spinning mass of air that rocketed toward me. This wasn't some new power that Tamaki had obtained—most likely, it was the work of the individual who had made the town we were in. Whoever they were, they apparently had some degree of awareness of the state of our battle, and they had taken Tamaki's snap as a signal to generate the gust of wind. That was my best theory, anyway, based on the timing of all the techniques and abilities that I'd seen her use so far.

Unfortunately, however, seeing through the trick behind her abilities and actually *defending* myself against them were two entirely separate matters.

"Ugh! A-Agh," I grunted in pain. I'd done my damndest to dive out of the way, *Monster Hunter* style, but tragically, dodge rolling doesn't give you I-frames in real life, and it hadn't worked in the slightest. The gust of air had scored a direct hit, sending me slamming into the concrete wall behind me. My whole body was racked with pain, and since the impact had been focused on my back, it'd also winded me so badly I couldn't even breathe for a moment.

"Guess that's that," Tamaki said, strolling over toward me as I gasped for breath, unable to stand. She had a metal bat grasped tightly in her hand—an improvised weapon she'd appropriated from an unstaffed sporting goods store over the course of our chase. "Don't fret about it, though. It'll only hurt for a tick. You were dead-on with all your prattle from before—even if one of us kicks the bucket, we won't actually die. All the pain—and our powers—will get wiped right on out of our minds, and we'll come back, just like that. So take it easy and die, okay?"

"So...dying means having our memories erased, huh?" I grunted. "That means...there's a really high chance that someone's out there who's been monitoring and managing everyone who got powers. Putting a system into place that wipes our memories would be a perfect way to make sure that our powers stay secret and no info leaks out about them...and I guess that probably means that *they're* the ones who set up this whole coming-back-to-life system too, right? Memory wipes... Immortality... I see what they're going for. This is

the perfect setup to get people to fight each other. Since all of this is supernatural, I'm guessing *they're* something other than human—some sort of entity, or entities, that transcend human understanding, for sure. And if they're making humans fight each other and watching those fights play out...the only motives I can think of are an experiment, a proxy war, a show, or a contest to gamble on."

"Wh-What the heck? Who even are you?" Tamaki stammered. She looked terribly shaken—maybe because my analysis had been on the mark? In any case, there was only one answer I could give to the question of who I was. I'd settled that issue a long, long time ago.

"I'm Guiltia Sin Jurai," I said. "Though come to think of it, I guess this is the first time I've told you that name, isn't it?"

"Heh... Heh, ha ha ha... Honest, what the heck? What's that even mean?" asked Tamaki with a feeble laugh. It seemed that just a little of the tension she'd built up within her this whole time had finally drained away. "I always thought that you had a lot more going on than you let on, but keeping your head on straight in a situation like this? That's really something. You're an awfully impressive person, you know that?"

I didn't say a word.

"Hey, Jurai. If you really are keeping cool as a cucumber and thinking all this through...then why haven't you asked me the real question yet?" asked Tamaki. "Don't you wanna ask why all this is happening to you, not Sagami?"

"Oh...that," I said.

By all rights, that really *was* probably the first question I should've asked. Why was I the one getting attacked? Sagami was the one who'd hurt her more deeply than anyone, so why was I being targeted instead of him? She was more or less just lashing out in pure resentment, so wasn't it unreasonable for me to be the one who had to bear the brunt of that fury?

I hadn't asked any of that, though. I hadn't voiced any of those doubts. As to why...

"I don't, no. After all...I already know the answer," I said. "You were scared,

right, Tamaki?”

Tamaki took in a sharp breath.

“You were scared that if you tried attacking Sagami like you’re attacking me right now, you might not be able to actually *hurt* him at all, weren’t you?”

Tamaki hesitated for just a moment...then shook her head. “Can’t get anything past you, can I, Jurai?” she said.

If Sagami had been the subject of Hinoemata Tamaki’s revenge-driven sneak attack—if he were standing here instead of me—how would he have reacted? I couldn’t say for sure...but I did know one possibility. It was very easy to imagine him offering up an empty apology and walking out of the situation completely unscathed, when all was said and done.

In Sagami’s mind, Tamaki’s status as a heroine had long since been rescinded. He didn’t even see her as a girl anymore, and if she were to reunite with him, she’d have to face that fact all over again. She’d put everything she had into her revenge, but there was a terrible possibility that in the end, her target wouldn’t even give her the time of day. To him, she was nothing more than an inconsequential extra who’d faded into the background. The sense of emptiness that fact would bring her—the fear, the *despair* it would cause her—was unfathomable.

And so, Tamaki had gone after me instead. She’d targeted me because she’d known I would accept her revenge for what it was—she’d known I would acknowledge it as the tragedy she meant it to be. She’d known that I just didn’t have it in me to make light of her feelings the way Sagami had...

“You really are one peachy guy, Jurai. You’ve always looked me right in the eye and tried your hardest to get where I’m coming from. You and Shizumu are as different as anyone’s ever been,” Tamaki said with an awkward smile. “I never could’ve said this back then, but did you know? I really loved you back in the eighth grade. Honest.”

“...”

“Shizumu would fib about loving me all the time and never actually do a lick for me, but every once in a bit, I caught myself thinking that you would treat me

half proper. That's why I went straight to you when Shizumu said goodbye."

I felt a stinging pain in my chest. My memories of the darkest point in my life—my memories of that rainy day—were being dragged back up to the forefront of my mind. Memories of swearing that I would love and safeguard a girl who had been hurt so terribly deeply, and of how it had felt when those feelings were betrayed just moments later...

"What about Aragaki Zenya?" I asked after a pause. "How did you feel about him?"

"Oh, Zenya? Good question... I loved him too, I guess. You probably had it out for him, but when I tried chatting with him, it turned out he had a real nice manly side you'd never have thought."

A sense of nausea-inducing self-loathing shot through me. I just couldn't handle the way that Tamaki used the word "love." It felt far too blasé—far too flippant for me to accept. Those feelings must have shown through on my face, and Tamaki's expression warped into a grimace as she watched me. There was a deep sadness in her gaze, accompanied by a burning fury.

"Hey, Jurai. Why aren't rom-com heroines allowed to take a shine to more than one guy?" asked the girl who couldn't be a heroine herself, a certain urgency creeping into her tone. "The main guys in rom-coms always mess around with a bunch of girls at once, right? They act all sympathetic and say whatever the girls want to hear, never actually dating anyone—just keeping them all in a half-baked 'more than a friend, less than a lover' limbo, flirting it up the whole time. The heroines are always all, 'The protagonist was my first love!' and dedicate themselves to him and only him, but he's never like that at all, is he? He's never dedicated to anyone. He's nice to everyone, never does anything that'd make anyone hate him, and just wafts from one heroine to another like he's checking off events on a to-do list..."

"..."

"So come on, Jurai—clue me in. Why's the protagonist allowed to be flighty, but the heroines aren't? Why're they the only ones who get slammed for it?"

There was nothing I could say to that. When Sagami was dating her, he had taken an interest in other girls like it was the most natural thing in the world for

him to do...and then he'd dumped her for cheating on him a single time, just like that. He'd branded her with the mark of a failed heroine for a single indiscretion.

"I really worked my tail off, you know that? I put my everything into being the best girlfriend I could. I did it all to be Shizumu's heroine...but he didn't do a lick to be my hero!"

When we have feelings for someone, we naturally begin to build up a persona that we think will suit them. We put in effort to become their ideal—to become someone they could love. The question remains, though: is hoping for or expecting your partner to do the same for you right, or is it wrong? Is it just, or is it misguided? That was a question I had no answer to.

"That's why I wafted off to you and Zenya, you know? It was because of how Shizumu acted... That's why I ended up being as unfaithful as a rom-com protagonist. But...was that really such an awful thing? Was that really bad enough to get me booted off the heroine stand in one go?"

I'd seen a program on TV once—or something along those lines—that'd claimed when unfaithful wives were asked why they'd cheated on their husbands, a majority of respondents gave the same answer: because he hadn't paid enough attention to them. Reducing the problem to a single, simple phrase like that would inevitably cause plenty of people to criticize them for cheating over something so seemingly petty, but only because it failed to account for the fact that there were as many different ways for a husband to not pay attention to his spouse as there were couples in the world. It just wasn't a problem that *could* be boiled down to a simple statement.

On a similar subject, although the prevailing attitude seemed to be that we lived in an era of unprecedented gender equality, when it came to matters of infidelity and adultery, there was still a substantial gap between how men and women were treated. To put it frankly: on a societal level, women were sanctioned *far* more severely for cheating than men were. Male celebrities who got divorced after cheating on their wives could still make appearances on TV like it was nothing, but a female celebrity in the same position would be harshly criticized by men and women alike, far and wide.

That was all just a matter of public opinion, of course. I was sure that there were plenty of husbands out there who chose to treat their wife's infidelity as a momentary indiscretion, and then they lived out the rest of their lives in happiness with their wives afterward. This wasn't an issue that could have a definitive, one-size-fits-all sort of answer, and trying to seek one out would be a lost cause. Just as there were countless ways for an infidelity-causing problem to manifest between couples and spouses, so too were there as many solutions for that sort of strife.

However...in Sagami Shizumu and Futaba Tamaki's case, there had been no such solution. It just hadn't existed. Sagami hadn't been able to perceive his girlfriend as anything other than a rom-com heroine, but at the same time, he hadn't been willing to make any effort to play the part of the protagonist. The moment she'd deviated from his ideals, he'd lost all interest in her. To someone like him—someone obsessed with purity and virginity—a heroine who cheated or had a romantic history was a taboo among taboos. In his mind, those were sins heavier even than murder. With the sole exception of cuckoldry fetish games, a heroine turning her interest toward another man was an unthinkable and unforgivable infraction.

If—purely hypothetically *if*—Tamaki really were a heroine in a light novel or a dating sim, then the odds were good that virtually none of its readers would take a liking to her either. In this day and age, writing a heroine who could fall for more than one man was considered downright criminal. Simply put: the readers would never love Tamaki.

But so what? No matter how much the readers might hate Tamaki, I still never would. Even in that moment, when she was lashing out in a protracted, unjust, and violent manner, I still didn't feel the slightest bit of resentment toward her. All that I felt was guilt—guilt for not having been able to save her on that day in the eighth grade. Guilt and regret for running away instead of facing her.

And that's the reason, Tamaki. That's why, even if you do end up killing me here...I'd actually be okay with it.

It would have been a totally different matter if her killing me meant me *actually* dying, of course, but I knew for sure now that death in this battle would

result in me coming right back to life again. In that context, I was all right with letting her get one good murder in. If lashing out at me—hurting me—would help heal Tamaki’s emotional wounds even a little, then I was all right with getting killed by her. It was the punishment I felt that I deserved.

But...

“So...not saying a peep, huh? I guess that means you think this is all my fault too?”

“No! I just—”

“It’s fine. It’s all just peachy now. I’ve already decided to tear it all down, after all,” said Tamaki, disregarding my rebuttal entirely. “You’ll come back anyway, so what’s the harm in dying just once, Jurai? You’ll forget all about your power, sure, but you don’t have to worry a lick about that. I’ll take care of all your little pals before you know it, so you’ll all be amnesia buddies together. You won’t feel left out a bit.”

“...Like hell you will.”

“Huh?”

“I said like *hell* you will!”

For a moment, I’d planned on letting Tamaki kill me. I’d thought that wouldn’t bother me too much. But if she wasn’t *just* going after me...that changed everything. If my friends would be put in the same peril after I was dead, then I couldn’t afford to sit back and let it happen. I couldn’t afford to let Tamaki stay bound by her past any longer.

“That so? Hmph,” snorted Tamaki. “So, what’s your scheme? Gonna take me down to protect your friends?”

“No,” I replied. I heaved my bruised and battered body back upright, glared at her, then shouted with all my might. “I’m not gonna take you down—I’m gonna *vanquish* you! And I’m not gonna protect them—I’ll be their *aegis*!”

Tamaki blinked. “You...huh? How’s that any different?”

“In *every* possible way!”

“Try barely a whit!” she shouted. At the same moment she denied my

unshakable sense of aesthetics, she leaped forward and swung her bat, bringing it arcing down toward my skull. But—in that split second—I moved forward as well, hurling myself toward her in a full-speed dash.

I'd spent the entire battle up to that point running away from her, but now I'd shifted to offense for the very first time...and just as planned, it caught her off guard enough to throw off her aim. Before she could brain me with her bat, I managed to close in on her and wrap my arms around her. If I were being a poser, I'd say I caught her in a clinch, and if I *weren't* trying to make myself sound cool, I'd say that I basically just hugged her.

Oh, right. I hugged her like this back then too, didn't I? I thought, despite knowing very well that this was *not* the time.

"Wha?! Ugh... Let go!" Tamaki shouted. She started struggling and flailing, but I held on to her with all my might—and, at the same time, I started tapping at my smartphone, which I'd pulled out mid dash. "Huh?! Wh-What're you doing with that, Jurai?! What's your game?!"

"I'm contacting a friend," I replied.

"Huh? Quit talking bunk! My power's still shutting that down! There's not a lick of a chance you could get through to them!"

She wasn't just pulling that out of thin air. I'd already tried to contact my clubmates whenever I'd found the chance during our extended chase, but every time, I'd miraculously lost my signal at *just* the right moment to screw it up. Apparently, me calling in one of my friends to save me from certain doom would be a conventional development in Tamaki's eyes. However...

"Your power's not gonna have a problem with me just making small talk, is it?"

I wasn't going to ask the person I was texting for help, nor tell her what a crisis I was in. No, I was sending a perfectly normal, casual text, phrased in such a way that she'd never imagine I was currently in peril. Not even Tamaki's ability could stop me from doing that—and, as expected, my text went through without issue.

"What difference is that supposed to—"

“Hey, Tamaki. Do you know about the Doublixir?”

“H-Huh?!”

“It’s one of Doraemon’s future gadgets: a liquid that causes anything you drip it on to double itself every five minutes. Nobita uses it to duplicate a steamed chestnut bun for himself, but he ends up not finishing all of the buns he makes, and the one he leaves behind keeps doubling itself every five minutes. The problem spirals out of control so badly that, in the end, Doraemon has to use a mini rocket to launch all the chestnut buns into space.”

“...”

“That’s where the story ends in the original work...but when you think about what must have happened to those chestnut buns afterward, the implications are actually sort of scary. Wouldn’t that mean that somewhere out in the void of space, an astronomically large number of chestnut buns is still growing exponentially every five minutes? Eventually, that entire universe will be blotted out by a limitless number of chestnut buns. Tons of people have argued about the whole theory online, apparently—like, about how it wouldn’t turn out that way because the universe is constantly expanding, or how the law of conservation of mass shuts the whole premise down from the start.”

“Wh-Why’re you prattling on about all this?!”

“Because it reminds me of something. The effects of the Doublixir seem an awful lot like those of *my* power, *Dark and Dark of the End*.”

“They... What?”

“When I first awakened to that ability, I ended up cutting my own arm off and sealing it away in another dimension. The black flame wasn’t going to go out no matter what I did, and that was the only solution I could come up with to get rid of it...but tell me, Tamaki,” I said, dropping my voice to a near whisper as I spoke right into her ear.

“I sealed that arm away...but what do you think happened *afterward*?”

Severed by way of the guillotine, my right arm had been cast into a realm of

deepest darkness. It'd been left there in the bottomless void, burning away without anyone to observe it...so what would it look like *now*?

“Wh-What happened? You mean—”

“I mean *it's still burning*! I can tell. I have a natural, intuitive sense of what my own power's doing, and I feel it plain as day. If you thought that it was the sort of fire that would keep burning until its fuel was exhausted, then let me tell you: it's not *nearly* that half-hearted. Once it's been lit, it'll keep burning forever—and I do mean *forever*.”

Just like an ever-growing cluster of chestnut buns occupying a corner of the universe, my flame would continue to burn within its alternate reality. It would burn...and it would *spread*. Even now it raged away, blindingly incandescent in its ever-deepening stygian fury.

“That flame is *the end* given form. The moment it's brought into being, it marks the conclusion of both its wielder and the world they live in. If I hadn't managed to seal it away...it would have burned the whole earth to ashes, and kept burning still.”

“Y-You're fibbing. There's no way that could be—”

“You think so? Then how about we go find out for ourselves?”

Tamaki gasped. “W-Wait, Jurai...did you just text—”

“That's right. I was contacting Chifuyu. I asked her to open up a Gate into the dimension we sealed my flame in...and I asked her to open it up *right here*! It was a real lucky break that she bought a smartphone the other day,” I added.

I'd taken great care to phrase my message in as innocuous a manner as possible, so there was no way that Chifuyu could have figured out what sort of situation I was actually in by that alone. By keeping her unaware, I'd managed to circumvent *Lost Regalia's* restrictions by way of technicality.

“I don't know exactly how large my flame has grown by now, but speaking as someone who's experienced it once already, I can say this for sure...it's *not* gonna be a pleasant way to die. It's not nearly as powerful as the Dragon of the Darkness Flame, see. It won't burn you to ash in the blink of an eye. You'll get to *watch* yourself burn as it slowly but surely consumes you, moment by agonizing

moment, until you finally lose consciousness. I know it's my own power, but I have to admit...it's a real *nasty* one."

"Ugh... How?!" shouted Tamaki. "How is this happening?! This doesn't make sense! How'd you even come up with this, Jurai?! My power's still working! It shouldn't have been possible for you to pull out a genius idea at the last second to save yourself from certain doom!"

"It makes total sense," I replied. "It's simple, really—I've had this method thought up from the very start."

"F-From the start? No way... You mean, from the moment you were caught in my trap...?"

"Nope. Further back than that."

"Further...?"

"I came up with this plan the same day I awakened to my new power."

"H-Huh?!"

"Who do you think you're talking to, Tamaki? Don't you know I'm Guiltia Sin Jurai?" I said, punctuating the declaration with a full-blown "Mwa ha ha!" I laughed—nay, *cachinnated* with all my might, rousing my spirits and steeling my resolve. "To most people, *Dark and Dark of the End* would seem like a power with no application, no matter how hard they thought about it. Me, though? I came up with *ten* applications the very same day I obtained it!"

"Wha—?!" Tamaki gasped, her eyes wide with shock.

...Okay, so I have to admit, I was exaggerating *just* a little when I said I'd come up with ten plans. The actual number was two. This was one of them, and the moment had finally come for it to take its turn in the spotlight.

"Looks like it's time," I said. A faint light was beginning to glimmer from the ground beneath our feet—the light of one of Chifuyu's Gates. She was opening one up directly beneath me, just like I'd asked her to.

This whole plan had been a gamble. It all hinged on whether or not Chifuyu would be able to use her power in this town—a space made by someone *else's* power—but apparently, I'd won that wager in a big way. The two powers were

part of the same general category, but as expected, Chifuyu's was a cut above *within* that category.

The moment I saw the light begin to form beneath me, I clenched my arms around Tamaki. I squeezed her as hard as I could, ensuring she couldn't possibly get away. I'd let her go in middle school...but this time, I would hold on to her to the bitter end.

"Time for us to plunge into the abyss together, Tamaki," I muttered.

"Ah... N-No, don't!" Tamaki yelped. She struggled frantically to get away, but it was too late.

"The gateway to hell opens...*now*."

Now—let us begin the end of the beginning.

"Inferno Gate: Maximum Genesis!"

A split second later—the doorway to Hades fell open. The ground beneath our feet vanished, and after the barest moment of weightlessness, I felt us plummet downward. It was like we'd been swallowed up—dragged into and devoured by the unfathomable darkness that stretched outward onto eternity.

"N-No... No! H-Help..." shouted Tamaki. "*Help me, Shizumu!*"

In those final moments, as the darkness closed in around us, she called out the name of her former lover, desperately begging him to save her.

That's right, Tamaki. This is what you should've done from the start. If you're having a hard time, just say it. If you want someone to help you, just ask for it. You should've just screamed it out loud from the start. Instead of deciding that there was no point asking him for help, you should have believed in your boyfriend and expected the best from him.

If you had...then I'm sure things wouldn't have turned out this way. It would have ended differently for you and Sagami—and for you and me, as well.



Epilogue:
friend

© Hideki Nakagawa (TRIGGER)

Epilogue: friEND

Why had I decided to go rushing to Andou's side? How had I actually managed to reach him? There were more than a few mysteries revolving around both of those questions, but an explanation for everything fell neatly into place the moment I found him: by that point, the battle was already over.

Most likely, it had been finished at the moment I'd resolved to go find him. In other words, by that point in time, *Lost Regalia* had already stopped influencing my actions. Akutagawa's artificial city had seemingly been dispelled as well, which was fortunate, since otherwise I never would've been able to make it here.

"Sagami," Andou said as he noticed me jogging toward him out of breath from the run I'd just been through. He was sitting on the floodbank by the river, and he slowly stood up as I approached him. Tamaki was lying on the ground nearby as well. She looked completely unharmed at a glance, so I assumed she'd just passed out.

I took a moment to gasp for breath before speaking up. "Huh...? Wait, Andou... Did you *win*?"

"I mean...kinda? Close enough, anyway."

"Wow... That's certainly something. How on earth did you manage to use *your* power to come out ahead?"

"I bluffed," Andou replied before launching into a casual explanation that was remarkably devoid of any bragging or self-congratulation.

The flames of *Dark and Dark of the End* had been sealed in an alternate dimension, where they'd kept burning and growing up to this very day...was the story that Andou had fed Tamaki, apparently. She'd known all about his power's hidden ability thanks to Aki's recon, but Andou had managed to turn that disadvantage on its head and use it in his favor. Tamaki had known that he had an uncontrollable power that would burn himself to ashes if he dared to use it,

so a bluff that would have come across as nonsensical absurdity if he'd pulled it out of nowhere had instead seemed downright plausible.

Of course, in Andou's words, "I-It's not like I was *totally* bluffing about the part where it's still burning to this day, for the record! I have, like, a *feeling* that it really is! It's like...like an intuitive sorta thing, y'know? I mean, I haven't actually checked or anything...but I think it's probably still burning! I mean, I *want* it to still be burning. It'd be just plain sad if it couldn't even manage *that* much." For whatever that was worth.

But, I digress. The point is that since Tamaki had fallen for Andou's bluff, the shock she'd felt as she'd plummeted through Chifuyu's Gate had been too much for her to take, and she'd passed out. That meant that she'd never learned the location she was *actually* falling toward—in other words, the dimension Andou had actually asked Chifuyu to send him to—that being a pool filled to the brim with stuffed animals. The two of them had gently plopped down into it without sustaining so much as a mild bruise.

"Oh? That's quite impressive. I'm surprised you managed to come up with all that," I admitted.

He'd found a work-around to suppress his opponent's power, used his own theoretically worthless power to his advantage, *and* brought the battle to a conclusion without harming a hair on his opponent's head. Of course, it wasn't like he'd come up with it on the spot. He'd spent an eternity planning the whole tactic out long beforehand. It certainly wasn't a conventional way to win, but it *was* about as Andou-like as you could get.

"By the way...I see you're not surprised," I noted.

"By what?" asked Andou.

"By the fact that I know supernatural powers are real, and that I know what your abilities can do. You don't seem startled in the least."

"Hah! You knowing something you shouldn't hasn't been surprising for ages. In fact, I don't think there's anything you could tell me that'd really surprise me anymore. That's just how it goes with you," Andou explained ever so caustically. "Come to think of it, what are you even here for?"

“I came to save you.”

“You... *Huh?*”

“I came here to save you, Andou. I knew you were in trouble, so I came running, fully prepared to put my life on the line to save yours. Shame I didn’t make it in time, of course.”

“...”

“Well, you don’t have to be *that* surprised about it.”

He was giving me a look that screamed “Who are you and what have you done with Sagami?” so loudly that I was actually a little offended. That fact that he’d literally *just* finished saying how nothing I could say would surprise him anymore didn’t exactly help either.

“Yeah...it’s weird, isn’t it? This isn’t like me at all,” I admitted. I hadn’t meant to voice my doubts—they just slipped out. *Ugh... Expressing myself like this is certainly more embarrassing than I gave it credit for.*

Andou really did look shocked, but before long, he let out a sigh. “It’s *really* weird, yeah...but eh, not in a bad way or anything. That’s just how it goes with you, right?” he said, using almost the exact same words he’d said to me just a moment before. “Hey, Sagami. Do you remember how you took me to the hospital to visit your mom that one time? Like, in the spring of our third year in middle school?”

“Yes, I certainly did that.”

“And when I asked you why, you said that you’d just wanted to see how I’d react, right?”

“I did indeed.”

“Back then, I assumed that you meant that you thought my reaction would be funny...but that wasn’t right at all, was it? You didn’t want to see my reaction—you wanted to know what it would be.”

Seeing...as opposed to knowing?

“Back then, you weren’t watching me the way you usually did. You were watching me carefully, observing how I’d react, because you *cared*. It was sorta

like, I dunno...like what drives people to look themselves up online, I guess.”

Looking yourself up—in other words, searching your own name online in order to gauge your reputation and see what people have written about you.

“They say that manga artists and novelists tend to look themselves up all the time, you know?” said Andou. I didn’t reply. “In other words, writers watch readers in the same way that readers watch writers. Back then, when you took me to that hospital, you were acting like a writer, not a reader. You were anxious about whether or not I’d accept you, and you were expressing yourself like, well, like any other person would.”

Somewhere within me...was a writer. A writer who I’d thought had died long, long ago. A writer whom no one had managed to discover—whom even I had failed to notice...and yet Andou Jurai had unveiled him before I knew it.

“‘If you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.’ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,” said Andou. It was a true chuuni classic quote if I’d ever heard one. “Sagami. You’ve been watching me for a long time...and that whole time, I’ve been watching you too.”

“Have you, now...?” I said. I closed my eyes, and gave him a silent nod. “You know, being watched might not be so bad after all. I’ve spent so long focused solely on the fun I could have watching others...but it’s true. Having someone else see *me* is surprisingly nice.”

As readers, we evaluate. As authors, we are evaluated. Both sides of the equation have their own sources of distress, and both sides bring their own sorts of joy, as well.

Just then...

“Mnh... H-Huh...?”

...Tamaki’s eyes fluttered open. There was a look of bewilderment in them—surprise, presumably, at the fact that she wasn’t dead. She turned her head from side to side, inspecting her surroundings...and soon, her gaze met mine.

“Sh-Shizumu!” Tamaki gasped. Her eyes shot wide open, and she scooted back away as if she was scared of me.

I, however, stepped toward her, and Andou...didn't stop me. Considering everything I'd done up to that point, it would have been completely reasonable for him to assume that I was about to cast her right back down into the deepest pits of her own personal hell, but he made no attempt to hold me back.

Most likely, he expected better of me. As a reader, Andou had genuinely high expectations for me as a writer. He was setting the bar high, sitting back, and watching over the conclusion of our rom-com. A work that had been consigned to a seemingly eternal hiatus by the circumstances of its authors was, at long last, about to begin its final chapter.

"It's been a while, Tamaki," I said.

Tamaki didn't reply. She couldn't even look me in the eye.

"Let me start by saying this: I'm *not* going to apologize," I said. Tamaki cowered away so fearfully, you'd think I just slashed her with a knife. "Three years ago, the two of us broke up...and I don't believe I have a single thing to apologize for when it comes to that. No matter what reason she has—no matter what sort of scumbag her hero may be—a heroine must *never* let herself be claimed by another man. My standards for purity would never allow me to love someone who would make that mistake, regardless of the circumstances."

When all is said and done, people simply don't change that easily. Infidelity was something I couldn't bring myself to ignore. I couldn't look past it, and I couldn't stop it from destroying all attraction I had for her. Within my reader's mind, Tamaki was over and done with. I would never fall for her again. It was a truly egotistical, arrogant, and hypocritical sense of values, and yet...

"It wasn't my fault. The reader's never to blame."

Tragic though it might have been, cruel though it might have made me, I was myself—a reader—to the end. The fact that I still didn't feel so much as a hint of guilt, even after everything that had happened, was as clear of a sign as there could be that I was irredeemable.

Tamaki had started crying before I knew it. She was crying so hard, you'd think I'd gouged open an old wound just to rub salt in it. Her grief was palpable, and I felt nothing at all upon seeing it. Just like when I watched my mother slumber away, I felt like it was all a work of fiction, happening in some other

dimension that I had no part in. It didn't occur to me at all to reach a hand out to her, or offer her a hug.

"But..."

And then I said it. I said the words that I'd forgotten to say—the words that I *should* have said. That one, single phrase that a reader has to offer to the works that they consume.

"Thank you, Tamaki."

"Huh...?"

"Thank you for falling for me. Thank you for everything you did for me. Thank you for accommodating me. Thank you for doing so, so much to make me love you."

John Lennon said that love is wanting to be loved. I'd never understood those words, but now, I finally felt like I was starting to get it. The reader within me could never have comprehended them, but the writer within me stood a chance.

Everything she'd done, she'd done to make her boyfriend love her. Everything an author did, they did to make their readers love them. It was wrong to belittle it all as acting, flattery, and lies. There wasn't so much as a hint of dishonesty to the feelings that drove them. Those feelings were proof of the connections that we forged with one another, and they were truly something to be celebrated.

"Thank you, Tamaki. I really was happy to have you as my heroine."

Tamaki let out a gasp...and tears streamed down her cheeks like a waterfall. It felt like somehow, purely on a whim, I had said the words that she had always wanted to hear from me.

Oh... I guess I probably should've done this from the very beginning. Whenever Tamaki did something for me, I should have just told her "Thank you." I should have acknowledged all the effort she put into making me love her.

Maybe if my voice had reached her, we could have warded off our story's cancellation. Maybe its serialization would have lasted for at least a little longer. Maybe we would have wrapped everything up in a final chapter worthy of all

that came before it. It was all too late now, of course. I was no longer in love with Tamaki, and I would never fall for her again. The same went for her—she'd surely be better off without having a guy like me in her life any longer.

"Let's change, Tamaki," I said.

I'm sure people would tell me it was far too late for that. They would say I had no right to even suggest it. Nevertheless, I played the role of the me I wanted to become, expressing myself using my own words.

"Let's stop letting the past hold us back—stop leaning on it like a crutch. Let's look to the future and take a step forward. I'll...do my best to make an effort, right along with you. It's terrifying and humiliating to even think about...but I promise I'll give it my best shot."

"Yeah... Let's!" Tamaki said, tears still flowing down her cheeks as she gave me a powerful nod. She finally looked up now—looked at me, and at Andou beside me—then bowed her head. "I'm so sorry..."

It wasn't my place to decide whether or not she should be forgiven. That right rested in the hands of the one who'd really been harmed today—which is to say, Andou. I looked behind me, wondering what he would say...and found him bawling his eyes out. He had his arms crossed and was trying *really* hard to look stoic, but he was still crying so much, it was almost disturbing. I mean, he was probably crying harder than Tamaki herself!

I almost cracked up then and there...but at the same time, a thought struck me: the ice had begun to melt. Andou's heart—his capacity for romance that had been frozen by the trauma of his time in the eighth grade—had finally begun to thaw. The glacier of regret and guilt that had long hidden the love within him was turning to water and flowing down his cheeks...

Okay, no, that's probably going a little too hard on the flowery metaphors. Hmm. I'm starting to think that I might not have much talent as an author after all.

Meanwhile, as I was preoccupied by that truly trivial line of thought, a pair of grins began to grow upon Andou and Tamaki's faces. Finally, the two of them burst into laughter. I couldn't even say who started first...and speaking as their friend, I couldn't have been happier to see them smile so brightly.

A Preview for Next Time: ENDorphin

Superfluous. This whole section is utterly, intolerably superfluous. Why would you go all the way past plain “fluuous” and into “super” territory? Why would you take something that was already perfectly finished and add on one final touch that ruins it all?

This whole story was wrapped up nice and neatly. If we just *stopped*, here and now, then the book could end on a positive, refreshing note. I don't know if these “previews for next time” or whatever are something that the editors insist on or something that authors decide to put in independently, but regardless, I have to wonder: what possible merit could there be to shoehorning in a blatant sequel hook for the next volume right at the end of everything?

“Tamaki?!” shouted Andou from beside me. His eyes grew wide with shock as he watched a pitch-black sphere manifest in the air...and consume Tamaki whole. Mere moments after our story had concluded in the most beautiful way possible, *someone* had crashed onto the scene, assaulting us in our moment of mutual joy.

The sphere was a black hole: a void in space capable of swallowing up anything and everything. It had appeared directly behind Tamaki and sucked her in at a terrifying speed. There was no time to even think of rescuing her. She hadn't even had the time to scream. Tamaki had just been silently engulfed by the singularity, vanishing without a trace. It was like reality was laughing in the face of our moment of reconciliation, ruining it all with brutal, merciless efficiency.

“T-Tamaki...? *Tamaki!*” Andou bellowed. His panic and astonishment weren't hard to pick up on.

“It's all right, Andou,” I said, my voice coming out so composed, it surprised even me. “Tamaki isn't dead. This War doesn't allow any of its participants to actually lose their lives in battle with each other. Even if you do ‘die,’ you'll just

come back to life again.”

I delivered my explanation in a soft, quiet tone. Behind that softness, though—within my mind—within my heart...

“That...was *Pinpoint Abyss*, I take it?”

It was a technique that utilized an ultra-powerful gravitational field to eliminate someone in the blink of an eye, and a maneuver that *he* was fond of and used often. Or, rather, that he wanted people to *believe* he was fond of and used often.

“Bwa ha ha!”

A dry, peculiar laugh rang out from on high—a laugh that I’d heard that very same day just two or three hours before. I looked up to find a solitary man standing atop a nearby bridge that spanned the river. I say he was standing “atop” the bridge, but to be clear, I don’t mean that he was standing on the sidewalk or the road. No, he was high up above, standing on the truss itself. It was a perilous place where only construction workers or other tradesmen would normally find themselves, but he was simply standing there like it was the most natural thing in the world, his long coat flapping in the wind behind him.

The man’s silvery hair shined eerily in the light of the crescent moon. He looked almost mythical, standing there in the moonlight—like a devilish figure who had stepped straight out of a religious mural. It was...*very* hard not to assume that he’d calculated his entrance with intense care. There’s just no way he *hadn’t* engineered his positioning just right so the moon would be located directly above him when viewed from our perspective.

Kiryuu Hajime...aka Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. In a sense, he was the polar opposite of me and my many long years spent as an incorrigible reader. *He* longed for the limelight and was driven by an insatiable lust for others’ approval. In other words, the writer within him was far too strong of a force. He was an incorrigible writer—a man whose case of terminal chuunibyou had lasted well into his twenties without so much as a hint of decline—and still to this day, he strove to play the part of both author and protagonist, spinning an endless tale of pure and unfiltered self-congratulation.

“And that makes eight.”

Kiryuu’s scornful, sneering words came as more than a bit of a shock to me. *“That makes eight”? Does he mean...there are only eight Players left in the war? That eliminating Tamaki has brought us down to— No, no, that can’t be right.*

The numbers just couldn’t have dropped that dramatically in that short of a time frame. I’d run into more than eight Players that day after school alone.

What happened? Something must have gone down over these past few hours...so just what on earth did that man do? Who’s still in the picture, and who’s been taken out of it?

“The auditions are over, and the players have all been chosen. Now—let the beginning of the end commence,” said Kiryuu.

That told me everything I needed to know. It told me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that when he’d said “That makes eight,” he’d been referring to the *Final Eight*—to the new rule that had been added to the Fifth Spirit War at Kiryuu Hajime’s behest.

This War wasn’t supposed to continue to the point that the last man standing would claim its prize. Rather, the battle royal would come to an end when *eight* Players remained. I had gotten it into my head that the sole purpose of that rule was to turn the War into a team competition...but what if his intentions hadn’t been so simple? What if, for instance, the playing field narrowing to eight contestants would instead move the War along to a totally new stage?

“...Why?” said Andou from beside me, looking up at Kiryuu with an expression of purest confusion. Kiryuu matched that gaze with the sort of look you’d give your archenemy, or your fated rival...or, perhaps, the sort of look you’d give the subject of your yearning.

He didn’t spare *me* so much as a glance. Of course he didn’t. There was no point, no entertainment to be drawn, from watching an onlooker like me. He was there to be seen, and I was there to see. That was the relationship that we’d always had—the nature of our childhood friendship.

This very moment, here and now, would be Kiryuu Hajime's long-awaited chance reunion with Andou Jurai. To him, it was surely as important of a scene as there could ever be. It was the sort of scene that an author would write with the express intent of making it stick in their readers' minds, the sort of situation that would prompt the greatest sense of impact and catharsis possible, and I was just *there*, sticking out like a sore thumb and thoroughly out of the loop.

That's not to say that I felt anything was particularly wrong with all that, of course. I was never *not* out of the loop, and I'd always preferred it that way. And, if I'd still been the same person I always had been, I might've let it slide...

"I, Sagami Shizumu, declare my intent to participate in the Fifth Spirit War."

...but now I spoke aloud, expressing my will to join the War using the specific phrase that I had been taught. An instant later, a pale light engulfed me.

Kiryuu glanced at me, his ever-joyful smile shifting as his eyebrows furrowed with suspicion. "Shizumu... What're you playing at?" he asked.

"Oh, just playing author," I replied.

"..."

"You remember my hypothetical power—I believe you granted it the moniker *Innocent Onlooker*? Well, I've just awakened to it for real."

The truth was that quite a long time ago, on the day I'd first met Leatia, my power had been awakened within me. That being said, I wasn't in quite the same situation as the other Players. I'd pestered Leatia into putting me in a fuzzy, ambiguous state where if I decided that I wanted to join the War, I could do so independently at any given moment. In short: I had asked for, and been granted, a moratorium on my decision of whether or not to participate.

Not even I totally understood why I'd made that request. By all rights, I should have been completely disinterested in taking part in *any* sort of supernatural battle, but for some reason I couldn't explain, turning the chance down outright had felt like a waste. Looking back, that feeling might well have been the faintest trace of the author within me asserting himself. The side of me that only Andou had been able to find for so long had been unwilling to give up on his right to play a part in this story.

And that brings us to now. To the moment when I, by my own will, chose to declare my participation in the War and become a Player.

“That makes *nine*, doesn’t it, Kiryuu?” I said. “I don’t know who all is left in the running, and I don’t know what exactly the *Final Eight* rule really means...but regardless, I think I can call this a success, can’t I? Have I managed to throw at least a bit of a wrench into the works of your scheme—or rather, your storyline?”

I had no idea how significant the number eight was to his plan...but if it *was* significant to at least some extent—if there were *nine* Players remaining in the War rather than eight, thanks to my participation—then the War would be unable to move along to its next stage. The story would stagnate, come to a grinding halt, and be drawn out far longer than it should have been.

“Lucky you, Kiryuu. You’re getting one of your beloved extensions. It’s still a little too early for us to let this work come to a close. Why don’t we entertain the readers for just a little while longer?”

“Well... This is a surprise. Can’t say I saw it coming at all,” Kiryuu remarked. “To think *you*, of all people, would stand in my way at the eleventh hour... I was convinced that you weren’t going to take anyone’s side or make anyone your enemy, all the way to the bitter end. Gotta admit, I feel kinda betrayed,” He shook his head with a cynical, exasperated smile. “I was planning on offering you a front-row seat to watch the conclusion of *my* story, y’know?”

“And I was planning on taking it,” I replied. “I’ve been looking forward to it all this time...but I suppose my anticipation’s gotten the better of me. It seems I just can’t be satisfied watching from the stands anymore.”

“We’re about to head into the final chapter. It’s too damn late for this. There’s no screen time left for you, Shizumu.”

“That’s perfectly fine. If there’s no screen time left for me...then I’ll just have to make some,” I said. I said it like an author—like a protagonist.

“Bwa ha ha!” Kiryuu cackled. “What is this? It’s like you’re a totally different person. What the hell happened over the past few hours?”

“Nothing particularly significant, really. I just got it into my head to give

changing a try, that's all. I've decided to put in just a little effort this time, for my friends' sake."

Kiryuu's gaze locked with mine, and the two of us glared directly at each other. He was looking at *me* now. I wasn't out of the loop anymore. After all, I'd taken a step forward. I had intentionally, personally, written the name Sagami Shizumu into this story's *dramatis personae*.

"Though of course, all that said, people's true natures don't change quite that easily. I'm still the reader I've always been, and nothing more. When all's said and done, I just want to be entertained above all else," I said. "But...imagine if I managed to take you down. Wouldn't *that* be more entertaining than anything?"

The beginning of the end wouldn't be ending anytime soon. Not on my watch.

Thus did an onlooker who had refused to take to the stage for so long decide, after all this time, to throw a fit about how he really *did* want his share of the spotlight after all. He set out to pick a fight with the author himself, ruining the one big moment that the whole story had been building toward from the outset. A single egotistical reader deciding to assert himself had thrown the whole plot into a state of chaos.

Our story had jumped its rails, and no author could hope to bring it back under control anymore.

Afterword

Maybe this is just me, but it feels like the more one devotes oneself to the act of reading, the more one begins to naturally develop the desire to be seen as a *discerning* reader by society at large. To put that in more simple terms: everyone ends up wanting to act like a critic.

So then—who, exactly, would society consider to be a first-rate reader? “A reader who can evaluate books entirely objectively” seems like the natural answer. People who only ever talk about their own preferences—the sort of people who’d say “I don’t like it when the main character’s a girl, so that book sucks,” for instance—are right out of the running. Nobody would bother listening to the opinions of a food critic who judges dishes based on their picky preferences without even trying them, and the same principle applies to books.

In order to be accepted by society as a critic, a reader must be able to analyze a book’s strengths and weaknesses objectively, suppressing their own preferences to as great of a degree as possible and evaluating the work in clear and transparent terms. They have to allude to the author’s previous works to gain an air of perceived expertise, mix in opinions that ever so slightly oppose those held by the general public just to generate a little controversy, and so on and so on. I can’t help but think that when one goes to extreme lengths like those, experimenting through trial and error to find the best way to convince others to acknowledge them, they’re acting less like a reader and more like a certain sort of specialized author in their own right.

And with all that said, it’s been a while! This is Kota Nozomi speaking. This time around was the thoroughly improbable Sagami volume, of all things. Sagami is a character I’m personally quite fond of, but if you were to ask me whether or not he was really in demand with my readers, I’d definitely struggle to give an answer. As a result, writing this volume was no easy task, to say the least. Sagami himself would probably say “What? No way—who would want a volume about *me*?” but in the end, I decided to just go for it and write the story I wanted to. I hope that you enjoyed it!

Next up, an announcement: I have a new series starting soon! Its title: *Giant Killing Dark Hero*. To describe it in simple terms, it's about a protagonist who's the lowest of the low in terms of general stats but the mightiest of the mighty in terms of mental strength, and he goes around kicking the everloving crap out of a bunch of peace-addled fools using the least honorable means possible. Please look forward to it!

Last but not least, some thanks! To my editor, Nakamizo: thank you once again for your hard work. I submitted my proposal for the Sagami volume fully prepared for it to be shot down from start to finish, and deeply appreciate you green-lighting it without question instead. Next, to 029 and Trigger's Nakagawa Hideki: thank you for drawing such wonderful illustrations! This ended up being a pretty tricky volume to illustrate, but both the cover and the insert illustrations turned out incredibly well. And, finally, I give my greatest and most sincere of thank-yous to all the readers who have stuck with this series for the past eleven volumes.

And that's all! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

KOTA NOZAKURA
ILLUSTRATOR

PRESENTS



Bonus Translation Notes: On Blu-ray Bonuses

No need to bury the lede on this one: in the last volume's TL notes I promised a description of the bonus merch included with the Blu-ray release of the *Supernatural Battles* anime, and this volume, that's exactly what you're going to get! Let's dive right into it!

...Okay, so maybe a *little* lede-burying first, because some context is probably merited for any readers who may not be super familiar with how the whole physical anime industry works in Japan. To make a long story short, seasonal anime is typically released on Blu-ray on multiple discs that are sold separately, each of which includes a very small number of episodes. *Supernatural Battles*, for instance, was released on six separately sold discs, each of which contained two episodes and retailed for 7,700 yen (\$49.55 in the current economy, and roughly \$70 in saner times).

If this is news to you, then your first thought was probably something along the lines of, "Wait, what? You're telling me that *two episodes* of a show on Blu-ray in Japan costs more than the *entire* show costs on Blu-ray if you get the English release?" The answer to that question is yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you. That's why Blu-ray regions are a thing—justifying that price is presumably why Japanese releases of anime tend to also include bonus stuff in some form or another.

So, what sort of bonuses are we talking? In this instance, each disc came with three major pieces of bonus material (not counting the cases, which are quite nice themselves): a bonus disc containing a song and an audio drama, a booklet containing art and behind-the-scenes info, and another booklet containing a short story written by Kota Nozomi himself. Note that the short story booklets didn't actually come with the version of the set that I was able to obtain, but that's not a problem for reasons that I'll address right at the end of this section!

Let's go ahead and start with the bonus discs, specifically with the songs! All six songs are technically the same song, titled "Nobody Knows, Oh Yeah!" The

gimmick is that the song's a duet, and each version is sung by Andou and one of his potential love interests, with Tomoyo, Chifuyu, Sayumi, Hatoko, Kudou, and Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First taking the spotlight in that order. Andou's lyrics remain mostly consistent from song to song (he more or less recites a ridiculous chuuni cliché every line), but the other half varies wildly from version to version, and the instrumentals are all completely different, so I'll go ahead and go through them in broad strokes!

To start, volume one: Tomoyo! Unsurprisingly, Tomoyo's lines are mostly dedicated to calling out Andou's nonsense and/or roasting him for it. The exception is the chorus, which she seems to get kind of into, even working Andou-style chuuni English into some of her portions. As for the instrumentals, the only way that I can describe it is that it sounds like an anime OP. Like, serious Fripside energy.

Next, volume two: Chifuyu! Her lyrics also fall broadly into the roasting Andou category, though in her case they're less targeted at specifics of what he says and more broadly noting that he's not making sense/telling him to stop shouting. Her instrumentals are *completely* different as well, and have a certain nursery rhyme, little kids' edutainment song vibe to them.

Volume three: Sayumi! As you might imagine, we're right back into roasting Andou territory with her lyrics, though in a more eloquent sort of way that plays off his word choice. I'm no expert, but to my untrained ear, the instrumentals and general style of the song are just straight up enka, which certainly suits Sayumi in a number of ways.

Volume four: Hatoko! We're finally out of roasting Andou territory with her lyrics, which instead mostly center around the fact that she has no clue what Andou's talking about. Her song is very poppy and bubbly, with a few little semi-meaningless, scat-singing-style verbal additions that distinguish it from the others.

Volume five: Kudou! This one's *very* different, abandoning the back-and-forth chuuni antics of prior versions in favor of lyrics centered around the experience of awakening to an ability that's totally worthless in all practical senses, contrasting Kudou's and Andou's reactions to being put in that scenario. This version of the song is fairly poppy as well, though in a slightly less upbeat and

energetic way than Hatoko's was.

And finally, the one that made me write this section: Kiryuu! Literally no one will be surprised to hear that Kiryuu's song goes *super* hard—I'm talking metal guitar, ultradramatic vocals, and just a generally over-the-top vibe all around. As for the lyrics? Pure, undiluted chuuni excess from start to finish. It's glorious.

That brings us to the other half of the CDs: the audio dramas! Compared to the previous two dramas, each of which were somewhere in the vicinity of an hour long and covered a whole volume in abridged form, these are much shorter—roughly ten minutes each—but also feature entirely original (albeit largely inconsequential to the greater plot) short stories.

The first of those stories centers around Andou and Kudou! It's set during the brief period when Kudou thinks that she and Andou are dating, and features her cooking a deliberately bizarre meal for him in order to test whether he'd still like her if she was an awful cook (much to the horror of Tomoyo, who's there too). Andou spends the whole time being extremely uncomfortable and failing to clear up the misunderstanding with Kudou, which is theoretically his whole goal throughout the incident.

Story number two features Andou rushing home to watch a TV show, only to get sidetracked by Chifuyu, who enlists him to help her pick out a birthday present for Kuki. It doesn't go very well, on account of the fact that Chifuyu has no clue what Kuki would want, or even what she likes on a basic level. Chifuyu has a mini crisis over the fact that she doesn't understand her best friend at all, but then Kuki happens to cross paths with them and ends up reassuring Chifuyu that the fact she tried to make the gift a surprise means that she knew what Kuki would want most after all...and also notes that her birthday is, in fact, *next* month. Oh, and Andou totally misses his show.

Story number three moves along to Sayumi—or, rather, to her family. Maiya shows up at Andou's house out of the blue, explaining that she ran away from home and asking him to let her crash at his place. Andou eventually gets Maiya to reveal that she ran away after a fight with Sayumi, and over the course of telling the story, Maiya goes from complaining about how comically perfect Sayumi is to praising her for it, finally bemoaning the fact that they fought at all. That's when Sayumi emerges from a nearby bush—she'd been listening in from

the start—and the two sisters make up...but then start fighting again after Andou asks what had set the argument off in the first place (it was a debate over the proper method of squeezing a toothpaste tube).

Story number four stars Hatoko and Machi! Machi calls Hatoko over to her place to help her with busywork for a college course, and Hatoko waxes nostalgic about being in Andou's house. Andou himself comes home soon afterward, unaware that Hatoko's over. Andou starts monologuing to himself, Machi pounds on the wall, and Hatoko is amazed to discover that the siblings can have whole conversations through wall-pounding. When Machi convinces Hatoko to try it herself, she *very* lightly knocks on the wall, and Andou instantly realizes who she is, much to her delight.

Story number five: the Hitomi story! The story opens with Hitomi and Leatia chatting, but Leatia quickly snaps and calls Hitomi out for bringing Hajime up *way* too much. Hitomi explains that she had a fight with Hajime (over a pudding cup, which Leatia calls out as being a cliché) and told him to leave, only for him to *actually* do just that. Leatia tries to help—at one point by doing a disturbingly good impression of Hajime—and ultimately, Hitomi goes out to look for him...and finds him right outside her door. The two of them have a touching moment of reconciliation that's only *slightly* ruined by Hajime being a shameless freeloader.

And finally, story number six: the Sagami story. Andou walks in on Sagami getting asked out on their school's rooftop. Through a series of classic Sagami-style conversational left turns, Sagami explains that he *somehow* ended up picking up a girl's gym uniform, then calls Hatoko in to help him get it back to its actual owner. Sagami takes the opportunity to trick Hatoko into saying a bunch of horrible sexual innuendos out loud, Andou tells him to knock it off, and Hatoko reflects on how nice it is that the two of them get along so well despite the fact that they don't even like each other.

That just about does it for the bonus CDs! As you can probably see, none of their contents are what I'd describe as essential, particularly for the sake of enjoying the main series. Rather, they're fun little bits of bonus material that, among other things, give just a little extra speaking time to a bunch of characters that didn't get all that much of it in the anime itself.

Next up: the bonus booklets! All six of these follow the same general pattern: two pages dedicated to the episodes that were included in that volume, a few pages of character profiles, an interview with one of the series's main voice actors (as in, the actors for the literary club members and Kudou), the lyrics to that volume's version of "Nobody Knows, Oh Yeah!" and a credits page for that volume's audio drama.

As far as interesting things from the booklets go, the two big points that caught my attention were the interviews and the sidebars in which the director (Takahashi Masanori) and actors picked out favorite scenes and aspects of the series. There are a lot of tidbits throughout the interviews, but we have limited space to write about them here, so I'm just gonna pick a smattering of my favorite parts and list them in no particular order!

Surprising absolutely no one, multiple members of the cast picked Hatoko's "I don't understand" rant as one of their favorite scenes. Notably, the segment that the director wrote about it confirms the longstanding rumor that Hayami Saori nailed the whole speech on the very first take! Apparently, Takahashi went into the recording session prepared for it to drag on longer than usual, but in the end, it was actually *shorter* than a typical recording would be.

One of the interview questions was "If you could have a supernatural power for one day, what would you pick?" Only Tomoyo's and Kudou's voice actresses actually picked powers from *Supernatural Battles*, and both of them went with *World Create*. Yamashita Nanami (Chifuyu's voice actress) said she wanted "the power to enter the 2D world."

Several members of the cast were asked to come up with questions for the next cast member who'd be interviewed. Yamazaki Haruka (Tomoyo's voice actress) asked Yamashita Nanami "How are you *that* good at winking, anyway?" to which Yamashita replied "I can only actually do it with my left eye."

Multiple cast members—including Okamoto Nobuhiko, Andou's voice actor—picked the bit where Andou sings to himself while stripping since he thinks he's home alone as one of their favorite scenes.

One of the interview questions asked the cast members to talk about a chuuni moment that they'd caught themselves experiencing recently. Fukuhara Kaori

(Kudou's voice actress) talked about waking up at 4:44 in the morning and thinking more seriously than she should have about the possibility that she could get dragged into a horror scenario (the number four, for reference, is somewhat like the number 13 in American culture, as it can be read like the word for "death"). Taneda Risa (Sayumi's voice actress) talked about smirking to herself while listening to music, inadvertently failing to realize that other members of the cast were trying to talk to her while she did so, and Yamazaki Haruka talked about catching herself making the sort of exaggerated gasps and exertion noises that voice actors have to record for anime in real life.

Instead of the above question, Hayami Saori was asked "Is there anything that you haven't understood lately?" She replied "I don't understand, I don't understand, I don't understand!" Also, she listed Squirrely as her favorite character and put "*that scene*" as one of her favorite Hatoko-centric sequences.

The final episode's credits include stills of the various characters from the series, one of which features Machi sampling a pot of stew in her kitchen. On her character profile page, the director notes that said stew was, in fact, canonically made by Hatoko, not her.

And, finally, the elephant in the room: the bonus short stories. You'd *think* I would be livid at the prospect of there being huge chunks of written content from this series that I'll never get to translate...and you'd be right, if it weren't for the fact that I *will* be able to translate them, because volume 12 of *Supernatural Battles* is literally just the six bonus Blu-ray short stories compiled into a single volume, with a final, exclusive short story tacked on at the end. This means two things: first, you won't have to worry about missing any major content from this series after all, and second, for all intents and purposes, volume 11 really was the penultimate story! We're firmly in the endgame now, and I hope you'll enjoy seeing how this series concludes when volume 13 comes along.

But first, references!

Prologue

△ (*for the sake of argument, let's just call Big Windup! an outlier*).

Big Windup! is a baseball manga by Higuchi Asa that, as Sagami's train of

thought implies, is known for really digging into the particulars of each and every game that its characters play in, depicting them in remarkably granular detail.

Chapter 1

△ Sagamicizm of the One-Ten-Three

The title of this chapter—and, for that matter, the titles of most of the chapters in this volume—is a play on the kanji used to write a character’s name in Japanese! Each chapter’s title uses the name of the character Sagami meets in it (in other words, the character depicted in the chapter’s illustration) as the basis for its title.

△ As Kaneko Misuzu put it, “Everyone’s different, and that’s just fine.”

Kaneko Misuzu was a Japanese poet who was born in the early 20th century, died young, and *then* achieved widespread renown some decades later when her poetry was rediscovered and popularized. The line that Sagami is quoting here is from a poem called “Watashi to Kotori to Suzu to” (roughly, “Me, the Bird, and the Bell”), which celebrates the idea of individuality and is one of her most famous works.

△ ...where I found myself sitting directly across from a crusty, Kitaro-haired hag...

“Kitaro” in this instance is the titular protagonist of Mizuki Shigeru’s *GeGeGe no Kitaro*! We briefly covered the series back in volume 5, when Kiryuu theorized that Hitomi was styling her hair after Kitaro’s on purpose, but to recap: Kitaro is a youkai who resembles a human child, but he keeps his bangs long to cover his missing left eye in much the same manner Hitomi hides her right eye.

△ ...apparently he’d rolled the idea that the fallen angel Lucifer had twelve wings into his personal mythological headcanon somewhere along the way...

There is, apparently, some theological basis for the Lucifer-having-twelve-wings theory! I am by no means a scholar of religion, and the sources that I’m finding for the idea are all varying shades of dubious, but at the very least, it’s not something that Kiryuu (or Kota Nozomi) pulled out of thin air.

△ ...or for the panties off a hot babe...

This, of course, is a shout out to the very first wish that was ever made using the Dragon Balls in, well, *Dragon Ball*! The wish gets made by a character named Oolong, who preempts the story arc's villain (who is about to wish for world domination) by wishing instead for the first thing that pops into his head...underwear. Which, by the way, he then proceeds to wear *on* his head for the rest of the arc. Let it never be forgotten that early-era *Dragon Ball* was very, very silly.

△ Off the top of my head, I assumed that making like Hiei in the Dark Tournament arc and wishing for the bloody deaths of everyone who had played a part in organizing the war would be rejected outright.

We're back in *YuYu Hakusho* territory! We've discussed Hiei himself before—that's the wielder of the Dragon of the Darkness Flame, and thus the inspiration for a *lot* of Andou's chuuni aesthetic, for reference. The Dark Tournament arc, meanwhile, revolves around a tournament that, like the Spirit War, rewards everyone on its winning team with a wish.

△ Maybe from his perspective, this Fifth Spirit War is just The Spirit War: Part 2.

The sole purpose of this note is to specify that, yes, the phrasing of this line *does* use the same terminology that's used to distinguish *JoJo*'s parts.

△ (For the sake of argument, let's just say Tsugumi Seishiro and her masculine name are an outlier.)

Tsugumi Seishiro is a character from *Nisekoi*, a Jump manga by Komi Naoshi, and *is*, in fact, a cross-dressing girl despite her not quite adhering perfectly to Sagami's theory!

△ If it seems like someone's power reflects their personality, that's just the Barnum effect at work.

The Barnum effect, named after the famed circus showman and legendary grifter P.T. Barnum, is a psychological term that describes people's tendency to perceive vague, sweeping statements that apply to a massive number of people as having been specifically targeted at them. To somewhat oversimplify the

phenomenon, the idea is that if someone gets you in the mindset that they *know* things about you on a deep, often mystical level, then makes a statement that does in fact apply to you, you're more likely to be amazed at how they were right than you are to realize that said fact also applies to basically everyone else.

This effect—or rather, the psychological tendency it describes—is the foundation that allows cold reading, a technique used by con artists of all shapes and sizes, to work as effectively as it often does. On the less malicious side of the spectrum, it's also the basis for astrology, most of those personality quizzes that you find all over the place online these days, and—as Akutagawa notes—the Japanese superstition that one's blood type has an influence over their personality and compatibility with others.

Chapter 2

△ *The oldest story in history was, umm...The Tale of Genji, dating back to the Heian Era, I think?*

Sayumi is right about *The Tale of Genji* being the world's first novel—or at least, many people have made that claim with confidence in the past, though it's unsurprisingly a matter of considerable dispute (some people, for instance, claim that *Don Quixote* was the first novel in the modern sense of the term, a fact that I mostly bring up as an excuse to talk about *Don Quixote* again). It was written in serialized form by one “Murasaki Shikibu” (real name lost to history) somewhere right around the year 1000, which does indeed put it squarely in the middle of the Heian era of Japanese history. The work's story, to be *incredibly* reductive, revolves around an unimaginably hot courtier sleeping his way through the imperial court and generally failing upward.

△ *The Late Queen Problem.*

The odds are pretty good that you haven't heard of the Late Queen Problem before, on account of the fact that despite it being named after an American author (technically speaking, a pseudonym written under by multiple American authors), the theory itself was come up by and popularized among Japanese literary theorists! To the best of my knowledge, it doesn't really get discussed much this side of the pond aside from in the context of discussing Japanese

mystery fiction that engages with it.

△ *Proving that something doesn't exist... This is starting to veer toward probatio diabolica territory.*

Probatio diabolica, the devil's proof, is more or less just a term used to describe a circumstance in which one is required legally to prove something that is, in fact, *impossible* to prove.

Chapter 3

△ *I was convinced that a veritable field of lilies was blooming within that school, if you catch my drift.*

The Japanese word for lily is “yuri,” and if you’ve read this far into this series, odds are pretty good that tells you everything you need to know about what Sagami is insinuating in this line! On the off chance I’m wrong about that, “yuri” in the context of Japanese media refers to works portraying homosexual relationships between female characters. It is, of course, much more complicated than that—because when *isn't* it?—and in many use cases it carries connotations of purity. Many works that get classified as yuri take a nonsexual, or even nonromantic, approach to the relationships they portray...though of course, many *other* works are expressly romantic and/or sexual, making it very hard to make broad statements about the genre, on the whole. In any case, I think we all know perfectly well what side of that spectrum Sagami’s likely falling on here!

△ *When I tried to think of characters with powers that had actually addressed that contradiction in-universe, Genthru was the only one I could come up with offhand.*

liit’s *Hunter x Hunter* reference time! We’re long past the need to introduce that series at this point, so let’s get right into it: Genthru is an antagonist whose Nen power allows him to, among other things, create explosions in the palms of his hands. As Sagami alludes to, he does *not* have a convenient immunity to his own explosions, and has to dedicate more energy to protecting himself from them than he devotes to creating the blasts in the first place.

△ *She was contacting someone through LINE, best as I could tell.*

LINE is a messaging app that's used by virtually everyone with a smartphone in modern Japan! Its sheer ubiquity really can't be overstated, and it's largely usurped texting and phone email as the primary means of communication for most modern teens.

Speaking of phone email, the shift from Kudou's phone email address playing a key role in the events of volume 2 to LINE being casually referenced in volume 11 is a kinda cool sign of how pop culture changed in the real world in the time between the publication of those two volumes. V2 came out in 2012, V11 in 2016, and LINE was launched in mid-2011, for reference. It really did sweep in and change how a vast swath of the country casually communicated online (on LINE?) in less than half a decade.

Chapter 6

△ She looks so peaceful, doesn't she? It's almost hard to believe, right? She really is alive, though. She is.

As Sagami himself points out, this is a reference to *Touch*, a baseball manga by Adachi Mitsuru! It's only a partial quote, though, on account of the fact that in *Touch*, the word "alive" is swapped out with "dead." Speaking of the line's original context, the character in question dies after getting hit by a truck, which somehow makes Sagami's joke even more tasteless than it already was.

△ I'm pretty into nakige, after all.

"Nakige" is a subgenre in the visual novel medium, referring to games that are, in short, designed to make their players cry! A popular representative example of the subgenre would be *Clannad*, and, for that matter, the vast majority of games created by Key, the developer that made it.

△ Having a main character fight to save their mother hasn't really been a thing since the days of JoJo's Part 3 and Flame of Recca—

The plot of *JoJo's Part 3* is driven by its protagonist's quest to save his mother from a mysterious illness that, due to convoluted JoJo's reasons, can only be cured by killing DIO. *Flame of Recca*, meanwhile, stars a protagonist who tries to save his mother in an altogether different sort of manner by curing her of her curse of immortality.

Chapter 8

△ I can't think of any characters whose powers address the your-own-skill-can't-harm-you inconsistency other than Genthru and Feitan...

We've already been over Genthru, but since Andou clearly knows *Hunter x Hunter* better than Sagami, we're right back to it! Feitan's Nen ability creates an incredibly potent flame that burns everything around him, but it also requires him to use *another* ability first in order to make a suit of armor that protects him from the former ability's effects.

And, that's all for this time! See you again in volume 12, which I assure you is somehow even more unhinged than the past several volumes have been. Look forward to it!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 11

The classic “I only drink black coffee” line I started using back when I was a student has recently been upgraded (downgraded?) to “I don’t drink canned coffee,” “I don’t drink instant coffee,” and “I always order black coffee, even from Starbucks.”

Illustrator/Character Designer: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part-Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works), *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan), and *The 8th Cafeteria Girl* (Published by Shueisha).

Every time I see a voice actor who played a character in the *Supernatural Battles* anime turn up in some other show, I end up smirking to myself (a deeply relatable phenomenon).

Interior Illustrator: Nakagawa Hideki (TRIGGER)

Action animator who most recently worked on *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* (2014), *Little Witch Academia: The Enchanted Parade* (2015), etc. Currently working on *Kiznaiver* (2016).

My work can’t measure up to 029’s wonderful illustrations, but I hope it helped you appreciate the atmosphere of this volume even a little!

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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 11

Originally published as INOU BATTLE WA NICHIJOUKEI NO NAKADE Vol. 11

by Kota Nozomi

Translated by Tristan K. Hill Edited by Zubonjin

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