

When supernatural Battles Became Commonplace

6

Author
**Kota
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Illustrator
029



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Supernatural
Battle



Prologue

BAHAMUT,
the God Dragon
of Ruin

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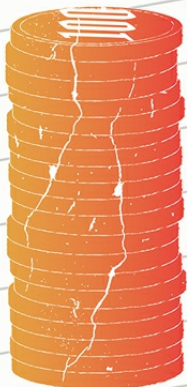
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A rare
film strip



The Tower
of Babel





Kanzaki
Tomoyo

CHARACTERS

ILLUSTRATOR:

029

CLOSED CLOCK

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.



**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**



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.

**Andou
Jurai**

**WORLD
CREATE**

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.



**Himeki
Chifuyu**

Prologue

“When all is said and done, what people desire above all else is to have others identify with their feelings. Don’t you think, Jurai?”

I can’t remember when exactly it was that Sagami had asked me that. I can’t remember, but judging by the fact that he’d called me “Jurai,” I can narrow it down to having happened at some point while I was in the eighth grade. That was the only period in which he’d ever called me by my first name.

The eighth grade: the era when he had called me Jurai in an overfamiliar gesture of friendliness, and I had called him Sagamin, a similarly affectionate nickname. Almost like we were friends. Almost like we were *best* friends.

“When you express an opinion, deep down, what you really want is for someone to say ‘That’s right!’ in response. People want *affirmation*. When they get that—when they find somebody who sympathizes with them—it helps them convince themselves that their existence is righteous. It grants a feeling that they’re *not* all alone in a way that nothing else can. Deep down, everyone feels a need for approval, and having someone offer you that validation, confirming they feel the same way, is the most vital means by which we can fulfill that need.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I agreed. “I like to recommend books to Hatoko all the time, right? Sorta proselytizing the joys of media, y’know? I’ve basically always known that she’s just not into the same sort of stuff that I am, but I still can’t stop myself from wanting to help her appreciate the things I like. I suppose you could say I want her to identify with my feelings about them.”

Sagami certainly did have a point. Seeking out concord from others is an incredibly natural thing for people to do. Everyone wants someone to understand them, to accept them, and to empathize with them. Sometimes it feels a lot nicer to hear someone say “You’re really doing your best” than it does to be told “Do your best!” Sometimes, when you complain to someone or ask them for advice, what you *really* want is for them to say “I get you” or

“That’s rough, man,” rather than have them try to foist some sort of condescending solution for your problems on you. The sympathy just *feels* nicer.

“Let me think of a good example...” Sagami continued. “All right—take talking about a manga or anime, for instance. Whenever people disagree about a piece of media, they tend to start sorting themselves out into fans and haters and make it into a pointlessly huge *thing*. Don’t you think that could have something to do with the identification I’m talking about?”

Sagami was what most people would call a geek. He loved the world of 2D to death, and he called the heroines from anime and games his waifus. That, I’d assumed, was probably why whenever we talked, it was pretty much inevitable the conversation would drift toward geek culture eventually, no matter what topic we’d started on.

“Why do you think people fight, Jurai?” Sagami asked, his tone sounding just a little bit more profound than it should’ve, considering we were theoretically still talking about geek media fan wars.

“Well, nobody likes hearing somebody bad-mouth something they’re into, right? It makes you want to fight back,” I replied. “And when everyone’s getting all hyped up about something you think is awful, it’s just sort of obnoxious...”

“Yes, exactly! You’ve hit the nail on the head, Jurai! But when you *really* think about it, isn’t that strange?” said Sagami. “Consider, if you will, the fact that by and large, people aren’t *that* stupid. Surely anyone can understand the basic premise that everyone has things they like and things they dislike? Just like how everyone has unique preferences when it comes to food, everyone has unique preferences when it comes to media. It’s so simple—everyone knows it. Even grade schoolers can understand it...but then, why do fights break out anyway? Why do the haters go so far to nitpick the shows they despise to oblivion? Why do the diehard fans refuse to accept so much as a single piece of criticism?”

I paused to think about it, and Sagami continued. “The answer, I believe, is that they do it because, deep down, what people *really* want is to identify with each other.”

Identify with: a phrase that quite literally refers to defining your identity

through someone else's example.

"Having someone deny your personal sensibilities to your face is upsetting, plain and simple," said Sagami. "It's annoying. It's irritating. It's painful. It's revolting. It's frustrating. Hearing a work of media you like get bashed or hearing one you hate get praised... It's so utterly and completely upsetting, it's too much for us to take."

People seek out those whose feelings they can identify with—seek out validation. And yet, at the same time, it's impossible to completely and unconditionally identify with anyone. At the end of the day, you are you, and they are them. We all know this. In our minds, at least, we're aware of it. So then why? Why do we try to understand so persistently, wish to be understood so fervently, and seek mutual understanding so desperately?

"It's strange, isn't it? We go to all that trouble when really, truly understanding each other is impossible for us humans," said Sagami with a smile—a bright, cheerful, dashing smile, without the slightest hint of gloom. "I love anime and manga, myself, but relatively speaking, my desire to be identified with is actually relatively minor. I'm never particularly put off when people insult a series I'm into, and when people go on about one I hate, I just think, 'Well, it takes all types,' and that's the end of it. After all, when everything's said and done, I'm just me."

I was struck by how unhesitant Sagami had been about all this—how clear it was that he held those beliefs so deeply. At the very least, that was how he seemed to me, anyway, which was why the words "You're pretty tough, huh?" sprung out from my mouth so naturally.

"Tough? Not even close. I'm *weak*," Sagami said without missing a beat. "Yes, weak. As weak as they come. A feeble little coward. That's why I'm *scared* to confront people. I'm scared of understanding people, and I'm scared of being understood. The thought of seeing from someone else's perspective creeps me out, and I *definitely* don't want anyone else seeing into the ugly, twisted depths of *my* heart. No, I prefer to be myself—a reader. I don't want to be hurt, and I don't want to be traumatized, so I just keep running away at top speed. I see what I want to see, and I avert my gaze from what I don't. A miserable little loser who fancies himself an onlooker—*that's* who I am."

That was what this all came down to, in the end. That was probably the key to understanding everything that happened. A single character in this story, Sagami Shizumu, was both the origin and the cause of it all. I can't tell the story of the darkest time in my past without mentioning the part he played in it. Because I didn't understand Sagami Shizumu—because I *tried to* understand him—my past received a stain that would never fade.

But, no—I shouldn't go acting like I was some sort of victim, and I shouldn't act like he did something wrong to me. After all, when all was said and done, I wasn't even involved. It had all begun while I was blissfully unaware, and by the time I'd realized what was happening, it was already over.

I want to put this out on the table in advance: I'm not the protagonist of this story. This is a romcom that I doubt anybody asked for and that nobody deserves, starring a girl who couldn't become a heroine and a boy who didn't even try to become a hero.

And, with that out of the way, I think it's time for us to get started.

Now—let us begin the end of the beginning.

Supernatural

Battles



Andou Jurai
Jikou Middle School,
second year, class 2.
Blood type: O

"You know how some people say that when you read a manga, or watch an anime, or play a game, or whatever, you shouldn't set your expectations for it too high? I guess the idea's that if you expect the world from a piece of media, you'll definitely end up getting let down by it in the end...but personally, I see it the other way around."

"In my book, if you don't have expectations for anything, then *nothing's* gonna be interesting. That's why you should crank your expectations up as high as they can go! The more you tell yourself that a book has gotta be incredible, the less likely you are to start skimming as you read it, and the more likely you are to find a special sort of appeal to it you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. And if the story still turns out to have been boring in the end...well, them's the breaks, I guess."

Excerpt from the sealed pages of the *Bloody Vivre*

CHARACTER FILE - 1

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Chapter 1: Preamble

By the way—I think it goes without saying that “the beginning” and “the end” are two sides of the same coin on a conceptual level. Endings exist because there was first a beginning, and beginnings exist because there was first an ending. Nothing can end if nothing begins, and nothing begins if nothing ends. You can’t bring something to an end that never began to begin with, and there’s no way to begin something that will never end.

Eventually, in the end, everyone dies. Every life that begins will inevitably end. This is sort of a matter of perspective, but I think it’s valid to say that one’s life is, in and of itself, a journey toward their death. None can escape that ultimate destiny. We simply glide along the rails of time, moving ever forward toward our ultimate, singular ending. And with that fact in mind, could it not be said that life itself is, by its very nature, death?

From the very beginning, our ending has already begun. As we end, we experience beginning after beginning. Like a Möbius strip, life has no front or back side. Its beginnings and endings, though they seem to oppose each other, actually complete each other—two sides of the same coin.

Thus is the beginning, as is the end.

Thus is life, as is death.

But in that case—what is it that people live for? Understanding the inevitability of our death—bound by the curse that is our inescapable end—why does mankind still strive to move forward? *Is* the end of one’s life even their ultimate end as an entity? Perhaps there’s still room for doubt in that area. If one places their faith in the cycle of reincarnation, then death is nothing more than a step toward their next life. The ending, as such, equals and leads to a beginning—a beginning that, in turn, leads to another ending.

And so, when you put all the pieces together, to live is...

“...and before I knew it, I’d gotten so caught up in thinking about all that stuff

that the day was already over,” I concluded with a deep sigh of regret, clutching my head in despair.

The place: my room. The time: a little past five in the afternoon. The date: a few days after the beginning of summer vacation. For most students, this time and place would be a blessed one—a veritable Elysium, a holy sanctuary, a new garden of Eden, paradise found, an ideal utopia, Shangri-La, El Dorado, and Xanadu all at once! The fact that summer was just beginning and the threat of homework had yet to loom just made it all the better!

Personally, I’d taken to calling this period of summer vacation its “golden era.” There was *also* a potential platinum era of summer vacation, by the way, which would come about when you’d finished up all of your homework in advance. I’d only experienced a platinum era once, myself, but what a joy it was! Getting to mess around to your heart’s content without a worry in the world really is something special. But I’m drifting off topic—it might not’ve been platinum, but the golden era of summer I was experiencing was still a spectacular period in its own right.

“Oh, to have spent this most precious, inviolable, and irreplaceable of days on mere *thought* alone! ’Tis a sin, surely, to partake of such waste!”

“Andou, I’m going to have to ask you to stop speaking like that. It’s incredibly obnoxious,” Sayumi grumbled. She was seated on the other side of the low table I kept in my room, looking more than a little fed up. It was summer vacation, so she wasn’t wearing her uniform; her casual clothes were a mostly black ensemble that looked nice and cool while also not showing much skin at all.

“I mean, *you’re* the one who started all this by asking what I did today,” I countered.

“That was me making generic small talk to lead into the actual conversation. I didn’t expect you to *actually* answer it in full.”

“Since the question was posed...I was forced to take a long, hard, objective look at myself,” I continued. I’d never even considered it before Sayumi had brought the subject up, but when I looked back on how I’d spent the day with a clear head, I realized the sheer, stunning quantity of time that I’d managed to

waste. I'd started pondering in the morning, and before I'd known it, evening had arrived. *Seriously, what am I doing? How could I idle away a precious day of this golden era like that?*

"I think we can consider it a good thing. You'd do well to spend a little more time on self-reflection, Andou," said Sayumi with a slightly amused smile that contrasted sharply with the way her words cut me to the quick.

I let out a sigh. "Y'know where I went wrong? Trying to get started on my ethics homework on a whim, that's where. Working on that sorta stuff sent my mind into philosophy mode..."

"Oh, that's right—you chose ethics as your elective, didn't you? I'd forgotten."

I nodded. The second years at our high school were allowed to choose one of three social studies electives to take: modern society, politics and economics, or ethics. The majority of the student body went for modern society, but I'd chosen to go with ethics instead. It wasn't a popular course at all for some reason, and in the end, I was one of only ten or so students in my grade level who'd actually picked it.

"I've always thought it's weird—why *is* ethics so unpopular, anyway?" I wondered out loud.

"Because it's a subject that most students aren't familiar with, I presume."

"I guess, but right now ethics is my most fun class by a mile."

To be fair, I'd initially chosen the class by process of elimination. Modern society and politics and economics weren't really my thing, which had left ethics as my one remaining option. Once the class started and I began to get a feel for what it was all about, though, I found myself totally immersed in the subject.

It wasn't *just* that the class was fun, though—it went well beyond that. Mencius's belief in the fundamental good of humanity! Xunzi's belief that human nature is evil! Socrates's concept of knowing that you know nothing! Plato's theory of Forms! Hobbes's *Leviathan*! Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*! Descartes's principle of "cogito, ergo sum": "I think, therefore I am"! The famed eighteenth-century German literary movement: Sturm und Drang!

What the heck?! These are all so friggin' cool! And I didn't just mean the actual terms themselves. When I learned what they all meant, it turned out that their meanings were just as great—great enough to set the very depths of my soul astir! I'd *never* found a subject I enjoyed studying as much as this one before! *Ethics*: hella *cool*!

“On a fundamental level, most of ethics boils down to ‘this person thought this way, but this *other* person thought *this* way instead,’” said Sayumi. “It’s a subject that’s well suited to people who find learning and memorizing that sort of subject matter fun. Naturally, the opposite is true as well—if you *don’t* find that entertaining, it isn’t the subject for you.”

Hmm. I guess that’s fair enough, yeah. The subject was so much fun for me I could hardly even express it, but it *was* the sort of area of study that other people might just not get at all.

“For me, like...okay, here’s a good example: I got *super* inspired when they taught me that the theory of humanity’s fundamental goodness and the theory of humanity’s fundamental evil are really just two different ways of saying the same thing,” I explained.

To boil that principle down to its absolute bare-bones essentials for the sake of explanation, the theory of fundamental goodness states that people are born good and have to work their hardest to maintain that good nature throughout their lives. The theory of fundamental evil, on the other hand, postulates that people are born evil and have to strive throughout their lives to correct that inherent nature and become good.

The two theories’ opinions of humanity start out on exact opposite ends of the spectrum, and yet they both settle on the exact same conclusion: that our best option is to strive to be good people. The names just make people misunderstand and think that the parts about humanity’s fundamental nature are the theories’ main points (actually, I had that exact misunderstanding myself), when in reality, the *real* point that both theories are going for is the importance of education.

The theories of fundamental good and fundamental evil. They said totally different things—but in the end, they were *saying* the same thing. That was a

truth that had really resonated with me...

“...but when I tried to explain all that to, like, my friends and my sister, all of them just said, ‘So what?’ and that was the end of it.”

So what: a powerful phrase that was unfortunately capable of shutting down a conversation in an instant. It was a phenomenon I’d experienced regularly over the years. Take, for instance, the time I first learned about a concept that had become maybe a little too well-known for its own good in recent years: Schrödinger’s cat. I got *super* hyped up about it and went around boasting to all my friends and family about how amazing it was, and all I got in return was an indifferent “So what?” each and every time.

“I really do believe that this is a question of personal preference,” said Sayumi. “That being said, if your interest in the subject leads to your studies proceeding smoothly, I certainly don’t see anything wrong with that. I can also understand your desire to find someone who can identify with your passion as well.”

Identify with my passion. Identify with...

“Andou?”

“Ah, sorry. It’s nothing,” I said with a shake of my head. “So, Sayumi, this seems like the perfect chance to get some more good ethics-talk in! How about we start by discussing Nietzsche’s proclamation that God is dead?”

“I believe I’ll refrain, thank you very much,” said Sayumi. “I’m afraid I didn’t come here today to discuss ethical theory with you.”

“Okay—so, why *did* you come here?” I asked, the words slipping from my mouth before I knew it. “Sayumi. What exactly did you come all the way out to my house to accomplish?”

Sayumi fell silent. It was a rarity for her to find herself at a loss for words—an *extreme* rarity—but there she sat, her expression stiff and her lips tightly closed.

This whole incident had begun when my sister pounded on my wall.

Andou Machi was my elder sister by two years. She was born in March—hence, “Machi”—and her *true* identity was that of a ruthless despot who worked her little brother like a slave. Machi preferred to let her fists do the talking, and when she *did* use her words, they were always colored by her foul mouth. I guess you could call her one of those hyper-violent heroines that’ve really gone out of fashion in recent years.

From my perspective as her younger brother, she was nothing more nor less than a violent, terrifying street thug, but from the perspective of the outside world, it seemed she was looked upon surprisingly well. Her grades and behavior had been outstanding from elementary to high school, and it seemed she’d been considered something of an honor student. I could only conclude that *I* was the only victim of her violence. Did that make me feel just a little bit special? No. Not at *all*. “Curse you and your beguiling veil of innocence!” was closer to how I usually thought about her.

That brings us to earlier this evening, when my sister, with absolutely no warning or pretext, pounded on my wall. The wall pound was one of her many bad habits. Our rooms were right next to each other, and for some reason, the wall between them had been built unusually thin. Were you to make a noise that was even *slightly* loud, you could be sure that the inhabitant of the next room over would hear it—and as a result, the moment I would start making any appreciable amount of noise, Machi would start pounding on the wall.

I’d be in my own room, minding my own business as I immersed myself in my own little world, when suddenly the sound of a violent impact would jolt me back to reality. It was a classic case of auditory violence. It was bad for my heart *and* soul. In fact, considering the incredible amount of psychological stress it generated, I’d go so far as to say she was doing the devil’s work.

Now, *she* probably didn’t even hesitate. *She* probably thought it was no big deal when she pounded on the wall—just a little warning, that’s all—but she couldn’t have been more wrong. What she’d failed to consider was that this was one of the many cases where the perpetrator thought their actions were no big deal while the victim sustained *grave* damage with every incident. It struck me as the same sort of disparity between aggressors and victims that brings about bullying so very often.

With each pound on the wall, she would chip away another fragment of my sense of reason. As my sanity continued to degrade, I felt myself fall increasingly victim to my own inner beast. The more I was being driven into a mental corner, the more my irritation was taking hold of me.

Today, I was *very* close to the limit of my patience. *Perhaps*, I thought, *it's finally time for me to let loose and rebel. Perhaps it's time for the younger brother to cast down his sisterly tyrant from her throne of lies.* She thought that I was a sad little wimp who'd do anything she told me to after the slightest show of force, and I was starting to realize how amusing it would be to bear the beastly fangs I'd kept buried within me and see how she liked *that*.

The time had come—the time for an uprising! As the urge to fight—the urge to *destroy*—welled up within me, I turned to the wall and shouted with all my might.

"I'm *sorry*, Machi! I'll be quiet, I promise, so please, just cut it out!"

Right.

Okay.

So.

Let's just say that I decided to let her off the hook today and move on.

Yup, that's the ticket. Patience is one of the most important traits that a person can have. They say it's a virtue for a reason—and a heavenly virtue, at that! I just sorta had a feeling that letting the bloodthirsty beast that lurked within me stay lurking for a *little* while longer would be for the better, that's all. And anyway, it's not like she was *really* bothering me much in the first place! A couple wall pounds isn't even *close* to enough to damage my impregnable mental barriers!

"Huh? Oh, nah," rang out my sister's voice from the other side of the wall. She sounded a little hesitant, which was strange, actually. *Normally*, her wall pound would've been followed immediately by a storm of verbal abuse. I'd reflexively bowed down, but the confusion was enough to make me cautiously glance back up at the wall again.

"Look, Jurai, I'm not actually mad or anything. Save the apologies," said my

sister.

“Huh? Then what’re you pounding on my wall for?”

“I had something to say to you.”

“Then you could’ve just *knocked!*”

“Eh, y’know. Just felt like it.”

You “just felt like” nearly giving me a heart attack with all that pounding?! This is more than I can take! When I thought back on it, it struck me that I hadn’t even been making so much as a peep at the time the pounding began. I’d been sitting quietly at my desk pondering the world’s myriad endings and beginnings at the time. She hadn’t had any good reason to pound on that wall at all!

“Come *on*,” I groaned. “What a waste of a good bow!”

“I act just a *little* intimidating, and you jump straight to bowing down to me? You’ve got one hell of a servile streak going on, huh?”

“And whose fault do you think *that* is...?” I grumbled, cursing the deep-seated habits that had sent me bowing and apologizing reflexively the second I heard a thud. For the record, it was *her* fault for playing our wall like a friggin’ drum! I could easily imagine her becoming one of those awful managers who pounds on their desk while they give their subordinates the third degree.

“Sheesh, seriously...” I sighed. “You’re a girl! You’re supposed to want a dude to pound the wall for *you*, not do the pounding yourself!”

“Why the hell would I want *that*? I’m not into guys who go around pounding walls and making a nuisance of themselves.”

“No, not *that* sort of wall pound! I mean, like, the other thing!”

“*What* other thing?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. *Like, uhh...man, this is gonna be a huge pain to explain, isn’t it?* “Okay, so, there’s two types of wall pound. One of them’s the thing that you do all the time, where you pound on the wall because you’re pissed about something your neighbor’s doing and want to intimidate them into cutting it out.”

“Hmm.”

“And the *other* kind is when some super hunky dude slams his hand into the wall to block a girl’s path. Don’t ask me to explain why, but apparently, a lot of girls are really into it for some reason.”

“Oh, *that* thing,” said my sister. It was a pretty slipshod explanation, but apparently, I’d still managed to get the point across to her.

It seemed like people had started using the phrase “wall pound” to mean both of those concepts recently. Personally, I’d always thought that the first definition felt more *right* somehow, though. *I mean, that’s how they use it in KochiKame, and that’s gotta be worth something...*

“Yeah, I don’t get it. Are girls *really* into that sorta thing, Jurai?”

“Don’t ask me—you’re supposed to be the girl here!”

“I’m not *supposed* to be a girl—I’m as *girl* as it gets! But, like, think about this practically. If someone *actually* blocked your path by pounding the wall in front of you, it’d just piss you off, right? Like, my first thought would be that they were picking a fight!”

“Pretty sure that’s just you,” I sighed. “Anyway, I think this is one of those things that you can only get away with if you’re hot enough.”

“Nah, I’d still get pissed if a hot guy tried that on me. Like, just *talk* to me, asshole!”

I didn’t have any perspective on all this stuff, being a guy and all, but it seemed that my sister at least would *not* find her heart set aflutter by the latter form of wall pound. I was starting to suspect that this was actually one of those things that was popular solely because it only really happened in fiction—like how super violent or clumsy heroines are cute when you see them in a story, but would be a huge pain to deal with if they actually existed in real life.

Maybe wall pounds were *only* desirable in shojo manga, and would be plain old obnoxious if someone tried it in real life—the sort of action that was only appealing to an onlooker, not an involved party. Basically, I figured it might be something that only a reader could enjoy.

“Wait a second. What did you even want from me, anyway?” I asked.

“Oh, right,” said my sister. “Totally forgot. You’ve got a visitor.”

You could’ve said that in the first place, moron! is what I *didn’t* say as I hurried downstairs, where I found Sayumi standing in our entryway.

“Sayumi,” I gasped. She responded with a nod, and long story short, I ended up leading her to my room and bringing out some tea and snacks in an attempt to be hospitable.

“Your sister is quite pretty, isn’t she?” Sayumi commented after sitting down and taking a sip of her tea. “I’ve heard as much in passing before, of course, but I have to admit, I didn’t expect her to be quite that beautiful. She treated me quite politely in spite of how abrupt this visit was as well.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty good at putting on a front like that,” I replied.

“I believe her name is Machi, isn’t it? On account of her having been born in March.”

“I can’t believe you actually know that.”

“I heard it from Hatoko. I can’t remember precisely when, but the conversation left quite an impression on me. You were also named ‘Jurai’ because you were born in July, weren’t you?”

“Mwa ha ha... Well, that’s what I *tell* people, anyway. The truth, however, is that my name and my power share a deep and profound connection... Once, in the era I reigned supreme over the Demon Realm, my power’s ebon flames were feared and abhorred as cursed lightning! Hence why ‘Jurai’ is written with —”

“I’ve been meaning to mention this for some time, Andou: don’t you think that claiming that fire was characterized as lightning is a bit of a stretch, even for one of your self-indulgent fantasies? I appreciate that you were reaching for a way to ascribe retroactive meaning to your name, but still, it’s a little much.”

I winced. “I’m sorry, Sayumi, but please...don’t calmly pick holes in it like that. I’d rather you just come out and insult me, or ignore me entirely...”

That’s more or less how the conversation continued for a while. One of our

usual periods of pointless banter had begun, and eventually, we ended up on the topic of what I'd done that day, segueing into the discussion on ethics I'd opened with, and finally leading to my ultimate question: "Sayumi. What exactly did you come all the way out to my house to accomplish?"

And with that, the pieces all fit together. The pieces that I presented out of order for the sake of emphasizing the heart of the matter, that is.

Sayumi didn't say a word, and an awkward silence fell over my room. I wasn't trying to *criticize* her for showing up at my house like that, for what it's worth. I just thought it was weird. Out of all the people I knew, Sayumi was the *most* polite and prone to standing on etiquette by a landslide. Someone like her showing up totally unannounced piqued my curiosity. Plus, she'd been acting a little strange this whole time. Instead of explaining what she'd come for, she'd launched into pointless, banal small talk instead. I didn't have a problem with small talk, of course—I would've been perfectly fine with talking about random nonsense all through the night—but it was just...*weird*.

The Sayumi I knew would *always* get in touch in advance before coming over to someone's house. She just wasn't the sort of person who'd disregard that sort of common courtesy. Even if there *had* been some sort of pressing circumstance that had forced her to swing by without warning, I would've expected an explanation to be the absolute first thing that came out of her mouth. That was why I'd cut the flow of the conversation short and put the question on the table. I felt like I was being a little overbearing, but it also felt like it was a necessary sort of overbearingness. If Sayumi couldn't bear to bring up her reason for coming, then it fell to me to move things along for her.

And yet, still, she stayed silent.

"I mean, y'know, it's not like I *mind* or anything! Heck, you could barge in on a whim while I'm eating dinner like Yonesuke does in that one reality show, and I wouldn't mind a bit! You're always welcome!" I said. I just couldn't bear the tension for a minute longer, and I had to break it up with a little frivolous banter. "What's the deal, anyway? This isn't like you! I mean, it's not like you're here to ask me out or anything, right?"

Suddenly, Sayumi twitched violently and looked up at me. Her eyes were

wide, her expression stiff.

“Uh... Huh? W-Wait,” I said. *Wh-What sort of reaction was that? Huh? Wait. Wait...huh? H-Huuuh? Wait, wait, wait!*

“S-Sayumi...? D-Don’t tell me you *actually*—”

“Absolutely not,” said Sayumi, slamming the door shut on that possibility with merciless vigor. “No need to worry. My business with you today has absolutely nothing to do with that sort of romantic affair.”

“O-Oh, okay,” I said, heaving a sigh of relief. I knew that being relieved by that would give the impression that I’d have been *upset* about her asking me out, which wasn’t exactly the nicest thing to do...but, I mean, I think anyone would have felt a little relieved under the circumstances.

“I’ll admit, you’re right,” she continued. “This *isn’t* like me. I’m normally never this indecisive, and I have to say that I’m mortified to think I’ve disgraced myself like this.”

“Okay, *disgraced* seems like a little too—”

“The idea that I made you think I was hesitating because I was trying to *ask you out*... This is surely the greatest mistake of my life. The shame will follow me till the end of my days.”

Okay, wow, ouch! At the very least, though, that made it *quite* clear that she wasn’t here for anything of the sort.

“It won’t be long before night falls, and I don’t intend to stay longer than necessary, so allow me to cut straight to the point,” Sayumi finally said. “Will you tell me about Sagami Shizumu?”

That was the topic of the day—and moreover, it’s the topic of this volume.

Sagami Shizumu was a second-year boy attending the same high school as me, Senkou High. He was such a pretty boy you might mistake him for the physical incarnation of beauty itself—as long as he kept his mouth shut. His personality was such a disaster that calling him “the ultimate sleazebag” wouldn’t even do him justice. He suffered from a pathological illness that forced

him to judge women based solely on whether or not they triggered his moé senses, and he had a truly sordid romantic history with the opposite sex. There was no end to the women who took an interest in him, presumably on account of his looks, but most of them ended up disgusted by his true scummy nature and fled for the hills in short order.

“Actually, that’s not what I meant to ask about at all,” said Sayumi, shaking her head. “I wanted to hear about your relationship with Sagami.”

I gave Sayumi a look. For a second, I thought that this was a fujoshi thing, and she was talking about shipping me and Sagami together again. This wouldn’t have been the first time a conversation with her had ended up traveling that road. It didn’t take me long to realize that that wasn’t the case this time around, though. The look in her eyes wasn’t flippant enough for that—no, it was such a serious look, it was almost scary.

“I mean, I dunno what to tell you,” I said. “I’ve told you this before, actually—we’re just acquaintances. I don’t have anyone else to eat lunch with in my class, so I end up eating with him by process of elimination.”

“That’s precisely where my doubts arise from,” said Sayumi. “As far as I’ve observed, it seems to me that you and Sagami end up doing quite a large number of things together in that sort of manner. You’re certainly not joined at the hip, by any means, but I would say that your relationship is perfectly representative of an ordinary friendship between two high schoolers. Despite that, you steadfastly refuse to call him a friend. Why is that?”

Now it was my turn to fall silent. I’d always described Sagami and I as being more than acquaintances, but less than friends. Or at least, that was how I’d always described our current relationship. “It’s not really that big of a deal,” I eventually said. “All that stuff’s just me being pedantic about what words I use, you know? It’s not that deep.”

“True,” said Sayumi. “When all is said and done, it’s just a matter of the words you chose. The difference between acquaintances and friends, between friends and best friends...it’s all entirely subjective. But why, then, is that subjective difference something that you’re so insistent about?”

Sayumi paused for a moment, waiting for an answer, but before I could come

up with one, she carried on. “From what I’ve heard, it seems that you’ve known him since middle school. Is that right?” she asked.

She was so talkative all of a sudden, I’d almost forgotten how nervous and reserved she’d seemed just moments earlier. That said, it seemed to me that there was a link there—that she was jumping from one thought to the next without pause in an effort to outpace her apprehensions. She was suppressing her nerves and hesitation by talking her way through them.

“And yet,” she continued, “the two of you went to different middle schools. You attended Jikou Junior High, while Sagami went to Onaga Second. They’re in the same school district, so it’s not totally implausible that you were in clubs that had some sort of association—or it wouldn’t have been, if not for the fact that you’ve told me in the past that you weren’t in a club in middle school. Considering that...”

Sayumi kept going on and on, rattling off theories and conjectures, but I was barely listening. I was too distracted by that look in her eyes, the look on her face, to pay attention to her words. How she looked so strangely frantic to learn about my past—enough so that she’d decided to come right up to me and ask directly, without any sort of pretense.

“Did something happen?” I asked, though it took quite a lot of effort to spit the words out. “This might not be the nicest way to put it, but, well...my past isn’t really any of your business, is it? To be totally honest...I’m kind of confused about why you’d even care about my history with Sagami. Unless...” I said, a thought suddenly striking me. “Did something happen between you and him?”

“No,” said Sayumi, calmly rejecting my theory. “I’m asking purely out of personal curiosity. This is your personal, private business, of course, so if you’d prefer not to talk about it, I have no intention of pressing the point.”

I paused to consider her words. There was no way for me to tell if she was being honest. At the very least, she’d never struck me as the sort of person who would pry into somebody’s past out of curiosity alone. That being said, she’d already given me a clear and direct answer, so asking her again and trying to get her to admit that something had happened seemed pointless—even if I couldn’t help but assume that there was *something* else to this.

All that being said...if left to my own devices, I would never want to talk about my relationship with Sagami at all. Sayumi seemed to pick up on the fact that I was conflicted, and she spoke up once more, her voice clear and direct. “I want to know about Sagami. I want to know what sort of person he is. And I want to know about *you*, as well.”

The doubt and distress in her eyes were palpable. At the same time, there was a sense of resolve that showed she had no intention of backing down on this question. A few seconds of silence ensued, and I was the one who finally said something.

“So, Sayumi...are you familiar with the Cthulhu mythos?” I asked.

It was a pretty wild left turn to take the conversation in, and for a moment, Sayumi seemed bewildered, but she eventually answered. “The Cthulhu mythos? That would be the fictional mythology built up by the American horror novelist Howard Phillips Lovecraft and his literary peers, yes?”

“Right,” I said. “Yeah, you probably know more about it than I do, actually. I just did a tiny bit of research into it after *Nyaruko* made me curious, honestly,” I admitted. An awkward pause followed, so I cleared my throat and carried on. “So, anyway, the way that Lovecraft chose to express his ideal form of horror is something we call ‘cosmic horror’ nowadays. To put it really simply, cosmic horror’s based on the idea that there are beings out there in the cold, vast universe that humanity’s logic and common sense just don’t apply to on a fundamental level, and that our lack of understanding and inability to communicate with that sort of monster is what makes them so scary.”

That, presumably, was why works in the Cthulhu mythos tended to involve so many gods or monsters that human values and standards just didn’t seem to apply to. Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, would probably be the perfect representative of that phenomenon.

“The way I read it, it boils down to the idea that the scariest possible sort of creature is one that we can’t understand—but personally, I just can’t get behind Lovecraft on that one point in particular,” I said, my voice starting to waver before I knew it. “In my book, something that it feels like you *could* understand is a hell of a lot scarier...”

I paused for a moment, and when Sayumi didn't say anything, I carried on. "Compared to a monster that you know from the outset you'll never find common ground with—a monster you *know* you'll never understand, no matter what—something, or rather, *someone* you think you might be able to understand is scarier."

A horrendous presence that comes from the outer edges of the universe and transcends human comprehension might be scary, but a fellow human smiling by your side is scarier. Nothing is more terrifying than someone you have the misapprehension of perhaps being able to understand.

"I've thought that way ever since I was in the eighth grade."

"The eighth grade..." Sayumi repeated thoughtfully.

"I'll tell you everything, Sayumi. I wouldn't do this for anyone else, but if you're the one asking, I'll tell you everything about my past you want to hear," I said. "The story of my time in the eighth grade...of when I met Sagami, and when he, me, and a girl named Tamaki all became friends and lived it up together."

And so, with that preamble out of the way, I began to talk. About my time in the eighth grade. About the period when I *wasn't* a victim of eighth-grade syndrome.

"That's right...this was back before I'd taken on the name Guiltia Sin Jurai..."

"Excuse me, Andou," Sayumi sighed, a look of exasperation on her face. "For the record, I'm trying to ask you a serious question."

"Oh, I'm *completely* serious," I countered. I really *was* too. Back then, I hadn't taken on my true name yet. I was just plain old Andou Jurai, living out a plain old life as a plain old second-year middle schooler. This is the story of that plain old boy wasting away his days in as plain of a manner as you could imagine.

Or perhaps not. No, there's a better way of putting it.

This is the story of how I became Guiltia Sin Jurai.

Chapter 2: Andou Jurai's Eighth-Grade Spring— Lovebird Warning in Effect

“Oh. Gotcha...”

I was on my way home after the first day of my second year in middle school, and Hatoko had just given me back a book I'd loaned her over spring break. When she told me that she hadn't read it in a genuinely remorseful tone, those two words and an awkward smile were my immediate reaction.

Hatoko and I would loan each other books and magazines a lot back in those days. Well, really, she only loaned them to me every once in a while—most of the time, I was the one providing her with reading material. Whenever I got really hooked on a new series, I always wanted to show her how great it was. I wanted to share my enthusiasm with her, and I wanted her to identify with what I was feeling. I poured everything I had into explaining the things I loved to her...but sometimes, it didn't feel like she really *got* it. Make that more often than not. Pretty much all the time, actually.

At the end of the day, it seemed that our tastes in media were simply incompatible. I was all about what most people would call chuuni-targeted stories, and no matter how many times I'd tried to make her understand them, I'd never managed to make a breakthrough. Her response to that light novel felt like it had been a long time coming: not only did she not get it, she hadn't even read it at all.

“I sorta figured you wouldn't understand... Meh, that's just how it goes,” I said, doing my best to casually shake it off as I resumed my walk to school. The conversation drifted to a different topic immediately, but even then, I couldn't quite bring myself to look Hatoko in the eye.

At that moment, I came to two distinct resolutions. They were things I'd decided for myself in advance and that I hadn't mentioned to anyone else. The first was that if Hatoko didn't read the book I'd loaned her or she didn't enjoy it, I would stop lending her books entirely. And the second was that if Hatoko just

couldn't understand me in the end...I would lay my case of chuunibyou to rest.

I'd stop spouting cringey nonsense. I'd give up on thinking up stupid one-liners and signature poses, stop thinking up headcanons, fanfics, and original characters for my favorite manga and anime, stop operating under the assumption that being *different* made me cool, stop dreaming up totally impossible special moves and totally incoherent titles. Everything that society at large perceived as *chuuni*—all those things that came to me as naturally as breathing—would henceforth be purged from my day-to-day life, no exceptions.

On that day, I cured myself of my eighth-grade syndrome.

And on that same day, we began our new lives as eighth-graders.



"Huh? Wait...*what?*"

Up to that point, Sayumi had simply listened silently to my story, but now her eyes widened as she let out an exclamation of shock.

"What's wrong, Sayumi? This is basically still just the prologue!"

"I'm sorry...you *cured yourself* of your chuunibyou?" Sayumi asked.

"Yup," I casually replied.

Sayumi looked more baffled than ever. "I can't even begin to make sense of this," she muttered. "How could someone like you—someone who's still *actively* wallowing in the most appallingly edgy fantasies conceivable—have *gotten over* your chuunibyou? You're nothing less than the living avatar of chuunibyou itself!"

"The avatar of chuunibyou..." I repeated. *Y'know, that actually has a kinda nice ring to it. Feels like it could play a mean game of Hyperdimensional Soccer.* Of course, I could understand why she was surprised. My year in the eighth grade represented a gap in my personal history. A dark, empty void—a blackened oblivion. Hence, the darkest period in my life.

Looking back, the way I'd behaved during that period made me almost seem like a totally different person. It was almost enough to make me think that

some *other* Andou Jurai had stepped into my shoes and lived my life for a year in my stead. Maybe my dark side really *had* awakened and taken over back then.

“What on earth *happened?*” asked Sayumi. “What could have possibly been impactful enough to make *you* give up your chuunibyou?”

“You have it backward, actually,” I said.

“Backward?”

“Yeah. I gave up on chuunibyou because *nothing* happened.”

I paused to collect my thoughts, then continued.

“So hey, Sayumi—how long did you believe in Santa Claus for?”



If you were to ask me how long I’d believed in Santa Claus, I wouldn’t be able to give you a decent answer because, frankly, I don’t really remember. Having made it into the eighth grade, it was a given that I didn’t believe in him anymore, but I couldn’t even begin to remember *when* that shift had taken place. I’m pretty sure that I’d just been another innocent little kid who’d believed in Santa without question back in kindergarten...but of course, this is *me* we’re talking about. It’s equally plausible that I’d gotten it into my head that denying Santa’s existence would make me hella cool and tried to debate my upperclassmen into submission on the topic.

The point’s moot, though, because I don’t *know* when it happened. I can’t remember. At some point along the way, I realized that I’d simply naturally come to disbelieve in Santa. It’s not like I’d had some sort of strong conviction regarding his nonexistence, but really, I think the same’s probably true for the majority of people in the world. When it came down to it, people who’ve gone through dramatic revelations—like catching their dad partway through sneakily changing into a Santa outfit—were few and far between.

As you grow up, you simply stop believing in Santa before you know it. It doesn’t have to be accompanied by a huge change in your sense of values, and it isn’t always prompted by some big incident. The way you think about things just sort of *drifts* over time, without any drama or events to be found. Trauma

and miracles aren't the only things that can bring about paradigm shifts within our worldviews—*time* is just as effective at changing us, and at some point, that fact started to scare me. I wasn't scared of changing, to be clear—I was scared of *not realizing* that I had changed.

I was scared of changing “before I knew it,” or “naturally,” or “unwittingly,” or “as a matter of course.” Gregor Samsa may have woken up one morning to the sudden realization that he'd transformed into a monstrous insect, but in my mind, an obvious, physical metamorphosis like that would be a lot less scary than a transformation you *couldn't* see at all.

Here's a good example: I used to love tokusatsu TV programs, like the whatever-Rangers and *Kamen Rider*. I'd looked up to the superheroes in those shows, and I'd believed that someday, I'd get to be one as well. I'd run around with a toy version of one of their transformation devices, “training”—playing, really—all day long.

And then I just...grew up. Well, okay, maybe I didn't grow up *that* much. I continued to watch tokusatsu shows religiously even after getting into middle school, and I still kept buying those toys on the regular. My parents and my sister hadn't been making much effort to disguise their disapproval, but I'd never let that stop me from immersing myself in my hobbies. I'd had more and more chances to read manga and watch anime as time went on as well, and I'd found myself particularly drawn to stories with dark, edgy worldviews, projecting myself onto the characters within them and even coming up with my own original scenarios. Until finally, one day, a thought suddenly struck me.

Wait a minute.

When did I realize that Kamen Riders aren't real?

I thought back on it, and I realized that I couldn't come up with an answer. Just like I couldn't recall when I'd lost my belief in Santa, I couldn't remember when I'd come to an understanding that the heroes in my favorite shows were purely fictional. I hadn't caught some middle-aged guy unzipping himself from his costume after a superhero stage show up on a department store's rooftop,

and my sister had never given me a self-righteous sermon about how all of that stuff was made up.

Before I knew it—

Naturally—

Unwittingly—

As a matter of course—

I had simply accepted that fiction was just that: fiction.

I knew that the actors who portrayed Kamen Riders were by and large young, up and coming talents whom their agencies were trying to push into the limelight, and I knew that they were swapped out with professional stunt people called suit actors for the scenes when they transformed. I knew that every manga had a creator too. I knew that Araki Hirohiko wasn't a wielder of Hamon, and I was aware that Kubo Tite and KBTIT were not, in fact, the same person.

I knew that the world of serialized manga was a harsh one where unpopular series were canceled mercilessly, and I knew that the results of reader surveys could seriously influence their stories. I knew that anime were created by animators and directors, and I knew that mascot characters were just people wearing big, bulky costumes. I knew that Luffy and Krillin were voiced by the same person—same for Usopp, L, and Feitan; Toriko and Nube; Gin, Joseph, and Switch; and plenty of others.

I *knew* all of that. I knew that they were all stories—*just* stories, and nothing more. I knew it...and I'd accepted it. In my heart, I still aspired to be like all those heroes I looked up to, but in my mind, I knew that absolutely all of them had been invented by a bunch of adults. They were nothing but illusions. Before I knew it, my heart's and mind's paths had diverged, and as time passed, the gap between them grew more and more precipitous. The moment I'd noticed that a contradiction like that had sprung forth from my own psyche without me even realizing it, I felt so scared and frustrated I didn't know what to do about it.

But, of course, there *was* nothing I could do about it, and that fact felt like it

was liable to drive me off the deep end. The moment I made the mistake of taking an objective look at myself—the moment I realized the inherent contradiction of aspiring to be like designedly unreal characters, and the moment I internalized the irreconcilable differences between heroes and business interests—was also when I came to truly understand that I was one of those intolerably cringey chuunis that society looked down upon. And, in noticing that fact, I could remain a chuuni no longer. Looking at myself from an objective perspective was the end. It'd become time to move on. And so, looking for an impetus to take that final step, I'd gone to Hatoko...

"Hey! You falling asleep on me, dickhead?!"

Oh. That sudden burst of verbal abuse brought me back to my senses. I hadn't been knocked for a loop or anything—I'd just withdrawn into my thoughts in an effort to escape from reality.

"Think you can just *ignore* me, huh, Andou? Think you're some sorta badass, huh?!" said one of the five boys who were currently looming over me. The one who was leading the interrogation looked furious, while the remaining four could barely contain their derisive laughter. We were in a public park pretty close to my school, and I'd ended up surrounded by the five of them with my back pressed against the wall of a filthy public restroom.

This was about a week after I'd gotten into the eighth grade and, by extension, about a week since I'd given up my chuuni ways. I wasn't in a club and typically went straight home as soon as school got out. I walked *to* school with Hatoko sometimes, but after school, I almost always ended up commuting solo. Hatoko had been putting her all into the soft tennis club, so our schedules just didn't mesh for that purpose. I was planning on going straight home on that day as well, but just as I was about to get on my bike and go on my way, I was apprehended by Aragaki and his cronies.

"*Hey!*" shouted the tallest of them—Aragaki himself—as he glared at me, a menacing scowl on his face. He wound up his arm, then slammed his hand into the wall right beside my head. It was a real wall pound, and I have to say that getting that done to you by a tall and pretty built dude is nothing short of terrifying. I found myself shrinking back reflexively.

“H-Hey, come on, Aragaki,” I stammered. “Cut me some slack, okay...?”

“Shut’cher *trap*, Andou!” he spat. “This is your own fault for being so damn full of yourself, y’know?”

“Seriously, I’ll apologize as many times as you want me to! I’m sorry, honestly!” I desperately begged.

“If saying sorry was good enough to get you off the hook, we wouldn’t need cops!” shouted Aragaki in an astonishingly uncreative attempt at intimidation. I *almost* cracked up, but I knew for a fact I’d just be adding fuel to the fire if I did and held the impulse back. Unfortunately, the best that I could do was hang my head and try not to look directly at the thugs who were surrounding me. From an outside perspective, this probably would’ve looked like a cut-and-dried case of bullying.

Aragaki Zenya was—pardon my French—a total douchebag. His hair was dyed the sort of flashy color you’d normally never see on an eighth-grader, and he and his cronies whiled away their days smoking and drinking on the regular. The big thing that distinguished them from the delinquents you read about in manga sometimes was the fact that they didn’t make a habit of going out and getting into street fights. They didn’t break the school’s windows or ride around on stolen motorcycles either—they just loitered around, occasionally preying on locals who looked like they’d be easy targets.

It was kind of remarkable how full of himself Aragaki was, considering how petty his actual rule-breaking tended to be. The *other* thing about Aragaki, of course, was that he was actually pretty handsome and was surprisingly popular with the girls at school as a result. It was pretty exasperating, honestly, and I had to wonder just how on earth douchebags like him managed to attract *anyone*, much less with such consistency.

Anyway—the point is that Aragaki was a douchebag, and birds of a feather flocked together. He was the leader of their little group, and we’d been in the same class back in our first year of middle school, so I’d ended up getting tangled up with him pretty often. He didn’t try to extort me or do anything *really* violent to me, to be clear—it was more along the lines of petty harassment—but that didn’t make it any less unpleasant to deal with.

“Anyway, kinda rare for you to *apologize*, isn’t it, Andou?” said Aragaki with a sneer. “What happened to the dark powers sealed away in your right arm or whatever?”

Aragaki’s four cronies erupted in vicious, mocking laughter, and I forced myself to chuckle along with them in the vain hope it would take a little of the heat off me. The reason I’d ended up their target was incredibly simple: my chuunibyou was to blame. Back in the seventh grade, I’d been a veritable maelstrom of chuuni cringe. I’d pretend my right arm was throbbing with pain, held extended conversations with empty air—I could keep going, but there are just too many examples to bother listing them all. Now that I was self-aware about how excruciatingly embarrassing and cringey all the stuff I’d done back then was, it struck me as obvious that I’d earned the ire of the local douchebags as a result. I *wish* that were the beginning and the end of the story, but unfortunately, the not-so-old chuuni me’d had other ideas.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Andou? Not gonna give us a ‘mwa ha ha’ today?”

“Isn’t this the part where you’re supposed to strike some lame-ass signature pose? What’d it look like again? Something like this?”

The mockery continued relentlessly, and I knew why. For some mind-boggling reason, back when I was on my chuuni kick, I’d chosen to respond to their douchebaggery by cranking up my chuuni level to eleven. I’d gone all in on the posing, literally and figuratively, out of some misapprehension that I *had* to portray myself as being some sort of special, unique entity. Needless to say, my actions had made my relationships with Aragaki *et al.* even worse than ever, and that brings us back to the present moment. I’d cut off every bit of even remotely chuuni-adjacent behavior entirely when I’d gotten into the eighth grade, but that didn’t mean my past had been totally done away with. Real life doesn’t have a convenient reset button.

“Please, just trust me—I’ve turned over a new leaf. Honestly! I’m totally done with all that stuff, so just let me off the hook, okay?” I begged, thinking all the while, *Wow, this is pathetic.*

By “this,” of course, I meant myself. How sad was it that when faced with a bunch of punks who were only scary because they came in a clique, the best I

could do was suck up to them? I was plain old Andou Jurai, a perfectly unremarkable kid without so much as a special trait to his name, not some badass hero who could punch those douchebags into the stratosphere like you see in stories. The only things I knew how to do were act like a subservient little loser or pose it up and let my fantasies carry me through the encounter.

“Say what? You’re sounding mighty full of yourself, eh, Andou?!” raged Aragaki. I couldn’t help but wonder if he even *knew* any phrases other than “You’re full of yourself” to use in this sort of situation, but needless to say, I kept those doubts strictly to myself. “Just so you know,” he continued, “what we’re doing here? It’s *not* bullying—we’re just teaching you a little lesson, that’s all. Cringe-ass nerds like you need *someone* to tell them to take a hint, or who knows how much trouble they’ll cause in the end? That’s all we’re doing—teaching you what’s what!”

It was an incredibly self-centered take, and it was really obvious that its only purpose was to justify his actions. It was, in fact, exactly the sort of thing that a petty bully would say. Still, though, I found myself just a little bit sold on his logic. Getting singled out and harrassed by him and his group was incredibly unpleasant and humiliating, to be sure, but on the other hand, part of me thought that I’d earned that humiliation and just had to accept it. I guess I thought it was a way to remind myself of my past mistakes, or something like that?

If I’m being completely honest, not even I totally understood my thoughts on the matter, but the point is that I’d gone way overboard and had refused to take a hint for so long that it felt like I’d just have to suck it up and take the punishment I’d earned. I couldn’t even disagree when he said I’d been full of myself. I was upset enough with my past self that I thought this treatment was only fair. *Seriously, why did I have to do all that stupid pretentious crap all the time? I’m just some random guy—I can’t even handle a single bully! I never should’ve gotten wrapped up with any of that chuunibyou stuff in the first—*

“No! That’s wrong!”

Suddenly, and seemingly out of nowhere, a voice rang out. It sounded like a

boy's voice, and its tone was eloquent and clear. Aragaki, his flunkies, and I all turned to look in the direction it had come from. There, beside one of the park's play structures, stood a young man—a remarkably attractive one. His build was slender and delicate, and he was on the shorter side of things as well. If he hadn't been wearing a boy's uniform, I might've mistaken him for a girl at a glance.

"What's *your* problem, pal?" said one of Aragaki's goons.

"Isn't that the Onahole Second uniform?" said another.

Onaga Second Middle School was one of the other junior highs in our area, and it had been given the exceedingly unfortunate nickname "Onahole Second" by some of the locals. It was the sort of nickname that you'd expect out of a middle school boy, I guess. On a similar note, my school—Jikou Middle School—frequently got called "Jerkoff Middle School" by that sort of crowd.

Anyway, Aragaki's crew was making a transparent effort to pick a fight with the young man, but he didn't even look at them. "No! That's wrong!" he repeated.

"Huh? The hell's that supposed to mean?!" yelled Aragaki.

"No! That's wrong!"

"Oh, you're *asking* for it, pal!" Aragaki shouted. He must've thought the guy was making light of him, so he started stomping over in his direction.

At that point, the young man finally acknowledged our existence. "Huh? Oh...were you talking to *me*?" he asked, acting as if he'd genuinely failed to notice we were there until that precise moment. "Do you need something?"

"Do I *need* something?! I *need* you to explain what the hell your problem is, asshole! You trying to pick a fight or what?!" Aragaki bellowed.

"No, not really. I wasn't talking to any of you at all. I was just doing some solo *Danganronpa* role-playing over here, that's all," the young man casually explained. Aragaki stared blankly at him, and an oppressive silence fell over the park. The young man, however, seemed entirely unperturbed. "I can take my game over to the corner if I'm interrupting something! Please, don't let me disturb you. Feel free to carry on with your beatdown, or shakedown, or

whatever it is you're doing, to your heart's content. This is a *public* park, after all—*everyone* has the right to use it!"

With that, he trotted over to a corner of the park. "No, that's wrong. No! That's wrong! No! That's wrong...pu hu hu."

Back to playing make-believe Danganronpa already, huh?

"No, that's wrong. No, that's wrong—*objection!*"

With a little Ace Attorney thrown in for good measure, I guess.

"No, that's wrong! Objection! Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case... Legal High! Ba-badum, ba-badum, ba-badum-dum!"

And he's pulling his background music from the Legal High soundtrack. The guy seemed to be setting his make-believe session in one heck of an entertaining courtroom. In any case, it seemed that he really had just happened to be in the area, and he was totally uninterested in involving himself with us. Unfortunately for him, though, Team Aragaki wasn't about to let a person like him go unharassed.

"Oh, you little punk... Feeling pretty full of yourself, aren't you?" Aragaki growled in another less-than-eloquent display of intimidation. Before I knew it, the five of them had surrounded the young man, who just sort of stood there, a look of blank incomprehension on his face.

"Huh?" he said. "Umm...am I in danger?"

"Shut'cher trap!" shouted Aragaki. "The hell's your deal? You trying to play the big badass here and get in our way or something?"

"Oh, no, absolutely, positively, definitely not in any sense whatsoever!" said the young man. "I have *less* than zero intention of bothering you people. Oh, I know—why don't I help you instead? I'll go keep watch at the park's entryway, and you can beat the crap out of him while I stand lookout!"

I'm sure you've already figured this out by now, but it still seems worth saying: he was clearly *not* some sort of savior who'd arrived to deliver me from my predicament. In fact, he was actively trying to sell me out to save his own skin. So, yeah—my first impression of him was as terrible as it possibly could've

been.

“Ah!” shouted the young man. “He’s running away! Look, everyone, that guy’s trying to make a break for it! You have to catch him! Hurry!”

“Crap!” I spat. I’d thought I could take advantage of the confusion to make a quiet exit, but mister pretty boy decided to point at me and raise the alarm as I snuck toward the park’s exit. *Was that really necessary, you jerk?!* In the blink of an eye, I was once again surrounded by Aragaki and his gang, who herded the pretty boy into the circle along with me.

“What the hell, man?!” I quietly grumbled to him. “I would’ve gotten away if it weren’t for you!” I’d only just met him, but since he was shorter than me and looked like a weakling, I didn’t hesitate to speak in a pretty aggressive tone. Yes, I know that’s kind of pathetic to admit, but that’s just how people work sometimes.

“‘What the hell’ is my line, thank you very much,” said the pretty boy. “How could you dare to sneak away on your own after pulling *me* into your trouble?” His tone was just as blunt as mine—it seemed that both of us had instantly judged ourselves to be above the other in our extremely localized social pecking order. “Ugh,” he sighed. “Why did I have to get dragged into this mess? I was just waiting for my date to show up, minding my own business, and now *this...*”

“*Waiting for my date to show up*”? The second I heard that phrase, the last iota of remorse I’d felt for getting him involved vanished into the aether. *On second thought, I’m totally okay with dragging him into my problems. Suffer, mister hot stuff!* “Okay, then,” I said. “I have a proposal: why don’t you valiantly sacrifice yourself to give me an opening to escape? Then you can brag to your girlfriend about your heroics whenever she shows up.”

“Ha ha ha, no thank you!” countered the pretty boy. “But now that you mention it, why don’t *you* sacrifice yourself for *me*? Then I’ll follow your example by leading a long, leisurely life of fulfillment.”

“That’s not following my example at all!”

“Okay, then *I’ll* sacrifice myself for *you*!”

“Stop looking at me like that! I know what you’re going for, and you’re not

gonna trick me into volunteering myself! This isn't a Bugs Bunny sketch!"

"Point of order: I'm not into rescuing guys from stuff like this in the first place. Now, if you were a hot girl on the other hand..."

"What, you'd save me then? You're a real gentleman, huh?"

"No, I was going to say that I'd hide somewhere nearby and watch them have their way with you."

"Wow! You're a gigantic scumbag!"

"I get that a lot."

"Hey! The hell're you two pals chatting about, huh?!" snapped Aragaki. As I resisted the urge to clarify that we weren't chatting and definitely weren't pals, he turned his attention to the pretty boy. "You're one of those Onahole Middle School kids, aren't you? What class're you in, and what's your name?"

"Second year, class one, Sagami Shizumu!" the pretty boy—Sagami, apparently—immediately replied. It seemed he was in the same grade as me.

"There's a third year at your school named Sengoku, y'know? He's pretty famous around these parts, and I'm a pretty good friend of his," boasted Aragaki.

Oh, boy, here we go. It's the most boring move in the blowhard playbook. Kakashi once questioned whether there's anything duller than listening to someone else brag, but the truth is that, yes, there actually is: listening to someone else brag *about someone else*. The only thing you accomplish by boasting about having some amazing acquaintance is making the person you're talking to feel vaguely uncomfortable. It's like watching a housecat brag about their tiger friend: utterly laughable.

"Oh...wow, that's amazing. I respect you so much now. I wish I could be like you," said Sagami, who, sure enough, seemed utterly and completely uninterested. His monotone lip-service didn't go over so well with Aragaki, of course, who grabbed Sagami by the lapels. "Wh-Whoa! W-Wait a minute! I'm a pacifist! You can't hit a conscientious objector! No, stop, please, I *hate* getting hurt! R-Right, I know—you like money, don't you? I'll pay up, so just don't hurt me!" begged Sagami in a disconcertingly unnatural tone.

Now, I'd considered the possibility of buying my way out of the situation as well. I mean, of *course* the thought had crossed my mind. I'd decided against it, though, because I knew that if I tried that move, it would all be over for me. If you pay up once, you can be sure there'll be a second time. Plus, I was still getting all of my spending money from my parents. It just wouldn't have felt right to hand over money that I hadn't even earned without putting up a fight first. I still had *some* pride left, and that was the one line that I never wanted to cross. Sagami, on the other hand, leaped straight over it with wild abandon.

"Hey now, cut it out! You're going to make it look like we're shaking you down or something," said Aragaki with a sneer. "But y'know, if you're *volunteering* to give us a little donation, hey, I won't say no! Just remember—you brought this up yourself, got it? There's no extortion going down here, right?"

Aragaki let go of Sagami's lapels, and Sagami immediately started to frantically dig about in his pockets.

"Ha ha ha!" cackled Aragaki. "You're a smart one, but god *damn* are you pathetic! I bet your girlfriend would be real disappointed if she saw you like *this*, huh?" It seemed, then, that Aragaki had overheard our whispered exchange.

Surprisingly, though, Sagami just smiled. It was a smile so dashing and natural that it gave me chills. "Disappointed?" he said. "No, I don't think so. After all, she's—"

"Heeey, Shizumuuu!"

Before Sagami could finish whatever he was trying to say, an almost unfathomably bright and cheery voice rang out from the park's entrance. It was a girl's voice—one so cloyingly sweet, just listening to it felt like it was going to give me heartburn—and lo and behold, when I looked up, I saw a girl standing over on the edge of the park. She was holding one of those drinks that come with a little toy packaged alongside it, and she waved it in front of her as she dashed over toward us.

"Sorry to hold you up! I got a touch sidetracked and lost track of time," said the girl. She was wearing a long-sleeved sailor uniform, and she had a set of

leggings on underneath. She was just a little taller than me, had a slender build, and struck me as a remarkably cute girl all around, though I couldn't help but note that there was something a little odd about her intonation when she spoke.

"Hey, take a gander at this! It's the pack-in you've been wanting for ages, right, Shizumu? You said you'd looked high and low for it, but I caught this one on sale at that old candy shop behind the school!" she said. Her intonation really *was* a little peculiar. It was oddly flat, and it was devoid of the sort of inflection I was used to in a way that made it just a little hard to parse what she was saying. I wasn't sure where the dialect was from offhand, but hearing a girl with such a beautifully clear voice speak in such a perfectly flat tone felt mismatched in a really odd sort of way.

"Tamaki...you made it," muttered Sagami. That, I assumed, was her name, and this Tamaki was presumably the girlfriend he'd mentioned. Suddenly, I felt a deep sense of pity for the guy. No man would ever want the girl he was into to see him make a pathetic disgrace of himself. Having your girlfriend witness you getting shaken down by a bunch of random douchebags would be as humiliating as it gets.

"Huh...? Wait a tick—what's going on, Shizumu?" Tamaki asked, stopping in her tracks as she seemed to finally notice me and Aragaki's group. A look of confusion passed across her face.

"Perfect timing, Tamaki," said Sagami with a smile—a smile that instantly told me that my feelings of pity had been *entirely* misdirected. "I was just waiting in the park for you like I promised when these people came up and started picking on me," he said without so much as the slightest hint of shame...before appending a truly absurd final note. "So, yeah—will you wipe 'em out for me? Thanks!"

Tamaki fell silent. Her gaze dropped to the ground, and a moment later, she started faintly trembling. She clenched her hand around the can she was carrying so tightly, it shivered, and shivered, until finally, with a sharp *crack*, it yielded under the force of her grip. I was stunned. *Hoooly crap, seriously? Wouldn't it take, like, a stupid amount of pressure to crush a full, unopened can?* The liquid that the poor, mutilated can had once contained splattered to

the ground. Tamaki chucked its remains away, then looked up at us with murder in her eyes.

“What’re you people doing to *my Shizumu*?!”

Tamaki sprung into action, sprinting toward us at an incredible speed as she howled with indignant rage. Unfortunately, I can’t really say much in particular about what happened after that point on account of the fact that the very first victim to end up getting wiped out by her ferocious, bestial offensive...was none other than me.

“Wait, what?! But I didn’t do anything~~aaaa~~ugh?!” was about as far as I got before I wound up screaming incoherently, then eating dirt moments later. I’d been wearing the same uniform as our five assailants, and it seemed Tamaki had pegged me as one of them as a result. From her perspective, I was just another one of the guys who were picking on her boyfriend—and, specifically, I was the one standing the closest to him. Honestly, targeting me first was fair enough on her part.

In any case, the point is that Tamaki’s first punch dealt a critical hit to my midsection, and her power-of-love-enhanced strike knocked me right the heck out.



“I believe ‘chaos’ is the first word that comes to mind,” said Sayumi as I finished up the story of how the three of us first met. She looked deeply skeptical, and frankly, I couldn’t blame her. Even I thought my own story sounded sorta nonsensical. In retrospect, it really was pure chaos, with the proper English pronunciation and everything.

“Learning that you were bullied was surprising enough on its own, but everything *past* that point was just so patently absurd, that first bout of surprise now feels quaint in comparison.”

“Yeah, Sagami and Tamaki both left a pretty intense first impression, huh? I wouldn’t say that my whole thing was bad enough to count as bullying, though... Like, it really felt more like they were just pestering me. It’s not like

they ever did anything really *bad* to me.”

Of course, some people would probably see what I went through as unambiguous bullying. It was just a matter of perspective, really. Looking back on it, I couldn’t help but think that I was actually going through a pretty rough time back then, but when I was in the moment, I never really *felt* like I was a victim of bullying at all. I was in the process of giving up on myself in a variety of senses back then, and I’d really believed that everything Aragaki and his crew did to me were things I’d brought upon myself.

“I have to say, though,” Sayumi continued, “Sagami’s girlfriend—Tamaki, you called her—must have been quite confident in herself. Not just anyone would pick a fight with five people single-handedly—or rather, *six* people, considering she thought you were one of them. I can’t possibly imagine she was a normal girl if that was how she behaved.”

“I dunno if *you’re* in any place to say that,” I noted. I had a feeling that Sayumi could take on *ten* big muscular dudes at once without breaking a sweat. “But yeah...physically speaking, Tamaki really was as tough as they come. She wasn’t a martial artist or anything as far as anyone’s ever told me, but she sure did know how to fight. Even more than that, though, she was so crazy about her boyfriend that it really messed with her priorities, I guess. I think she probably would’ve picked a fight with Hanma Yuujirou himself if he’d decided to pick on Sagami.”

“I can tell she was very devoted to him,” said Sayumi.

Devoted to him...yeah, that’s a good way of putting it. Tamaki really was so hopelessly in love with Sagami, it was kind of embarrassing to witness.

“So, then—can I assume that after you were knocked out, Tamaki gave the remaining five people a similar treatment?” asked Sayumi.

“Nope,” I replied. “Apparently, Aragaki and his cronies scattered to the winds after they saw her punch me out. I guess that first punch was so crazy powerful that it scared them away.”

“So, in other words...you were the only one who actually got hurt in the end.”

“Right,” I admitted with a wince. *Hmm. Y’know, when she puts it that way, I*

really did draw the short straw in that encounter. I got punched for literally no reason. “But, I mean, it wasn’t *that* bad. Aragaki’s crew stopped picking on me after that, for one thing. Kinda made taking a punch feel worth it.”

“Oh, did they? That’s rather, well... I’m surprised they were willing to drop their grudge against you so easily, I suppose.”

“When all’s said and done, I think I was just a handy way of killing time for them,” I replied. “If they’d been, like, hardline delinquents, they might’ve tried to get payback or something, but they weren’t really hot-blooded enough to try something like that.”

Sayumi fell silent, and a few moments passed before another thought struck me. “Ah, but Aragaki *is* gonna come up again eventually, so try to keep him in mind.”

That being said, it wasn’t like he turned up again to have another go at me or to get revenge or anything like that. I can’t even begin to tell you how much I would’ve preferred if it were something that simple and straightforward. I would’ve been downright lucky if he’d ended up being an actively antagonistic force who’d turn into the final boss of my flashback arc or whatever.

But no. Aragaki Zenya would reenter the story at the most unexpected moment imaginable and in the worst manner imaginable. Actually, no—make that a manner so awful it exceeded all possible imagination.



The fact that Sagami and Tamaki went to the same school raised the question of why they’d bother setting up plans to leave school separately and meet up again in the park. Apparently, it had been Tamaki’s idea—in her mind, there was an appeal to going out of their way to meet up rather than just going home together in the first place. It struck me as a really romantic way of looking at things, and between that and the way she’d rushed headlong into danger for Sagami’s sake, I was rapidly reaching the conclusion that she was a girl who was in love with love itself.

“I’m so, so, so sorry! Honest, it was all just a mixup!” Tamaki said, bowing and apologizing profusely the moment I came to. I found myself lying on a bench—apparently, she’d carried me over there while I was out. I sat up and turned to

look at her as she continued to pile on the apologies.

“Are you feeling okay? Doesn’t smart too much? I’m so, so sorry—really belted you good, didn’t I?” She’d looked like a raging monster before, but now she’d shrunk in on herself so much it was almost hard to believe she was the same person. I couldn’t bring myself to stay mad at her.

“I’m okay,” I said. “And, I mean...meh, it’s fine. You sent Aragaki and his pals packing, so it all worked out in the end, more or less.”

“Very true. *I’m* totally unscathed, so everything worked out for the best,” Sagami cut in with a nod. He was holding the toy that had come with the drink Tamaki had bought for him: a phone strap with a tiny figure of some little girl character on it. The can had been pulverized, but the little bonus toy had apparently gotten through the incident just fine.

“I think you owe me *several* apologies,” I said as I watched him inspect the little girl in his palm.

“If anyone here is owed an apology, it’s me,” countered Sagami. “I’m the one who got dragged into a majorly obnoxious mess, after all. Why were those goons targeting you, anyway?”

“You really don’t think twice about prying into other people’s business, do you?” I retorted.

“Oh, well, if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s perfectly fine with me. I don’t actually care, anyway,” said Sagami with a genuinely disinterested shrug. In a backward sort of way, his apathy actually won me over, so I decided that I might as well open up to him.

“The thing is...I used to have what people call chuunibyou. Up until very recently, actually,” I explained. It almost felt like I was talking about someone else—like my past self was just a character in some story. “I guess I was pretty obnoxious back then, in a lot of ways. The guys you just chased off would’ve said I act really full of myself, which was what got their attention and ended up making me their target. You reap what you sow, basically.”

Sagami looked over at me. Suddenly, there was a faint trace of interest in his eyes. “You’re a middle schooler, right? What grade are you in?”

“Eighth,” I replied. “Same as you.”

“Ah! Ditto for me!” Tamaki piped up. All three of us shared a grade level, then.

“So you’re saying you got rid of your eighth-grade syndrome as soon as you got into eighth grade? You’re a strange one, aren’t you?” commented Sagami.

“I don’t think *you* have any right to talk,” I jabbed back.

“I’m curious now—what *specifically* did you do during your chuuni era?” he asked.

“I mean, a bunch of stuff. Like...oh, okay—there was this one time when I thought I’d look super cool if I pretended to doze off in class and waited for the teacher to call on me, then answered their question perfectly, right? So I reviewed all the material for one of my upcoming classes super carefully, then pretended to take a nap during class, even though I wasn’t actually tired, just to set a moment like that up.”

“Well, that’s...certainly an idea,” said Sagami, who looked vaguely horrified. “That sounds closer to catfishing than catnapping.”

Yeah, I can’t argue with that. I had to admit, it was a pretty stupid stunt all around. I’d pulled it in most of my classes too, with the end result being that a majority of my teachers had it out for me. I had a bad feeling about what my academic record from that year must’ve looked like.

“Huh?” said Tamaki. “Hold the phone—didn’t you do something mighty close to that too, Shizumu?”

“Tamaki, please, don’t lump me in with the likes of him!” said Sagami, sounding almost wounded. “All I did was make sure to set up a spare desk beside mine on a daily basis so there’d be a seat free next to me if a beautiful transfer student ever ended up joining our class!”

“Hah, seriously? That’s hilarious,” I said. The seat next to the main character’s just *happening* to be empty when a transfer student shows up was one of those clichés that you just kind of had to live with in anime and manga—not something you could *actually* make happen in real life!

“So, hey—what’re you called?” Tamaki asked as she watched me stand up from the bench. The contrast between her cute and tidy image and the thick nature of her dialect was so intense, it was almost shocking.

“What am I called...” I muttered.

“What, can’t give a girl your own name? Wait—no way?! D-Did my punch clobber the memories clean out your noodle?! Oh, yikes, wh-what now...? This is one of those deals, isn’t it? You know—one of those ‘Where am I? Who is Ai?’ sort of things?”

“No, it’s not! I’m fine! I can say my name, that’s not the problem!” *And who is Ai, anyway?* I took a deep breath, then introduced myself. “My name’s Andou Jurai, and I’m a second-year at Jikou Middle School. That’s your usual ‘Andou,’ and ‘Jurai’ is written with the characters for ‘a long life to come.’”

“‘Jurai’? Huh! That’s an awful cool name, isn’t it?” said Tamaki, seemingly with total earnestness.

She was probably right—my name *was* pretty cool by most standards. It was pretty uncommon, which made it—and me—stand out from the pack. That was probably why I’d gotten the idea in my head that I was somehow special to begin with. I’d ended up trying to read some sort of deep meaning into my name, writing it with different characters, translating it into English, and iterating it over and over as I searched for a version that was to my liking. And, of course, whenever I’d introduce myself to someone, I’d pick my latest version and present it to them in the grandest display I could muster. *But, no. Not today.*

“Nah, it’s not really cool at all. My parents just named me that because I was born in July. It sounds sorta like the month’s name, right?” I said, explaining my name’s perfectly mundane origin without hesitation.

“Oh, huh! That’d do it,” said Tamaki with a nod of understanding. “I’m Futaba Tamaki. The Futaba part’s just how you’d figure, and to write Tamaki, you just write the first character in ‘environment’ all on its lonesome. You can just call me Tamaki.”

“And I’m... Actually, I already said my name in front of you, didn’t I?”

“Yeah. Sagami Shizumu, right?”

“Yup. That’s ‘Sagami’ written in the same way as ‘Sagamihara,’ and ‘Shizumu’ written like ‘silent dream.’ You can call me whatever you like—surname, given name, makes no difference to me,” Sagami said, then held out his hand. “Nice meeting you, Jurai.”

“Likewise,” I said, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake.

Supernatural

Battles



Sagami Shizumu
Onaga Middle School,
second year, class 1.
Blood type: O

"It feels like moé characters have been a real trend lately, doesn't it? Places and groups will have their own moé mascots to sell little knickknacks of or put on posters, right? I have to say, I'm *not* a fan of that trend."

"It just feels so *pushy*, you know? Think about it—isn't whether or not a character has moé appeal something that the viewer's supposed to decide? It's about *their* sense of moé, not the creator's, and when the creator ignores the consumer's viewpoint and declares a character to be moé unilaterally, it just feels wrong to me.

"It's one thing when they say a character's a pretty girl or whatever. I can understand *that*. That's just a matter of their appearance, after all. Moé's different, though. Moé isn't something that you can create. It's something you have to *find*."

Excerpt from the sealed pages of the *Bloody Vivre*

CHARACTER FILE-2

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Chapter 3: Andou Jurai's Eighth-Grade Spring, Part 2

—Arcade of Ruin

Ever since our simultaneously intense and incomprehensible first meeting, Sagami, Tamaki, and I sort of just ended up hanging out with each other. The three of us—four, on days when Hatoko didn't have any soft tennis club activities—found ourselves meeting up on a regular basis.

As my trouble with Aragaki's group probably hinted, my various cringey antics at school had resulted in me being pretty socially isolated. I wasn't being completely ostracized or anything—people would still tell me when we were having class in a different room than usual and pair up with me in gym—but I didn't have any classmates who'd hang out with me after school or on holidays, Hatoko aside.

Sagami was in a similar boat, it seemed. I had to assume his personality was the source of his isolation, and while he attracted quite a lot of attention from girls on account of his looks, the guys would barely give him the time of day. That's probably why the two of us found ourselves naturally drawn to each other: we were comrades in loneliness, come together to lick each other's social wounds.

Sagami was what most people would call an enormous geek, and his knowledge of that general field of interest bordered on encyclopedic. He was neck-deep in all sorts of subcultures, and he knew everything about all manner of things I'd never even heard of. That's not to say I had no interest, of course—on the contrary, I'd always been into subculture stuff as well, and he taught me all sorts of things. He introduced me to all sorts of brand new worlds.

"Wait, what the heck does 'doujin' mean?" I'd ask.

"To put it simply, it refers to works of media—manga, games, novels, and the like—that were made by nonprofessionals. Quite a lot of them are fan-made works based on already popular, established pieces of fiction. There are some pretty good ones out there, and since lots of them are sold online these days,

they're pretty easy to get ahold of!"

"Wait, they *sell* fan-made stuff? Is that, like, legal? Wouldn't that violate copyrights or something?"

"That's...a question best left unaddressed. Yup."

Or...

"Who *is* this singer? Doesn't her voice sound kinda weird?"

"That would be because the singer's a Vocaloid. The vocals are all computer-generated. I know it sounds a little off at first, but trust me, once you get used to it, you'll be hooked."

Or...

"Wait, seriously?! The Stands in *JoJo* are named after western music?!"

"Mostly band names and song names, yeah. A lot of stuff other than the stands too. Like, Zeppeli's named after Led Zeppelin, and Esidisi's named after AC/DC."

Or...

"Whaaat?! Those two manga are by the same author?! But they're in the same magazine!"

"That's not all. *This* manga was made by the same author as this one, this one, this one, this one, this one, *and* this one!"

Or...

"Bwuh?! H-Holy crap, dude! Put that away! Middle schoolers aren't supposed to have those! That's *totally* rated eighteen plus!"

"Ha ha ha! You're such a kid, Jurai!"

Or...

"A 'gender bender'...? Huh! I didn't know that stories where guys turn into girls were, like, a whole *genre*. I dunno—I'm not a big fan, honestly."

"Some people are into this sort of thing."

Or...

“A *p-pregnancy* fetish...? Okay, no, I do *not* get this one. Who goes around *fetishizing* the miracle of life...?”

“Some people are into this sort of thing.”

Or—

“‘F-Futanari’...? Hermaphrodites...? Huuuh? So, like, girls with—*huh*? Wha? I-I don’t get this at *all*... Seriously, this is freaking me out! I mean, I-like...*why*?”

“Some people are into this sort of thing.”

...It’s very possible I would’ve been better off *not* visiting some of those worlds he’d introduced me to. In any case, our shared interests gave us a lot of conversational common ground, and we grew closer at a rapid pace. I found myself irresistibly drawn to Sagami and all those new worlds he was capable of teaching me about.

“So, Jurai...you’re a geek, aren’t you?”

The weather report that day had been spot on: it had started raining around noon, and it was still coming down by the time school let out, so I held the umbrella my mom had forced me to carry that morning overhead as I headed for our meeting place. My destination was a covered bus stop just in front of Onaga Second Middle School, aka Onahole Middle School. It seemed I’d shown up just after the bus had left, and I’d found Sagami sitting there alone. That was when I’d returned a volume of manga I’d borrowed from him and he’d asked me that question.

“Huh?” I grunted. “I mean, I guess I can’t exactly deny it. Don’t think I wanna hear that from *you*, though.”

“Oh, no, don’t get me wrong—I didn’t mean it in a bad way,” said Sagami.

The word “geek” kinda fell into a fuzzy gray area. It wasn’t totally clear if it was pejorative or not. It definitely *used* to be, way back whenever, but these days, it seemed to have come into a broader, more benign sort of use. Some modern geeks even seemed to consider the term a sort of status symbol.

“The thing is, you gave up all of your chuuni habits, right? I would’ve expected

you to wash your hands of all your geeky hobbies while you were at it, but, well, you didn't. Plus, most of the series you're really into are chuuni as all get-out."

He was right about that. My taste in media hadn't really changed from my chuuni days at all. I was still reading the same sorts of books now that I had been back before I swore off that sort of behavior. I guess the fact that I'd stopped pretending that I was somehow special didn't mean I'd developed a distaste for that kind of fiction on the whole.

"Actually," Sagami continued, "why *did* you quit with all that chuuni stuff, anyway? Why the sudden urge to grow up?"

"You're making it sound like that's a bad thing. I thought we were *supposed* to grow up," I countered.

"I'm not so sure about that. Adults who still behave like children are a problem, to be sure, but I'd say that children who're weirdly fixated on acting like adults are an issue in their own right. A kid's job is to be a kid, after all," said Sagami, doing his best to talk circles around me.

I let out an irritated snort. "It's not like I had some big reason or like something huge happened to change my mind, okay? It just...sorta hit me all at once how all that stuff only happens in fiction and isn't anything more than that. I realized how all of it was contrived by business interests, every aspect concocted specifically to convince consumers like me to buy it. I don't even know *when* it was that I realized all that...and, well, I just sorta decided I was done with it all."

Even *I* was shocked by how haphazard my explanation was. The feelings I'd been grappling with were fuzzy and unclear, and I just couldn't seem to find the right words to express them with.

"I see now," said Sagami with a knowing nod. I hadn't thought that my story was compelling enough to convince anyone of anything, but apparently, that wasn't the case. "I think I know what you're trying to say. It's one of those things where you start to feel like every piece of media just exudes an aura of 'Yeah, we know you morons eat this trash right up,' isn't it?"

"I dunno if that's *exactly* what I'm getting at..."

“Personally speaking, I got over that ages ago. We’re talking about people’s *jobs*, after all—it’s a given that not *everything* they create will be made purely out of passion.”

As I paused for a moment to consider his words, Sagami carried on. “Take voice actors, for instance. Plenty of them end up accepting roles in eroges they have absolutely no interest in solely for the purpose of giving their careers a boost. Then they end up shouting stuff like ‘Mnaaaahhhhhh, yesss! Your dick milk’s spurting all over meee! Ahaaauuuggghhh!’ or whatever, all the while internally lamenting the fact that this *really* wasn’t what they’d gotten into the voice acting industry to do—”

“*Dude!* You can’t just *shout* stuff like that in public, holy crap!”

“Point is, you just have to draw a line between the work and its creators and enjoy it in spite of all that. At the end of the day, it’s all just fiction,” said Sagami. I fell silent once more, and he continued. “Frankly, Jurai, I think you’re probably just being fastidious.”

“Fastidious?”

“I think you love fiction a *lot* more than you give yourself credit for. Manga, anime, light novels, movies, TV dramas...you’re profoundly drawn to them and the made-up worlds they portray, and you love them from the bottom of your heart. Despite that, you can’t remember the moment you realized their commercial nature, so you fell into despair—but not at the commercialism itself. Rather, you got upset at *yourself* because recognizing the presence of commercial interests in fiction hadn’t bothered you in the first place.”

He really did know how to make it sound like he had all the answers. *Despair at my own lack of despair*. It sounded preposterous on a surface level—like he was just playing around with words and semantics—but for some reason, I found myself thinking that he might not’ve actually been all that far from the truth.

Maybe I really *had* wanted to feel a more intense sort of despair. To indulge in it. To *wallow* in it. Maybe I wished that the moment I’d found out that Kamen Riders and Ultramen were played by a bunch of random old men in suits, I’d thrown myself to the ground, cried a river of tears, and let out a throat-searing

wail of purest lamentation. Instead, I'd missed my chance for all those theatrics, and I'd let the revelation just drift on past me without comment.

"You know, normal people don't think about this sort of stuff at all," said Sagami. "They breeze through their lives, accepting things as they come without paying them much mind. Not you though. It's like— Oh, what's a good example... Like if you discovered that your significant other was cheating on you, realized that you weren't actually all that upset about it, and found yourself thinking 'Huh? Wait, was I ever actually in love with her to begin with? When *did* I fall for her, anyway?'"

"That's a pretty mature example, huh?" I commented. *Doesn't really make very much sense either.*

"The point is that you're fastidious. Fastidious, and sincerely so. You've realized that you've been betrayed by your lover—betrayed by fiction—and that you weren't particularly hurt by the betrayal. Thus, you've decided that you don't have the *right* to indulge in fiction like you used to. Don't you think?"

"You're reading *way* too deeply into this," I sighed. On the other hand, I *did* have to admit that the intense feelings I'd had for all that chuuni stuff had faded as of late. That intoxicating sense of brain-tingling elation had just vanished into nothingness. For all I'd loved them, now I was bored of them. Reality had dawned upon me, waking me from those childish dreams. The wellspring of chuuni potential within me had run dry.

"That's how *I* read your situation, anyway," said Sagami, bringing his analysis to a close. He almost made it sound like I was a character in some story, being subjected to his outside analysis. He was standing right next to me, but he felt like he was looking on from far off in the distance.

It wasn't long before Tamaki arrived, and Hatoko got into contact with me soon after as well. Her club activities had been canceled on account of the rain, so the four of us ended up spending the day together. It wasn't exactly the best hang-out weather we could've asked for, unfortunately, and in the end, we decided to make our way to the big arcade by the local train station. Of course, we probably would've ended up there even if it *wasn't* raining.

We arrived at the arcade to find it packed with other students who'd decided to drop in on the way home from school. Sagami suggested that we start things off by all playing a round of *Idolmaster*, and after the rest of us summarily shot that proposal down, we ended up wandering over to the crane games. That's when disaster struck.

"Ah! Ah, ah, aaaaaaugh!" I wailed, my face practically pressed up against the machine's glass case. The stuffed animal I'd been going for had slipped right out of the claw's grasp, plopping down into the same position it'd started in. "Okay, come on, this is *not* funny anymore! I had *such* a good hold on it this time, I'm sure of it! Did they loosen the claw's grip strength or something? Is the stupid thing even *trying*?!"

"I wouldn't shake the machine like that if I were you, Jurai. The staff's going to chew you out," said Sagami as I pounded on the case in a half-crazed frenzy.

"Shizumu's got it right, Jurai. Shouldn't you just let it go? Folks never end up actually snagging the prize when they get into that sort of headspace, no matter how much money they chuck at it," added Tamaki with an icy stare.

Hatoko, meanwhile, was standing off to the side with a look of intense concern on her face. "Oh, Juu," she murmured.

It had all started out so innocently. I'd just casually decided to play a crane game, and at first, I was having a blast. The fun in that sort of game comes from the fact that even if you totally screw up and send the claw off in a wildly useless direction, your friends can tease you about how much you suck and you can be all "Oh yeah, then why don't *you* give it a try!" or whatever. To make things even better, I'd actually happened to graze the prize I was going for in just the right way to put it in a really good position on my first attempt!

I thought I'd get it super easily with just one more try, so I slotted in another coin. I messed up the timing on that attempt, but I figured "Eh, it'll just take one more shot" and put in another coin. And another. And another. And another. Before I knew it, I was a thousand yen deep, and nobody was laughing anymore. At the one thousand five hundred yen mark, everyone's expressions turned grim—and when I finally hit two thousand yen, we'd all broken out in a cold sweat.

“I’m gonna go get some more change,” I said. “You guys stay here and make sure nobody else snatches it while I’m gone.”

“P-Please, Juu! You have to *stop!*” Hatoko begged as I plodded my way toward the change machine like some sort of mournful arcade specter. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“D-Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll get that stuffed bear on the next try—just watch!”

“I’m sorry,” said Hatoko. “I’m so sorry... I never should’ve said I wanted it...”

“Don’t apologize... Please, Hatoko, just don’t... You’re breaking my heart over here...”

At first, the idea was to win the stuffed animal and give it to Hatoko as a present. After coming this far, though, I had a vendetta. This was *my* fight now.

“Hey, Juu? Can I be honest? I didn’t *really* want it that much in the first place. I’m actually more interested in the sweets in that machine over there than I am in the teddy...”

“Don’t say that... Just... Don’t talk to me at all,” I groaned. My spirit was on the verge of shattering to pieces, but still, I forced myself to walk over to the change machine, replenish my ammo reserves—that is, my stock of hundred-yen coins—then step forward onto the battlefield once more.

“You should just call over one of the staff people, Jurai. If you spend enough money without winning a prize, they’ll move it somewhere where you’ll be able to get it really easily. That’s standard policy in arcades like this,” said Sagami. Even he, the living embodiment of sleaze and savagery, was acting *nice* for once. I could only imagine how desperate I must’ve looked to prompt that sort of attitude from a guy like him.

“*Don’t,*” I snapped. “I can’t ask for help after coming this far! That’d be like admitting I lost!”

“Lost what, exactly?” asked Sagami.

“The battle of wills!”

“Oh, how *very* cool of you.”

“Look...I’ve *only* spent two thousand yen, okay? That’s totally fine, no issues!

If you bought one of those in a store, it'd *easily* cost three thousand yen or so, right? I'm still coming out ahead!"

"Oof! That's the mindset of a man who's about to blow all his pocket money on a crane game, no question about it."

"If I stop now, all the money I've already put into this will have been a waste... I can't give up before I get something for my trouble..."

"And *that's* the mindset of a man who's about to lose his shirt at a pachinko parlor."

"And I mean, just compare this to buying a video game or whatever! Those cost, like, five thousand yen a piece, and we buy *them* all the time without making a big *thing* out of it!"

"*That* would be the mindset of a man who sinks outrageous sums of money into a gacha game."

"Maybe I should approach the situation from another angle... Maybe I should pretend to let it have my money!"

"And that would be the mindset of George Joestar."

I forced my trembling hand forward and dropped five hundred-yen coins into the machine's slot. One try cost two hundred yen, but by paying five hundred all at once, you could get three attempts in total. In terms of total expenditure, it was a given that spending more initially would be more cost-effective in the long run...and while part of me realized the fact that I was thinking along those lines was proof positive that I'd fallen into the designer of the game's trap, I didn't let myself dwell on it.

I stacked up my remaining coins off to the side of the buttons—like the pros do—and once again began operating the crane. I'd gotten two thousand yen's worth of coins, just to be on the extra, *extra* safe side, and the resulting tower was pretty darn high. I mean, it was only three or four centimeters tall or so, really, but to me, it looked like an impregnable citadel—no, a truly monolithic tower that stretched to the heavens above!

"My Tower of Babel stands peerless, and no foe is mighty enough to bring down its walls," I muttered under my breath.

“Hey, Jurai? Was that supposed to be foreshadowing?” asked Sagami. “You *do* know that the Tower of Babel collapsed before they could build it tall enough to reach the heavens, right?”

To make a long story short: myth became reality. It wasn’t even a long story to begin with, actually. My Tower of Babel was brought down before I even knew what was happening. A long, uncomfortable silence fell. Nobody could bring themselves to say a word. We’d finally reached the point where even poking fun at me felt inappropriate.

“...MNGGGHHHAAAAAUGH!!!”

“Juu?!”

“WHY?! WHYYYYYYYYYYY?! GRAAAAAAHHHAAAUGH!!!”

“O-Oh, no... Juu’s putting on a performance worthy of Tatsuya Fujiwara!”

“*Graaaaaahhhhhh!* I will be the god of a new wooooooooorld!”

“Don’t you go prattling like Yagami Light!” said Tamaki.

“He’s gone on a binge! Jurai’s binged his way through four thousand yen! Jurai’s filled with regret!”

“And don’t take Kaiji as your role model for showing regret either,” added Sagami.

“In this world, the weak are the sustenance of the strong. The strong live. The weak die...”

“Don’t philosophize like Shishio Makoto either. Jurai...how long are you planning on dragging out these Tatsuya Fujiwara jokes?”

“Phew! I feel better,” I said. Wailing and crying my heart out had actually been pretty refreshing in the end. *Yeah, okay—bawling it out without paying any attention to who’s watching really might be surprisingly nice at times like these. Source: Esidisi.* “And now that I’m calm, I think it’s time for me to rethink this whole deal,” I continued.

Everyone’s expressions grew visibly less tense as I cracked a smile at them. “Y-Yeah, good idea!” said Hatoko. “Let’s all just calm down! When you really think about it, there’s no good reason to go *that* far just for a—”

“Now that I can think this through with a clear head, I’ve realized it’s time for me to change my approach entirely! I shouldn’t be trying to lift the stuffed animal up—I can use the tip of the claw to *push* it into the hole instead!”

Hatoko’s smile vanished in an instant, while Tamaki stepped over, patted her on the shoulder, and shook her head. I, on the other hand, barely spared the two of them a backward glance as I went off to stock up on more ammunition.

And, finally...

“I... I... I *goooooot iiiiiiiit!*”

Luckily enough—I mean, assuming you could consider *any* aspect of this debacle lucky—about a thousand yen later, I’d finally managed to secure my prize.

“G-Good for you, Jurai.”

“Peachy. Yup, just pure peachy.”

“I, umm... C-Congratulations, Juu!”

Their words may have been celebratory, but the look in their eyes was less than enthusiastic, and their expressions were stiff and forced. The pity and compassion they felt for me was absolutely palpable, and as I raised my spoils of war far up above me, I suddenly snapped back to my senses. The burning fervor I’d been consumed by vanished away at the speed of light, leaving behind one simple question: *What the hell am I doing? Five thousand yen. Five thousand yen! All of this month’s allowance and the leftover cash from last month, gone in a flash!* I’d been bewitched by the siren call of the crane game. Truly, crane games were *not* to be trifled with. *I see it now—that flimsy claw is shaped like something designed to take lives...*

“It’s all yours, Hatoko,” I said, shoving the stuffed bear into her hands as my spirits fell at a precipitous rate.

“H-Huh? N-No, that’s okay!” said Hatoko. “I can’t just take something this valuable!”

“It’s not really *valuable*,” I sighed. “It just ended up being a bit more of an

investment than I was counting on.”

“B-But...”

“Hatoko...please. Just take it. I don’t even *want* it. If *you* don’t want it either...this’ll have been a waste in all sorts of ways...”

Hatoko still looked hesitant, but my teary-eyed plea finally broke through her resolve. “O-Okay, I’ll gratefully accept your gift!” she said, holding out her hands in the sort of posture with which you might accept a trophy or a certificate in a formal ceremony. I handed over the stuffed bear. “Thank you, Juu! I’ll treasure it forever!”

“Right... Could you, y’know, not make it sound like *quite* that big of a deal? You’re kinda pouring salt on the wound, here...”

“Of course it’s a big deal! It cost five thousand yen, you know? Five *thousand* yen!”

I just couldn’t bring myself to reply to that. *Innocence really is a terrifying thing*. In any case, now that I’d snagged myself the item I was after, there wasn’t any reason for me to hang around by the crane games any longer. I wanted to get away from them as quickly as possible, actually.

“Hmm? Hey, Jurai, take a peek at this!” Tamaki called out as I made tracks. “See? That squirrel stuffie looks like it’s just about to topple over too!”

Tamaki was pointing at a stuffed squirrel in the same machine. It was caught on the rim of the chute, dangling precariously in the air. My last attempt to grab the bear must’ve dislodged it as well.

“Why not snag that while you’re at it?” suggested Tamaki. “You put down five thousand yen, so you might as well make it a twofer, right? I’ll bet you could take it in one go!”

She had a point. The squirrel’s tail was just barely keeping it in place, and the odds were good that just skimming it with the claw would be enough to make it drop. Still, though...

“No!”

...I was done. I wouldn’t be getting caught in *that* trap again. I knew exactly

how this would go: the squirrel might've *looked* like I could get it with ease, but by the time I'd realize it was actually downright impossible, I would've already sunk too much money into it to be able to bring myself to stop. I wasn't about to make the exact same mistake all over again! *Mark my words, crane games! I've learned my lesson!*

We went on to play air hockey, a shooting game, the taiko game, and a bunch of other assorted arcade activities as we did a pass through the facility. At around the time most of us were just about ready to go home, Sagami announced that he wanted to play a round of a certain game known for its massive popularity among elementary school girls, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. The rest of us ended up loitering around while we waited for him to finish.

"I seriously can't believe that guy sometimes," I grumbled.

"Oh, what's the harm? Just look how much fun he's having!" said Hatoko.

"Okay, but you *do* know that's a game for little girls, right?"

"Sagami's a purehearted boy, that's all!"

Wrong. Dead wrong! Part of me wanted to correct Hatoko, but when I glanced over at the carefree smile on her face, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I would've felt like a nitpicking jerk. The three of us—Hatoko, Tamaki, and I—were relaxing on a couch that was set up in a far corner of the arcade. I could make out Sagami across the complex, nonchalantly blending into a line that was otherwise entirely made up of little girls, and I watched him as I drained the café au lait I'd bought with my last remaining hundred-yen coin.

"Ah—sorry, I have to go visit the ladies' room! Here, I can throw your trash out on the way," said Hatoko. She stood up, gathered up all of our empty cans, and headed off toward the restrooms.

"Hatoko's such a charmer, isn't she?" said Tamaki, who was sitting next to me. She watched Hatoko walk away, her gaze lingering until Hatoko vanished into the maze of arcade machines. "You two've been friends for a solid age, right? I'm jealous. I've spent all my life ping-ponging from school to school, so I've never had anyone like that."

“You’ve had a lot of transfers, huh? For your parents’ jobs or something?” I asked.

“Well, something like that. Oh, take a gander—it’s finally Shizumu’s turn!”

I glanced over to find that Sagami had taken a seat in front of the gaudily colored arcade cabinet. The beaming smile he wore as he watched those digital girls dance on the screen was no less loving and caring than those you’d see on parents as they watched their kids compete in a school field day. It probably would’ve been *really* creepy if he hadn’t been so handsome, honestly.

“Hey, Tamaki. I’ve been meaning to ask you for a while...what do you *like* about Sagami, anyway?”

“His looks.”

“...”

“Ha ha ha! I’m joking, jeez! Don’t go taking me for real!” Tamaki cackled. “I do like his looks, for sure, but that’s not all I like about him.”

“I mean, the guy’s got a pretty face, I’ll admit that...but he’s also, well, *you* know,” I muttered. I *was* talking about her boyfriend and all, so I felt a certain obligation to be a little indirect with my criticism. The thing is, though, that not only was he a geek, he was the precise sort of geek that girls wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole. Like, no matter *how* hot you are, I wouldn’t think you’d have an easy time keeping a girlfriend if you’re the sort of person who would abandon her and your other friends to go get super engrossed in a game for grade schoolers.

“Doesn’t fuss me. I like that about Shizumu,” said Tamaki with an enchantingly cheerful smile. “It all started back when I got into middle school and wound up staying here in this town with my grammy and gramps...”

“Your ‘grammy and gramps’?” I repeated. *Sounds like a couple characters straight out of a children’s picture book—like Guri and Gura, or whatever.*

“Oh! I mean my grandmother and grandfather. The three of us live together, and their Fugusuma accent’s awful sharp. Ended up talking just like them! You’d be whacked at how fast they talk too,” said Tamaki with a shrug.

It seemed, then, that she'd picked up her peculiar style of speech from the people she lived with. I'd heard about people absorbing accents and stuff like that from the people around them before, so it wasn't hard to believe. Living with two people who speak in a dialect would probably make it hard *not* to start picking up their mannerisms. *Also, huh—I guess "Fukushima" is pronounced "Fugusuma" when you're speaking in a Fukushima accent? That's kinda funny.*

"So, I couldn't really stop my accent from peeking out at school, right? And whenever it did, I'd get all red to the gills, so I tried not to do much of any prattling at all...but then I let my accent slip out in class, and Shizumu heard it."

And what, according to Tamaki, were Sagami's first words upon hearing her talk like that? "Girls with accents are moé as hell."

"Yeah, that sounds like him, all right," I sighed.

"So then Shizumu started going on and on, asking me to talk more."

"Hmm—I'm starting to get the picture, I think. So that's how your relationship got started?"

"Sure is. I didn't fall for him just from that, though! That happened a bit later. He had me say all kinds of stuff, and the more we talked, the more I took a shine to him. I mean, you get him—Shizumu never lies, right?"

"He doesn't?"

"Nope. He does what he wants to do, and he shrugs off what he doesn't. He's upfront and honest! If an anime he wants to catch is coming on, he'll amble on home even if we're in the thick of a date, and if he's stuck to a game, he'll pass on all my texts and phone calls."

"That, uhh...kinda makes him sound like he's just really inconsiderate, honestly."

"Better than him being a liar, though. Much better," said Tamaki.

"Consideration's a heavy burden emotionally. Being considerate's tiring. If he put off the things he wanted to do to keep me company, I'd just feel bad. I love Shizumu because he doesn't fuss about holding back on the things he likes."

I paused for a moment to let her words sink in. In my experience, most middle

schoolers were so oversensitive when it came to their love lives that you'd think they were allergic to romance on the whole. Plenty of them were so afraid of getting teased by their peers that they'd even keep the fact they were seeing somebody a secret. Not Tamaki though. She was perfectly willing to talk about her feelings without so much as a hint of shame. Actually, she seemed *proud* to declare her love for the world to hear. It would've been easy to assume she was just bragging, but that's not how it came across to me. Instead, she took my breath away. I found myself hoping that if I ever fell in love with someone, I could be as upfront about my feelings as her.

"Hmm...?" I grunted as a snippet of some other conversation happened to catch my attention. The arcade was constantly, clamorously loud, of course, and there was always *someone* chatting within earshot, but the contents of this particular exchange were especially significant to me for a distinct reason.

"Talk about your lucky day, huh? It only took one try!"

"Yeah."

"Guess we owe it to that kid who kept feeding coins into the thing like a moron."

"Yeah. It was thanks to him."

"You'd better take good care of that squirrel, okay? I spent a whole two hundred yen out of my precious paycheck winning it for you, after all!"

"Yeah."

Their voices gradually faded away into the distance as the exchange went on. One of them sounded like an older woman who had a rather lackadaisical tone, while the other sounded like a little girl who was still young enough that her words had a childish hesitation to them.

In any case, I sprang to my feet and sprinted across the arcade, making for one machine in particular.

"It's gone! It's friggin' *gone*!"

"Whoa! What's got you in such a panic, Jurai?" asked Sagami, who must've just finished up with his game. He walked over to me as I pressed my face up

against the crane game's glass case.

“That stuffed animal from before—it's gone... The squirrel that was just *barely* hanging on after I got the bear...”

“Oh, that? Yeah, someone else just won it.”

“*What?!*”

“Must've been a mother and her kid...or a couple sisters, maybe? Anyway, an older lady who looked like she needed a nap and a little girl who was as cute as a doll won the thing. Only took one try too.”



“O-O-One try...? It only took them *one try*...?”

“It was just the *cutest* thing, honestly. The little one couldn’t reach the buttons, so her sister or whatever had to hold her up while she— Uhh, Jurai? You kind of look like you’re about to start crying tears of blood over there.”

“You little... If you were watching all that, then why didn’t you *stop* them?! You could’ve at least called me over!”

“Huh? I thought you didn’t want it?”

“I mean, I *didn’t*...but still!” I didn’t collect stuffed animals, and by all rights, somebody else winning the squirrel didn’t cause me any issues whatsoever. *Still, though...why does it feel so much like somebody’s snatched an achievement out from under my nose?*

“Come on, cheer up. Just think of it as you giving a cute little girl a present!” said Sagami. “Anyway, I’ll be just a bit longer—I’m gonna hit up the Vocaloid game.”

“Oh no you don’t!” I said, grabbing Sagami by the shoulder. He wasn’t gonna get away with spouting generic encouragement and slipping away again on my watch! “You’re going off to play some game on your own *again*? Take a hint, dude! Find something we can all do together!”

“Oh, no need to worry about that,” said Sagami as he glanced over toward the couch. Hatoko had arrived back from the restroom at some point, and she was chatting away with Tamaki. “Hey, Tamaki, Hatoko! There’s another game I want to play, so wait up for just a little longer, okay?” Sagami shouted.

“You gotcha!” Tamaki called back. “We’ll just be over here, prattling about girl stuff!”

“Yup!” agreed Hatoko. “Take your time, Sagami, and don’t worry about us, Juu! Have fun!”

“See?” said Sagami with an insufferable smirk.

How and why does this guy get away with so much when girls are involved? Stop indulging the clueless jerk, please! The fact that they said they were talking about “girl stuff” made it pretty hard for me to rejoin the couch crew, so I

ended up wandering off with Sagami instead. He clearly knew exactly where he was going, leading us to a particular arcade cabinet. He pulled out and scanned an ID card made specifically for the game in question, fed a coin into the cabinet, and started navigating the game's menu with a practiced hand.

"Y'know, just because Tamaki lets you get away with all this crap doesn't mean you should be doing it," I grumbled as Sagami slapped away at the game's buttons, hitting them in time with the music. "She's your girlfriend, you know? Maybe try treating her like she matters to you."

"I'd rather stay the way I am, thanks," Sagami replied without missing a beat—in a very literal sense.

Dang, he's good. Can't believe he's carrying on a conversation and playing a game like this at the same time. Of all the pointlessly impressive talents.

"Before I started going out with Tamaki, she told me that I shouldn't worry too much about her, and that it'd just bother her if I tried to be too considerate," Sagami continued. "I took her word for it, and so I do what I want to without worrying about what she thinks of it. Call it my way of showing how much I trust her."

"Better than him being a liar though. Much better."

Perhaps, I realized, it wasn't my place to stick my nose into their relationship and question how they did things. They had a peculiar sort of faith in each other, and I wasn't sure if anyone other than the two of them could ever *really* understand it.

"But, well, seeing as you and Hatoko are with us today, I'll call it at just one game," said Sagami, who, true to his word, stepped away from the arcade cabinet after he'd used up his first credit. "Can't let myself get too sucked into a game, like a certain someone."

"Hmph," I grunted, unable to fight back against his sarcasm. When he put it that way, the fact that I'd just gotten incredibly worked up and had fed a stupid amount of money into a crane game *did* sort of disqualify me from accusing him of not being able to take a hint.

"Ah, right! I just remembered a favor I want to have you do for me," said

Sagami.

“What?” I asked.

“I want you to call me a nickname from now on. ‘Sagamin,’ specifically.”

“*Huh?* No way. Why should I have to call you a cutesy little nickname like *that?*”

“There’s a *very* good reason, I assure you,” said Sagami with an incredibly serious look on his face. “So, first, we have you start calling me Sagamin, right?”

“Right.”

“You do it in front of Tamaki, even, and she starts thinking ‘I wish *I* had a nickname for him,’ and ‘I wish he’d call *me* a nickname,’ and stuff. Sounds plausible, right?”

“Right, right.”

“And then *I’ll* be all ‘Well, we *are* dating, so why don’t we call you by a nickname that’s sort of like mine? We’ll take your name and add a bit to it, just like Sagamin.’”

“Right, right, right.”

“Now then, Jurai, riddle me this: what happens when you add an ‘n’ sound to Tamaki’s name?”

Uhh. Tamaki plus an n? So, Tamakin? Wait, but that—

“That means *balls*, dude!”

“Bingo,” Sagami said with a spirited thumbs up. “As long as we make it seem natural and play it cool, I’m pretty sure we can trick her into saying it without even *realizing* it’s just another word for ‘nads. Then, when it *does* finally hit her, you just know she’ll blush like crazy. *That’s* the part I wanna see.”

“Holy *crap*, you’re a sicko!”

I was so far past repulsed I didn’t even know what to think anymore. *What kind of freak would come up with a plan like that? He’s like some sort of demon, carefully crafting a plot to tempt her into a terrible folly! Seriously, who goes that far to trick their girlfriend into saying a dirty word? Actually, wait—maybe*

her being his girlfriend makes it less bad, from a certain perspective? I mean, it'd definitely be worse to do something like that to a stranger... Huh.

“So, Jurai? Are you on board? Come on—Operation Make Tamaki Say Balls is in need of your support.”

“Ask me again after you’ve come up with a better operation name.”

“Hmm. Okay, then—Operation Tricky Tamaki Testicle Trap is in need of your support.”

“Oh my god, that’s *so much worse!*”

“Just so you know, I have no intention of taking no for an answer,” said Sagami with a perfectly charming smile—a smile so angelically amiable, it was downright devilish. “And if you *try* to say no, I suppose I’ll just have to tell Hatoko all about that game I loaned you the other day.”

“Ugh!” I grunted. It was such a perfectly simple yet perfectly effective form of blackmail, I felt a shiver run down my spine. *He does not shy away from fighting dirty!*

“Ha ha ha!” Sagami chuckled. “I wonder what Hatoko would say if she knew you’ve been playing one of *those* games? Maybe she’d blush and be all, ‘Juu, you pervert! I hate you!’? Or maybe she’d just go ‘*Ugh*’ and stare at you like you’re a repulsive insect?”

“O-Oh, you little jerk... You *do* know that threat’s a double-edged sword, right? Just try it—I’ll squeal on *you* to Tamaki before you know it!”

“Fine by me. *I* play eroge with my girlfriend’s knowledge and consent.”

Oh, Tamaki... Could you be any more understanding of a girlfriend? That sword had sure *looked* double bladed, but no, only one of its edges was sharp after all. *Guess I’m dealing with a scissor blade or something.*

“As it so happens, we played that very same game I loaned you toge—”

“*Okay*, I get it! Point made! I’ll do it—just stop talking! I’ll call you Sagamin! Are you *happy* now?!” I practically wailed.

Sagami, of course, just smiled at me. “Yup! That’ll do just fine. Let’s get started now, in fact. Go ahead and say it!”

I grimaced. “Sagamin.”

“Hmm? What was that?”

“*Sagamin!*” I shouted. Sagami gave me a satisfied nod as I gritted my teeth against the shame. *Dammit, this sucks! Whatever this feeling is, I think it’s gonna make me barf...* It was like the strangest, most potent blend of humiliation and repulsion, and it was already starting to build up deep within my gut. *I mean, calling him by a nickname? It’s almost like—almost like we’re friends or something!*

“Okay! Let’s get a move on, Jurai. The girls are waiting for us,” said Sagami.

I shook my head, and did what had to be done. “Yeah. Let’s go, Sagamin.”

From that day forward, I consistently referred to Sagami with the friendly and familiar nickname Sagamin. That being said, Tamaki never actually took to mimicking the nickname or asking for her own, no matter how much I used it. I had to assume that calling him by his given name, Shizumu, felt special in its own sort of way—she *was* his girlfriend, after all. Operation Tricky Tamaki Testicle Trap ended in conclusive failure...but the nickname stuck, and the fact that we used to act like we were *friends* was the one truth that wound up being written into the history books.



“Wait a moment...was the girl who won the stuffed squirrel...?” Sayumi muttered after I’d finished recounting the tale of the Arcade of Ruin to her. Her question trailed off, though, and she never finished it.

“Was she what?” I asked.

“No...it’s nothing. It’s not my place to bring it up, in any case,” said Sayumi with a shake of her head. I had no clue what she was getting at, but she seemed satisfied, at least. “In any case...I certainly never expected that Sagami’s preferred nickname could have such a vulgar intent behind it.”

Apparently, Sagami still made a habit of asking people to call him Sagamin to this day. I couldn’t even begin to guess why—Tamaki wasn’t around anymore, and I’d stopped calling him that ages ago. Knowing him, though, there was

probably some sort of logic behind the choice.

“By the way—what are your thoughts on how Tamaki seems so far?” I asked. “What do you think about the sort of girlfriend she decided to be?”

“An interesting question,” said Sayumi. “I suppose I would say that she strikes me as having a tendency to go to extremes, but otherwise as being very capable of keeping a healthy distance between herself and others. She seems open-minded enough to accept her partner’s hobbies as well, which is a very important trait for the sake of a long-lasting relationship or marriage.”

“Yeah... Right? That’s what I thought too,” I said. “She really was an incredible girlfriend. She did her best to be one.” *And yet...*

If I’d been able to meet with Tamaki at that precise moment, I had something I would’ve wanted to say to her. I’d been too shocked to say it when I’d bumped into her the other day, but if I had the opportunity to do it over again, I’d try to slow down and really explain my thoughts to her. “*Consideration’s a heavy burden emotionally. Being considerate’s tiring.*” If that was how she’d thought, then I felt the need to teach her something that I’d learned in my ethics class—the same lesson I’d taught Kuki, about how sometimes lies and secrets are important for preserving our relationships.

Xunzi believed that human nature is evil. A lot of people misunderstand that belief though. When he referred to “evil,” he wasn’t talking about violence, or theft, or any of that sort of stuff. When he referred to evil, he was referring to humankind’s *weakness*. He believed that at our core, we humans are too weak to resist being dominated by our own desires, and that whatever good deeds we may do are nothing but hypocrisy on our part.

Good deeds are inherently hypocritical. We are born evil, so we wish to be good. In short, good deeds are falsehoods. They’re lies. I wanted to tell Tamaki—the girl who’d fallen for a man who would never lie, whether to himself or to the world—that sometimes, a lie or two here and there wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

Supernatural

Battles



Kushikawa Hatoko
Jikou Middle School,
second year, class 4.
Blood type: O

"Light novel covers all look the same to me.

I can never tell them apart from each other!"

"..."

"...Huh?"

"...Wh-What?"

"H-Hey, what's wrong? Why're you all looking at me like that...?"

"Huh?! What is it?! Did I really say something that awful?!"

Excerpt from the sealed pages of the *Bloody Vivre*

CHARACTER FILE-3

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Chapter 4: Andou Jurai's Eighth-Grade Summer—Pet Shop of Horrors

“Sure is a scorcher, huh, Hatoko?”

“It really is, Juu.”

It was an oppressively hot Sunday in mid August...and y’know, why do we say “oppressively” hot, anyway? Not that the specific word choice really matters, I guess. The real point I’m trying to get at is that it was so unbearably hot you could work up a sweat just by taking a couple steps outside. Hatoko and I were walking through a quiet residential street, and I had a leash in my hand, the other end of which was attached to the collar of Hatoko’s family’s dachshund. It was a tiny little creature with brown and black fur, and though it was trotting along in front of us, its steps seemed a little heavier than usual.

“Bah seems a little out of it, doesn’t he? Do you think it’s the heat?” Hatoko asked. Bah, of course, was the name of her dog. Well, *technically*, his name was Bahamut, the God-Dragon of Ruin. It probably goes without saying that I was the one who’d named him.

A long time ago (well, really, just a year ago relative to this point in time), the two of us found a puppy that someone had abandoned. We knew that one of us would have to take him in, and after consulting our families, it was eventually decided that Hatoko’s household would host the pup. I received his naming rights as a sort of compensation for not getting to keep him, and after a lengthy period of consideration, I’d granted him a truly sublime true name: Bahamut, the God-Dragon of Ruin. In spite of the fact that he was, y’know, a dachshund. Not exactly the most draconic of breeds. *What was wrong with me back then, seriously...?*

“Mwa ha ha... How many times must I tell you, Hatoko? His name isn’t Bah! It’s Bahamut, the God-Dragon of Ruin! Although he’s taken the form of a puppy while he awaits the return of his powers, he is nonetheless— Gah!”

It must've been the heat. It was melting my brain, I swear, and in my delirium, I reflexively returned to my past self for a moment, pulling out all the chuuni stops and behaving like a total poser. We used to go through this whole little routine every time Hatoko called her dog "Bah," so I'd leaped into the usual pattern without a second thought. *When was the last time I belted out a full-on "mwa ha ha," anyway? Feels like it was months ago.*

"Ah, umm," I stammered. My words caught in my throat, and I trailed off, unable to finish my thought. A few seconds of excruciatingly awkward silence passed by.

"You've changed, Juu," Hatoko finally muttered. I couldn't read the look on her face at all, but I could tell that it was taking effort on her part to keep that neutral expression up. Hatoko was usually one of the most naturally expressive people I knew, so seeing her make a face like that was a rarity. "You've stopped laughing in your usual weird way, and you've stopped talking like a weirdo too..."

I didn't know what to say. Another moment of silence came and went.

"You're still a scatterbrain, though."

"Hey."

"But, really—you've changed," Hatoko repeated, turning away from me. It was like she didn't want me looking at her face while she said it.

"I grew up," I replied, unable to keep a hint of inexplicable bitterness from slipping into my tone. Growing up was supposed to be a *good* thing, so why would I be bitter about it? "Well, anyway," I said, trying to cut that subject short and move the conversation along, "I kinda get the feeling the heat's not the only reason Bahamut's not feeling great."

"What else would it be?" asked Hatoko.

"I mean, *you* know where we're going right now."

"Ah...right, that makes sense," said Hatoko with an awkward smile.

Our objective that day wasn't to take her dog out for a walk. We were taking him to the vet at her parents' request. He wasn't sick or hurt, to be clear. No, he

had to go to the vet because... I mean... Well. He had to...how to say this...? He had to lose a certain function of his male anatomy. Bluntly, we were going to get him neutered.

I glanced down at Bahamut. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I couldn't help but think he was looking a little dejected as he plodded along before me. I didn't know how much he could understand human language, but even if he couldn't grasp the meaning of our words at all, I suspected that his ever-keen bestial instincts might've tipped him off to the fact that he was about to be emasculated.

Yeah, that's a pretty freaky thought, all right. I mean...they just cut them off, right?! I knew that there were plenty of merits to having *those* removed, and an awful lot of pet owners chose to go through with the surgery these days...but speaking as a fellow biological male, I had some mixed feelings about the whole proposal. It wasn't even really about the whole losing reproductive function thing—no, it was more about the idea of having a scalpel anywhere *near* that particular region. *That* scared the hell out of me.

In spite of the summer heat, I could practically feel the chilly touch of metal between my legs as Hatoko and I escorted Bahamut onward.

Shortly after exiting the residential district, we herded Bahamut into the pet carrier we'd brought with us and hopped onto a bus that would take us to the station. Our usual vet's office was just a short distance away from there. The plan was to head straight to the vet, but as we got off the bus and prepared to set off, a voice rang out from behind us.

"Huh? Oh, hey, if it isn't Hatoko and Jurai."

I turned around to find an anime geek standing behind us.

Right, okay, I know—that doesn't really explain anything. I just couldn't describe him in any other way. "Anime geek" was the first and only first impression that came to mind. He had on a plaid shirt tucked neatly into a pair of jeans, and he was wearing a perfectly generic pair of entirely unfashionable off-brand sneakers. On his back was a big backpack with several rolled-up posters sticking out of it, and he was carrying a paper bag plastered with an

illustration from some anime or another. To top it all off, he had a bandana tied around his forehead—a particularly perplexing detail considering how friggin’ *hot* it was.

If you polled a hundred people on what they thought anime geeks looked like and made a composite image out of their answers, you’d get this guy, without question. The one surprising point was his face, which was almost shockingly handsome. The sheer contrast between his looks and his outfit was whiplash-inducing, but more so than that, I was struck by the fact that this beautiful fashion disaster of a man looked strikingly familiar.

“...Is that you, Sagami?” I asked.

“Sure is,” said Sagami. “What’s *your* deal? Why the bug-eyed stare?”

“I mean, this is kind of a lot to take in... Seriously, what are you *doing*?” I asked.

“Heading home from Summer Comiket with my spoils of war,” said Sagami, holding up the bag in his hand for me to see. I caught a glimpse of a bunch of thin booklets within, and I knew perfectly well what sort of content books of *that* size and shape usually contained.

Comiket—short for Comic Market—was the world’s largest doujinshi sales gathering, and the summer version thereof was also the single biggest event of the summer for geeks of Sagami’s ilk. I was a little interested as well, but I’d never actually bothered going, personally. It’s not that I didn’t *want* to give the event a look—it was just, well, kind of intimidating. I was still in the shallow end of the pool as far as geeky interests went, and I was a little afraid that if someone like me went to an event like that, I’d be really obviously out of place. *I guess that explains it though. I’d totally forgotten Comiket was happening today.*

“This was the first day, so I stuck to the corporate booths and went home early,” said Sagami. “You can’t last all three days if you push yourself too hard and burn out on day one. As far as I’m concerned, the *real* Comiket’s going to happen over the next two days.”

“That’s great and all, but, I mean...what the *heck* are you wearing?” I asked. “Are you cosplaying a stereotypical geek or what?”

“Huh? What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” asked Sagami. “These are just my normal everyday clothes.”

“You wear *that* crap casually?!” *I never knew. Who’d have thought that Sagami’s taste in clothes is just that bad?* “Why a *plaid* shirt though?!”

“I thought it’d be generally inoffensive.”

“And the shoes? Where did you even *get* those?”

“I just picked out something that’d be easy to walk around in.”

I winced. “And why’re your backpack’s straps so *tight*?”

“Wearing it this way makes it feel lighter, obviously.”

I stared at Sagami. Sagami stared back. Seconds passed.

“And the bandana...?”

“It’s the height of fashion.”

No good. He’s hopeless. This man fundamentally does not understand fashion. I didn’t really have the right to criticize him, considering that my older sister picked out all of my clothes, but I still knew truly tacky taste in clothing when I saw it. *Actually...it’s more like he has no taste in clothing at all. Like he’s just not interested.* I’d always thought that Sagami wore his school uniform in a rakishly disheveled state for the sake of fashion, but I was starting to suspect he only wore it that way because it was more comfortable. Maybe he had only been keeping his hair styled like live-action Kenshin’s because cutting it was too much of a pain to bother with too. The fact that he somehow managed to pull it off anyway was just a bit of pretty boy privilege.

“So, what are you two up to?” asked Sagami. “I’m guessing that dog belongs to one of you?”

“He’s my family’s, and his name is Bah!” said Hatoko. “We’re taking him to the vet.”

“Your family’s? I see now... Why the vet though? Is he sick?”

“Ah, umm, well... No, but...we’re getting him neutered,” Hatoko hesitantly explained with a slight blush.

Sagami cocked his head. “‘Neutered’?” he repeated, as if he wasn’t familiar with the term. “What’s that? Is it something you have to go to a vet for?”

“Yeah, it’s, umm... Well, neutering’s when they...umm...do some stuff to make sure your pet can’t have kids anymore...”

“*What* stuff? Be specific!”

“Huh? Umm— Hmm. That’s, well... Wh-When you have boy pets, you, umm... Oh, how should I put this? I’ve heard you have to t-take off their you-know-whats...”

“Huh? No, I *don’t* know. What do you have to take off?”

“Th-Their, umm... Oh, *you* know! You...You *do*, right? Their, you know, *those*. Like, *those*!”

“Come on, Hatoko, help me out! What’s about to happen to that dog? What’s the vet going to take away from it? Come on!”

“I-I’m trying to say, umm... Ugggh...”

“Come on, come on, come *on*, Hatokooo! Just tell me, pleeease? Give it to me straight! Speak up, and if at all possible, throw some pantomime in to help me really get the idea! What *are* they about to take away from that dog? Oh, I know. You can point at *my* body to help me understand! Right? Come on, come oooo—”

“Oh my god, drop *dead*!” I shouted as I sent Sagami flying with a mighty kick. I’m talking, like, a full-on Veau Shot trajectory! “I *know* you’re playing dumb, you jerk! Quit picking on Hatoko!”

“Waaah!” Hatoko sobbed. “Juuu...”

“It’s okay, Hatoko! There, there—the bad man can’t hurt you anymore!”

“Ugh,” Hatoko sniffed. “He almost forced me to say ‘penis’...”

“You, uh...kinda just said it.”

“Huh?! F-F-Forget I said that! Forget it, please! Aahhh!”

Strictly speaking, they’ll be taking his balls, not his penis. Probably not the time to nitpick though. As Hatoko started bawling, I rounded on Sagami and

shot him a baleful glare.

“Oh, you two—I was just kidding around, you know?” said Sagami as he picked himself off the ground and dusted himself off. He had the same flippant smile on as ever, and he showed absolutely no signs of remorse. “Of course, Jurai *is* right—I knew what neutering meant the whole time. It’s a surgical procedure where you slice open an animal’s scrotum and extract its testicles, right?”

“Of *course* you knew,” I grumbled.

“It’s within my area of expertise,” Sagami explained totally nonchalantly. “Oh, that’s right! Speaking of testicles, Tamaki caught a cold.”

“Why would *that* remind you of her?!” *Seriously, of all the word associations! What sort of freakish pattern of thought would make your girlfriend’s name pop into your mind thanks to a word like that?! I’d love to take a look into that guy’s mind someday— Actually, no, scratch that. I never, ever want to get even a glimpse into his thought processes. But I digress.* “A cold? In the middle of summer?”

“Yup. We were actually planning on going to Comiket together, but she ended up having to sit the trip out. Not much you can do about that sort of sickness, so I’ll be on my own for this event,” Sagami said, then heaved a sigh. “And she would’ve been the perfect little peon for the next two days. It’s such a shame, honestly.”

“Why’re you going to a comic event when your girlfriend’s sick? Shouldn’t you be going to visit her right now?” I asked.

“What? No way! I’d rather not get infected, thank you very much,” said Sagami with a grimace.

“Seriously, dude...?”

“For the record, Tamaki specifically told me that I didn’t need to bother coming by for a visit. And besides, having somebody show up at your place when you’re feeling sick always ends up being more of an annoyance than a help, doesn’t it?”

“I dunno,” I muttered. It *was* kind of a tricky question. I’d always find myself

wanting company whenever I was sick, but when somebody actually *did* arrive to pay me a visit, it would usually turn out to be more of a pain than anything else.

“Here’s a fun fact while we’re on the subject: when you have a cold or the flu and end up with a fever, it’s recommended that you take measures to keep your testicles nice and cool. They’re sensitive to heat, see, and in the worst case, you could boil them so badly you won’t be able to have kids even if you *don’t* bother neutering yourself!”

“Can we please stop talking about testicles already?!”

Considering it was the weekend, I wasn’t really surprised to find the vet’s office fairly crowded when we arrived. Somebody turned up to give Bahamut his initial examination pretty soon, though, and Hatoko carried him into another room deeper in the office. Sagami and I, meanwhile, were left to loiter around in the waiting room and endure the distinctly animalistic scent that dominated the place.

“Wait a minute—why did you even follow us in here, Sagamin?” I asked.

“Meh. Nothing better to do,” said Sagami as he leaned back in the seat next to me.

I wasn’t really unhappy about him coming with us, *per se*. I just wished he’d taken a moment to go home and get changed first. I could’ve handled his geek-chic fashion on its own, but the paper bag and its anime illustration were kind of a lot. It wasn’t *technically* R-rated in its subject matter, and I counted myself very slightly lucky in that sense, but it sure did depict some anime girl getting tangled up in a mess of tentacles, of all things. The important bits were all blocked from view, but it was still distinctly and undeniably smutty.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? This place is so crowded, but for some reason, nobody’s moving into our personal space,” said Sagami. “I could get used to having this much breathing room! Maybe the forces of karma are smiling down upon me?”

“Maybe you should try looking in a mirror,” I sighed. Thanks to the moron beside me, everyone else in the vet’s office was giving *me* disapproving looks as well. Really painful ones too, which was only natural considering that there

were quite a few women in the office at the time. Sagami was completely unperturbed, but I just couldn't take it anymore and grabbed a nearby magazine to hide behind.

As I flipped through the magazine—which I honestly wasn't even interested in to begin with—Sagami looked over my shoulder and spoke up. "Oh, I've heard about that! It's been all over the news lately," he said, pointing at an article titled "Popular Idol Caught in Love Affair!"

It was a big enough scandal that even I'd heard about it. The idol in question had cultivated a pure, innocent image, and she'd risen to such heights of popularity that she was known across the nation. Then she got photographed checking into a hotel with some guy, and her fans immediately went into conniptions.

"Yeah, I've heard some people are making a really big deal out of it," I replied. "I've heard some of them are, like, breaking all their CDs of hers and stuff."

"Yup," said Sagami with a nod. "I snapped all of mine right in half and posted pictures of them online. I burned every last one of my magazines and photobooks too. Purification by fire, you know?"

"Wait, *you're* one of those people?!" I shouted. The idol in question had done a decent bit of anime voice work, and I'd known that Sagami was a pretty dedicated fan of hers, but I never imagined that he'd be the sort of fan who'd completely lose his crap over something like this.

"It's just unbelievable, isn't it? Like, who does she think she *is*?" said Sagami. "And here I was, giving her my support because I thought she was a pure and virginal maiden! I've never felt so betrayed. Just *thinking* I invested so much time and money into used goods like her makes me want to lose my lunch!"

"Okay, you're really overreacting," I said as I cringed harder than I'd ever cringed before. His obsession with virginity was skeeving me out in a major way. "Who cares if she falls in love or whatever? Isn't that her right? Judging by all the reports, she hasn't even been sleeping around or anything—it looks like she's in a real, dedicated relationship with the guy. Wouldn't a *real* fan want their idol to have a decent love life?"

Sagami let out a long, exaggerated sigh at my attempt to make him see

reason. He seemed really exasperated and gave me a frigid stare. “Yes, people say things like that a lot, don’t they?” he grumbled. “‘A real fan would want their idol to be happy,’ they say. ‘If this is enough to make you hate her, then you were never a real fan to begin with,’ they say. They get all self-righteous, even though they have no idea what they’re even talking about.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let me turn this back around on you, Jurai: what *is* a ‘real fan’ in the first place?”

I hesitated, unsure of how to reply.

“Is overlooking the secret love affairs of an idol you support how fans *should* behave?” Sagami asked. “What about if they start smoking behind the scenes, or drinking, even if they’re a minor? What if they secretly go out to mixers with dudes, neglect their practice, start sucking at singing and dancing, and secretly get plastic surgery to hide the fact that they’re losing their youthful good looks? Would a *real* fan overlook all that and keep loving them anyway? Does a *real* fan have to keep loving their favorite idol no matter *what* she does?”

“That’s not what I—”

“Of course not. That would be absurd. If a *real* fan comes to despise their idol, they come out and say it,” Sagami insisted. He was starting to get really worked up and had clearly moved into one of his usual sermons. “Keeping up your passion for an idol no matter what happens is just laughable. That’s not being a fan—that’s being brainwashed. What’s natural is to like what you like and hate what you hate. That’s all there is to it. Right?”

Sagami gave me a look, and when I didn’t reply, he carried on. “And not just for idols—this applies to just about everything. If a magazine you follow starts to lose your interest, you can just stop buying it whenever you want. If an anime you’re following gets boring, you can just drop it. It’s perfectly all right to avoid a manga or light novel because you don’t like the art style. As consumers, it’s our right to choose what we do and do not consume. We have the *right* to hate what we hate. Take food, for instance—there’s nothing wrong with deciding you don’t like a dish after trying a single bite and avoiding it from that point onward. There’s absolutely no reason whatsoever to force yourself to eat

something you don't like, and if your tastes change, you should just accept it. These are *indulgences* we're talking about, so why *not* just enjoy the things you like, to the exclusion of all else?"

"Okay, then," I said, then took a deep breath. I felt the need to strike back somehow. It wasn't like I felt attacked and was trying to get back at him or anything like that—I just sort of felt aggravated by how he was going on and on about his little theory and wanted to say *something* in response. "That means that if someone decides they hate *you* for being who you are, it's totally okay for them to do so?"

"Yup. That's right," said Sagami without a hint of hesitation. My retort hadn't shaken his resolve in the least. "And if they did, I'd hate them right back in response. We'd find mutual hatred for each other, and that would be the end of it. See? Wasn't that easy?"

"Easy...? I guess, in a really nasty sort of way."

"Of course, that's never *actually* the end of it. That's what makes this world of ours such a pain to live in. It's just full of people who can't tolerate the idea that there are people out there who don't hate the same things they do. Vice versa as well, of course—there are tons of people who get *ridiculously* worked up over the idea that some people hate the things they like."

That was it. That's when Sagami said it.

"When all is said and done, what people desire above all else is to have others identify with their feelings."

Bahamut's blood tests and whatnot turned out all normal, so they ended up carrying out the surgery that day, as planned.

"They said it'll take about two or three hours, so we should come back and pick him up in the evening," Hatoko reported, so we decided to go find somewhere to kill time while we waited. Apparently, they'd offered to allow us to watch the operation, but Hatoko couldn't stand the sight of blood, and Sagami and I, well...didn't really want to watch *those* getting removed. I offered a silent prayer of encouragement to Bahamut, and then we left the vet's office together.

“The vet also said that there’s a festival happening today at a shopping mall just nearby! They said it might be fun to hang out there while we wait,” Hatoko mentioned. For lack of any other objective, we decided to go check the event out.

The shopping mall in question took about ten minutes to walk to. The festival was set up in the massive mall’s parking lot, and a huge crowd was milling about the stalls. I could already smell the delectable aromas of the festival food they were selling, and they had one of those big trampolines you tend to see at festivals like these set up as well—the sort contained inside a huge inflatable dinosaur or Pikachu or whatever. Like, the sorta bouncy castle-adjacent things that little kids love.

“Yikes. This is a lot more crowded than I’d figured,” I said.

“Ha ha ha! Come on, Jurai. I know plenty of battle-hardened veterans who would laugh their heads off at you for saying *this* is a big crowd.”

“Shut up! Comiket’s not a good frame of reference!”

“Ah, look, look!” shouted Hatoko. “They have candied apples! I love those!”

“That’s true, Hatoko, but look—don’t those sausages over there look delicious too?” said Sagami. “And look over there. Chocolate bananas! And uncut sushi rolls as well! I’ll pay for whichever of them you want, as long as you eat it in front of me.”

“How about recommending something that *isn’t* long, dark, and phallic, you freak?!” I snapped.

“You’ll pay for it?! Really?!”

“No, Hatoko! Don’t get excited about this, and don’t eat *anything* he recommends to you! Trust me!”

“Aww, why not?”

“Because!”

I frantically guarded Hatoko from the efforts of Sagami Shizumu, the avatar of sexual harassment, as we walked through the crowd and soaked up that distinctive festival atmosphere. Pretty much every word out of Sagami’s mouth

was some sort of vulgar joke, all of which flew right over Hatoko's head, leaving me to leap in and shut down her innocent responses before Sagami could steer them in a bad direction.

"Ah, look, Juu!" Hatoko said at one point. "There's a shooting gallery!"

"Oh, huh, you're right," I replied.

"And ooh, look at that stuffed dolphin! It's so cute!"

"Want me to win it for you?"

"Huh? You'd do that?"

"Yeah, sure. Leave it to me! There's a trick to these, see..."

"Please, Jurai. Stop," said Sagami. "I'm getting an incredible sense of *déjà vu* right now. I see the punch line coming a mile away, and I'd rather *not* see it come to fruition. I never want to witness a tragedy like I did that day at the arcade ever again..."

So, yeah, every once in a while, Sagami would jump in to play the straight man as well. It's not like we were *constantly* putting on a silly little three-man comedy routine, of course.

"Ugh!"

"What's wrong, Sagami? Why do you look so horrified?"

"Because, Hatoko, something terrible's just happened to me. Look at this—the popsicle I just bought had a winning stick, so I get another one for free."

"Oh, wow! That's amazing! It's your lucky day!"

"Yeah, she's right—that's *lucky*, not terrible! What's the problem?"

"The problem is that I just wasted a stroke of luck on something incredibly petty! I'd rather save up my luck and use it on something *really* great, all at once."

"Well, that's a twisted way of thinking about all this."

"I dunno—I think I might sort of understand what he means!"

As you can see, we spent plenty of time chatting about truly pointless

nonsense as well—the sort of empty small talk we’d all inevitably have forgotten about by the next day. At the very least, that went to show how close to us Sagami had become: close enough that just being together meant the conversation would keep flowing, naturally and uninterrupted.

At the end of the day, the festival *was* only on the sort of scale you could expect from a shopping mall’s parking lot. An hour or two of wandering around was enough to see and do everything we felt like seeing and doing. The event felt a little lacking, all together, but we *did* manage to kill time while Bahamut had his surgery, so I suppose it had served its purpose.

“Come to think of it, there’s going to be another festival at a nearby shrine sometime soon!” said Hatoko as we headed back for the vet’s office.

“Oh right, yeah. I forgot about that,” I said. *That* one was going to be a proper, full-blown summer festival too, not a miniature approximation of one. There’d be stalls, a Bon dance, taiko drumming, and fireworks. The whole town was putting its all into making the event as big of a deal as they could manage.

“I know! Let’s all go together!” proposed Hatoko, clenching her fists before her excitedly. “Tamaki can come too if she’s over her cold by then!”

Sagami, for some reason, just stared blankly at her.

“What’s wrong? Hellooo? Earth to Sagamin?” I said.

“Oh... Nothing’s wrong. I was just thinking that this was a new experience for me, that’s all,” said Sagami with a faint smile. “Girls have always been all over me, you know? They’ve always invited me places, and plenty of them have asked me to go on festival dates.”

“Are you trying to brag?” I grumbled.

“No, just telling the truth,” said Sagami. “That’s why, well... I have plenty of experience going out with girls, but I actually have almost no experience going out with friends. Hence why this feels, well, kind of fresh to me. I’ve never gone to a festival in a group like this before.”

I fell silent. That was kind of a hard revelation to react to, honestly. What would it be like to be a hit with girls but have no friends? I couldn’t tell if he was

bragging or bemoaning his fortunes. Of course, him not having friends was, well...not super surprising, honestly. He had more than his fair share of personality defects, after all.

“Thanks for inviting me, Hatoko,” said Sagami. “I’ll pass the invitation along to Tamaki. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled.”

“Oh, you don’t have to thank me! The more the merrier, right?” said Hatoko with a grin. “We’ll all have to study for our entrance exams next summer, so this summer’s our last chance to spend lots of time hanging out with our friends! If we don’t make the most of it, we’ll end up regretting missing the chance, so let’s go for it!”

Her words were so purely genuine and earnest, I was almost embarrassed just listening to them. Saying stuff like that and actually meaning it was what made Hatoko, well, Hatoko. I found myself smiling as I watched her skip along ahead of me.

“Friends, huh...?” Sagami quietly muttered. “I suppose that means we’re already friends in her mind.”

“She’s the sort of person who can make friends with anyone,” I said.

“And that’s what makes her so different from the two of us, eh?”

“Speak for yourself! I’m nowhere *near* as far gone as you.”

“I guess we *have* been friends for a while now, haven’t we, Jurai?”

I sighed and scratched my head. This topic was putting me in a weird state of mind—sort of a cross between awkwardness and shyness. “You only just noticed? I mean, you’ve been having me call you a cutesy nickname like Sagamin for *how* long?”

“Well, I never thought I *wanted* a guy friend,” said Sagami. “I mean, you know what I’m like. I’m the sort of person who loses interest in eroge the moment they introduce a best friend character.”

“I couldn’t care less.”

“Oh, unless the best friend’s a femboy! That’s a *completely* different scenario. *Those* characters deserve to be fully voice-acted, no exception! Same deal for

girls who're forced to cross-dress because of some weird family drama."

"Okay, seriously, I *do not care*! Why are we still talking about this?!"

"But you know..." said Sagami. "It turns out having friends isn't really that bad after all." Then he flashed a big, dashing smile at me, the effect of which was only slightly diminished by his stupid bandana.



"The four of us spent a ton of time together that summer," I explained after I finished telling Sayumi the story of our hellishly hot pet care adventure.

"Hatoko and Tamaki were both pretty proactive, and they ended up making a ton of plans for us. We really did go to that festival in the end, for one thing."

The four of us went all out. We wore our yukata and everything. Hatoko and Tamaki both looked ridiculously good in that sort of outfit, though if I had to pick who'd pulled it off better, I'd probably have to hand it to Tamaki. Yukata are generally suited to people with slender builds, and while Tamaki definitely fell into that category, Hatoko was...well. She had a little too much volume in the chest area to pull off a yukata in the traditional sense, you could say.

"What else did we do...? Oh, we went out on a sort of ghost hunt at one point! There were a bunch of rumors floating around that the park I met Sagami and Tamaki at was haunted by a silver-haired specter, so we went to check it out in the middle of the night. We didn't find anything in the end, though. Actually, Tamaki and Sagami spent the whole time flirting, and that was pretty much the end of it."

We did plenty of other things that weren't distinctly summery as well. We went out to karaoke, and we played video games together at home. Somebody brought up going to the pool once, but Tamaki shot that plan down. Apparently, she was too embarrassed to be seen in a swimsuit.

"I can certainly tell that the four of you got along very well," said Sayumi. "That's rather remarkable, considering two of said four were in a relationship. I would think that would make things awkward for the rest of you."

"If we were friends *before* they'd started dating, I could see that, but they'd been together since before I'd met them. I think that helped," I replied.

It was sort of like how it's hard to imagine a time when your parents weren't married, I guess. I'd never known the two of them outside of the context of their relationship, so in my mind, that was just how they were. Sagami and Tamaki dating was the standard state of things. What a terrible misapprehension I was stuck under.

"We did a bunch of other stuff that summer...but, well, that was all just fun and games, so I'll skip over it," I said. The next stage of my story that mattered took place in the autumn that followed. "Things are gonna get a little messy after this point, so I'm just gonna tell you everything, all at once."

This is where the part of my story that I'd never really wanted to talk about begins. The fall of my second year in middle school was where the dark stain that fell over my history began to spread.

Chapter 5: Andou Jurai's Eighth-Grade Fall—A Heart-Pounding Theater for Two

"Hey, Jurai! Wanna go peep a movie together?"

One Saturday in mid-September, as the lingering summer heat finally began to fade away, I got a phone call from Tamaki. I was sprawled out on my bed at the time, and I almost sat up in surprise when her distinctly accented invitation blared through my phone's speaker.

"A movie? What, like, now?" I asked.

"Ayup!"

"You mean with Sagamin and Hatoko, right? Sorry, but Hatoko's got club practice today."

"I know! She's always got club on Saturdays, so we'll have to send her a rain check this time."

"Just us and Sagamin then?"

"Nope! I'm not giving Shizumu a shout this time."

"Huh?"

"I wanna pop over with just the two of us," Tamaki said, then she told me when and where to meet her before concluding with an "Okay, don't keep me waiting!" before hanging up without giving me the chance to reply.

I spent a few seconds just sitting there, staring at my phone's screen. *A movie? With Tamaki? Just the two of us?*

"Eh... That works, I guess."

I decided not to read into it and started getting ready to head out into town.

I arrived at the station square we'd agreed to meet at only to find the place surprisingly packed with couples. I got the impression that this was a commonly

used meeting place for dates—Tamaki had mentioned that she and Sagami used the area for that purpose all the time. There was a big clock set up in the plaza, and it informed me that it was around twenty past two in the afternoon, making me about ten minutes early. That meant that I had time to brood.

Why *had* Tamaki invited me out to see a movie? When I thought back on it, it struck me that this would be our first time hanging out together without Hatoko or Sagami around. I'd be alone with Tamaki—alone with Sagami's girlfriend. So...would this be considered some sort of infidelity? It wasn't like we'd ended up alone together as a matter of happenstance—we'd gone out of our way to meet up and see a movie together, and judging by Tamaki's phrasing during our phone call, Sagami wasn't even aware that any of this was happening. What would he think about his girlfriend going to the movies in secret with some other guy?

Hmm. I had a distinct feeling that a lot of people would consider this unambiguously objectionable. I'd made my way out to the meeting place without thinking too deeply about what I was doing, but now that I'd had the time to mull it over, it was starting to sink in that I *might've* been stabbing Sagami in the back by going along with this—that I was in the midst of actively betraying my friend's trust—and I was starting to feel really, really guilty about it all of a sudden.

Just as I was starting to panic and wonder if I should go home, my vision went black.

"Gueeeess Yu!"

"Whoa?!" I yelped in surprise. The sudden darkness had caught me way off guard, not to mention the soft, warm sensation on my face. *Also, who the heck is Yu?!*

"Ha ha, did I spook you?"

I clutched at my pounding heart and spun around to find Tamaki standing behind me and smiling impishly. She was wearing a brown poncho that totally covered her upper body and a pair of navy blue pants beneath. The whole ensemble screamed "flying squirrel" to me more than anything else, but it *was* certainly cute and girly enough in spite of that. I'd gotten the impression that

Tamaki was fond of bulky, flowy clothes in that general style. She'd certainly always seemed to wear that sort of thing whenever she wasn't in her uniform, at least. From what I'd heard, that sort of style was referred to as the "forest girl" aesthetic.



“Sorry for hauling you out here like this! Didn’t really give you much chance to bail though, did I?” she said apologetically. “So, yeah, thanks for showing! Oh, right—you didn’t tattle about this to Shizumu, did you?”

“I didn’t, nah,” I replied.

“Oh? Peachy! It proper slipped my mind to tell you to keep mum,” she said with a sigh of relief. I felt a gloom begin to descend over me—it seemed we really *were* doing this behind Sagami’s back after all. “Come on, let’s mosey on out!” Tamaki continued, then she set off. She seemed totally oblivious to my internal conflict as she strolled along happily, heading toward the movie theater...or so I’d assumed, but instead, she made a beeline toward the station itself.

“Hey, where’re you going? The theater’s that way, isn’t it?” I said, gesturing off in a totally different direction.

“I’ve got a different theater slotted in for today!” Tamaki replied. “We’ll have to hop a train.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Just because! Come on, let’s hustle! The movie’s gonna start without us!”

Unable to figure out how I really felt about any of this, I ended up following Tamaki toward the ticket gates without another word. Going out of our way to take a train and see the film at a faraway theater, though? That settled it—the situation had finally taken the leap into unambiguously sketchy territory.

A roughly ten-minute train ride brought us to the station we were headed to, at which point Tamaki took the lead and brought us to the theater she’d had in mind. It was quite close to the station, on the top floor of a pretty large building. The place had to be almost twice the size of our local theater; it had a ton of movies on offer and an impressively large concession stand to boot.

“Okay, let’s hop in line!” said Tamaki, heading straight for the ticket booth.

“W-Wait a sec!” I shouted, cutting her off in a fluster. I’d let myself get dragged along without protest so far, but it was high time that I got some

answers. “Hey, Tamaki... Look...I don’t have a problem with going to see a movie with you or anything, okay? But, like, I just really think we should say something to Sagamin about it! It just wouldn’t feel right if we didn’t!”

“Huh?” said Tamaki. “What’re you prattling on about, dummy! Telling Shizumu would spoil the whole shebang!”

“In that case...sorry, but I’m heading home,” I said.

“You’re bouncing? Why? You came this far!”

I paused for a moment to collect my thoughts. “You and Sagamin are both really good friends to me, you know? So I don’t want to do anything behind either of your backs, and I don’t want to keep this sort of secret.”

I’d said the word “friend” so naturally, I’d barely even realized it. The word had just sprung up from somewhere deep inside me. Somewhere along the way, Sagami Shizumu and Futaba Tamaki had become irreplaceable presences in my life. My own stupid antics had denied me a place I could belong at school, but thanks to those two, I’d finally been able to feel like I fit in somewhere. My time in the eighth grade had been empty and substanceless at first, but ever since I’d met them, it had turned into an incredibly important period to me.

“Huh? HUUUH?” grunted Tamaki, cocking her head and crossing her arms in confusion. My pained explanation, apparently, had missed its mark—or so I’d thought before she suddenly clapped her hands and said, “Ah! Jurai, did you get it in your noggin I was asking you on a *date*?” with a perfectly deadpan expression.

“No, I mean... I didn’t say *that*...” *Wait. Huh? She’s acting like that’s not what’s happening here!*

“Did you think that going about together like this might be cheating or something?”

“I-Isn’t it?!”

“Pff... Aha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” cackled Tamaki. She completely broke down in a fit of hysterical laughter, clutching at her sides as she giggled with all her might. “Ha haa haaa, oh god, that’s *rich*! Don’t fuss about it, Jurai—I’ve only got eyes for Shizumu, really. Oh, drop me, you *are* a guy, aren’t you?”

Totally slipped my mind, honest!”

Tragically—or maybe fortunately—it seemed that Tamaki saw me purely as a friend and had absolutely no feelings for me whatsoever aside from that. I found myself torn between a sense of relief and a slight twinge of disappointment.

“You know,” said Tamaki, “tromping out to the theater today was all for Shizumu to start with!”

“Huh? We’re here for Sagamin?” I asked, bewildered.

“Yup! To snag him a surprise present. His birthday’s coming right up—it’s September ninedeeth.”

“‘Ninedeeth’...? Oh, the nineteenth?”

Another aspect of the Fukushima accent, it seemed, was an occasional slurring or flattening of some sounds. My name actually got a similar treatment—every once in a while the way she said it came out sounding more like “Zurai” than “Jurai.” *I’m not Zura, I’m Jurai!*

“September nineteenth... So, like, less than a week from now?” I asked.

“Yup,” said Tamaki. “That’s why I snagged you to back me up!”

I’d never even considered the possibility that something like *that* could be going on. Asking a boy to help pick out your boyfriend’s present? Now *that* made sense to me—you saw it all the time in shojo manga and stuff, though those stories *also* tended to have the boyfriend in question catch you in the act, leading to a bout of obnoxious, drawn-out drama. The key difference, of course, was that we were going to see a movie, not going shopping. That little detail had led me into one heck of an awkward misunderstanding.

“You know how movies pack an itty-bitty film strip in along with your ticket these days?” asked Tamaki.

“Film strips? Yeah, I’ve heard of that,” I replied. Typically, they’d be a short segment of film—just a few frames long—from the same movie you’d bought tickets for. What scene in particular your strip would be pulled from was totally random though, and I’d heard that sometimes you’d get a really clear closeup

of a character, and other times you'd basically just get black boxes.

"Well, the deal is, Shizumu's been hitting the movies over and over going after a real particular film strip," Tamaki explained.

"Ahh. Yeah, that sounds like something he'd do, all right."

"He says he's gone to see it ten times now, but every strip's ended up being pitch black or a background."

"Holy crap, that's some awful luck!" *Seriously, ten times...? That's downright incredible! Not to mention a major investment in terms of time and money!*

"I tagged over with him to see it once, but you know Shizumu...he's just so nice. Said he'd feel nasty for dragging me along, so he's been going it alone ever since then."

"I think that's more normal than nice, personally," I commented. It was, in fact, what any reasonable person would do. I had to admit, though—Sagami doing what any reasonable person would do *did* somehow feel like an incredible act of virtue on his part, for some outlandish reason. It was like how a violent street punk can suddenly look like an incredibly great dude if he happens to save a puppy for whatever reason.

"So that's why I've been hitting the theaters on the lowdown collecting film strips for him! I wanna give him the one thing he wants most for his birthday!"

"So, the reason you brought us out to this theater in particular...?"

"Is 'cause the theaters around these parts are the only ones passing them out."

Everything was finally coming together. It all made sense now. "So...you invited me along because that meant you could get two film strips instead of one. Sheesh—you could've explained all this from the beginning, you know?"

"My goof on that, honest. I never thought you'd get all worked up and think I was asking you on a *date*!"

"I-I did *not* get worked up about anything!" I shouted. Tamaki just grinned at me, and the warmth of her smile made me feel a warmth in turn, somewhere deep down inside me. It was a sense of relief—relief at the fact that she really

was the person I thought she was. No matter what happened, no matter who she was with, Sagami would always be first and foremost in her mind. In my mind, Tamaki was a girl who lived for love. “I’m kinda jealous of Sagamin, though,” I continued. “He really found himself a great girlfriend.”

“No point buttering me up, you know?” Tamaki jabbed. “I’m sure you’ll catch yourself a great gal one of these days. You’re a pretty swell guy yourself, after all.”

“There’s no point in *you* flattering *me* either. Eh, seeing a movie isn’t too much to ask, if that’s all that’s going on here.”

“Honest?”

“Just one showing, though!”

I had a lot of respect for Tamaki’s feelings, and I wanted to do something to celebrate Sagami’s birthday as well. Plus, the movie in question was one that I’d kinda been interested in seeing anyway—though of course, I had no interest in collecting film strips from it.

This theater in particular passed the bonus film strips out along with your tickets, rather than after the showing.

“Ah, no good! Mine’s pitch-black,” said Tamaki. We’d bought our tickets and moved away from the counter so she could open the envelope her film strip came in and take a look at it. Unfortunately, she’d had no luck—though really, I didn’t know what *would* constitute a lucky draw. I took a glance at her film strip, and sure enough, every frame more or less just looked like a black square. I could barely make out what might’ve been fireworks or an explosion or something, but it was hard to tell what exactly I was looking at.

“Did you snatch a good one?” asked Tamaki.

“I’m gonna wait to open mine until after the movie, personally,” I replied.

“Huh?! What for?!”

“Duh? I don’t wanna get spoiled.”

A pitch black scene like Tamaki’s was one thing, but if I’d happened to get a

piece of film from an important scene, it could seriously ruin the viewing experience. There was no guarantee that mine wouldn't show a side character getting killed off or turning out to have been the villain the whole time or whatever.

It'd be like flipping through the illustrations at the front of a light novel before reading the book—you could never be totally sure you wouldn't accidentally spoil yourself in the process, and if you did, you'd have no one to blame for it but yourself. I mean, it made total sense that the creators would want to pick significant scenes to illustrate, and from a reader's perspective, seeing the hypest part of a book get drawn is super great...but still, glancing at the pictures only to see the main character going through an epic awakening or a side character stabbing them in the back is just the worst feeling. I'm talking serious, painful regret.

Tamaki sighed. "You're a real jab in the tokus sometimes, you know? Give it here, then—I'll take a gander."

"I dunno about that either. It's like...like how when you buy a magazine, it feels wrong to let someone else flip through it before you, y'know? We can look together after the movie's over."

"Such a sissy," Tamaki grumbled, but considering I was already doing her a favor, she didn't press the issue any further—though her scowl made it clear that she *wanted* to.

Meanwhile, the scheduled starting time for the film drew closer and closer. We bought some popcorn and soda at the concession stand, then headed into the theater and descended the stairs toward our assigned seats.

"Oh, wow. Looks like a full house, huh?" I observed. "It's been a while since this movie came out too. Guess this *is* supposed to be the most popular anime movie in theaters right now."

"There's a bunch of repeaters going after a particular piece of film like *Shizumu* too," said Tamaki. "That's why it's such a hit."

"Let's just leave that unstated, okay? I'd rather think it's popular because it's good."

“If you wanna sell something, you gotta use tricks like that to keep competitive. Think about the music business—record labels toss in tickets that let you shake hands with an idol and stuff like that when you buy CDs, that gets the fans to snatch up a mountain of discs, and then the songs rocket right to the top of the charts.”

“Seriously, let’s leave that unstated. The CDs sell because the music’s good.” As we chatted, we made it to our seats. As I settled into mine, though, I found myself a little surprised by just how close to Tamaki it felt like I was.

H-Huh...? Have movie theater seats always been this close together? Sitting this close to someone in a dark room for an extended period of time was certainly a prospect. I was starting to understand why seeing a movie was such a go-to option for dates. Thinking back on it, this was actually my first time going to see a movie with a girl like this as well. I’d gone to a movie with Hatoko once back when we were in elementary school, but we’d had my sister sitting between us at the time.

Okay, calm down! What’re you even getting nervous about? This is stupid! I told myself as I reached for my drink...and found myself touching Tamaki’s hand instead.

“Huh? This one’s mine, Jurai,” said Tamaki.

“Uh...ah! M-My bad!” I stammered. I’d fallen into that classic movie theater trap: accidentally reaching for the person next to you’s drink. I jerked my hand back, then glanced over at her just in time for our gazes to meet—and at a really close distance.

“Seeing as we’re here and all, wanna hold hands?” said Tamaki.

“*Huh?*” I gasped. “Wha—but—wh-why...?”

“Hee hee! Just yanking your chain,” Tamaki giggled as I fell into a hopeless panic. “I held hands with Shizumu the whole time when we watched it together, see. He was stuck on the movie like glue, but I was so stuck on his hand I barely noticed the movie at all. That’s why I was thinking that this time I’d really try to focus on it!” she explained—boasted, really—with a slight blush.

I felt a relieved smile spread across my face. I felt ridiculous for getting so

nervous about sitting next to her. She really didn't have eyes for anyone other than Sagami, and I was coming to appreciate that she didn't even see me as a member of the opposite sex. You'd think that would sting a little, but really, I wasn't upset by it at all. I was actually happy, if you can believe it. Tamaki was so purely and earnestly in love with Sagami it was almost satisfying to watch her do her thing. I really liked that about her—as a friend, needless to say.

The movie came to a close, and the audience began to slowly stand up and filter out of the theater. The only people who didn't were either the sort of people who always waited until the very end of the credits roll or the sort of people who didn't like dealing with a big crowd on the way to the exit. Tamaki and I were neither of those types, so we got moving right away—though in my case, the fact that I really needed to use the restroom was also a factor.

“You all right, Jurai? Didn't sop yourself?”

““Sop myself”?”

“Didn't pee your pants, I mean.”

“Oh! Nah, I didn't. I'm a little too old to go wetting myself in a theater.”

“Glad to hear it. Okay, then...it's finally time to peek at what treasure you've got in that envelope of yours! Open it up, open it up!”

Tamaki looked like she was in the highest of spirits. Personally, I would've liked to have spent some time chatting about the actual movie before the big reveal, but her attention had unfortunately completely shifted over to the film strip in my possession. I couldn't blame her, really—for her, this was the day's main event.

We moved over to a corner of the hallway so we wouldn't block the path, and I pulled the envelope out from my bag. “Okay, here goes,” I said. Tamaki nodded enthusiastically, and a few weirdly tense seconds passed by as I opened the envelope and slid the film strip out of it. Taking a close look, I saw a girl smiling into the camera. Her face took up the entire frame and occupied all five of the frames on my strip.

“So then,” I muttered as I inspected the strip. It wasn't a background or a

pitch-black scene, so it wasn't a *total* write-off, but the conclusion still seemed pretty clear. "Rats... That's a dud, all right."

My shoulders slumped with disappointment. The character pictured in my film strip was so unpopular among the franchise's fanbase, she was actually kind of famous for it. She barely got any screen time, had little to no presence even when she was in frame, and she barely had any character development to speak of, leading people to not like her much at all from what I recalled. I wasn't super well versed in this anime's fanbase, and even *I'd* heard about her lack of popularity, which really said something about just how disliked she was on the whole.

"Sorry, Tamaki," I sighed. "Looks like neither of us had any luck today." It wasn't my fault or anything, but it still just felt right to apologize somehow.

In defiance of my expectations, however, Tamaki's face had lit up in a brilliant grin. "That's the one," she whispered.

"Huh?"

"That's it! That's the one! That's the character Shizumu wanted so badly!"

"Wait, seriously?! Isn't she the one who's famous for how *unpopular* she is?"

"Yup, but it seems she got popular for being unpopular," said Tamaki. "All the jokes and memes about her piled up so much she came out on the other end as a fan favorite! That's what Shizumu said, leastwise. Guess part of the fanbase is really bonkers about her."

"Huh," I grunted. I wasn't totally sure if I could take the claim that a whole segment of the fanbase was crazy for her at face value—it sounded a little too much like an effort to hype her popularity up—but at the very least, it was clear that Sagami was a big fan. *I guess this is what he's been going to the theater over and over for this whole time.*

"S-So, Jurai...?" said Tamaki. "Y-You don't mind letting me keep hold of that, right...?"

"Yeah, of course. That was the whole point, right?"

I passed the film strip over to Tamaki. She stared at it for a moment, then

threw her arms up in the air and shouted “Woohoooooooo!” at the top of her lungs. She was absolutely whooping and beaming with glee at the thought that she’d gotten ahold of the perfect present for her boyfriend. *Sheesh... I think this is embarrassing me more than it is her.*

“You’re *such* a stand-up guy, Jurai, honest! This would fetch a good hundred thousand yen if you threw it up on Yahoo Auctions!”

“Are you kidding me?!” A hundred thousand yen?! So, wait—does that mean I just indirectly helped get a hundred-thousand-yen present for Sagami? For him? King sleazebag himself? Even though he didn’t get me anything for my birthday? I just got a hundred-thousand-yen present for another dude? What sort of slashfic is this?!

While I writhed with profound, intense regret, Tamaki giggled to herself. “Oh, I can’t wait to peep what sort of face Shizumu makes when he sees this,” she said to herself. I sure as heck couldn’t demand the film strip back after seeing her *that* happy, of course.

Guess that’s that, then. I’m resigned to my fate. You’d better not expect this to ever happen again, Sagamin.

“Bringing you along was a full great idea, all right! Thanks so much, Jurai!” Tamaki said, then spread her arms wide apart, as if to give me a big ol’ hug. She didn’t *actually* hug me, of course—it was just a joke. She was messing around, that was all. For all her cheerful friendliness, Tamaki *did* draw a line when it came to interacting with guys like that. When she was around other people, she’d even be reserved about PDA with Sagami. Between that and her preference for not showing much skin, I’d gotten the impression that she was a surprisingly chaste person all around. At the very least, she wasn’t the sort of girl who’d hug a guy for funsies.

I, however, stepped forward and hugged her.

I hugged her tightly. As tightly as I possibly could.

“Wha...?” Tamaki gasped with surprise. Her ecstatic joy vanished in an instant as she stiffened up. I could literally feel her confusion and tension as I held my

arms around her, standing up as straight as I could to make up for the fact that she was a bit taller than me.

“H-Hey, Jurai...?” said Tamaki. “What’s the deal? What’re you doing...?”

“...”

“L-Let go... F-For real, let go...”

“...”

“Jurai...?”

I paid no heed to Tamaki’s faint repeated protests. I just stood there, holding her tightly, keeping her faced firmly in my direction, never allowing her to turn around for so much as a second. I didn’t want her to see what I’d seen, the sight that’d made me stifle a gasp as I confirmed my eyes hadn’t been playing tricks on me.

I’d spotted someone a ways ahead of me in the hustle and bustle of the crowd—someone familiar. That plaid shirt. Those jeans. The tacky, off-brand sneakers. He still looked like the poster boy for generic geek fashion, though the absence of the backpack and paper bag made the fashion disaster at least a little better than the last time I’d witnessed it. Regardless, there could be no mistaking that remarkably pretty boy face or his live-action-Kenshin-style haircut: Sagami Shizumu was strolling through the crowd before me.

Now, seeing Sagami here wasn’t surprising in and of itself. He’d been watching the movie over and over again in his quest to get his hands on the film strip he wanted, so him coming out to this theater was far from an implausible development. Things might’ve gotten a little awkward if he’d seen me here with Tamaki, and her big surprise for him might’ve gotten ruined, but I knew that Sagami would understand if we just explained it to him.

So, why had I hugged Tamaki? Why was I keeping her sight and attention totally focused on me without even bothering to consider how it would make me look? Simple: because Sagami was walking along with some girl I’d never seen before by his side.

Unlike Tamaki, she was on the fairly petite side of things. She was also dressed in a pretty flashy outfit that showed a lot of skin. I couldn’t see her face

very well given how far apart we were, but I *could* tell at a glance that she was pretty well-endowed. She cut a sharp contrast to Tamaki across the board, really, although the second I caught myself unconsciously comparing the two of them, I quickly made to shake the thought process off. *Dammit, what am I even thinking? Why would I compare Tamaki with her? What difference would it make if Tamaki were prettier than her, or if she were cuter than Tamaki?*

I watched over Tamaki's shoulder as Sagami chatted away with the mystery girl, a dashing smile plastered across his face. It was a pure smile, utterly undiluted by the slightest hint of doubt or gloom. The *exact* same smile he wore when he was with Tamaki. Finally, he and the girl vanished from sight, melting away into the rest of the theatergoers around them.

"J-Jurai... Th-That hurts. You're hurting me," a voice whispered into my ear. Finally, I snapped back to my senses and practically pushed Tamaki away from me.

"S-Sorry," I said.

"I-It's okay," said Tamaki, hanging her head as she readjusted her outfit. Her cheeks were a faint shade of red.

Some of the passersby were giving us looks—no surprise, really, considering we'd just been hugging in public like that. We probably looked like a young couple, flirting away without any regard for the people around us. The awkwardness and embarrassment were too much to take, and the two of us quickly made tracks.

"H-Hey...Jurai?" said Tamaki as she walked along behind me. "What was that? Why'd you do it...?"

Why? What was I supposed to say? Not the truth, that's for sure, and so I ended up saying "Because...you were just so crazy cute" instead.

"Huh?! Wha... Wha?!" Tamaki yelped.

I could hear her hysterical stammering behind me, but I didn't turn around and just kept walking. I had to wonder what the hell I was saying too, honestly, but I'd been put on the spot so abruptly that it was the only excuse that came to mind in time. It came to mind because there was an element of truth to it: I

really *had* thought she was cute. The sight of her getting so excited to get her hands on a present for her boyfriend was downright adorable. It wasn't a romantic sort of attraction at all—I just thought, as her friend, that she was a really cute girl. That's why the moment I saw Sagami walking along with that girl—the moment I saw him giving her his signature smile—my mind had just gone blank.

“Wh-What's that...what're you prattling on about...?” said Tamaki. “You can't — I mean, I'm already— Um... I-I don't get any of this, but...it's not right...I'm dating Shizumu, so...”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. I knew that very well. All too well.

“I-I'll just forget it!” said Tamaki in a tone so bright and cheery, it was downright unnatural. “Yup, that's the ticket. I'll forget it! What you just said, that thing a minute ago—I'll blank it all out! So...”

“Yeah, that'd be for the best.”

With that, we just silently walked along, barely saying another word to each other. It wasn't until we stopped by a nearby café that Tamaki seemed to suddenly switch gears and got talkative again. She started sharing her impression of the movie, never mentioning what I'd done so much as once. I played along, enjoying our conversation and acting as if nothing at all was amiss—our perfectly surface-level, utterly superficial conversation.

Maybe I was just misunderstanding everything. I couldn't find it in me to force myself to make that assumption though. My heart and mind were both far too preoccupied to do anything of the sort.

Sagami's birthday arrived a few days later, and that night, I got a text from Tamaki. She'd sent it to report on how her gift went over and to thank me for my help. Apparently, Sagami had been over the moon to receive that film strip. The message concluded with the lines:

Again, thank you so much! Shizumu's really grateful too. I hope you'll find a wonderful girlfriend yourself someday!

Tamaki always wrote her texts in standard Japanese, by the way. Considering how intense her dialect was when you spoke with her in real life, it'd always felt weird to talk with her through text...or, I mean, it had at first. I'd pretty much gotten used to it at that point.

"A wonderful girlfriend for myself, she says," I muttered. It wasn't very hard to figure out what she'd really meant with that closing remark: it was an indirect but unambiguous rejection. I was pretty sure she was under some misapprehensions about my intentions, but clearing the air would just stir the problem up all over again, so I figured I'd just let it go. If the matter of my hug had been settled in her mind, then that was for the best. I, meanwhile, had something else to think about.

The next day after school, I called Sagami out for a chat.

"What is it? That's quite the scowl you have going on, Jurai," Sagami said as he strolled up to me. I'd asked him to meet me in the same park where we'd had our first encounter. He plopped down on a nearby bench, while I remained standing, gazing down at him.

"You got your film strip, right?" I asked.

"Yup," said Sagami. "Oh, right—I've been meaning to thank you for that. You went to see that movie with Tamaki to get it, right? Thanks, really. I can't believe you'd do that for someone like me. I'll treasure it forever."

It seemed that Sagami already knew about my involvement in his present. *Good—that'll make this nice and quick.* "We went to the theater last Saturday," I said.

"Hmm," grunted Sagami.

"What about you? What were *you* doing that day?" I asked, shooting him a glare.

"Last Saturday?" Sagami said, then seemed to sink into thought for a few seconds. "Umm...ah. Okay, I see what this is about," he finally said as a look of understanding passed across his face. "I went to the movies that day, with a girl. Just the two of us."

He just admitted it, straight up, without a hint of panic or dismay. He readily

confessed to cheating on his girlfriend. As my emotions began to churn, however, he carried on.

“A girl...or rather, my precious little sister,” Sagami casually added.

I was completely taken aback. “Y-Your *sister*?” I stammered.

“That’s right,” he said. “Her name’s Shizuka, and she’s a first-year in middle school. Haven’t I ever mentioned I have a younger sister? She’s just as cute as I am, her boobs’ve really gone through a growth spurt lately, and thanks to my influence, she’s ended up with all the same geeky hobbies I’m into. That’s why we go shopping and see movies together every once in a while.” I just stood there, speechless. Sagami smiled at me. “I figure you probably saw me with my sister, huh?” he said.

“Y-Yeah, I guess. What, is that all...?” I said, breaking out into a smile as well—a smile of relief and reassurance. The stifling pressure I’d felt building up within me suddenly faded away, and I heaved a deep sigh. “Man, seriously...? I feel like an idiot for worrying so much about it. Ahh, dammit—this whole thing was just me jumping to conclusions? Come on!”

“You *do* have a bad habit of making wild assumptions,” said Sagami.

“Oh, shut up,” I sighed.

“Heh. Ha ha ha!”

“Quit laughing at me.”

“Ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha haaa!”

“Okay, seriously, cut it out.”

“Sorry, sorry! It’s just so *funny*!” Sagami said, then looked me right in the eye.

“I mean, really—why on *earth* would you believe me?”

“...Huh?”

I couldn’t process his words. My train of thought had ground to a halt, and as I stood there paralyzed, Sagami carried on, still wearing that same smile he

always did.

“I was lying,” he said. “I don’t have a little sister. I’m an only child, with all the selfishness and egocentricity that comes with the package. Tragically, I don’t have a sister who’s a huge tsundere for me *or* a stepsister who’s kuudere for me. I’ve *tried* to get sisters like those, believe me, but it just hasn’t worked out so far.”

Sagami had invalidated his own excuse with an air of complete, flagrant indifference, and all the tension that had drained away from me moments before rushed back in with a vengeance. I felt unsteady, like the ground beneath me had been replaced with a stagnant bog, and an intense anxiety took hold of me.

“So then, wait,” I said. “That girl I saw you with—”

“Was an underclassman from Onahole Middle,” said Sagami. “She’s a first-year named Yusa Kokoro—I just call her Kokoro, although she calls me Sagami. Anyway, she asked me out the other day, and we ended up deciding to see a movie together.”

“Are you *kidding* me...?” I said. I was surprised by how quietly the words came out and how conspicuously my voice trembled as I said them. I *had* to be mad—I *wanted* to be furious—but I didn’t know what or who to be mad at, or even what sort of rage I should’ve been feeling. “How can you just *say* this crap like it’s nothing? Don’t you realize that—”

“Would count as cheating by most people’s standards? I suppose so,” said Sagami, finishing my thought with such disinterest you’d think he wasn’t even talking about his own actions. “Oh, but don’t get the wrong idea—I’m not planning on breaking up with Tamaki. Kokoro knows I have a girlfriend already, but she said she wanted to spend time with me anyway, and, well, what sort of guy could turn down an offer like that?”

“Who knows, and who cares! I don’t give a crap about her, whoever she was,” I said. “What about Tamaki? What about *her* feelings...?”

“Fair point. This probably *would* hurt her feelings if she knew about it...so let’s keep it between the two of us, eh?” said Sagami with an air of complete shamelessness. He made it sound like that was the obvious and best choice for

everyone involved.

“Like *hell* I will... You seriously think I’ll help cover up your cheating?!” I spat. Even just thinking about doing that left a nauseous taste in my mouth.

“Look...I’ll try to consider this as a onetime impulse and forgive you for it. I won’t say anything to Tamaki either. I just need you to get into contact with this Kokoro girl *right now* and break it off with her.”

“Why?” asked Sagami.

“You’re seriously asking me *why* you shouldn’t be cheating? Isn’t that kinda friggin’ obvious?!” I shouted. But no matter how firmly I insisted on my position, Sagami’s aloof attitude didn’t budge. I could’ve accomplished as much by talking to a wall as I had by scolding him.

“Let me ask you a question, Jurai,” said Sagami. “How many manga are you reading right now?”

“*Huh?*”

“Just answer me. You can leave out the ones that’re serialized weekly, if you want. How many series do you regularly buy new volumes of whenever they come out?”

“I dunno... Twenty or so, probably.”

“Well then, tell me this: have you ever considered picking a single series you like the best and reading it exclusively?”

I paused for a moment as his words sunk in.

“You haven’t, right?” Sagami continued. “Of *course* you haven’t. You like to read all sorts of stories. You don’t want to be tied down to a single one you like the best, so you cheat your little heart out. You’ve got a big, happy harem of stories at your beck and call. It’s the same thing, really.”

“It’s *completely* different! Manga and girlfriends aren’t even close to—”

“They’re the same as far as I’m concerned. I want to interact with and enjoy the company of all sorts of heroines. Even if I *do* have a favorite, that doesn’t mean I don’t want the rest of them as well. Watching just one single anime forever would be truly tedious, and beating it to just one single eroge forever

would be an exercise in futility.”

There was nothing I could say to that. I mean, there were *plenty* of valid arguments against his position. Sagami’s theory was deeply flawed no matter how you looked at it, and I was inclined to see it as nothing more than a slapdash attempt to justify his behavior. If you took a poll, I think the vast majority of people would agree with me. Nevertheless, I found myself at a loss for words. I realized that no matter what I said to him, it would be pointless. His attitude was unbudging, and I was now keenly aware how fruitless attempting to talk him down would be.

“Though, well, all that being said,” Sagami began as he stood face-to-face with me. Really, it was more like he was looking up at me since I was a little taller than him...and yet somehow, I couldn’t shake the feeling he was looking *down* on me instead. It felt like he was standing far away above me, observing me from on high like a spectator from a totally different dimension. “You’re certainly right in the sense that I should be prioritizing Tamaki for the moment. She really *is* my number one right now after all. Cheating with some other girl just isn’t worth it if it means I’ll end up missing out on my favorite. So, fine—I won’t meet up with Kokoro again.”

For the moment. Right now. It felt like Sagami was putting a very clear emphasis on those words. With that, he turned his back to me and began to walk away. “If that’s all you wanted to talk about, I’ll be heading along home now. Bye-bye, Jurai—oh, and thanks again for the film strip.”

I didn’t have the presence of mind to ask just how much he’d wanted that stupid thing. I was left standing there still and speechless as the sun sank below the horizon and the park fell into darkness.

That was the moment when the cracks began to show. I’d touched upon the darkness that lurked behind the perfect, happy couple I’d thought would always be all over each other, and I found myself feeling what I could only describe as dread.

That was also the moment I came to a realization: if you find a crack, it means you’re already too too late. Like how cancer only produces symptoms once the

disease is too extensive to cure, a crack isn't a portent of a relationship's dissolution, but is rather a characteristic of one that is actively, inevitably disintegrating.

The darkness in their relationship had been left unaddressed, so it had begun growing and infecting everything around it.

Quietly, ever so quietly, the sickness spread.

Quietly, ever so quietly, the darkness deepened.

Supernatural

Battles .



Futaba Tamaki
Onaga Middle School,
second year, class 2.
Blood type: AB

"You know how when it comes to harem stories, some folks prattle on and on about how 'The protagonist's just some guy, I don't know what's so great about him' or 'I don't get why the heroines all fell for him in the first place'? Well, the way I see love, that kinda stuff's just the home truth."

"Love's all about falling for some person you barely know for some reason you can't explain, then getting strung along without having the foggiest about what you're getting into! If we could always explain exactly why we fall in love the way we do, then romance would be a heck of a lot easier across the board!"

Excerpt from the sealed pages of the *Bloody Vivre*

CHARACTER FILE-4

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Chapter 6: Andou Jurai's Eighth-Grade Fall, Part 2— Rain So Quiet, Feelings So Muted

The idea that new beginnings always enter one's life unexpectedly is such a well-known tidbit, it's hardly even worth asking people if they've heard the idea before. It's a stale, hackneyed observation that gets thrown about with wild abandon, and you barely have to search at all to find a billion Japanese songs that discuss it in their lyrics. Beginnings, however, aren't alone in their abrupt nature. Endings are abrupt as well, arriving just as unforeseen with just as little warning.

All that being said, I don't believe that endings are a matter of chance. All that had form must someday cease to be. All worldly things are impermanent. All that prospers will someday decline. Life is ever mutable, ever shifting...and everything that begins must end. What else could you call that other than inevitable?

In my view, as soon as something has begun, its ending always lies just ahead of it. We never notice it ourselves, but our own endings—our own demises—dwell practically next to our beginnings. The moment anything comes into existence, it's already begun the process of coming to an end. The moment a person is born into this world, they're already walking the path to their death. It's only in the moment that we perceive that ending, the ending that's been with us since the very start, that we truly cease to be.

The end of the beginning...is over before we know it.



It happened one day toward the end of fall—or rather, the beginning of winter. It was a Saturday right around the middle of October, the month where humanity is left without gods while they leave us to meet with their kin. As the seasons were beginning to transition, the weather grew unstable, and on that particular day, a cold rain had been pounding away since early in the morning.

“Jurai...where are you right now?”

I’d let most of the day pass me by, lazing about without doing anything in particular, when I got a phone call from Tamaki right around evening.

“Huh...? I’m at home. Why?” I replied.

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Tamaki. Even over the phone, I could tell that her tone of voice was oddly subdued. “I’m...right nearby your place at the moment, actually. Sorry, but can I stomp on in for a span?”

“Near my place?” I repeated in shock, then leaped off my bed and ran to the window.

“I, well...didn’t bring an umbrella, see,” said Tamaki as I peered outside. Just like that, there she was: Tamaki herself, standing by the side of the road, stock still and unshielded from the downpour. The big, fluffy clothes she always wore drooped heavily under the weight of the rain they’d been drenched with.

“What the heck are you doing out there?!” I said.

“Jurai...I’m so sorry, but please...let me in? The rain’s freezing...and my phone’s getting soaked...”

Tamaki spoke in a voice so somber, so faint, it felt like the rain would swallow it up whole.

“It’s all wrecked up—all of it.”

For better or for worse, I was the only one at home at that particular moment. My sister was out on the town, and my parents had both left to handle some errand or other. I let Tamaki in and gave her my old middle school gym uniform to change into.

“Ah, Jurai...?” Tamaki said in a slightly apologetic tone as I handed the uniform over. “Do you, umm...have anything with long sleeves I could snag instead...?”

I realized my mistake instantly: my old uniform consisted of a short-sleeved sweatsuit top and shorts. Tamaki looked like she was halfway to hypothermia, so of *course* she wouldn’t want to be wearing something like that. I sprinted

back upstairs and returned with a long-sleeved tracksuit I happened to own as well, which I passed to her before showing her where our laundry room was. Then I went back into the living room, turned our air conditioner to its heater setting, and set up a space heater as well to get the place nice and warm. I could've turned up the heat in my room, I guess, but I figured the living room would heat up faster.

"Want something to drink?" I asked after Tamaki had finished changing. "I guess I only really have tea and instant coffee on hand though."

"Thanks," said Tamaki, who'd sat down on my couch. "Guess I'll take some tea."

I brought her a mug of green tea, then moved the space heater a little closer to her. "Is this helping?" I asked. "Just let me know if it's too hot."

"You're so nice, Jurai. Really, just a stand-up guy," said Tamaki in a dull, vacant tone. "I'm sorry... I just don't know what I should do anymore... You're the only one I could head to for help."

She seemed like she was on the verge of tears—or like she'd already cried herself dry, more likely. Her eyes were terribly bloodshot, and her voice was a little nasally. Her speech had always had that flat, dull affect to it, and now it felt more than ever like her words were as thick as mud.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Shizumu dumped me," Tamaki readily answered. It was almost shocking how simple and straightforward of a reply it was, but at the same time, it instantly explained how she'd ended up walking all the way to my house in the rain without an umbrella.

"He *dumped* you...?" I repeated, aghast.

"Sure did... Said he wouldn't go out with me anymore."

"But...*why*...?"

"He found some other girl he fancies more."

In an instant, my mind descended into a state of turmoil. "Some other girl...? You mean Yusa Kokoro?" I muttered, then realized an instant later that I'd

screwed up. I shouldn't have said that name.

Sure enough, Tamaki sat up straight in a flash. "You know about her?!" she shouted. "How?! Where'd you find out?! You're not in school with her!"

"I, umm..."

"How long've you known?! Why didn't you say something?!" Tamaki demanded as she shot to her feet.

"C-Calm down," I said, putting my hands on her shoulders and coaxing her back down onto the couch. I sat down next to her and desperately searched for the best way I could explain myself. Unfortunately, I wasn't a gifted enough conversationalist to cover for my mistake, nor shameless enough to lie to her face. "It was just a coincidence," I finally said. "I happened to see Sagami walking around with some girl this one time."

I wasn't about to reveal that "this one time" had been the time I'd gone with Tamaki to the movies. I was a terrible liar and didn't exactly have a silver tongue, but I could at least manage to keep secrets that felt like they'd be better off unrevealed.

"I questioned him about her...and he told me that she'd asked him out, they'd gone on a single date, and that he wouldn't see her again. I thought that'd wrapped the whole thing up, so I didn't think I had to tell you," I explained. It came out sounding like an excuse, and I knew it, but somehow it seemed to help Tamaki find her composure once more anyway.

"Oh. Okay," she said with a nod, then fell silent.

"I'm sorry I kept it secret," I said.

"You don't have to apologize, Jurai," said Tamaki.

"But I—"

"Don't."

A painful silence fell over the room. This was my home, but it felt like I'd wandered my way into some completely unknown estate. I felt alienated and shut out in the most agonizing sort of way, and I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I could've talked crap about Sagami, or I could've tried to comfort

Tamaki, but the words just wouldn't come. It felt like a hole had been opened in my heart—though of course, the hole in Tamaki's heart was sure to have been far wider, deeper, and darker.

"You know," Tamaki eventually mumbled, "my folks used to bully me."

I stiffened up. Her voice sounded almost hollow, and it was such an abrupt change of topic I was totally unprepared for it. It felt like I'd just been sucker punched in the back of the head. Her folks *bullied* her? If she meant what I thought she meant, that wasn't the sort of thing you could write off with a word like *bully*. It was something far more unpleasant, far more dreadful than that word implied.

"My mom played around a lot... She had guys all over the place. She never even knew which one was my dad. Thanks to that, my home life's always been awful complicated. Mom never had a job, so she'd amble 'round from guy to guy and cart me along with."

That would explain why she's transferred schools so many times. To think I'd just casually assumed that her parents' work was at fault...

"I guess my first dad was a real peach at first, but then he goofed up at work and ran out on us. I was still a tyke back then, so I don't remember any of it. The second one was the worst—he was basically an alcoholic. He'd send me out to shop for his booze, but kids can't buy that stuff, obviously. He'd beat me up if I came back without anything though, so I'd have to think up whole plans to get my hands on a bottle... The third one wasn't a talker. Didn't seem to care a whit about me or my mom—felt like they were only married on paper—and they called it quits last year. They're bashing it out about the divorce these days—you know, who gets what. That's why they had me go roost with my grammy and gramps."

Her story spilled out in a single, unbroken stream. It was like listening to a newscaster read off a teleprompter, her voice cold and stiff. Finally, she raised up an arm—an arm almost entirely covered by the long-sleeved sweatsuit I'd lent her.

"I've still got the marks. From the punches, and the cigarette burns too. On my arms and legs. Wasn't ever a mean enough state to send me to the hospital,

but, well, you can still tell at a glance...”

I’d always assumed that Tamaki had favored bulky, flowy clothes on account of her fashion sense. I’d thought she’d just *liked* dressing that way, and I’d never even questioned it. *What the hell have I been doing all this time? Have I been paying any attention to her at all?* There’d been all sorts of hints I *could’ve* caught, but I’d been so happy and complacent with the status quo I didn’t notice even one of them. I don’t mean to say I *could’ve done* something about it even if I had noticed, but the point stands.

“I told Shizumu about all this,” Tamaki said as she lowered her arm again. Her tone was so indifferent, so cold, it was like some part of her soul had frozen solid. “When I asked him out and we started dating...I told him everything. About my transfers, why I only wear long sleeves—all of it. And Shizumu said he didn’t care a whit...”

It seemed that when he’d finished listening, all Sagami had said was, “Oh, really? That’s rough. So, what exactly does all that have to do with our relationship?” He couldn’t have cared less, from the way he talked about it. I could vividly imagine him saying something like that—it was so perfectly consistent with the peculiar distance he kept from other people.

“I was so tickled... I thought I’d really picked out a good one to fall for,” said Tamaki. The two of them had started dating, and not all too long afterward, they met me. “I’d always thought my life was just a big old waste...but lately, I’d been starting to have a little fun. Shizumu became my boyfriend, I made friends with you and Hatoko... But then...he threw me away.”

Tamaki’s gaze dropped to the floor. She gripped the hem of my sweatsuit, squeezing it so hard it was almost painful to watch.

“Was it all...too heavy, after all? I worked so hard for Shizumu... I never knew a fig about anime, but I watched as much as I could so I could keep up with him... I would’ve done anything to make him happy, but...” Tamaki paused, clasping a hand onto her left arm. Her long sleeves hid whatever it was she was grasping at, but I had a feeling I could guess what lay beneath them. “I guess...Shizumu didn’t want a girl that’s all busted.”

“No!” I shouted. “This isn’t your fault! Sagami’s in the wrong, not you!”

“Jurai...”

“It’s okay, Tamaki—none of this is your fault at all!” I insisted with a vocabulary so pathetically limited I was embarrassed with myself. Offering empty clichés in place of encouragement was the best I could do though. I wanted to help her, but I didn’t even have the beginnings of a plan that could let me do so. All I had was the mess of emotions roiling within me, and those were what finally spilled out in a pointless mess.

“Hey, Tamaki...why not try talking with Sagami one more time?” I said. “I’ll go with you! We can talk with him together! We can even bring Hatoko—why not, right? You don’t have to worry about her, I’m positive she’ll take your side! Then we can all—”

We could all what? What *could* we do? Hatoko and I could chew Sagami out, sure, but *then* what? Would everything be all better again if Sagami bit the bullet and went back to dating Tamaki in spite of his disinterest? Of course not.

Could we drag Sagami down, then? Pull that Yusa Kokoro girl into some scheme or another and wreck the hell out of their relationship? But even if we did, what would that accomplish? Could I just beat the hell out of Sagami first, and figure things out later? Sure, but it’d be pointless. *Ugh, this is hopeless!* It was already too late to do any of the things I *could’ve* once done.

This was just conjecture on my part, but I was pretty sure that Sagami had already moved on from Tamaki. The fact that he’d broken up with her to her face was proof enough—I knew Sagami well enough to know he’d never do that unless he was totally done with her. Their relationship was utterly and completely over.

“It’s fine...” said Tamaki in a voice so quiet, it was practically a whisper. “No matter what I do, Shizumu won’t come back to me. I know it already.” She knew Sagami even better than I did, and she could feel that truth even more keenly than I could. “Thanks for lending an ear, Jurai,” she continued as a look of resignation passed over her face. “I’m...glad I dropped on out here. Didn’t even know where I was going, really—I was just tromping around and ended up here before I knew it.”

“But... But, I—”

“You really are a stand-up guy,” Tamaki said. Tears pooled in her eyes, her voice shook—and she hugged me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me close to her. Just like I’d done to her before.

“Wha...? T-Tamaki?” I gasped. She was leaning all her weight onto me, and it took everything I had to not tip over and fall flat on the couch. This wasn’t even *remotely* the time, but I found a part of my mind preoccupied by the fact that she wasn’t wearing a bra at the moment and cursed my stupid, obnoxious male instincts. She smelled of shampoo and the rain, and both aromas hit me at point-blank range.

“I’m sorry... Just put up with me for a tick... Please...”

“Tamaki...”

“Now that I’ve lost Shizumu...you’re all I have left...”

I more or less reflexively returned Tamaki’s embrace, hugging her with all my strength. She was wounded and trembling, and hugging her was all I could do. For some time, the only sound to be heard was the quiet patter of the rain outside.

Finally, Tamaki broke that moment of quiet. Without letting go of me, she whispered into my ear. “Jurai...you said that I’m cute, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you...love me?”

“Yeah,” I said, agreeing without a second thought.

“Oh, *good*. Thank you,” said Tamaki. Her voice was bright, clear, and for once, completely devoid of her usual characteristic flatness. It was the first time I’d heard her speak so clearly.

Tamaki slowly released me, pulling away from me once more. Her hair was still slightly damp, her eyes moist, and her cheeks flushed. Her gently curved lips were as red as could be. The Tamaki before me looked so unlike the Tamaki I knew, it felt like she’d reached into my chest and physically grabbed hold of my heart.

And then—as if it were the most natural thing in the world—Tamaki closed

her eyes. I had no experience with girls at all, but even so, I understood what this was all building toward. I knew what she intended. I sat there silently as Tamaki raised her hands to my cheeks. They were terribly, terribly cold, and I felt a desire to warm them up for her.

I'd finally figured out the one thing I could do to help Tamaki. I just had to love her.

All I had to do was give her all the love she needed to make up for Sagami's absence—to make up for her parents' neglect. I could stake my everything on loving her, and I could continue to love her come what may. I could make sure that nobody ever had the chance to hurt her again. It would work. I knew for a fact that I could treat her better than Sagami ever had. After all: I was in love with her. Surely, that was the emotion that burned away within my chest—

"No. That's wrong."

A voice rang out. It cut through the dim static of the rainfall like a knife through butter. I'd heard that line before. They were the same words he'd spoken during our first encounter.

"What you're feeling right now isn't love, Jurai. It's condescending pity, nothing more. You've succumbed to the intoxicating appeal of getting to save a pitiful girl who's been placed into tragic circumstances, and you've come out on the other side as a narcissistic, self-absorbed white knight. Basically, you're jerking off to your own sense of self-righteousness."

There he was, standing in the doorway to my living room. He looked down on us, *spectated* us with eyes so keenly perceptive, it was almost scary.

"This isn't really my responsibility, but just so you know, I'd recommend you stop trying to be nice in this sort of way. It's only a matter of time before some other tragically misfortunate girl shows up, and you'll end up drifting to her before long for sure. This is exactly how guys end up getting dragged into a web of lies of their own making," he said, picking my actions apart like he was analyzing a character in a story.

I looked up and shot him a glare. "Sagami...!"

“Please, don’t be a stranger! Call me Sagamin.”

“Shut your trap.”

I was disoriented and bewildered, to be sure, but I wasn’t *that* confused by this development. After all, I was the one who’d called Sagami here in the first place. Tamaki hadn’t told me that he’d broken up with her yet, so my first thought had been that I should call him over, and I’d texted him while she was changing. I’d still been under the impression that helping her through whatever struggle had sent her out into the rain was *his* duty at the time. Still, though, he’d certainly picked the worst possible moment to walk in on.

“Sh-Shizumu?! Wh-What’re you...?” Tamaki stammered in stupefied confusion, her eyes wide. Unlike me, *she* seemed shaken to her core. Her gaze darted frantically about the room before finally falling on me: the guy she’d been hugging just a moment ago. “N-No! No, it’s not what you think!”

Wham! Tamaki shoved me with all her might. The impact was strong enough to send me sprawling out onto the floor, where I totally failed to break my fall. A sharp pain shot through my back as I landed hard, but Tamaki didn’t even spare me a second glance as she rushed over to Sagami.

“This isn’t what it looks like! It...It was all Jurai! I told him I wasn’t game, but he just wouldn’t drop it! He just stuck onto me out of nowhere!”

Wha— T-Tamaki...?

I sat partway up, lifting my head off the ground to look at the girl I’d been prepared to stake my life on protecting just moments before. Tamaki, however, wasn’t looking at me at all. She had eyes only for her former lover, gazing hopefully at him as she flashed him a flirtatious smile.

“Hey, Shizumu...you trust me, right? It’s like I told you before—you’re the only one for me, honest,” said Tamaki, her pleas interspersed with uncontrollable sobs.

Sagami, however, didn’t so much as acknowledge her presence. He completely ignored her, as if so much as *looking* at her would sully him, and instead directed his words to me as I still lay on the ground. “You get it now, right, Jurai? *This* is the real her. She just wants a man, and it doesn’t matter at

all to her who that man is. She'll open her heart and legs to any old schlub, as long as he treats her like his pretty little princess. She's as easy and flighty as could be."

With that, Sagami spun about on his heel and walked away.

"Wait...Shizumu, wait!" Tamaki shouted. She sprinted after him and grabbed onto his arm. "I'm sorry! Please, I'm so sorry... Just give me another chance!"

Sagami stopped in his tracks and slowly turned to face her. A moment later, Tamaki shivered and flinched back. I understood why the moment I saw his face: the look in Sagami's eyes was colder than the deepest pits of hell itself. Those were the eyes of a man who'd lost all trace of interest in what he was looking at. It wasn't the sort of look you'd give a human being. It was the sort of look you'd give a piece of trash left discarded by the side of the road. Or rather...it was the sort of look you'd have in your eyes while watching a scene in an anime in which your least favorite character had just talked, and talked, and talked for what felt like an eternity. A look that spoke of anger, exasperation, frustration, and disgust all packed in and condensed into their most potent forms.

"I...ah..." Tamaki babbled. She was trembling. The way that Sagami looked at her—no, the way he looked straight *through* her seemed to terrify her, and it left her shaking uncontrollably. She looked like she was freezing, even more than when she'd been out in the rain.

"Give it a rest," said Sagami. "I'm through with you. I might've loved you more than anyone before, but I can't stand you now. I can't even see you as a girl anymore."

Tamaki's stammers ceased. She stood there, silent, as Sagami carried on. "I won't ask you to give back everything I bought for you. As far as I'm concerned, that's all yours now. If you want the stuff you gave me back, you can have it. And with that, I think we're done here," he said, then paused. "Oh—except for that film strip. I'm keeping *it* no matter what you say."

Part of me wanted to ask just how much he'd wanted that stupid thing, but this was obviously not the moment.

"Ah, right! I almost forgot one more thing," said Sagami. "About your accent..."

I thought it was cute at first. A novelty, you know? But now that I'm used to it...? Nah. Doesn't do it for me at all."

Those were the last and worst words he spoke to Tamaki. With that, Sagami said a perfunctory goodbye to me and departed from my house, leaving us behind. I was still lying on the ground, while Tamaki was just standing there, frozen stiff. The look on her face... Well, honestly, I don't know how she looked. I couldn't see her face from over on the floor.

"Dammit... Hey, Sagami! Wait!" I shouted as I took a knee, forced myself upright, and sprinted after him, rushing right past Tamaki as I went.



Among all my bitter memories of my time in the eighth grade—within all the shadows that consumed the darkest point in my life—that single moment is what I've always regretted most. The truth is, I wasn't chasing after Sagami. I was running away from Tamaki. I was too scared to look her in the eye—too scared to learn her true nature—so I pretended to let my anger overtake me and chased after my chosen villain instead, leaving her behind. I refused to so much as look at her.

That was the end for me and Tamaki. We never saw each other again throughout the rest of middle school. As such, that was the final scene in the story of my greatest regrets in which Futaba Tamaki will make an appearance. I ran away, and thanks to that decision, this wound up being the note on which our time together had come to an end.



The downpour had let up considerably by the time I ran outside. It was one of those drizzles that was just weak enough to make you wonder if you should even bother bringing an umbrella but just strong enough to make your face unpleasantly damp after a few steps. I hadn't even considered grabbing one when I'd sprinted out of my house, but Sagami had different priorities and was casually strolling along, umbrella in hand. I charged up to him, grabbed him by the shoulder, and spun him around to face me.

"I said *wait!*" I shouted.

“Oh, Jurai. Need something?” Sagami asked with a puzzled stare. He really didn’t seem to have any clue why I’d chased after him.

“Are you friggin’ *kidding* me?!” I snapped. “You need to get back in there and apologize to Tamaki *right now!*”

“Why?” Sagami asked.

“What do you mean, *why*...? Do you have any idea how badly you hurt her feelings?!”

“And would apologizing do anything to fix that?”

“Would it—” I began, then faltered. *It wouldn’t. It could never.*

“Let’s imagine I *did* apologize, for a moment,” said Sagami. “It might help relieve the *incredibly* minuscule and insignificant pinprick of guilt I feel about this whole situation, I suppose. Meanwhile, it would be like pouring salt in the wound for Tamaki. Her feelings would be more hurt than ever. Do you really think I should go apologize to her anyway?”

I fell into silence as Sagami’s words sank in.

“I meant what I said a moment ago, Jurai. You can’t just go around being nice to anyone and everyone who’ll let you force your kindness onto them. That sort of kindness is purely superficial, and all you’ll accomplish with it is getting yourself taken advantage of. That, or accidentally hurting the feelings of the person you’re being kind to.”

He made it sound so convincing—even though I knew he was full of crap—that I found myself sick to the stomach to think that I could be smooth-talked so easily. I was disgusted with myself for being too stupid to come up with anything better than an emotionally driven tirade to argue against him, and I was disgusted with him for being able to keep up that air of cool, composed indifference even after everything that had just happened.

“You’re the one who cheated on her, so where do you get off acting like you have the moral high ground?” I growled. “Tamaki really loved you, you know? And then you went and stabbed her in the back!”

“Even if we assume that were true, I don’t believe it would give you any right

to criticize me,” said Sagami. “I’m a busy guy, and I don’t have the free time to keep dragging out a relationship with someone I’ve lost interest in. If you buy *Jump* once, does that mean you’re obligated to keep buying it week after week? Of course not. You can stop reading it whenever you feel like it, and relationships are the same way. If you grow to dislike your partner, you can just break up with them. If you find someone better, you can date them instead. Personally, I think this is all really obvious.”

“Y’know what they call people who behave that way? They call them—” I began, then abruptly fell silent as I realized that something about what Sagami had said was *off*.

Wait a second. What did he say just now, right at the beginning? “Even if we assume that were true”? What does he mean, “even if”? What does he mean, “assume”?

“Hey...Sagami,” I said, “what are you talking about? Where’s all this ‘even if’ stuff coming from?”

“Oh, whoops—slip of the tongue, I suppose,” said Sagami. “But, well, I’d rather not waste any more time on this than I have to, so I suppose I might as well just tell you everything and get it over with. I don’t know exactly what Tamaki said to you back there, but I think I can more or less imagine, and I have a feeling you’re probably under a misapprehension right now.”

“What misapprehension?”

“I dumped Tamaki—that part’s true—but I didn’t do it because I liked Kokoro better than her. I *did* keep my promise to you, for whatever that’s worth. I had absolutely no contact with Kokoro whatsoever from the moment I made that promise to the moment I broke up with Tamaki.”

“Wait...but no, that doesn’t make sense!” I insisted. I’d been certain that Sagami had swapped girlfriends on a capricious whim. Tamaki had done everything she could to be the best girlfriend possible, and he’d betrayed her. Plus, he’d chosen a girl who was more or less her exact opposite to go out with instead, as if to spite her. But now he was saying that I was misunderstanding things? That I was wrong? “But then...why *did* you dump her?” I asked.

Sagami readjusted his grip on his umbrella.

“Because she cheated on me.”

The rain started picking up again.

“She was seeing somebody else behind my back, so I dumped her. I think discovering that your significant other’s been cheating on you is a perfectly valid reason to break up with them, wouldn’t you say?”

My train of thought had ground to a halt. My mind was such a mess, it was like I’d overloaded my brain. *She cheated? Tamaki cheated? Not Sagami?*

“That...can’t be true,” I stammered.

“But it is,” said Sagami. “I saw the texts myself.”

“The texts?”

“We were out on a date today, just like usual, when Tamaki went to the restroom and forgot her cell phone. I knew that looking at it would be a dick move, but I gave in to temptation and did it anyway. Just like that, I found conclusive proof she’d been cheating, and just like that, I lost all interest in her and broke up with her on the spot.”

I could hardly think of a less surprising way to have your infidelity get found out. Peeking into somebody’s cell phone was a major violation of their privacy in my book, even if you *were* dating them...but if your snooping reveals the fact that your partner’s been cheating on you, the culpability of the situation would be turned on its head.

“So then...who was it?” I asked. “Someone from your school?”

“You know him, actually,” said Sagami in a tone utterly devoid of interest. “It was Aragaki Zenya.”

I felt myself stiffen up. A vertigo-like sensation washed over me, and for a second it felt like I might fall over. *Aragaki Zenya*. Never in a million years would I have imagined that *his* name would crop up here. It was the most inconceivable moment for him to reenter the story.

“You know, the douchebag from way back whenever,” Sagami continued. “I

didn't know his name was Zenya until today, actually. I learned it from Tamaki's texts. She was calling him by his given name—she sounded *very* familiar with him, actually. Heart emojis all over the place and everything.”

“What...? But...why? Why would Tamaki...? With *Aragaki*...?” *Of all the people it could've possibly been, why did it turn out to be one of the most irritating people I know?*

“Your guess is as good as mine. I didn't scroll all the way up to see how they hit it off. I stopped caring the second I realized she'd been cheating on me...but, well, I can't say I don't understand how you feel right now. Goes to show that it doesn't matter how much of a douche you are as long as you have the looks,” said Sagami. It wasn't an explanation that I could ever possibly accept, but he seemed totally convinced. “To me, that day back in spring was the day I had my first meeting with you. To Tamaki, though, it was also the day she met Aragaki Zenya. I don't think either of them had a good first impression of the other, but I imagine they probably went through all sorts of drama with each other while I wasn't watching. You see it all the time in shojo manga, right? Love blooms from the worst first impressions.”

“That can't be true... It *can't* be,” I moaned over and over like a broken record. It was unbelievable—I didn't *want* to believe it—but deep down, part of me was convinced.

I flashed back to what I'd seen from my living room floor moments before, remembering the attitude Tamaki had taken toward Sagami. The pleading, ingratiating way she'd spoken to him wasn't the tone I'd have expected from a girl who'd just been unilaterally broken up with for a terrible, selfish reason. It was the attitude of a girl who was desperately begging forgiveness for her recently uncovered infidelity.

“It's like I told you before—you're the only one for me, honest!”

She'd said that she only loved Sagami...and implied that she'd already said it *before* I was in the picture, when the two of them were alone. That, more than anything else, all but confirmed to me that she really had cheated on him. Much as I couldn't believe it—much as I couldn't accept it—Tamaki's own attitude told an exceptionally clear tale of the truth of the matter.

“But then, why...?” I muttered in a daze. I almost pitched forward, but I planted my hands on my knees to keep myself upright. “Why didn’t Tamaki tell me about all this...?”

“Like I said before, that’s just the sort of girl she is,” said Sagami. “I assume that she figured out I wasn’t on the table anymore and decided to give you a try next. What a scummy excuse for a woman, really. It doesn’t matter what abuse she went through growing up—it doesn’t justify her using her backstory to lure guys into supporting her. I honestly can’t stand it when girls try to pass themselves off as the tragic heroine like that.”

“Oh, you son of a *bitch*!” I shouted. Sagami had finally pushed me over the edge. His words were so appallingly insensitive, I saw red and reached out reflexively to grab him by the collar. Sagami, however, dodged backward, and my arm swung fruitlessly through empty air.

“You should really learn to be more skeptical about the things people tell you, Jurai,” said Sagami with a look of profound exasperation. “Judging by that reaction, I assume she told you about her abusive family history too. But, tell me—did she actually *prove* it?”

“Huh?” I gasped.

“I’m asking if she showed you any evidence. Did you ask her to roll up her sleeves and show you the scars?”

“Do you seriously have to ask...? Of course I didn’t,” I said. From a common sense perspective, there’s no way I ever possibly could’ve. *Nobody* could listen to a story like that and respond by asking to see some solid proof she was telling the truth. Nobody could...and she knew that too. “So...you’re saying it was all just a bunch of lies?”

“As I said, I don’t know. I haven’t had the chance to check either. I’m just raising the possibility, that’s all. The *real* problem at hand isn’t whether or not she was lying—it’s the fact that, regardless, you bought into her story without even thinking to question it. You were sympathizing with her like you’d never sympathized with anyone before, right? Can you imagine what might’ve happened if I’d shown up just a minute or two later?”

“I...”

“Not that it really matters to me, of course. I couldn’t care less about her anymore, and I don’t give the slightest hint of a crap about whether or not her story’s true. And, hey, if you still want to date her after hearing all this, I won’t try to stop you! I’d actually be happy for you! Congratulations! She’s used goods, sure, but do try to take good care of her anyway.”

I imagined her face, and I imagined myself asking her a question. *Hey, Tamaki. What were you trying to accomplish with all this? Is Sagami right? Were you really just trying to trick me? When you told me about your past, about how you needed me—was all of it just a lie? And above all else...why did you cheat on him?*

Oh. Oh, I see.

I took in a sharp breath as a revelation struck me. It fell on me like a pile of bricks. It was hardly even a question in the first place. After all, the answer was standing right in front of me. This was all because of Sagami Shizumu. She’d been tempted by another man because her boyfriend was an irredeemable piece of human waste.

“Being considerate’s tiring.”

“Consideration’s a heavy burden emotionally.”

Tamaki had once excused Sagami’s behavior by saying those things, and I was certain she’d sincerely felt like she was being treated fairly—in the sense that she was hoping her feelings would change if she believed hard enough. She’d probably told it to herself over and over again, convincing herself that she shouldn’t expect his consideration. In truth, though? Of *course* she’d wanted him to be considerate. Of *course* she’d wanted him to take on that burden. Even if she’d been okay with Sagami’s outlandish behavior and utter disregard for the people around him, *surely* she’d wished that he’d pay at least a little attention to her needs.

Maybe, in truth, she thought that him needing his girlfriend to protect him from some random douchebag was pathetic. Deep down, she must’ve hoped that he was going to spare the time to pay her a visit when she’d had a cold. She must’ve hoped that he’d prioritize her over Comiket, even if it *had* been the biggest event of the summer for geeks like him. Maybe she couldn’t stand all his

geeky hobbies to begin with. Maybe she didn't want to go to a movie made solely for people with that sort of special interest. Maybe she knew how lame his fashion sense was and had been really put off by it.

Tamaki loved Sagami from the bottom of her heart...and that's exactly why it must've been unimaginably painful that he'd never shown her the same sort of love in return. The strength and depth of her feelings were exactly what had led her to stray into the arms of another guy.

I'd thought that Tamaki was the ideal girlfriend. She'd always prioritized her boyfriend, following along after him and bowing to his every whim. She'd held his opinions in the highest of esteem, and she was never too aggressive about asserting her own. I'd thought she was cheerful, laid-back, understanding, and mature. But I was wrong. It wasn't that she was like that naturally—she'd been trying her hardest to *act* that way. The *real* Tamaki was a perfectly ordinary, kinda needy girl, just like everyone else.

"It's not too late to start over," I said, my voice trembling.

"Give it a rest," said Sagami. "That's out of the question."

"No, it isn't! She really loves you, you know?!"

"Correction: you *think* she really loves me. That's all you can say for sure, isn't it?"

It felt like he'd seen right through me, and his words cut me to the quick. They were devoid of consideration, and devoid of mercy as well.

"You thought that we were some sort of ideal couple, didn't you?" he continued. "That's why you're so freaked out right now—your supposedly perfect pairing's been broken. You're scared of the disillusionment that'll bring about in you. I hate to say it, but this is just how it goes between men and women. Love's just like this."

"So...you really don't like Tamaki at all anymore? You really can't stand her?"

"Right."

"Why?"

"How many times have we been over this? Because she cheated on me."

“But you cheated on her too! What, it’s okay for you to cheat, but not for her?! That’s messed up! You...You have no right to judge her!”

For once, Sagami fell silent.

“A-And besides... Cheating could mean a lot of different things, right? Did you even ask how far she went? Maybe she just went on a date like you did—that’d barely be cheating at all! *Real* cheating’s more—” I said, desperately pressing my point until suddenly, a chill ran down my spine.

It was his eyes. Sagami’s ever-vibrant eyes were fixed on me, and there was something in that gaze of his that froze me on the spot. It was subtle, and I couldn’t quite pin it down, but if I’d had to hazard a guess, I’d have said it was something close to fury. Sagami was always smiling, always flippant, always so noncommittal, it never felt like he was *seeing* you even when he was looking right at you, but now, I felt like the two of us were seeing eye to eye for the very first time.

“You shouldn’t underestimate how seriously I take matters of purity,” said Sagami, his voice tinged with anger. It was *almost* a cool line, but somehow, it didn’t make *him* seem even remotely cool to me. “I am *only* interested in girls who are unblemished on a deep, profound level. I’m not just talking about physical virginity—my standards demand *mental* virginity as well. A physical virgin who’s lost her mental virginity can’t be called a true virgin at all.”

“Mental virginity”? What the hell is he even talking about?

“It’s not about whether or not she’s broken some membrane. A true heroine preserves her mental virginity at all costs. She must be *completely* devoted to the man she falls for. Not only is a girl who gets tempted by other guys not a heroine in my book, she’s not even a girl. As far as I’m concerned, she’s just another guy.”

A guy? He’s saying Tamaki’s a guy? I wasn’t following Sagami’s logic at all, but there was one thing I knew for certain: according to his personal standards, the rules of conduct that he held himself and others to at all times, Tamaki didn’t count as a heroine. In Sagami’s mind, she could never be one.

By those same standards, though, I could say one other thing with certainty: *he* was no hero either. A guy like him could never serve as a story’s protagonist.

“Quit putting yourself up on a pedestal,” I spat. “Have you taken a look in a mirror lately? Are you even *hearing* all the self-important, pretentious bullcrap that’s coming out of your mouth? You’ve got some nerve to stand there and mouth off about your stupid standards like that! You think a self-centered dick like you has any right to criticize Tamaki?!”

“Yes, I do,” said Sagami. He said it without a hint of hesitation and without an iota of remorse. He said it in a placid tone, like it was only natural—like it was simply, obviously just the way things were. “After all, I’m a reader.”

And then Sagami went off.

“Readers are selfish, egotistical, and irresponsible by nature. They swap waifus on a seasonal basis while demanding complete, unfaltering devotion from their heroines in the same breath. They put their own looks on a pedestal and refuse to take girls who aren’t beautiful into consideration in the slightest. They follow dozens of series at a time without batting an eyelash, but the second a 2D heroine cheats or an idol’s past romances are discovered, they’ll flip out and lose interest in her in a heartbeat. They’re slaves to their tastes and take no interest in anything that doesn’t immediately suit them. Even if they get obsessively into someone, there’s every chance that within three years or so they’ll have totally lost interest or their tastes will have changed, and they’ll move on to obsess over a new heroine. They drop series halfway through on a whim, for no reason whatsoever. They buy a single volume of a series’ Blu-rays to get a ticket to an event that came as a pack-in, then never bother completing the set because without that ticket, they’d never have bothered buying the Blu-ray at all. They criticize books and manga they haven’t read, and they criticize shows they haven’t watched. They bash anime based solely on the light novels they get adapted from, trash songs based solely on the people who sang them, and declare games garbage just because their loading times are a little on the longer side. They refuse to read manga on the sole basis of not liking their art, and they refuse to read light novels they think have gross covers. They pick anime to watch based on the voice actors in them, not whether the stories sound interesting. They praise shows they watch to high heaven and then don’t bother buying the Blu-rays, extol the virtues of light novels they borrow from friends and never buy, and shower manga they buy used with praise. They read

Jump every single week without fail, but they do it *in* the convenience store so they don't have to actually pay for it. The things they like will constantly shift for no particular reason, and the things they hate will change at random without any justification. If one story's even slightly similar to another, they call it an inferior rip-off. They ramble about page layouts and art styles despite never having drawn a manga themselves. They freak out about unfaithful adaptations without ever considering the strengths and limitations of different types of media. They brutally mock QUALITY-tier animation without even considering how hard animation is and what awful conditions animators work under. If a series sells a little better than most, they say it was the work of a stealth marketing campaign, and if a series lags just a little behind in sales, they say it was a disastrous flop. They completely ignore all the relationships that authors painstakingly build up in their series and draw smutty fan comics where stories' heroines get mindbroken—and then they jack off to them. They pair any two male characters together and turn them into BL-bait. They indulge in the wildest of fantasies and delusions and plumb the depths of debauchery, then justify it all by saying 'So what? It's all just entertainment, anyway.' They assert the right to love what they love and hate what they hate. They have no obligations and the ultimate luxury to choose and reject whatever they see fit."

Sagami paused for just a moment to silently smile.

"They are a uniquely privileged class, allowed to be as sleazy, base, cruel, and sinful as they desire. They are the readers, the viewers, the spectators, the customers, the consumers, the masses—and I count myself as one of them."

After that—after *all* that, I lost the strength to stand and crumpled to my knees, which were immediately soaked by the puddle I landed in. I'd come to understand a terrible truth: Sagami and Tamaki's relationship hadn't ended today. It had been over since the beginning. The two of them had been finished since the very instant they'd met. Their relationship's demise had been there since its earliest moment—it had just taken until now to rise up to the surface.

Nobody could have had a functional relationship with a guy like him. Falling for someone like him—for a boy who stubbornly and persistently asserted his status as a bystander and refused to consider himself an involved party in anything—was a fatal error in and of itself. Futaba Tamaki only took an interest

in awful guys, and Sagami Shizumu never took a personal interest in the girls he dated. She was too blindly devoted to love for the sake of love, and he was too obsessively dedicated to viewing his own romance as just another form of entertainment. Sagami Shizumu would be Sagami Shizumu to the bitter end, and Futaba Tamaki would be Futaba Tamaki to the bitter end as well. And so, their relationship came to a definitive, catastrophic conclusion, without either of them coming to understand the other in the slightest.

“Bye-bye, Andou Jurai,” Sagami said, then went along on his way. His words were so weighty you’d think we’d never see each other again, yet so casual you’d think we’d be hanging out again the very next day.

The rain fell harder still.

By the time I got back home, Tamaki was nowhere to be seen. The clothes I’d lent her were lying on the living room floor, and hers were missing from the washing machine. I’d gone into a fluster and tried calling her, but her phone was off. Well, either it was off or she’d blocked my number. Or maybe the rain had shorted it out—wrecked it up, as she would’ve put it.

“Huh? Juu...?”

I’d been dazed and at a loss, and before I’d known it, I’d found myself walking over to Hatoko’s house. It’d been Saturday, of course, which meant she’d probably been at school practicing with the soft tennis club. They’d had a tournament coming up soon, and on rainy days, they’d use a nearby indoor tennis court to keep training in spite of the weather.

Unsurprisingly, Hatoko hadn’t been at home, and her door had been locked. I’d ended up just standing in front of her house, waiting in the rain for hours on end. I’d sat with my back up against her door, my gaze glued to the ground, watching raindrops pelt the earth.

“Juu?! What’re you doing?! You’re sopping wet!” shouted Hatoko. She dropped the tennis bag she’d had slung over her shoulder and dashed up to me, holding out her umbrella to keep me from getting even wetter than I already was.

I understood very well now how Tamaki had felt when she’d shown up at my

house. I understood the urge that had driven her to make her way to someone who could give her the emotional support she'd so desperately needed.

"A-Are you okay? What *happened*, Juu? Did you forget your house key? Or did you have a fight with Machi?" Hatoko asked. She sounded genuinely concerned as she pulled a handkerchief out from her pocket and tried to dab away the rain from my face and hair.

I couldn't bring myself to look at her, so I spoke facing the ground. "Sagami and Tamaki broke up."

I heard Hatoko gasp. "No way... Sagami and Tamaki? That can't be right—why would they...?" she muttered. She was reacting in pretty much the same way I had. Most likely, she'd seen them as the perfect lovey-dovey couple, just like me. That impression, however, had been a superficial one.

"Tamaki cheated on Sagami."

Their relationship was over the moment it began.

"And Sagami cheated on her too."

No matter what they did, they could never have been happy together.

"They...cheated? Huh? Wh-What... What does that even mean...?" Hatoko stammered, as if I'd just started talking in some foreign language. I'm sure she knew what the word meant in this context, but she'd probably never heard it get used like that outside of the context of manga or TV shows. We were still kids, living in a kids' world where that word had no reason to carry that meaning. Cheating was an adult concept used to describe adult situations, and we were still too young to grasp it.

"People are pretty scary, aren't they, Hatoko...?" I said, torn between crying and laughing at the same time. "I thought they were my friends. I thought they thought of me as a friend too... I thought we'd opened up to each other and could tell each other anything. We ate together and played together...and the whole time, I thought we were getting closer and closer."

I'd never been the sort of kid who wanted to make a hundred friends. I didn't ever try to learn English and use the internet to meet people from all over the world. I had, however, thought that I could make friends with people I knew in

person. Some of them would get on my nerves, and I wouldn't even want to be friends with some of them, but I'd thought I could at least get a grasp on what sort of people they were in spite of that.

"But in the end...I didn't understand anything about them at all..."

I hadn't understood the first thing about Sagami and Tamaki's true nature or true feelings. I didn't understand anything at all. I had no idea what either of them had been thinking anymore. I didn't know what feelings they'd been hiding away behind their smiles or what calculations had been driving their actions. I didn't know what sort of intentions Tamaki had had when she'd looked at me, or what perspective Sagami had seen me from when he had, and now, I was too scared to even consider the possibilities.

"The whole time I was hanging out with him...Sagami was betraying Tamaki like it was nothing. And in the end, Tamaki wound up betraying him too. They made it look like they were having so much fun together, but that whole time, they were stabbing each other in the back."

"Seeing as we're here and all, wanna hold hands?"

"It turns out having friends isn't really that bad after all."

"Now that I've lost Shizumu...you're all I have left..."

"I mean, really—why on earth would you believe me?"

"This isn't what it looks like! It... It was all Jurai! I told him I wasn't game, but he just wouldn't drop it! He just stuck onto me out of nowhere!"

"After all, I'm a reader."

"And they...they betrayed me too!"

"Juu..."

"I...don't know what I'm supposed to believe anymore..."

It would've been easier if they'd been a pair of terrible, unknowable monsters. If I'd known from the very beginning that I could never understand them, I never would've approached them at all. But they hadn't been monsters. They'd had the same humanoid form as me, spoken the same language, lived in the same era and the same town as me. I'd been sure that we could learn to

understand each other. I'd been blissful in my own ignorant misunderstanding.

Suddenly, my mind flashed back to the moment I'd given up my chuuni habits. Back then, I'd felt that fiction had betrayed me. I'd realized that all those worlds I'd aspired to live in were nothing more than convenient illusions put together by adults for their own interests. And now, it hit me: this was the same thing. My current situation was just that same experience all over again. I'd discovered that the couple I'd looked up to was a fabrication, that everything about them had been a lie—that in the end, it had all just been fiction. Fiction had betrayed me all over again.

"Hey, Juu."

A kindly voice called out my name, and I finally looked up. Hatoko had squatted down and was now right in front of me. I was slumped over on the asphalt, but she'd brought herself down to my level, and we were finally seeing eye to eye.

"Don't cry...please?" said Hatoko as tears began to spill from her eyes. I couldn't really tell whether I was crying or not, what with all the rain, but at the very least, I was positive I wasn't crying as much as she was.

"What're you talking about...?" I muttered. "You're the one who's crying, aren't you? I don't get *why*, though."

"Yes, I'm crying. Of course I am!" said Hatoko. "Hey...Juu? Don't leave me out of the loop, okay? I'm friends with Tamaki and Sagami too, aren't I?"

Thanks to her club keeping her busy, Hatoko hadn't spent as much time with the two of them as I had. Still, though, we'd gone to the arcade together, we'd gone shopping together, we'd gone to a festival, we'd explored that park in the middle of the night—Hatoko had spent plenty of time with the two of them over the past several months. I couldn't say if it had been easily enough time to go from being acquaintances to being friends, or not even close to enough, but one way or another...

"Of course I'd be sad if Tamaki got hurt... Of course I'd be upset if Sagami didn't think anything of it at all... And if you're crying, Juu, then I... I..."

Hatoko spread her arms wide and pulled me into a hug. Her umbrella fell to

the ground, and once again the rain pattered down on me. It didn't feel cold this time though. Hatoko's warmth had enveloped me and driven the cold out from my body.

“Don't keep all this pain to yourself, Juu,” she said. “I'll feel it with you. I can't do anything to fix this, but the least I can do is cry with you... So...don't keep it all to yourself...”



Her voice was so purely, profoundly kind, it almost felt wrong for me to hear it.

“Hatoko...”

“It’s okay, Juu,” said Hatoko. Her words were kind, yes, but they were also powerfully reassuring. They sunk into me, and I felt them make an impression deep within my heart. “I’ll never betray you, no matter what happens. And I...I didn’t understand Sagami or Tamaki either. I don’t think I even understand *you*. I don’t understand the things you like, and I can’t convince myself to like them...but I’m trying to. I don’t understand anything, but I’m trying my best to understand anyway.”

“H-Hatoko,” I said in a choking gasp.

“I know I told you not to cry a moment ago, but...yeah. Ha ha ha...I guess that’s asking the impossible, huh? So instead, let’s cry together,” Hatoko said as she pulled me closer. She wrapped me up, encompassing my everything. My weakness, my pettiness, my foolishness, my immaturity—all of it was bundled up in her kindness. She accepted everything about me.

Sagami once explained to me that I’d been disappointed in myself for not being disappointed by something else. Now, though, I was truly feeling disappointed. I was despairing. I was indulging in my disappointment. I was wallowing in it. I intended to explore my disappointment fully, leaving nothing unsettled. I was going to chew it to pieces, drink every last drop of it, force it down, and shut it up inside me forever. I was going to make sure that Sagami Shizumu and Futaba Tamaki would leave an indelible mark upon my very soul. And as the tears streamed down my face, I let loose a wail of despair, crying out so loudly it felt like I’d tear my throat to shreds as I huddled in Hatoko’s arms.



And so, Hatoko and my relationships with Sagami and Tamaki came to an end. Whatever it was we’d had—not a social square or a triangle, just a scattering of people with loose connections to each other—was over. Our story had begun in the spring of my year in eighth grade, and it had come to a patently miserable end that very same fall.

Looking back on all this from a more detached perspective, it might not've been that big of a deal at all. Maybe it was just your bog-standard ill-fated love affair. Middle schoolers' relationships start and end with almost hilarious speed and frequency. That's just a fact of life, and all that really happened was me getting dragged into the middle of one of those countless quarrels.

The truth, though, is that I can't look at any of it from a detached perspective. My viewpoint is relentlessly subjective and relentlessly pessimistic. I can never be like *him*.

Back then, during the blank, gaping void in my history, I'd lost faith in Sagami, I'd wounded Tamaki, and I'd been saved by Hatoko. If Hatoko hadn't been there for me in the end, I'm honestly not sure what would've happened to me.

By that same token, though, I have to wonder: what had come of Tamaki when she'd run out into the very same frigid rainstorm I had? I'd had Hatoko, but Tamaki had had no one at all. Nobody had reached out a helping hand to pull her back into the warmth. Sagami had discarded her, and I'd run away from her.

In any case, this was where the darkest era in my life came to a close—or so you'd think. The truth is, there's actually one more episode to this story. You can think of it as a silly little bonus chapter, I guess. Just like Pandora found hope left within her box at the end of it all, so too did a single ray of light shine through into my era of darkness. Deep within those depths, a strikingly brilliant, silver presence arrived to light up everything around it.

Alternatively, I guess I could put it this way: No, no, this isn't the end! Not by a long shot!

Chapter 7: Andou Jurai's Eighth-Grade Winter— Enter the Silver Knight: Friend, or Foe?!

“Heave, *Hurl!*”

Allow me to explain! The Heave Hurl is a special move known for its tendency to accidentally activate when its user exerts themselves by, say, picking up a heavy object or standing up from a chair. Other moves of its type include the Heave Hack and the Heave Harangue. The box I'd just picked up was stuffed to the brim with books and heavy as hell, so the special move was an absolute necessity if I wanted to have any hope of carrying the thing.

“Man, my room looks so much *bigger* now,” I said to myself as I looked over my handiwork. It'd taken a full day of cleaning and sorting, but my room now looked downright organized compared to the pigsty I'd woken up in that morning. With most of the stuff that had been cluttering up the place packed away, it felt like the room was a full fifty percent larger than it used to be.

“Quit banging around like that, Jurai!” my older sister Machi shouted up the stairs at me. “What're you *doing* up there, anyway?”

“Cleaning!” I shouted back. “Figured I'd get a head start on my New Year's cleanup.”

“You're *cleaning*?” Machi repeated incredulously. “I was wondering why you've been making such a racket all day, but I definitely wouldn't have guessed *that*. What sorta mood swing would make a slob like you decide to tidy your place up?”

“You're way more of a slob than I am! But anyway, I'd say it's more me turning over a new leaf than me having a mood swing,” I said as I surveyed the pile of cardboard boxes I'd stacked up in the hallway. “Figured it was about time for me to get rid of all my manga and games and stuff.”

To be more specific, the boxes contained volumes from the twenty or so manga series that I was actively following, plus some that I'd completed and

others that I'd stopped buying partway through. They also contained manga magazines that I'd kept because they'd included color pages for a series I liked or one-shots that I enjoyed, a ton of light novels, a few strategy guides, and a number of video games as well. By the time I'd packed up all the books and games that had occupied at least half of my room for so long, I was left with an extraordinary number of cardboard boxes I'd now have to deal with.

"Huh?" said Machi. "You mean, like, you're throwing them out?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I already talked with dad about it. He said he'd drop them off at a trash incinerator tomorrow."

"Man, talk about a waste! Why not sell 'em off to a used book store or whatever?"

"I just kinda feel like putting them all to the torch, that's all," I said. I wanted to throw them all into a raging inferno and watch as they were reduced to ashes, really.

"Seriously...?" said Machi. She sounded bewildered, like she couldn't believe I'd ever get rid of all my books and games this abruptly. "What the hell *happened*, Jurai? Isn't all that crap super important to you? You always used to freak out when I touched your game stuff after eating chips and not washing my hands!"

"That's a totally normal thing to freak out about," I countered.

"And you'd freak out whenever I borrowed your books and left them lying open and page-down to save my place."

"A solid percentage of people would consider that a normal thing to freak out about too." *Though when I look back on it, the only thing freaking out at her ever accomplished was earning myself a beating.*

"For real, though, what's wrong with you?" Machi asked. "First you get all weirdly quiet and docile, and now *this*? Did something happen to you, or what?"

"Nah, nothing in particular," I said. "I'm gonna be studying for my entrance exams starting next year, though, right? Figured I might as well get a head start on cutting out all the distractions from my life. Really force myself to focus,

y'know?"

Needless to say, my decision to burn away my most prized possessions had nothing to do with my exams. The truth was that, plain and simply, they'd lost their power over me. My heart could no longer be moved by fabrications of their kind.

Ever since that rainy day, no matter what I would read, watch, or play, it just left me feeling empty. I knew that I'd loved all of those stories in the past, but I couldn't for the life of me remember why. Looking at my collection felt like looking at a prize from a gacha machine or a crane game that you just *knew* you'd sunk way too much money into obtaining.

Although I'd been cured of my chuunibyou when I'd gotten into the eighth grade, I hadn't been able to bring myself to give up my geeky hobbies. Now, though, I was ready to wash my hands of all of it. I'd have been lying if I said I had no doubts, but I guess you could say that this was my way of drawing a clear line in the sand.

"Why not help me carry these if you don't have anything better to do?" I shouted. "You seriously wouldn't believe how heavy a cardboard box's worth of books are! Getting these down the stairs on my own is gonna be really rough!"

"But I refuse!"

Ugh, here we go with the low-hanging JoJo reference fruit. You could at least pick one that actually meshes with the flow of the conversation! You can't just assume that saying "but I refuse" will always be funny, no matter what context you say it in! Cheap shots like that are downright disrespectful to the source material, I swear.

"Anyway, you've got a lot of nerve to throw out all that stuff without asking me first!" said Machi. "After all, what's yours is mine, and what's mine is mine too!"

"Wow, way to be a Gian!"

"And what's *ours* was bought by our parents—in other words, the people who work day in and day out to support our lifestyles."

"Wow, way to be actually pretty reasonable!"

“You see where I’m going with this? You can’t just throw out your crap unilaterally, just ‘cause it’s yours! I’ll be the judge of what can and can’t get trashed, so you’d better unpack all those boxes again.”

“What? Are you *kidding* me?!” I wailed in exaggerated despair.

To be fair, my sister did borrow manga from me all the time, and we’d played a ton of video games together as well. My media was sort of communal property between the two of us, in a sense. It *would* be kind of crappy of me to throw it all away without giving her a chance to object...but, like, cut me some slack! I’d felt *really* conflicted while I’d packed all those books up, y’know? I shed a tear or two as I thought “Well, this is goodbye” and taped those boxes up, for your information! Opening them up again after all *that* would’ve been a waste on so many levels!

“Come on, Machi, give me a break! I used up pretty much all the tape we had left to get these boxes all packed! I can’t just open them back up again!”

“Shaddup! That was an order, not a request!” snapped Machi. “Wait up a sec—I’m gonna brew some tea and grab some chips.”

And just like that, she’s going right into manga reading mode! What, is she planning on rereading all of them under the pretext of picking which ones I’m allowed to throw out? I know how this sort of thing goes, and it’s definitely not going to end with me getting all my stuff packed and ready today!

“Hey, Machi!” I shouted, but this time, she didn’t answer. I leaned out and peered down the stairwell, but she was nowhere to be seen. Apparently, she really had gone off to grab tea and chips.

“Machi! For crying out loud—*Machi!*”

Still no response. She was probably already in the kitchen.

“...Uggo. Baldie. Fatass.”

“Say *what?*”

That got a response out of her. A response, and an aura of bloodlust strong enough to make it all the way up the stairs and send a chill racing down my spine.

“*Who’s* an uggo? And what was that about me being bald?”

“O-Oh. So you really *could* hear me,” I stammered.

“*Who’s* got a fat ass, huh?!”

“A fat— Wait, no! I didn’t mean it like *that*! I meant it in, like, the slang sense!”

“What difference does it make?!”

“Whether or not I was talking about your ass, which is a *huge* difference!” I shouted.

At the same moment, I heard the floor downstairs creak ominously. Faced with a fear as potent as the terror of having a titan loom over you, I made a snap decision to choose flight and get the heck outta there.

“O-Okay, gotta go buy some more tape! Have fun with your manga!” I shouted, then dashed into my room, threw on my scarf and gloves, flew down to the first floor three steps at a time, and sped out the front door at full speed without a backward glance.

Two months had passed since that fateful rainy day. I’d somehow managed to keep myself going in the aftermath, but only in the strictest sense of the phrase. I hadn’t really *done* anything—I’d just existed, whiling away day after day of my all too limited lifetime in static inaction.

From an outside perspective, I probably looked like a dull, apathetic bore. At some point back in elementary school, I’d gotten it into my head that apathy was “hella cool” and had made a point of *pretending* to not give a crap about anything, but this was different. Now, I genuinely couldn’t work up the willpower to do much of anything at all. I was an empty vessel, occupied solely by the daily round trip to and from school. I guess I hung out with Hatoko every once in a while, but that aside, nothing. Eventually, I decided that I couldn’t go on like that, and that brings us back to my attempt to give my room a really thorough cleaning. I was determined to say goodbye to all sorts of baggage, literally and figuratively.

I hadn’t met up with Sagami so much as once since that day. We hadn’t had

any contact at all, in fact. Since we went to different schools, there weren't all that many chances for us to bump into each other, after all. That said, I *had* happened to spot him in town once, by pure coincidence. I'd frantically ducked for cover, and I'm pretty sure he hadn't noticed me at all.

He'd been walking around with a girl at the time. Not Tamaki or Kokoro, though—it was yet another cute girl who I'd never seen before in my life. It was none of my business at that point, I know, but when I saw how he was smiling at her—how he was giving her the exact same smile he'd always shown to us—I felt sick to my stomach.

Tamaki, meanwhile, was gone. She'd transferred schools and left town entirely, from the sound of it. I'd gotten that bit of info from Aragaki Zenya, albeit indirectly. I'd just happened to overhear him talking about her with his friends at school. The particulars of his conversation were, well...let's just say I'd rather not think about them. What matters is that it became quite clear to me that he and Tamaki really had been in a full-on romantic relationship.

The day I'd learned about Tamaki's transfer, I'd ended up getting so restlessly frantic I'd actually paid her house a visit. She'd been living in her grandparents' place—a big traditional Japanese house—and needless to say, she wasn't there when I showed up. Her grandfather, on the other hand, was.

"Hmm? Are you one of Tamaki's pals?" he'd asked in that distinctly flat tone I'd grown so used to. It wasn't *my* dialect by a long shot, but the second I'd heard him speak, I'd felt a burst of intense nostalgia. Anyway, I'd said yes, he'd told me to come inside, and I readily took him up on the offer.

Tamaki's grandparents both struck me as kind, gentle people. They had me sit down at their kotatsu table, brewed me tea, and even treated me to some homemade pickles. It was the sort of hospitality that you ended up feeling a little ashamed to accept. They were also just like Tamaki had described in the sense that they talked and talked and talked at an incredible pace, jumping from one topic to the next with wild abandon.

"Tamaki's gone to roost with her mother these days," her grandfather explained to me. It seemed the divorce proceedings had all finished up, and her mom was now working a new job that a friend of hers had hooked her up with.

Tamaki had gone to live with her in her new home.

“It’s for the best. A child like her belongs with her parents,” said her grandmother.

“You’ve got that right,” agreed her grandfather with a nod. I couldn’t help but notice that in spite of their approval for the arrangement, they both sounded a little lonely.

They kept talking for a good long while, and eventually, they even pulled out one of their photo albums for me to see. I tried to refuse—it felt like looking through it would’ve been a violation of her privacy—but the two of them insisted, and I eventually caved to the pressure, agreed to take a look...and caught a glimpse of hell itself.

“H-Huh...?” I muttered as I flipped through the album’s pages. There were pictures of Tamaki everywhere, taken at all sorts of times throughout her life. There was one of her at her kindergarten entrance ceremony, at the pool, at a school event, and at her graduation ceremony. Then one of her elementary school entrance ceremony, at the pool again, at her school’s field day, at an arts festival, in a school choir, at a parent teacher conference, cooking with her classmates, and on and on.

All throughout the album—everywhere—were photos of Tamaki with her arms and legs bare, exposing her completely unblemished, scarless skin.

“Umm... Didn’t Tamaki have, um...scars, or something? On her arms...? She, umm, said something about wearing long sleeves because of that?” I asked, unable to stop myself.

“Scars...?” said her grandfather. “Does she?”

“Oh, must be that one,” said her grandfather. “Remember? When she scalded herself?”

“She...scalded herself...?” I repeated, unable to believe what I was hearing.

“Ahh, that’s the ticket,” said her grandfather with a nod. “Must’ve been about a year back. She tipped a pot over and poured it all over her arm.”

“We took her to see the doctor, and they said they’d try to fix it up so it

wouldn't stand out... The poor thing."

Speechless, I looked back down at the album and flipped through it once more, starting from the beginning. It felt like they'd put it together to keep a record of her growth and most of the pictures were centered on Tamaki, but the rest of her family still showed up with her every once in a while. I compared a family photo from just after she was born with a family photo from somewhere in her later elementary school years. Even at a glance, it was obvious that the father pictured in both photos was the same man.

"Thank you for everything, but I should be going home soon," I said as I returned the album to Tamaki's grandparents, then left their house as fast as my legs could carry me.

"Friggin' cold out," I grumbled, then took a sip of the (sweetened) coffee I'd bought at the convenience store I'd gone to for tape. My breath came out in big, billowing clouds of steam.

There was a thick enough layer of snow on the ground for me to leave footprints on the sidewalk as I strolled along. The sun had just about finished setting, and the town was dim, bordering on dark. It wasn't actively snowing at the moment, to be clear—the dusting I was walking through had fallen the night before, and enough of it had remained throughout the day to keep me from biking to the convenience store.

I walked along, taking my time and being careful not to slip as I made my way not to my house, but to a park. Specifically, I was headed for the park where I'd met Sagami and Tamaki for the first time. I didn't have any particular objective to accomplish there. I just knew that my sister would probably still be reading at that point, and if I was going to have to wait for her to finish anyway, I figured I might as well wander around a bit before going home.

I arrived at the park to find it abandoned. Judging by the footprints and marks in the snow, kids had been playing around in it earlier on in the day, though considering the time, it made sense that they'd all gone home already. For all I knew, the four of us might've met up in this very park to play in the snow as well if everything hadn't fallen apart.

Hatoko was sensitive to the cold, so she probably would've arrived bundled up in several thick layers of clothes. Sagami would've made some sort of vulgar snow sculpture, and I'd have pulverized it before the girls'd had a chance to catch a glimpse of it. Of course, if he'd made a Neo Armstrong Cyclone Jet Armstrong Cannon, I would've taken a moment to comment on how it was weirdly well crafted beforehand. Then we'd get into a snowball fight or something, and Tamaki would take advantage of her inexplicable strength to nearly take my head off with a fastball to the face...and the longer I spent playing out this whole impossible fantasy in my mind, the dumber I felt for wasting time on it.

"Tamaki..." I sighed.

In the end, Sagami had been right. Tamaki's stories of being abused and cycling through father figure after father figure had been a bunch of lies. She didn't have a tragic backstory after all. That being said, they hadn't been *completely* baseless lies. She hadn't been abused, but she *did* have a burn scar on one of her arms. She'd only had one father, but he and her mother *had* really gotten divorced. She hadn't been pulling stories out of thin air—she'd just been exaggerating her real life story to a hyperbolic degree. I guess the most blunt way to put it would be that she'd spiced her story up until she'd bent the truth beyond recognition.

It goes without saying that everyone experiences misfortune in their own way and evaluates it by their own standards. To a girl like her, having a nasty scar on her arm was probably a major issue. I had no perspective on how stressful and emotionally painful it'd be for a kid to have their parents get divorced, but I imagined that could be pretty awful too. The thing was, though...

"She could've just told me the truth about it," I muttered.

Why did she have to embellish her story so much? Was it really because she was trolling for sympathy? Did she want to play the tragic heroine and convince someone to swoop in and save her? By this point, I knew that I didn't understand where she'd been coming from...and I no longer wanted to understand either.

"Guess I'll just head home." It was getting too cold to loiter around outside

for much longer, and I'd killed enough time that my sister would've probably made at least a little progress on sorting my manga. Even if she wasn't finished, I could still start packing up the ones she'd read first.

And so, I turned my back on the park I'd made so many memories in, prepared to leave it for good...only to stop in my tracks.

"Huh?"

I'd seen something. A sort of white blur had slipped through the very corner of my peripheral vision. It was dark enough out that I hadn't been able to grasp what it was in that split second, but I knew I'd seen it: a white *something* flitting through the air, then vanishing from my line of sight in the blink of an eye.

I drew in a sharp, alarmed breath. *Oh, no. Oh, no no no. You cannot be serious... Did I seriously just see a ghost? I remember a bunch of rumors about a ghost showing up in this park floating around back in summer...but I mean, it's winter now! Winter's not ghost season by any stretch of the imagination! Nope! Nope nope nope nope nope! There is no way I just saw what I think I saw!*

I frantically told myself I was imagining things as I scanned my surroundings, my eyes as wide as dinner plates. If there *was* a ghost on the haunt, I'd want to get the heck out of there without wasting another second, but I knew that if I ran away with the matter still ambiguous, I'd have no hope of getting any sleep that night. I had to get a solid grasp on the situation, *then* figure out what my move would be.

A chill that had nothing to do with how cold it was outside ran down my spine as I scanned the park from end to end. Finally, my eyes fell upon the explanation I was looking for.

"Oh...what, is that all?" I said to myself. It was almost a letdown how simple the explanation was: the mysterious white blur was just a person with white hair.

Some little old man or little old lady—couldn't quite tell which—was pedaling their way past the park on a bicycle. The bike instantly explained the way the shape had slid in and out of my peripheral vision so smoothly. I'd been, as they say, jumping at shadows.

“Can’t believe anyone’s riding a bike in this weather, though,” I added under my breath.

It wasn’t snowing at the moment, but the roads were still slippery as all get out. Even Onoda Sakamichi himself would give up and take the train to Akihabara under these conditions! Whoever the mysterious bicyclist was, they had some serious guts for an old-timer.

“Huh?” I grunted as I somewhat nervously watched the bicyclist pedal into the very park I was standing in. They’d entered from the opposite side as I had, and they were making their way to the park’s bike rack. No sooner had they crossed the park’s threshold, though, than an ear-piercing screech rang out. I grimaced—it seemed the bicyclist had slammed on their brakes, and moments later, the bike’s tires lost their grip on the road, sending it and its rider crashing to the ground in an ungainly heap. If I had to come up with a sound effect to represent the spectacle, I’d probably go with “ka-smash!” or something to that effect.

“Ooof,” I said with a wince. “See? What’d I tell you?” *I mean, not that I actually told them anything. Make that “What’d I think about you,” I guess.*

He or she—I still couldn’t tell—was left sprawled out on the ground after their spectacular wipeout. They were writhing around a little, but they were making no attempt to stand up. It must’ve hurt like hell, and speaking as a firsthand witness to the accident, I couldn’t just ignore it and walk away. Instead, I hurried over to help them out, driven more by a sense of sympathy than a desire to do a good deed.

“H-Hey,” I said nervously as I approached the bicyclist. “Are you okay?”

Seeing them up close, the figure was a little...actually, make that *very* peculiarly dressed. I’d thought they’d had white hair from a distance, but seeing them up close, I realized that it was more of a shiny, iridescent sort of coloration. It was almost silver, even, and it was obviously not a natural color. It wasn’t even natural hair at all, actually. From this distance, I could tell it was a wig in an instant.

Then there was the matter of their glasses, which turned out to be sunglasses—specifically, the round variety that only a very particular sort of hot guy could

ever hope to pull off. They were wearing a white scarf wrapped several times around their neck and pulled up to conceal the lower half of their face, and they had a black trench coat on below it that was plainly a few sizes too big for them. Its bottom hem hung well below their knees, and the sleeves were baggy and loose. From top to bottom, they were dressed in white, black, white, and black again.

“Ah,” said the bicyclist, slowly raising their head off the ground to turn their sunglasses not to me, but rather to the tragic wreck that was their bicycle.

“Dame Dolor! My kinsman’s beloved steed! *Nooooooooooooo!*”

They *shrieked* to the high heavens. Shrieked in a very high-pitched voice, incidentally, and though the wig, glasses, and scarf made it impossible to make out their face, between their build and voice I was now pretty convinced that they were, in fact, a she. I could also hazard a guess that she was around my age. Her voice was a little nasally in a way that made me wonder if she had a cold, and that plus the way her scarf was covering her mouth made it pretty hard to make out what she was actually saying.

So, yeah—outfitwise, she was such a piece of work I didn’t even know where to start with her, but surprisingly, her outfit wasn’t even the part I felt the most pressing need to question. That dubious honor went to what she’d just screamed. *“My kinsman’s”? She definitely said “kinsman” just now, right?*

“Dame Dolor! Stay with me, Dame Dolor! No, this cannot be—how shall I ever beg my kinsman’s pardon should you perish here, O most plaintive of maidens?!” the girl wailed as she scrambled over to her fallen bicycle.

Uh. Did she just say...shall? Does she just talk like that all the time? And wait—is “Dame Dolor” supposed to be the bike’s name?

I felt a flash of alarm as a warmth spread across my face. I was racked with an intense sensation of déjà vu and an equally intense onset of shame. Part of me thought that the girl before me was just unimaginably cringe, but the rest of me could imagine her perspective all too well. Her deliberately monochromatic fashion, her pseudo-Shakespearean vocabulary, her nonsensical proper nouns

—I knew what she was, much as I wanted to deny it.

“Huh? Identify yourself, scoundrel!” shouted the girl, who’d apparently finally noticed me. She turned to glare in my direction...or so I’d assumed, though of course, her weird glasses made it impossible to tell if she was *actually* glaring or not.



“If either of us deserves the ‘Who the heck are you?’ treatment, I think it’s you,” I replied.

“Heh! You need not concern yourself with my name,” said the girl.

“Okay. In that case, I won’t even bother to—”

“That being said, the denizens of this realm have bequeathed upon me a title!”

I winced internally. She was chomping at the bit to tell me her name, and I hadn’t even asked.

“Yo: the one without name, kept captive within darkness deepest, and *Tomo*: she who shineth with golden resplendence, breaking day upon that prison of night and paving the way for its captive to follow! Kye ki ki!” said the girl. The way she laughed was so conspicuously unnatural I had to assume she was doing it on purpose. It reminded me a lot of my old “mwa ha ha,” in fact.

There really was no mistaking it anymore. I was standing in the presence of my past self. The girl before me, clad in a wig that shone whiter than the snow around her, was suffering from perhaps the most astonishingly high-level, categorically undeniable case of chuunibyou I’d ever seen.

Naming your bike was pretty fundamental chuuni material, if I had to be honest. Same with the silver wig, really. I think most Asian people go through a phase at some point in their lives where they wish they had blonde or silvery hair. The archaic word choice too—that had a certain *something* that really struck a chord with me, and picking out clothing that covered up her mouth and eyes was a classic trick to give yourself a mysterious air. I’d made use of it all the time, back in the day. Then there was the black coat—that was just *packed* with an air of catastrophic catharsis.

Yes, I could understand every aspect of her whole shtick at a glance, and boy, did I ever feel mortified by that ability. I understood her on a profound, instinctual level that I couldn’t really put into words.

“Son of man,” said the girl.

Oh, god, here we go. Word choice like that’s a classic way to subtly imply that

you're something other and greater than the petty humans that surround you. Talking about humans as a broad category's the perfect way to make it look like you don't fall into the category yourself.

"If you value your life, you'd do well to keep your distance," she continued with a threatening glance in my direction. Well, I assumed it was threatening, again—the sunglasses and scarf totally covered up whatever presumably intimidating face she was trying to make at me.

Goes to show that covering up your face has its drawbacks, even if it does look cool. To make matters worse, I was of the opinion that round sunglasses were cool specifically because of how you could let them slip down the bridge of your nose, giving the slightest glimpse of your eyes behind them. The girl, however, had a small enough face that her eyes were completely hidden behind the glasses' lenses. She looked less like a mysterious badass and more like one of those stock caricatures of shady Chinese salesmen you see in manga sometimes.

"Th-That so? I like being alive, so I guess I'd better just head along, then," I said. I didn't feel like getting any more involved with her than I already had, so I decided to play along just enough to justify a swift exit.

"Hmph. That the likes of a common human would bear witness to my affairs is a blunder unbecoming of my station. However will I look my kinsman in the eye after bearing this shame...? Kye ki ki—but with this, my yearlong ritual has come to a close! Kye ki ki! The promised moment bears down upon me!"

She'd gone so far off into her own little world, I wasn't sure if she was paying any attention to me at all anymore. She sounded like she was having a blast, but man, the way she laughed was really weirding me out. Was she looking to set up a broomstick-enabled delivery service, or what? On the other hand, it struck me that my "mwa ha ha" had probably been just as off-putting from an outsider's perspective. This was all a lot for me to deal with, basically, and while I did my best to cope, the girl turned back to her fallen bicycle.

"Kye ki ki! O Plaintive Dame Dolor—ever has your wild demeanor brought peril upon those who would mount you! So great is your lust for power, you would lay low even your own master, should you be given the opportunity...and

I could ask for nothing more from my closest compatriot!”

Apparently, this was her way of internally justifying the fact that she’d gone head-over-handlebars. She had a knack for clever explanations, I had to admit. You could really tell she was in the thick of her infection. I wanted to tell her that getting back on her bike in these conditions would be an awful idea, but I also knew that she didn’t have any reason to listen to advice from a stranger like me, so I decided not to butt in. She’d have to take responsibility for her own decisions. I turned away from her, ready to head home.

“Now then, let us be off, Dame— W-Wait, huh?!”

I heard a wild yelp, and at the same moment, I heard a sort of grating, creaking noise. Looking over my shoulder, I saw the girl sitting astride her bike, trying to press down on a pedal that was clearly going nowhere. As best as I could tell, the impact when she’d fallen had knocked its chain out of place, and when she tried to ride off again, it had gotten tangled up with the gears, jamming up the whole shebang.

“Ah! O-Oh, crap, the chain,” the girl muttered as she realized what the issue was and got off her bike. “Peh—so the drive system’s failed, has it? Those accursed magitechnicians ought to learn to do their jobs properly... How fareth thee, Dame Dolor? Have your wounds from the campaign in Vershella reopened, perchance?!”

And there she went, improvising a whole backstory off the cuff. Not that it really mattered, but I had to question whether her so-called “Dame Dolor” was supposed to be a machine or some sort of summoned creature. Would’ve been nice if she’d made that bit of exposition a little more clear cut—the lore she was building up was getting messier by the second.

“Kye ki ki! Rest easy! The ways of healing may not be my expertise, but long ago, I served in an underground medical unit, and I have not forgotten their methods!”

Ooh, two more classics! She just combo’d the “[Insert skill here] isn’t my specialty, but,” and the “I actually used to be part of [insert organization here]” together, instantly forcing you to question why a former member of a medical unit wouldn’t have medicine as one of their areas of expertise!

“O light that pierces and purifies the dark, answer my call and dwell in my grasp! One-winged birds belong not to the sky, and fangless hounds belong not to the land. By compass of corruption and chains of defilement, the dead are guided through pandemonium...”

And now she's chanting some sort of incantation. She muttered it quietly enough that I couldn't pick out most of it, much less decipher her cryptic word choice, and at the same time, she started doing her best to untangle the chain with her bare hands. Well, not quite bare—that was around when I noticed that she was wearing fingerless gloves. Running around in those on a day as cold as this one was an awful idea, but they actually seemed pretty well suited for the sort of intricate work she was currently attempting.

“...How they flock like moths to the flame, lured to elysium in water's darkest depths. How the shadowed sinners break free of their bonds, forsake their duty, and flock to that blackest paradise... Like moths to a black flame, umm...in deepest, darkest waters...”

Okay, I think you're leaning a bit too far into the darkness there. Trying to keep up her incantation while also focusing on her hands was resulting in both tasks turning into a bit of a mess.

“...What is it you see, O sinners, in those darkest depths? Umm...err... Meruda de gottoro val jinn tenoga'ga zuugiteen yi nyarldorugo...”

Ah! She got tired of making crap up and swapped over to an incantation in some made-up language! Now that's a power move! Making things nice and easy for herself, isn't she?!

“...delpa meira iyonabegi to do no te... U-Ugh, what the heck am I doing wrong? Why isn't this working...?”

And finally, the incantation's been abandoned altogether.

“O-Oh, crap, what am I gonna do? This is my brother's bike! He's gonna *kill* me...”

Hey, no breaking character! You're supposed to call him your kinsman! And don't admit that it's a bike!

“Ouch! U-Ugggh... How did it even *get* like this...? This part goes here, right...?”

And the bit in back, umm...gah! Agh, my hands are *freezing*...”

I just watched as she paused for a second to blow on her fingers.

“This sucks... Ahh, now it’s even *more* tangled up than before... I can’t take this... Ugh... I just wanna go hooome...”

“Graaaaaaaaah! I can’t *take* it anymore!” I shouted, then spun back around and dashed over to the girl. “Let me take a look!”

“Huh?!”

“Just tag out with me for a second, okay?”

“B-But... My kinsman told me that Dame Dolor rebukes the touch of any who don’t share a bond of blood with—”

“*Please*, just put all that crap aside for a minute and get outta the way!” I snapped, more or less forcing my way over to the bike. I stooped down, took off my gloves, and got to work untangling the chain.

Yikes, this really is pretty messed up. Gah, and it’s freezing too! This would’ve been a nightmare to take on with her skinny little girl fingers.

“Here, have this,” I said, pausing my work for a moment to pull a can of hot coffee out from my convenience store bag. I’d bought it for my sister, but this was an emergency. Hopefully she’d find it in her to look past my misappropriation. “It’s probably kinda cold by now, but better than nothing, right?”

“Th-Thanks,” said the girl, dropping character again to accept the coffee. She held it in both hands, her fingers red from the cold. “It’s nice and warm,” she mumbled.

“Glad to hear it. Hey, can you pick the bike up by the luggage rack for a sec?”

“Ah, sure.”

The girl lifted up the bike’s back half, and I tried to turn the pedal in reverse with my hand. It didn’t work out as I’d hoped, so I did a little more tinkering with the chain and tried again. It’d taken some trial and error, but the tangled mess was gradually starting to unravel.

“So, hey,” I said.

“Huh? What?” said the girl.

“Do you come to this park pretty often? You said something about a yearlong ritual, right?”

“Kye ki ki... Verily, I do. Once a moon, on the day my magic reaches its nadir, I alight upon this place—a singularity unique in this human realm—and endeavor to restore my powers!”

“Huh. Cool,” I said. *A singularity, huh? Nice. Those are pretty cool.* I’d never been totally sure what it was actually supposed to *mean*, but it just had good wordfeel, somehow.

In any case, it seemed safe to assume I’d uncovered the identity of the silver-haired ghost from the rumors back in summer. I couldn’t say for sure how long she’d been doing this, but she’d definitely been riding out here in that wig once a month, and that was enough to settle the matter for me. I had *no* idea what specifically she’d been doing, and I really didn’t want to know either, but I could very easily understand *why* she’d been doing it: to look cool.

I was an old hand in the field, so I understood her motives very well. The things she did looked cryptic and nonsensical to an outsider, but to her, they all had clear and distinct meaning. The wig, the glasses, the coat, the bike—they were a disjointed mess of unrelated components at a glance, but in her mind, they were all clearly bound together by concrete and specific elements, each one serving an indispensable purpose for the sake of the scenario she was constructing.

“H-Hey,” said the girl.

“...”

“Is, umm, is it going okay...?”

“...”

“D-Don’t just ignore me! If it’s really bad, I can always give my brother a call, and he’ll come—”

“Would you *please* shut up for a second?!”

“Eek!”

She was just trying to help, but I curtly brushed the attempt aside. I get that it was kind of a jerk move, but come on—if I failed to fix the bike after all that buildup, I’d be finished on so many different levels! I’d cast myself as the helpful but brusque passerby, and if I wanted to live up to that role, I couldn’t just give up and admit that I couldn’t actually fix the issue.

I forced my mostly numb fingers to keep moving, carefully untangling the chain one link at a time. The winter sky above grew darker, and about ten minutes of cold, silent concentration later...

“I-I did it! It *woorks!*”

...I *finally* managed to restore the chain to functionality and let out a long, deep sigh of relief. *Oh, thank god, seriously. Now she won’t think of me as some stuck-up weirdo who offered to help even though he had no clue what he was doing.* I felt equal parts relief and accomplishment as I wiped my oil-stained hands off in the snow. That made them feel even more frigid than ever, of course, but it was the only way I could think of on the spot to clean them off.

“U-Umm, here,” said the girl, offering me a pocket-sized pack of tissues.

“Oh, thanks,” I replied. I used about five of them to dry and clean off my hands, then held the packet back out to her.

“I-It’s fine! You can keep it,” said the girl.

“Nah, have it back,” I said. “You’ve got a cold, right? You’re gonna need these.”

I was technically just assuming that on account of her nasally voice, but after a moment of hesitation, the girl let me press the packet back into her hands. Maybe this would’ve been some sort of long-term plot point if she’d offered me a handkerchief and I’d ended up keeping it, but a half-used pack of tissues? Not so much potential there. Holding on to one of *those* to return to someone years later would be downright creepy.

I hauled the bike upright and tried pushing it around the park. The tires spun nice and smoothly, and it seemed that Dame Dolor was back in action, so I pushed her back to the girl. “Okay, here you go,” I said. “No more riding it

though, okay? It's way too dangerous in this weather. You'd better push it home instead."

"Right... Th-Thanks," the girl practically whispered, pulling her scarf even farther up her face than it was before. I couldn't tell if she was feeling shy, or if she was just embarrassed by the whole situation, but either way, it was honestly a kind of cute gesture. If only it had ended there.

"Kye ki ki! I commend thee, son of man! By your efforts, I shall arrive at my destination in adherence to the prophesized time! You've done well indeed!" the girl said a moment later, crossing her arms in a show of arrogance and packing her line as full of pointlessly complicated words as possible. She must've just remembered that she'd been trying to play a character.

She really is a genuine chuuni through and through. She wasn't actually *crazy* by any means, and she most certainly wasn't really a resident of another world. She just wanted to look cool, and she was doing her best to act out that ideal. She was under the blissful misapprehension that doing things that she thought were cool would make everyone around her think that she was cool as well. It really did feel like I was staring my own past self in the face.

"So, hey," I said. I didn't really know what I was doing—the words just popped out of my mouth before I knew it. "You should really lay off on all that stuff."

"Huh?" said the girl.

"Like, all the weird posing and playacting, I mean. You know what they call people who do that sort of stuff? They call them chuunis, and it's not a compliment," I said. Entering the eighth grade had cured me of my eighth grade syndrome, but she was still in the thick of it, and I found myself trying to warn her. "I'm pretty sure you'll end up regretting all this eventually. You're gonna look back and wonder how you could've ever been that cringey."

I don't really know why I felt the need to go off on a condescending rant like that. Maybe I was trying to lecture her in the hopes she'd learn from my past mistakes, or maybe I was just irritated by how it felt like she was rubbing those mistakes in my face with her little act. In any case, I couldn't stand to just watch her behave that way. It wasn't an act of kindness or an attempt to do a good deed. I'd just seen myself in her, and I didn't like what I'd seen. I'd identified

with her, and that sense drove me to act.

“Lemme guess—you read a ton of manga and watch a bunch of anime, right?” I continued. “I get that, honestly. I went through the same sorta phase, so I understand what you’re dealing with painfully well.”

It starts with an attraction to a fictional character or world. Soon, that attraction develops into an irresistible yearning, and before you know it, you find yourself thinking about what powers you’d fight with if you were that sort of person or lived in that sort of place. At that point, it’s only a matter of time before just thinking about it isn’t enough, and you start writing all your ideas down. Then, when writing them down isn’t good enough either, you start acting them out. The cycle plays out over and over, and your ego swells as you bask in the sensation that everything you’re doing makes you special, somehow. But in the end...

“You have to understand that it’s all fake. Every bit of it. The scenarios you dream up, the stories you’re obsessed with—everything,” I said. *They’re all fantasies, all fiction, and that will never change.* “Honestly, it’s kind of a given that we’d be into that sorta stuff. I mean, all the media that people like us are into was *designed* for us to obsess over it. A bunch of adults somewhere tailor-made those stories to appeal to kids like us. We’re all just dancing in the palms of creators’ hands.”

I distinctly remembered finding an online listing of the judges’ comments about works that were submitted to a light novel contest once. One particular comment said that a story read “like it was written by a chuuni, not for chuunis.”

I assumed that the novel in question was pretty dire. It was probably one of those books that stars a truly flagrant self-insert protagonist who’s despised by the whole world for no real reason, or maybe one who’s reached some sort of weird understanding that life is futile and has given up on it all, but who ends up being forced to fight enemy after enemy, or fight his own raging homicidal impulses, et cetera, all while preaching relentlessly about whatever the author’s idea of deep, philosophical contemplations on life and death might be. In short, I figured it was the sort of narcissistic, masturbatory fantasy fiction that would never have any commercial viability whatsoever.

That's when I was struck by a question: What sort of novel *would* be considered commercially viable? The answer I settled upon was that commercially viable novels are novels that were written not for the sake of the author, but for the sake of the readers. They're novels that were intended to be entertainment, to amuse and delight the consumers who would purchase them—that is to say, us.

It was only natural that I aspired to be like the heroes from my favorite stories. After all, those heroes were written specifically to appeal to stupid little kids like I was. People can only get hyped up by a hero's exploits because the story's writer went out of their way to make said exploits hype-worthy, and people can only get won over by a heroine's actions because the writer made sure that she'd be as universally appealing as possible.

"You have a right to get super invested in fiction if you want to, but you should know that if you're ever in trouble and really need help, *fiction's* never going to be there to save you. You'll never awaken to an incredible ability that solves the issue in an instant, and you'll never go through a sudden plot-induced power up. No matter how deep and intricate all the lore and plot points you think up are, they'll never be more than make-believe."

Fiction is packed full of all the artificial colors and flavorings you can imagine. It's sweet as could be, and it's powerfully addictive. If you let yourself subsist on a diet of fiction alone, though, you'll soon find yourself forgetting how bitter reality can be.

"Someday, all those worlds you wish you could live in are going to stab you in the back."

Take, for instance, how I came to understand that fiction is just fiction without even realizing it. I never even registered that betrayal, so I missed my chance to despair at it. And take, for instance, how the couple I looked up to was nothing more than a superficial fabrication. Their relationship broke down in cataclysmic fashion, and I've savored every last drop of the despair it brought me. I've given up on my unrealistic aspirations, forsaken fiction, and settled on reality. That, I have to imagine, is what it means to grow up.

"We can't stay kids forever. You and me both."

The girl hung her head. She didn't say a word, and thanks to her scarf and sunglasses, I couldn't tell what sort of face she was making. I fell silent as well, and I just turned around and walked away. For all I knew, she might've been crying, but still, I believed it was for the best. *Someday, she too will change her ways. Someday, she too will succumb to despair. And if that's the case, then in my book, it's better to get it over with early. Having a stranger like me lecture some sense into her is at least a little better than having her parents or her friends be the ones to force her to face reality. This way she can decide that I was a dick, hate me, and be done with it.*

I strolled away, taking care not to turn around for so much as a glance. As I walked, I faintly heard her voice. She spoke in a dark, gloomy tone, and it almost sounded like she was reciting a spell or a curse.

"First limit—passed. Second limit—passed. Final limit—passed."

I heard the clatter of a bike's kickstand, followed by the creaking of its gears shifting.

"Dame Dolor: Cacophonous Waltz mode, full power...and beyond! Second Stage Curse Keyword: Unlimited Crisis...Road to Eden—Sainted Princess Honor!"

To me, it sounded like a nonsensical string of unrelated words. I couldn't tell which parts were supposed to be part of the spell and which were supposed to be proper nouns. I also heard a weird sort of whirring noise along with her mutterings, and couldn't stop myself from turning around to take a look.

"Superterminal Climax: Winged Blades of Brightest White!"

"Aaaaaaugh!"

The very instant I turned around, the girl and her bike barreled directly into me. She had shouted out some sort of over-the-top attack name, but really, it was more of a mounted tackle. Actually, make that a mounted Double-Edge, considering that mere moments after she sent me flying, her bike slipped on the ice, and she wiped out in pretty much the same way she had back in the beginning.

"Agh... What the *hell* was that for?!" I shouted as I heaved myself up to a

sitting position.

The girl was already on her feet and stomping her way over to me. She planted herself right in front of me, taking up an imposing stance and looming over me. She was actually pretty tiny, but the fact that I couldn't see her expression or tell exactly where she was looking made her seem *way* more imposing. She was exerting some *major* pressure on me.

"I stayed quiet... I let you talk... And you just went on and on and *on* from your stupid soapbox," said the girl, emitting an almost visible aura of wrathful outrage. "Shut! The hell! *Uuuuuuuuup, you stupid jerkass!*"

Her scream was as pure and simple as verbal abuse could be. She wasn't done yet, though.

"'We can't stay kids forever'? What the *hell's* that supposed to mean?! How old even *are* you?! You can't be much older than me, right? Well then, how're you supposed to be anything other than a kid?! *I'm* a kid, so what's that make *you*?! You can put on some sad little show of being the big, cool, *mature* guy, but that doesn't make you any less of an annoying little brat at heart! Why do I have to sit here and take this crap from *you*?!"

"I-I was just saying it for your own good," I stammered.

"*My* own good? Hah! You *liar*! You were saying all that crap for *yourself*! I bet it felt *real* good to go off on your condescending tirade, huh? Got a real kick of superiority by looking down on me, huh? Fall off your high horse and go to hell!"

The shift in her attitude had been so sudden and dramatic that it left me gobsmacked. I could only assume I'd inadvertently touched one hell of a nerve with her and that she was one of those girls who went all out on you the moment you set them off.

"And what the hell's your *point*, anyway? Fictional worlds are all made up by a bunch of adults, so we're all just dancing in the palms of their hands? As *if*! What, do you think that all adults are just perfect superhumans or something? You think people suddenly figure everything out the second they turn twenty? Get *real*! *You're* the only one who's acting delusional here!" she shouted, intent on taking apart everything I'd said from start to finish.

“Adults screw up too! Adults fail sometimes too! They’re not *gods*! They’re just people like us, but older! Cartoonists and novelists and scriptwriters all work themselves ragged to make their stories! They don’t have the *time* to think about how their readers are dancing in their hands or whatever! They’re too busy putting *everything they have* into a desperate effort to get their crap *done*!” the girl said, then added a quick “Probably!” in after. Apparently, this was all just speculation on her part.

“And *anyway*,” she continued, “writing novels is... It’s *really* hard, you know? Sometimes you can imagine things perfectly but just can’t write them right, and sometimes you just can’t think up dialogue that’s fun to read at all... Sometimes not even *you* know if your characters are standing up or sitting down... Sometimes your worldbuilding just falls apart, and sometimes you make stupid continuity errors without even realizing it... Sometimes your story ends up going in a totally random direction you never planned on... But someone like you wouldn’t know a thing about *any* of that, and *you* think the people who make media are trying to play you like a fiddle? It’s *not that easy*, okay?! Jerks like *you* are the ones who always post online about how they could *totally* write a light novel even though they’ve never even *tried*!”

Somehow, it felt like we were drawing closer to the core of the matter. “Are you, uhh...trying to become a writer?” I asked.

“Wh-What?! N-No way, nuh-uh! Wh-Wh-What’re you even *talking* about?! Not even a little! Hell no! Never! I’m just speaking for the world at large here!”

Oh, huh. Guess I missed the mark there. I’d drawn the conclusion based on how invested she seemed to be in the issue, but I figured she wouldn’t deny it that emphatically if she really did want to be a writer.

“A-Anyway,” the girl said, “it’s not like fiction always goes the way the adults want it to, does it?! If they were really in total control, then why do so many anime totally bomb with their audiences? Why do so many manga get canceled? Why do so many games get their release dates pushed back? Why do so many light novels that have gotten pushed hard enough to have even gotten promo videos and stuff end up kinda just fizzling out when it comes to their actual sales?”

I gaped as the girl carried on. “Just because people *make* fiction doesn’t mean they’re always in total control of it! Sometimes stories have more control over their authors than the other way around! Stories are fickle, and demanding, and don’t listen to their authors at all! Fiction exists in a totally different, higher dimension than us, far beyond our ability to influence...and that’s why it’s so *good*, isn’t it?!”

Fiction exists in a different dimension? Fiction is far beyond is? That’s what makes it so good? “B-But, I mean,” I stammered feebly as I finally rose to my feet, still withering under the girl’s gaze. “At the end of the day, fiction’s not even *real*, right? That’s literally what makes it fiction, isn’t it? How’s something that’s not even real supposed to help you when you really need it?”

No matter how you try to justify it, fiction will always be fake. It’s a pack of lies, a sham, a backdrop, a convenient illusion. It doesn’t exist. No matter how much you look up to the heroes in your TV shows, you’ll never become one, and one will never appear before you. No matter how badly you fall for an anime’s heroine, no matter how much money you spend on her, you can never even touch her, much less marry her.

But still, the girl had other ideas. “What are you talking about?” she said. “Of course fiction’s real!”

“No, it isn’t!”

“Yes, it is!”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“It’s not, and you know it!”

“No I don’t, and yes it is!”

We were talking past each other, and I was just about done with it. “All right, then,” I shouted. “If fiction’s real, then where is it?!”

The girl thrust her hand out in front of her, made a little fist, and pressed it up against my chest—right where my heart was.

“It’s here! Fiction lies within your heart!”

Just like that, it felt like I’d shed something clinging on to me, as though it’d fallen to the ground with a light *fwsh*. It was like some indefinite presence that had been binding my arms and legs had suddenly been released. Or maybe it was the opposite—like *I’d* been suddenly lifted up into the air, pulled aloft from the deep pit I’d fallen into. I felt light as could be, like I’d just sprouted wings.

“Manga isn’t *just* ink on paper. Anime isn’t *just* a sequence of still images. Novels aren’t *just* a series of words. Games aren’t *just* programs. Movies and TV shows aren’t *just* projections on a screen either!” the girl declared, then thumped her fist against her own chest. “No work is ever complete when its creator finishes making it! Somebody creates, and then somebody else reads. Somebody creates, and then somebody else watches. Somebody creates, and then somebody else plays! The creators create, the consumers consume, and only then does fiction reach its actualization in people’s hearts!”

Manga and novels are only completed after somebody reads them. Anime, TV shows, movies, and plays are only completed after somebody watches them. Games are only completed after somebody plays them. And words are only given meaning when somebody else hears them...

“The fiction I bear within my heart right here, right now, will *never* betray me!” the girl shouted.

She looked straight at me, and her voice bore a confidence—an earnestness—like nothing else. Her round glasses had shifted down the bridge of her nose as well, just enough to reveal her eyes as she stared into mine. There was a storm of emotion roiling within them, and they dazzled me. It was like a furious flame was blazing away in her gaze, bright and warm, and its light pierced through the dark curtain of night that’d been shrouding my heart, exposing it for the first time in ages to the red glow of dawn.

“Fiction will never betray us! If you feel like it has, that’s on *you*, not on fiction! You’ve just *decided* that you’ve been betrayed, that’s all!”

All I could do was stand there, speechless. It felt like my heart had been washed clean—like it had been washed away entirely and delivered to me

anew, reformed. Like a tiny flame had been lit deep within my chest, its light rousing *something* inside me from its slumber.

“Kye ki ki! How imprudent of me, to get so worked up over a mere *human*,” the girl said as she snapped back to her senses...or rather, as she lost them again, I guess? The point is, she jumped back into the same persona she’d been putting on back at the start of our conversation. “Pitiable son of man: I pray that the cogs of fate shall bestow their blessings upon thine path!”

With that parting comment—her version of a goodbye, I presumed—the girl went on her way. She’d learned from her first two falls, of course, and walked on her own two feet this time.

“W-Wait!” I shouted on impulse. “I, umm... What’s your name?”

The girl paused. “Kye ki ki... The code that members of my clan are bound by honor to follow prohibits me from revealing my name to a human. Of course, it could never be spoken by a human’s tongue to begin with,” she said.

Oh, does it, now? I had a feeling that she’d give me a name if I pressed her, but somehow, I just didn’t feel like it.

“And what shall I call thee?” the girl asked, returning the question to me even though she hadn’t bothered answering it herself.

I hesitated, vacillated, paused to consider, then finally settled upon my answer.

“As of yet, I have no name.” *I’m not a cat, though.* “And so...I’ll have to think one up. I’ll come up with the most stupidly cool name you’ve ever heard.”

The true name I settle upon will be as stylish of a name as there could ever possibly be. It’s there inside me, etched into my very soul—and I’ll work to reclaim it.

“When next we meet,” I said, “I’ll declare my name to you with pride!”

I got back home and bolted up the stairs at a dangerously fast speed. The cardboard boxes I’d left were scattered about the hallway, the tape that had sealed them torn mercilessly asunder, but my sister was nowhere to be seen.

She'd already finished sorting and judging my manga collection, it seemed.

For the moment, I picked out a box at random, grabbed a book from it, and opened it up on the spot. By some twist of fate, it just happened to be the very light novel that I'd loaned to Hatoko during spring break earlier that year—the novel she hadn't managed to read through, and the one that had prompted me to leave my chuunibyou behind. It was the sort of book that people described as pure chuuni-bait, featuring a complex and intricately detailed story that portrayed a dark, stylish, and deeply appealing setting, chock full of pointlessly cool proper nouns.

I'd taken the time to reread it after Hatoko had given it back to me, and for some reason, I'd felt like it just wasn't as interesting as it'd been the first time I'd read it. The magic was gone, and my passion had faded. I'd fallen off the series and hadn't bought a single volume since. What I found within it now, though, made me gasp.

Let's use food as a point of reference. The exact same dish can taste different depending on how you feel at the time you eat it, right? If you've just eaten way too many sweets, you might start feeling the urge to have something sour, and if you just ate a plateful of extra hot curry, the normal-level stuff might not taste spicy to you at all. As you age, the vegetables you hated when you were a kid because they tasted bitter might start tasting good instead. When you have a cold, you might lose the ability to taste entirely. My point with all this is that books, it seems, follow the same logic.

"This...is *so good*..."

It was good. It was really, really, *really* good. How, I wondered, could a book *that* interesting even exist? How had I lost the taste for a book that incredible? Had I had a cold or something?

My brain's juices were flowing. It was pumping out endorphins like crazy, and I was *drowning* in dopamine. My brain was loading me the hell up with *all* its happy chemicals. My synapses were bursting, and a pleasant, throbbing tingle spread through my mind, shooting down my spine like a chill and bringing about the most outrageously powerful sense of intoxication I'd ever experienced. My soul was shaken, and my heart was caught in a death grip.

I was totally immersed in the book's world, more so than I'd ever been before, and before I knew it, I'd read through the whole volume. I grabbed the cardboard box it had come from, hauled it into my room, and dumped it out on the spot. Books scattered all over the place, and I grabbed another and started reading all over again.

I read. And read. And read. And read. And read. And read. And read. And read. And read. I read like a man possessed, with no appreciation for how much time had passed until I happened to pick out a phrase at the beginning of a manga I'd just started reading.

"This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, groups, or events is purely coincidental."

"Heh... Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

I burst out in a fit of spontaneous laughter. *Well, would you look at that! It was written there this whole time, plain as could be!*

It was right there on the tin. Fiction had been telling me that it was nothing more than fiction since the very beginning. It had never tried to fool me, and it had never lied to me. Fiction had never betrayed me at all. The girl from before had been absolutely correct—I'd just unilaterally *assumed* that I'd been betrayed. I'd leaped to all sorts of conclusions and run away without ever really facing my supposed betrayer and seeing it for what it really was. Fiction is nothing more than a forgery, and yet it's real in and of itself. A genuine forgery.

Way back whenever, Sagami told me that I was fastidious. He was wrong, though. I wasn't being fastidious back then—I was just being petty, plain and simple. I'd realized that something wasn't quite what I'd imagined it to be, and then instead of facing that something for what it really was, I'd kicked up a huge screaming fit and rejected it. I'd done everything I could do to act mature and play the adult, and in doing so, I'd turned my gaze away from the issue entirely.

It was the same way with Sagami and Tamaki. All that had *really* happened was that I'd discovered that they weren't quite the people I'd thought they were, but I'd decided that meant they'd betrayed me, had fallen into despair,

and had thrown an over-the-top tantrum about it. I'd acted as if we hadn't spent all that time together—as if the bonds that had begun to grow between us had never been real, even though they so clearly were.

“Mwa ha ha.”

Before I knew it, I was laughing. I was *cachinnating*. I went out of my way to say the words “Mwa ha ha,” laughing in the least natural way possible as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

“Mwa ha ha! Mwaaa ha ha ha ha ha!”

It ached. It ached, it ached, oh how it ached! My eye ached! My arm ached! My whole body ached! My very soul ached! From deep within my breast, from the farthest reaches of my mind, from the source of my soul itself, a wellspring of chuuni power gushed forth ceaselessly!

“Mwa ha ha! Ahaaa ha ha ha! *Haaaaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!*”

I laughed. I cackled. I laughed like a hero. I cackled like a demon king. I laughed *my* laugh, the way I always had, the way that suited me best.

Yes, I'd finally remembered. I'd finally reclaimed everything I'd lost. Once again, I felt the ebullient joy that arose from feeling that *I* was special, that *I* was unlike the rest of humanity, and I reveled in the sense of superiority it brought me. How joyous it was to stand aloof and independent, knowing the common masses would never understand me! How euphoric it was to immerse myself in my own world! How empowering it was to bask in the feeling that anything and everything would work out just as I wanted it to!

The next thing I knew, I'd flown to my feet and struck a pose. I'd pulled out all the stops and poured my body and soul into posing it up to the highest degree! Why, you might ask? Simple: because it made me cool. Because I *wanted* to be cool!

“Ahaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha! Auaugh, gah, pffft, hgwah! Mwa ha ha! MWAAA HA HA HA HA HA! AAAHA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!”

“*Shaddup!*”

Wham!

My sister slammed her fist against the wall. *Oh, wow, that takes me back!* *When's the last time I heard one of her wall pounds?* I'd kept pretty quiet in my room ever since the start of the school year, so she hadn't had to indulge in her unfortunate little habit for quite a while, but it seemed she'd still had the knack for it after all this time. Unfortunately for her, though, I was *back*. I'd reclaimed my true self, and that meant it was time for me to raise an uproar! My room was my world, and I was in total control of it! Like *hell* I'd quiet down that easily!

"Mwa ha ha! *Excellent*, O sister of mine! More! Make my wall *resound*!"

"Say *what*?"

"Mwa ha ha ha ha ha! Haaa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! I am *unparalleled*!"

A moment passed by, and just as I realized the next room over had gone oddly silent, my door swung open. Much to my shock, there she was: my sister, in the flesh. She'd given up on pounding on the wall and come over to personally intervene instead.



“H-Hey, Machi,” I said.

“*Who’s* unparalleled?”

“Wait... Wait, no, no, no, this isn’t fair! Pounding on the wall’s your whole role! This doesn’t work if you barge in here in person! You’re, like...oh, *you* know, one of those characters who gets lines sometimes, but never actually shows up on-screen! Right?”

“...”

“Mwa ha ha... Listen carefully, woman! Your overbearing arrogance has gone too far for too long! I recommend you back down and do as you’re told before I choose to unleash my *true* inner power!”

“...”

“H-Hey! Listen to me! C-Cut that out! Hurt me if you want, but you’re totally gonna unleash the evil alternate personality that’s sealed inside me if you do! My dark side’s gonna—”

“Hrrrah!”

“*Gyaaaaaaaaaah!*”

“Hiyah!”

“*Egaaaaaaaaaah!* St-Stop it, Machi! The human body’s not supposed to bend like this!”

“One, *two!*”

“*Aaaaaaaaugh!* Hark... It emerges... M-My lunch is about to make another appearance!”

“Hmmmh...”

“You’re storing up power?! What kind of charge attack is *that?!?*”

“Hmnhhhrrraahhhhhh...!”

“Okay, that’s *way* too much power! Stop charging! I-I’m sorry, okay?! You’re unparalleled, not me, so please, spare me the *gaaaaaaaaaaaauuggghhh!*”

And so, one winter’s day, a solitary hero let loose the first roar of his rebirth

and the deathly wail of his demise in immediate succession.

Chapter 8: Andou Jurai's Chuuni Spring—The Quickening of a Hero

My second year in middle school came to a close, I went up a grade level, and spring break came and went. On the very first day of the new academic year, before I went to school, I got in touch with Sagami and asked him to meet with me. I'd been avoiding him ever since that rainy day the winter before, but now, I called him out to the same park where we'd first met.

"Let me punch you, Sagami."

"What? No. Absolutely not. Really, please don't, I'm begging you! I'll apologize for whatever you want me to, so spare me!"

I ignored him and socked him right in his pretty little face. It was the first time in my life I'd ever punched someone, and I really sent him flying, earning myself a stinging pain in my fist that lasted long after the impact. They say that hitting someone hurts you as well, and I now had a personal appreciation for that fact.

"Ow, jeez... I could sue you for assault, you know?" Sagami spat. He was sprawled out on the ground and looked profoundly upset.

I walked over to him. "All right—now you hit me," I said.

"Huh? No way. Why would I?" asked Sagami.

"Whatever, just do it."

"I said no. I've never hit anyone before, and it'd probably really hurt my hand if I punched you."

I sighed.

"So I'll kick you instead," Sagami continued, doing just that the instant he made it back to his feet.

He nailed me right in the chest and laid me out flat on the ground, though I flew a fair distance before I got there. I'd heard that kicks are several times

more powerful than punches, and I'd just developed a personal appreciation for *that* fact as well. Plus, the fact that he was wearing shoes meant that *he* had taken basically no damage from the recoil. It was the most Sagami-like attack I could imagine, in a sense.

"Ugh," I grunted. "Y-You jerk, come on... You're supposed to *hit* me back! Isn't that how it always works in those high school dramas?!"

"Absolutely not," said Sagami. "No way would I dirty my own hands like that. My right hand and I have a passionate physical relationship, and I'd never hurt it intentionally."

"Would you *please* give the dirty jokes a rest for once in your life?!"

"Agh, ow! This still really hurts," Sagami said with a scowl as he gently prodded his rapidly reddening cheek. "What was the point of all this, anyway? First you mind your own business for months on end, then you call me here out of nowhere, and *then* you decide you want to play impassioned teenagers and trade punches? For the record, if you're still upset about the Tamaki thing and are trying to get even, you're lashing out at the wrong guy. The reader's never the one in the wrong!"

"Yeah, I know. I'm the only one who wronged myself here," I said as I picked myself up off the ground and brushed the dirt off my uniform. "You were just being yourself to the bitter end, and Tamaki was just being herself too. I'm the one who imposed a bunch of ideals on you, and it's my own fault that I got disappointed when you didn't live up to them."

What did I ever do for them, really? I'd hung out with them when they'd invited me to, messed around with them when I had nothing better to do, and that's about it. I'd never made any real effort to understand them, and I'd never done anything to help them understand me either. I'd called them my friends because it'd seemed convenient at the time, and the moment things went sour, I did a one-eighty and decided that they'd betrayed me, and that I'd been driven into despair, of all the over-dramatic nonsense. I'd played myself up as the victim for all I was worth.

"I only looked at the parts of you two that I wanted to see, and I never tried to face you as you really were. I only saw the things I liked about you, and the

moment I saw something I *didn't* like, I threw a crazed fit about it. So, yeah—I did the exact same thing that *you* did, Sagami.”

I'd just been another narrow-minded reader who'd only accepted the things he'd wanted to be true. The big difference between the two of us was that I hadn't been self-aware about it, which made my behavior all the worse in my mind.

“Let's be acquaintances, Sagami,” I said. “I can't stand people like you, so I won't be your friend anymore. Still, though, I know that if I run away from you now, I'll have to keep running my whole life. You'll keep weighing on my mind, no matter what I do, and I am *not* interested in letting that happen.”

“So...you're saying we'll settle on a happy middle ground and just be acquaintances instead?”

“That's right.”

“That makes *no* sense.”

“Yeah, I bet it doesn't. I don't really get it either.”

What I *did* get was the fact that if I totally broke off contact with Sagami here and now, he and Tamaki would both be lost to me forever. Their relationship with each other had been purely superficial, and my relationship with them had been one of convenience as well. It was all a sham from start to finish—all fiction. There was one thing about our relationship that'd been real, though: the sense of friendship that I'd felt for them, deep down. I'd really loved them.

“Hey, Sagami. You're only interested in things that can entertain you, right?” I asked, then dauntlessly flashed him a sneering grin. “Well then, you'd better keep your eyes on me. I have a feeling I'm gonna be *really* fun to watch from here on out.”

Sagami's eyes widened. This was the first time I'd ever seen him look that surprised.

“I'm done with running away from people,” I said. “If I decide that somebody's my friend, I'll face them head-on. I'll never betray my friends, and I'll never force my ideals onto them. I'll never be the sort of pathetic loser who builds up expectations for people and feels let down without ever even

involving them in the conversation again.” *I won’t run away anymore. Not from my friends, and not from the things I love.*

“If you’re gonna keep shouting on and on about the things you hate, then I’ll shout about the things I love.” *I won’t be the sort of guy who comes to hate the things he used to love at the slightest provocation. No, I’ll be someone who keeps loving the things he loves through thick and thin. I won’t give up on people because they have one little defect—I’ll try to find one thing that I like about them, and learn to like them on the whole by that virtue. And, finally, I’ll learn to like myself. I’ll live a life free of lies. I’ll prove how cool I can really be.*

“Mwa ha ha,” I laughed, finishing it all off with the coolest cackle I could muster.

“Heh. Heh heh, ha ha ha ha ha!” Sagami laughed as well. It wasn’t one of his usual flippant laughs, though. This was a full-on, mouth-wide-open laugh of genuine amusement. “Ha ha ha! Oh, that’s rich! I love it! Seriously, you’re something else! You’re the most interesting person out there...Andou.”

Andou, he’d called me. My family name. Just like I’d stopped calling him Sagamin, he’d drawn a line in the sand as well.

“I thought I’d seen all there was to see from you,” he continued. “But surprise surprise—looks like you’ve been renewed for a second season.”

“Mwa ha ha! You’d do well to not underestimate my true worth! The likes of *you* could never understand me in totality! Mwa ha ha!”

“Oof... Is it just me, or have you taken a pretty cringey turn since the last time I saw you? Did your chuunibyou relapse? Or maybe...is this the *real* you?” Sagami asked as he gave me an appraising glance.

I looked right back at him, staring at him with the same intensity I’d stare at someone who I was trying to curse with an evil eye. His gaze was as disturbing as ever, but I felt no need to run away from it anymore. After all...I’d reclaimed my true self. I was no longer Andou Jurai. No, my name was—

Sagami and I went our separate ways, and I met up with Hatoko to walk to school, just like always.

“You were a little late today, Juu,” Hatoko casually commented as we walked. “Did something happen?”

Juu. A nickname that only Hatoko had ever used. “You really need to stop calling me that, Hatoko,” I said with detached indifference. “We’re in our last year of middle school, you know? Isn’t it about time to give that tired old nickname a rest?”

A slight gloom came across Hatoko’s expression. “Yeah...okay,” she said. “What should I call you, then?”

Then I grinned. I grinned perhaps the biggest grin I’d ever grinned before. I’d spent all spring break thinking it through, and I’d finally settled upon my answer: the completed form of my true name. Hatoko, I’d decided, would be the first to hear it. I’d carve it into my soul, bearing it with me until someday, I could reunite with the girl I’d met that snowy evening.

“From now on, call me Guiltia Sin Jurai!”

Chapter 9: Guiltia Sin Jurai

After I finished recounting the tale of the darkest point in my history, Sayumi spent a moment just sitting there with a pensive look on her face. Before long, though, that expression faded away into a faint smile.

“Oh...I see now,” she said. “So, you really were telling the truth back when you said that this was the story of how you became Guiltia Sin Jurai.”

I nodded. “I’ve never run into that girl again, in the end—well, not yet, anyway. I went back to the park a bunch of times, but I never managed to find her there. Guess that was the last session of the monthly ritual she mentioned. It *was* December, so it sorta makes sense.”

Sayumi sank into silent thought, so I kept talking.

“Sometimes I wonder... Maybe that girl was some sort of god or whatever. Maybe she was the God of Chuunibyou, and she came to show me the error of my ways and steer me back along the right path.”

“Andou...” Sayumi began.

“Ah, I’m not being serious, of course! Just a joke, really. I’m not quite *that* far gone with my fantasies.”

“No, that isn’t what I meant,” Sayumi said, then paused for a moment, seeming to consider her words. “He he he... Yes, perhaps you’re right. Perhaps she *was* a god. After all, it’s difficult to believe that an ordinary human girl would ride a bike in an outlandish outfit like that in the middle of winter. But besides that, Andou, I...” she said, then hesitated again. “I remember hearing that you encountered Futaba Tamaki recently, didn’t you...?”

“I did,” I said. “She seemed like she was doing well, I guess? Same as ever, really.”

Tamaki told me that I’d sprung up—that is to say, grown up—since the last time she saw me, but personally, the moment I saw her, I thought that she hadn’t changed at all. She’d had the same bright smile as ever, she’d talked on

and on in the same thick accent...and she'd kept her arms and legs totally covered, just like always.

"Anyway, though, that's the end of my backstory," I said. "Thanks for being such a good audience."

"Thank *you* for being so forthcoming," said Sayumi.

"And about Sagami...do you get the picture now?" I asked, a slight sense of unease passing through my mind. "I'm in no position to tell you what to do, but personally, I'd recommend you try to keep your distance from him. It's not like he'd let you in if you tried to get close to him, anyway."

There's no getting close to a guy who lives in a totally different dimension. I'd learned that from firsthand experience, and judging by the nod Sayumi gave me, she was prepared to learn from my mistakes. She started getting her things together after that and was prepared to leave in short order. I figured she was trying to be polite, considering it was coming up on dinnertime.

"My apologies for imposing on you for so long," Sayumi said with a bow before leaving my house. I walked her out and stood by my front door to watch as she went on her way. After she was gone, I casually glanced upward to find countless brilliant stars shining in the summer sky above.

"Whoa, that's pretty," I muttered to myself. I knew that there were tens of thousands of light-years separating each and every one of them—a distance too impossibly vast for me to even conceptualize. People, however, have looked up at those stars, connected them together conceptually as constellations, and come up with stories and narratives to attribute to them. We've used fiction as a means to bring together stars that would otherwise never cross paths in any capacity.

Constellations aren't *real*, and stars glow because of scientific phenomena rather than some mystical power—yet the feelings and desires of people have bridged those tens of thousands of light-years to bind the stars together. In my eyes, that was something incredible. It was something indispensable for the sake of living as ourselves.

And so, I loved fiction. I gave it the affirmation it deserved. Even if it didn't *exist* in real life, the fiction within my heart was unmistakably genuine,

irreplaceable, and real. I believed that with all my heart and soul.



After parting with Andou, I pulled my cell phone out from my pocket, then took a look behind me to make sure he'd already returned inside, just for safety's sake. I'd walked far enough to feel confident that he wouldn't hear my voice regardless, but it was important enough to me that he did *not* hear the conversation I was about to have that the extra dose of caution felt necessary. I picked out a number I'd only recently saved to my phone's memory, and the boy I was calling answered immediately.

"Hello! You've reached Shizumu of the Sagami family," he said.

"Takanashi speaking," I replied. "Is now a good time, Sagami?"

I heard him chuckle. "Please, feel free to call me Sagamin! We've had this conversation several times now, haven't we?"

By now, of course, I knew that nickname's origin. I hadn't intended to use it before, and I *certainly* wasn't going to now. "I will not," I said. "I'll continue to call you Sagami, just like always, thank you very much."

"Will you now? That's a shame."

"I've just left Andou's house," I continued, "and I've heard all about his past—just like you told me to."

A few days after summer vacation began, I was abruptly contacted by Sagami, and he took me to Andou's home.

"I want you to go in there and ask Andou about his time in the eighth grade. Call me when you're all finished," he'd instructed me with no preamble whatsoever. "He likes to act like that period's some nasty stain on his history, and he definitely won't want to talk about it, but if you name-drop me, he should spill the beans no problem. You could say that you want to know more about me or something to that effect—he'll tell you everything, I'm sure. He *is* pretty on-guard when it comes to me, though, so I bet he'll want to warn you away."

Just like that, Sagami had gone along on his way. I'd been apprehensive about the situation, but in the end, I'd chosen to follow his instructions and knocked on Andou's door. Under ordinary circumstances, I would have informed him of my visit well in advance and brought a gift to thank him for his hospitality, but the abrupt nature of the matter meant that I'd lacked the time to do either of those things. The circumstances had been, to say the least, far from ideal.

"So, how was it?" asked Sagami. "I bet you were surprised by how fun his whole backstory was, huh? He was like a totally different person back then! I met him back when he was in his eighth-grade non-chuuni phase, so the way he acts right now feels unnatural to me, but when *you* met him, he'd already given up on giving chuuni up, so he was in his non-eighth-grade non-*non*-chuuni... Wow, this all sounds really complicated when I put it that way, huh?"

"Quite. The topic lends itself naturally to confusion," I said, although frankly, I was sure there could've been an easier way to phrase it.

"Well, anyway, the point's that eighth-grade Andou was like a totally different person. I guess if I wanted to say it like he would, I'd call one of them his normal self and the other his dark side? Not sure which is which, though. Who could even say who the *real* Andou Jurai actually is?" Sagami said in an almost gleeful tone of voice.

I would certainly never have described the story Andou told me as "fun," but that being said, I *was* glad I'd heard it. Andou was a boy with a borderline excessive capacity to care for his friends, and his case of chuunibyou had always struck me as unusually self-aware. Having heard about his past, I now felt that I was starting to understand where those traits had come from.

"I believe it's high time you explained yourself, Sagami," I said. "Why, exactly, did you have me ask Andou about his past?" I had been personally interested in the story, to be sure, and I was glad to have heard it, but I had little to no idea why *Sagami* would have been invested in me learning the particulars of Andou's history.

"Oh, Takanashi, please!" said Sagami. "You're smart enough to figure that out on your own, aren't you? In fact, I'd wager you already have."

I closed my eyes, sunk into thought for a few moments, then put my best guess into words. “You did so because the story of his time in the eighth grade—the time he calls the darkest point in his history—did *not* feature me in any capacity.”

“Bingo,” said Sagami. “I knew you had it in you! You’ve hit the nail on the head. You’re the only one of the four girls in the literary club who didn’t make an appearance during that era of his past—an era so important, you might even call it his roots.”

I fell silent, and a moment later, Sagami carried on.

“I’m sure you’ve already guessed who the girl he met at the park was, right?”

“Indeed. That was Tomoyo, I presume.” Andou had yet to realize it himself, but as an uninvolved party listening to his story from an outside perspective, I found it quite easy to guess. That said, this line of inquiry led me to a question of my own. “How did *you* know that it was her, though?” I asked. It struck me as strange, considering that I could only guess since I’d heard the story from Andou himself. I had a hard time believing he’d told Sagami about it.

“I have a few rather unique channels of information. As it so happens, I’ve known about Kanzaki Tomoyo since quite a long time ago. I don’t think that *she* knows much of anything about *me* other than my name, though. You might say I’m an acquaintance of her brother,” said Sagami. “But let’s get back on topic. You, Takanashi, are the only one who didn’t make an appearance during Andou’s time in the eighth grade. Kushikawa Hatoko was closer to him than anyone, Himeki Chifuyu missed meeting him by a hair’s breadth, and Kanzaki Tomoyo tied the whole story together at the very end of it all. In terms of foreshadowing, those three have *far* more plot threads tying them to him than you do.”

Once again, I fell silent.

“Being able to say ‘*Actually, we’ve met before*’ is an absurdly powerful weapon in any heroine’s arsenal. Maybe they made a promise together when they were kids or swore that they’d reunite someday—whatever the specifics, it’s a classic rom-com trope that’ll *never* go out of fashion, and for good reason. Compared to the other three, it’s plain as could be that *you’re* lacking in the

essential qualities that make a successful heroine. You remember when I told you that you were obviously the least popular heroine in the cast? This is why.”

“And that’s why you had me hear his story...?” I said. *So that I could grasp the whole situation before the other three manage to do so?* Sagami saw things from the detached perspective of a reader, and by sharing that perspective with me, he’d offered me an objective view of Andou’s history sooner than the others had been able to discern one.

“That’s right,” said Sagami. “There’s one other thing I was aiming for too. I wanted to help you figure out who your *real* enemy is.”

“My real enemy?”

“Let’s put it this way: I think you probably know very well who the main heroine is now, right?”

Kanzaki Tomoyo.

Kushikawa Hatoko.

Himeki Chifuyu.

Takanashi Sayumi.

Who, out of those four, could the main heroine be?

“Not like there’s any need to ask, really. The main heroine’s obviously Kanzaki Tomoyo,” Sagami continued. “She’s the one who dragged Andou back into his chuuni ways long after he’d abandoned them. You could even say that she’s the one who *changed* him. She drove away the spirit that was possessing him—or brought in another one to possess him again, I guess. Whichever.”

Andou Jurai’s history featured a dark, gaping void into which a lone silver knight had shined a piercing light—and that knight was Tomoyo.

“She’s this story’s main heroine. No question about it,” said Sagami, declaring it as a simple matter of fact that he, a reader, was capable of perceiving effortlessly. “If this were a light novel, she’d *definitely* be on the cover of the first volume. If the series got an anime, its editor and publisher would insist on slapping her onto the latest volume’s cover again as a gimmick to boost sales, even if it totally broke the sequence and styles of the covers thus far. That’s the

sort of weight her character carries.”

A pause ensued.

“Listen to me, Takanashi. If you want to claim the title of main heroine for yourself, you’re going to need to drag Kanzaki Tomoyo down from her position first. You have to destroy her. There’s no other way.”

“‘Destroy her’? That’s a brutal way of putting it,” I said. “It seems rather excessive, considering we’re discussing the love lives of a group of high schoolers.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I didn’t mean it in a *physical* sense!” said Sagami. “I mean you’ll have to destroy her status as a heroine. If you let things play out naturally, it’s only a matter of time before Andou connects the dots and realizes that the girl from his past is, in fact, none other than Kanzaki Tomoyo. That’s the direction this story’s heading in right now, and the moment he figures it out? Story’s over.”

“The story’s over”—in other words, Andou would come to a decision as to who he’ll choose, presumably.

“You’re going to have to be *very* careful to make sure that Andou doesn’t arrive at that conclusion, Takanashi,” said Sagami. “She doesn’t seem inclined to reveal the truth to him herself, but you never know when she might have a change of heart. You’ll have to keep her on a tight leash. Fortunately, you’re the president of her club. Considering your station, I figure you’ll have a pretty easy time working things out, huh?”

“So...*that’s* what you believe I should be doing?” I asked.

“As long as you can shut her down, you’ll be able to reset the whole playing board and start the story over with a blank slate. It’s the only choice that keeps you in the running. Don’t worry—you see sub-heroines supplanting the main heroine in popularity every once in a while, and it’s not like rom-coms *never* pair the main guy up with a sub-heroine in the end!”

I felt a faint chill run down my spine. The things he was saying to me were cryptic and borderline incomprehensible. I was struggling to make sense of any of it. I couldn’t understand his viewpoint, or his perspective, or even what he

was thinking on a basic level. The words “cosmic horror” flashed into my mind—in that moment, I was feeling the very sort of instinctual terror the genre strove to evoke.

“Sagami...what, exactly, are you trying to accomplish?”

“I’ve told you before, haven’t I? I’m a reader, and all I want is to read something interesting.”

“And to do that...you’d willingly sacrifice your friends and lovers?”

“*Sacrifice* them? I wouldn’t dream of it! All I do is watch. I watch, and then I freely hand out my disgustingly condescending opinions about how things played out, despite the fact that *I* never did anything at all.”

Another short silence fell before Sagami spoke up again.

“Let’s run through a hypothetical, shall we? Imagine that a character in a manga or a novel somehow gained awareness of their readers. Do you know what that character would think of their spectators? They’d *despise* them. After all, while the characters had been struggling their hardest to live their lives, fighting in epic battles, or playing out dramatic romances, the readers were just watching from on high, judging their lives as being ‘funny,’ or ‘boring, or ‘a masterpiece,’ or ‘garbage.’ The readers would look like a bunch of worthless, arrogant critics, and nothing more.”

Sagami was muttering to himself. I couldn’t understand what he was talking about in the least, but his tone struck me as somewhat self-deprecating. What *would* a character in a work of fiction think if they learned about their readers? I had no answer—it was a question I would’ve never even thought to consider on my own.

“And Tamaki?” I said.

“Huh?”

“What are your thoughts regarding her?”

“Can’t say I have any,” said Sagami. “I was into heroines like her for a while, but I’m over that phase. That’s about it.”

“So then...your nickname, ‘Sagamin.’ You’re *not* clinging to it out of a sense of

guilt you feel toward her?”

Another pause ensued. This time, for just a moment, *Sagami* had fallen silent. I had to wonder what the look on his face might’ve told me if we’d been speaking in person, rather than over the phone.

“Oh, *please*, Takanashi!” Sagami finally said. “Don’t try to foreshadow some sort of big twist that reveals I’m actually a nice guy at heart! I just took a liking to that nickname, that’s all. Nothing deeper to it than that.”

“Is that so?”

“Anyway, I think we can call it a day! I’ll get in touch next time I come up with a fun idea. Nighty-night!”

With that lighthearted farewell, Sagami hung up. I stowed my phone in my pocket and looked up to the sky. “I simply can’t comprehend that boy,” I sighed to myself.

Sagami Shizumu’s thought processes were completely opaque to me. The one thing that I could say for sure was that everything he had said to me had been solely for the sake of his own amusement. It was like how readers of manga tended to doodle manga of their own on a whim every once in a while. He didn’t have any real goal or intent behind his maneuvering—he’d leaped into it on a whim and would give it up the moment he lost interest. He was acting not for someone else’s sake, but rather for his own self-satisfaction, and he seemed to believe the world existed for that purpose. Of course, all that being said...

“...I hardly have a right to criticize him, seeing as we’ve joined forces.”

My apologies, Andou. I’ve taken advantage of your goodwill to drag the story of your past out of you. I may have been guided along this path by someone else, but the decision to walk it was mine and mine alone. I did so knowing perfectly well that it was a horrid means to my ends.

Still, though...in spite of everything, I simply wanted to understand you.

Afterword

This might seem random, but I'm the sort of person who never wants to meet their heroes if I can possibly help it. I genuinely never, ever want to encounter the cartoonists I love, the musicians I'm into, or the authors I respect in person.

Why? Simply put, I don't want to be disillusioned. I would prefer for the people I admire to stay at a safe distance from me. I don't want to hear a cartoonist I love explain that their story's whole backstory was retconned in after the fact, and I don't want to know that a singer I like autotunes their voice and can't hold a tune in person. If I read an incredible book, I want to believe that its author is a total hunk, and I'll go out of my way to avoid meeting them in order to maintain that belief.

On that note, the way it seems that idols, performers, creators, and artists are growing closer to their audiences lately just doesn't do it for me. I'd prefer for the people on the other side of my TV screen to *remain* there, and I'd prefer for the people who feel like they exist in a realm far above me to not come down to my level. People who live in a different world from me can stay there, thank you very much.

That said, I realize that I might only feel that way because I'd rather run from the truth than face it. Perhaps I'm opting to force my own convenient assumptions on my heroes, to think they're geniuses and claim that I'll be their fan for life, stringing together platitudes and refusing to so much as consider that they're operating in the same playing field as I am.

I wonder—is it just human nature to want the people you like to be perfect?

Anyway, that preamble's gone on for long enough—hello! This is Kota Nozomi. This time around, I wrote about a topic I've been wanting to address for a very long time: Andou's time in the eighth grade. This volume felt like something of a culmination of everything I've written so far, and I had a blast putting Andou through the agonies of struggling to reconcile fiction with reality and ideals with disillusionment. I also finally did it...I wrote an entire volume in

which not even a single supernatural power gets used. This series's title is starting to feel awfully inaccurate, all things considered.

Apropos of nothing, a major announcement:

When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace will be receiving an anime adaptation!

I'm sure a lot of people are going to be surprised by this announcement, but trust me, I was *definitely* the most shocked of all to hear that an anime had been locked in. I mean, you have to consider that I learned about this quite a while ago! I was so tempted to spread the news around you wouldn't believe it, and now I can finally shout it out from the hilltops.

The production will be handled by Studio TRIGGER, who are famous for their work on *Kill la Kill*. I've met with the production staff on a number of occasions, and I have to say that I'm incredibly grateful to them for the sheer depth of attention they've paid to my original work. We've had multiple exchanges where they were like "So, about this scene—is *this* what you meant when you wrote this part?" and I was like "Right, yeah... It was probably something along those lines..."

All sorts of information about the anime will be announced in the near future, I imagine, so please stay tuned! And while we're on the subject, the manga adaptation's first volume is scheduled to be released quite soon as well. Oh, and I doubt anyone really cares, but just in case: I got married the other day!

Now then, time for the acknowledgments.

First, to my editor: Thank you, as always, for your hard work! I'm sure it must be incredibly difficult to deal with multiple series under your watch getting anime adaptations at the same time, so do try not to overwork yourself, if possible. Next, to my illustrator, 029: Thank you once again for your wonderful drawings! I'm sure things are only going to get busier for us with the anime coming up, so let's give it our all! Last, and most of all, I offer my utmost of gratitude to the readers who've stuck with me for six whole volumes.

May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

A Preview for Next Time: Kanzaki Tomoyo's Eleventh-Grade Summer

When it comes to shonen manga and light novels, everyone knows that the protagonists are called heroes and heroines. When it comes to shojo manga, though, a super obvious label along those lines doesn't really come to mind for me. Does it make sense to call the female lead in a shojo manga its heroine? And, like...is the guy the hero? Does that mean that shojo manga can have main heroes and sub-heroes?

"Ugh, why am I wasting time thinking about this pointless crap? I should be *writing*, dang it!"

I turned back to my desk, focused once more on my beloved laptop, and started typing away again. Part of me wondered if it really counted as "writing" when, technically, I was *typing* rather than physically writing out words with my own hand, but considering that the vast majority of the authors out there had gone digital in this day and age, I figured that calling it writing was probably perfectly valid.

I'd spent pretty much all of my time since the start of summer vacation focused on my writing. You'd think some contest's deadline was approaching, considering how hard I was working at it, but nope, nothing of the sort. I wasn't even writing something I'd ever consider publishing—instead, I was working on a story purely for the fun of it. It was a work I'd started writing back in middle school purely because I'd wanted to, and I never planned on letting *anyone* read it, so putting it out into the world at large? Forget it!

A story like that didn't give me any deadlines to worry about, of course, and since I'd been scratching away at it on and off for years at that point, I honestly didn't even know why I still bothered. I just wanted to immerse myself in *something*, really. I wanted to find something to obsess over in an effort to escape from reality, and picking up the novel I'd been writing for fun had been my first idea.

As long as I had something to focus on, I wouldn't have to deal with any nagging thoughts I otherwise would've had to confront. The contest I'd submitted a work to was supposed to publish the results from its second round of judging within the week, according to its editorial department. I'd *like* to say that I wasn't all that concerned about the results, but, I mean, of course I was. That wasn't the *only* thing I had weighing on me, though.

I thought back to right before summer vacation—to the day I found myself in the literary club's room after school, all alone with Hatoko. We spoke, and I—
Bvvvt!

"*Gyaaah?!"*

A sudden buzzing noise rang out, and I practically curled up in a fetal position on my chair with shock.

"O-Oh, just my phone? Come *on*," I muttered. *Hooly crap, that scared me. Hearing three Vs in a row took me right back to Valvrave for a second there.* I glanced at my phone, which I'd left lying by my computer, and saw that my mom was calling me.

"Hello? Tomo?" she said as I picked up. "Sorry, but do you think you could go pick up a few things from the store for me?"

"Why are you *calling* me, mom?" I sighed. "You're down on the first floor, aren't you?"

"Well, I *tried* shouting for you, but you didn't hear me!" my mom countered. I'd been so focused on my writing, it seemed, that I'd accidentally ignored her.

"Okay, but you know you're just driving up the phone bill by calling me like this, right?"

"Oh, no need to worry about that! We're on Softbank's White Plan, and that means we have unlimited texts *and* minutes within our family, twenty-four hours a day!"

"..."

"Nobody beats Softbank when it comes to phone plans! No siree! Softbank's number one!"

Why does it feel like I'm low-key living in a commercial right now...?

"Anyway, thanks in advance, Tomo!"

"Ugggh..."

"Oh, don't you groan at me. When was the last time you took a look outside? It's a beautiful day, and you're spending it cooped up in your room! It's not good for you."

"Fiiine," I moaned. "I get it, okay?"

"That's my girl! Oh, and I've got something nice to give you as thanks for running the errands for me," my mom said, then hung up.

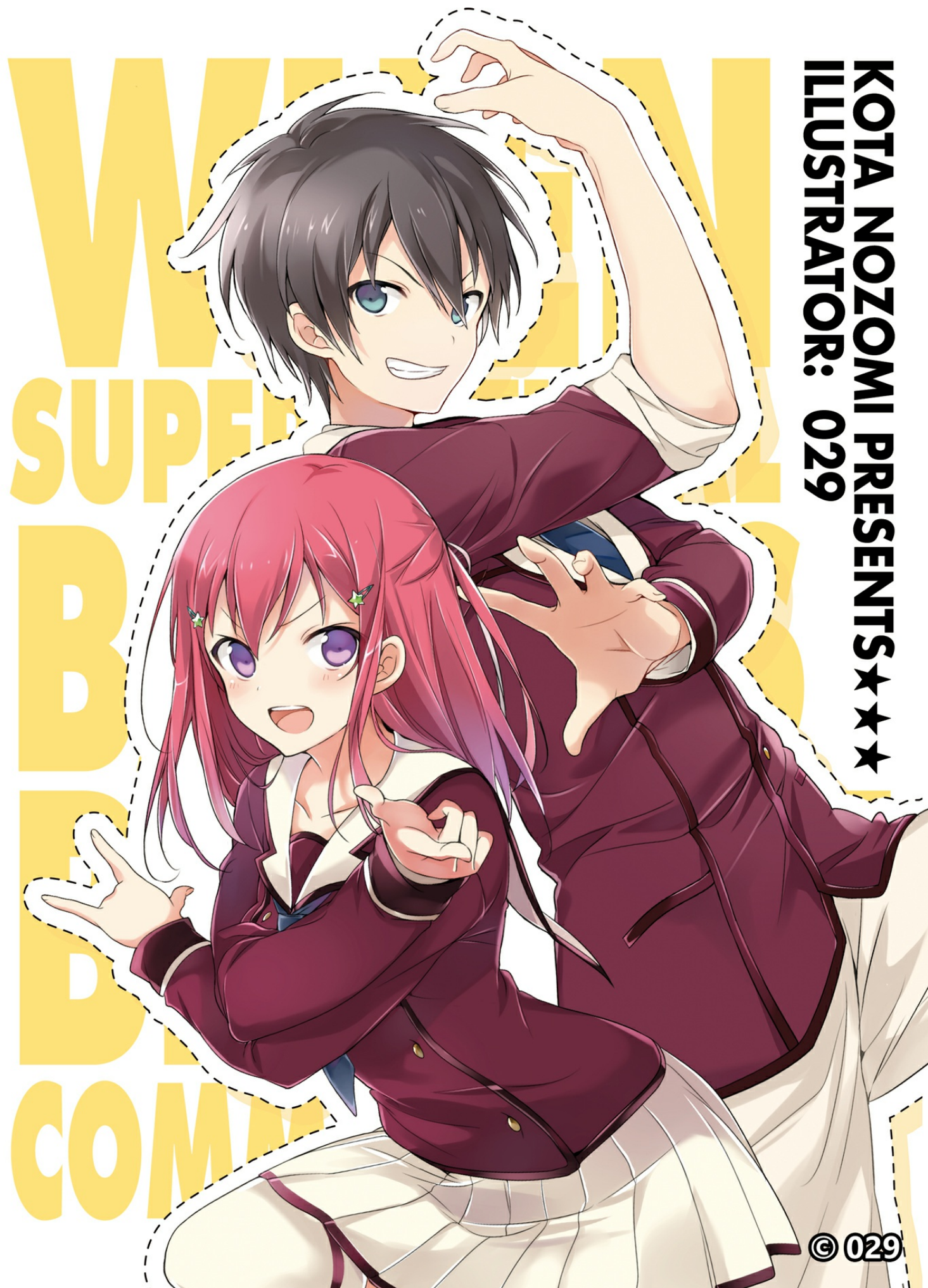
I saved the document I'd been working on, put my computer to sleep, and left my room. My mom was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs with her shopping bag, her wallet, and the "something nice" she'd mentioned held at the ready. It seemed I'd be paid in advance for my services.

"Seriously...?" I grunted as she handed everything over to me.

"One of your father's coworkers gave it to him, apparently," my mom said. "You've barely left the house all week, even though it's summer vacation, right? Go out and get some sun! It'll be good for you! I bet you've even got a boy you have your eye on to invite along while you're at it!"

My mom returned to the kitchen, and I looked back down at the ticket she'd passed me—a pair ticket for free entry into the public pool.

KOTA NOZOMI PRESENTS★★★
ILLUSTRATOR: 029



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Bonus Translation Notes: On Drama CDs, Part 1

In the previous volume's translation notes, I dug into the many forms of non-novel media that the *Supernatural Battles* franchise spawned over the course of its run. One of the most intriguing items that I managed to find evidence of was a pair of drama CDs, and I promised to try to get ahold of them and write about them for a future TL notes section. Well, I'm pleased to report that the future is now, dear readers: I've managed to import the first *Supernatural Battles* drama CD and listen to it in its entirety, and I have all the details about what goes down in this all but mythical piece of side content!

Before I dig into the actual story, a little context: the CD was initially released in mid-May of 2013, which places it just a little while after volume three came out and over a year before the anime's first episode aired. That second fact is the important one and explains one of the most interesting aspects of the CD: it does *not* feature the same cast of voice actors as the anime! I can't even begin to speculate why the drama CD's cast didn't return for the adaptation, but the end result is us getting to see two very different takes on the cast, which I'll discuss more later.

First, though, the question of the hour: what the *heck* is the drama CD about? The answer, it turns out, is very simple: it's, uh...well, it's basically just volume one. There are seven tracks, the first of which uses the "sparring in Chifuyu's wasteland" scene as a cold open, and then the remaining six are an abridged rendition of volume one's major scenes. The whole thing clocks in at a little over an hour, and there aren't any major additions or alterations to the story—most of the narration and dialogue are pulled directly from the source material.

So, yeah—a bit of an anticlimax, from a certain perspective, but on the other hand, it's also kind of good news! It means, after all, that there's precisely zero exclusive content in the CD, story-wise. You could skip it entirely and miss literally nothing whatsoever in terms of the series' overall plot, and considering how hard it is to get your hands on the stupid thing, the odds are pretty good that most readers will, unfortunately, have no choice in the matter.

A total lack of new story content, however, doesn't mean that there's nothing interesting to discuss regarding the CD. In other words, it's time to swing back to that line of thought I set up three paragraphs back: the cast. Oh, *boy*, the cast! Most of the voice actors who played a role in the drama CD offered a *very* different take on their character than their anime counterparts, and I thought I'd take the rest of this section to go through the list and give my own takes on what makes their performances so interesting.

Let's start with the character who gets far and away the most speaking time on account of him reading most of the narration: Andou! In the anime, Andou was portrayed by Okamoto Nobuhiko, who gave him a fantastic degree of manic chuuni energy that sold his role in the cast super well. Drama CD Andou, however, was voiced by Miyano Mamoru, a voice actor known recently for his role as Mario Mario in the *Mario* movie, as well as a few other past roles that nobody really talks about. Y'know, Yagami Light from *Death Note*, Okabe Rintaro from *Steins;Gate*, JJ from *Yuri!!! on Ice*, Lin from *Fullmetal Alchemist*, Kida from *Durarara!!*, the producer guy from *Zombieland Saga*—obscure characters who aren't at *all* universally iconic.

...So, yeah, they got an industry legend to play Andou, and *dang* does he ever kill the role! It's no surprise whatsoever that Miyano can do chuuni excess very, *very* well—after all, he'd just played the main character of *Steins;Gate* in 2009, and again for its anime adaptation in 2011 (put a pin in that, we'll be coming back to it in a minute). Nobody can shout hyperdramatic nonsense and make it sound both completely absurd and completely sincere quite like him, and he wields that skill to incredible effect here.

What I find really remarkable about Miyano's portrayal of Andou, though—and what sets him apart from Okamoto's portrayal, which nails the chuuni element as well—is how much more *grounded* Miyano's Andou comes across for large portions of his focus time. Part of that, I think, is on account of how much more narrating Miyano had to do than Okamoto. We see into Andou's thought process *much* more directly in the drama CD format, so we have way more opportunities to hear him speak without his chuuni persona obfuscating his thoughtful side. It lends a really different air to his character overall, and it makes it evident that he is much more considerate than his behavior suggests a

lot sooner than in the anime. That's not criticism, by the way—the anime's pacing benefits greatly from Andou just looking like a pure goofball at first and developing depth as time goes on—but it really makes me wish we could've seen Miyano's take on some of the later, more dramatic content in the series.

Moving right along, up next is Tomoyo, who was played by Yamazaki Haruka in the anime and Imai Asami in the drama CD! Imai's another industry veteran who's played a ton of roles, but my attention was instantly drawn to one role in particular when I learned she'd been cast as Tomoyo: Makise Kurisu from *Steins;Gate*. That's right—they *actually* cast Okabe as Andou and Kurisu as Tomoyo, and nothing will ever be able to convince me that they didn't do it on purpose. That being said, Imai isn't really channeling Kurisu in her portrayal of Tomoyo any more so than Miyano channels Okabe. They have great chemistry in their verbal sparring matches, unsurprisingly, but they also don't recycle the *Steins;Gate* dynamic at all.

As for how Imai sounds as Tomoyo, I struggle to describe how her portrayal contrasts with Yamazaki's because they actually both went with very similar takes on the character! Imai maybe comes across as a little less shouty-fed up and a little more calm-fed up than Yamazaki sometimes, but all things considered, their performances hit remarkably similar beats in a lot of ways.

Now, a character who *doesn't* hit similar beats—like, at *all*—is Hatoko. Hayami Saori's performance as Hatoko is downright iconic (thanks in no small part to a certain rant), so taking on the character was going to be a tall order no matter *how* you sliced it, but honestly, Kanemoto Hisako's Hatoko is so different from Hayami's Hatoko that I don't even know where to start comparing them. Kanemoto's Hatoko has a much higher-pitched voice, to start, and sounds...well, for lack of a better descriptor, much more *teenager* than Hayami's distinctively gentle, spacy tone. It's kind of remarkable how different her character feels as a result of that shift—I like it a lot, but wow, was it a shock at first!

Sayumi comes across very differently as well, in a somewhat similar way. Taneda Risa gave anime Sayumi a very confident, in-control sort of tone, whereas Hara Yumi's drama CD Sayumi comes across as much more quiet and reserved. Where Taneda's Sayumi felt somewhat domineering (i.e. when she

punishes Andou for his antics), Hara's Sayumi feels much more matter-of-fact. It's a subtle shift for the character, but one that does a lot to change how she comes across!

Last but not least, Chifuyu! This is another case where the anime and drama CD portrayals hit very similar marks. Yamashita Nanami's anime Chifuyu is maybe a little more monotone while Kugimiya Rie's drama CD Chifuyu is somewhat more quiet and whispery, but overall, I'd call them quite similar—though the fact that she has the least dialogue out of the main cast might play a factor in why I don't have quite as much to say about her.

Okay, I'm almost out of space, so lightning round time for the rest of the cast: Asumi Kana's Kudou feels a little calmer and less angry when she's in incognito mode, and a little more panicked and pathetic when everything goes south for her, Seki Tomokazu plays a surprisingly restrained Kiryuu, and Leatia's barely in it, but Otsubo Yuka does a good job sounding adequately exhausted with Kiryuu for the few lines she's given!

And, that's that for the drama CD! It's a really interesting piece of series history, and if you ever get the chance, I'd definitely recommend tracking it down and giving it a listen, but rest assured that if you can't, you're not missing any vitally important content. That being said, you might recall I said there were *two* drama CDs...but since the second one came packaged with volume ten, I'll be waiting to cover it until then. Instead, you can tune in next time for a discussion of the anime adaptation, assuming I haven't decided to write something different by the time I have to get that note section done. In the meantime, we have a *lot* of references to cover this volume, so let's get right to it!

Chapter 1

△ Mencius's belief in the fundamental good of humanity!

Mencius was a Chinese philosopher who was prominent in the fourth century BC. Andou does a pretty nice job of going over the general gist of his fundamental good theory, so I won't dig too deep into the details thereof, but it *is* worth noting that said theory—and Mencius's work in general—was both heavily informed by and important to the development of Confucian philosophy.

△ Xunzi's belief that human nature is evil!

Xunzi was one of Mencius's younger contemporaries, having been born around sixty years after him. Again, Andou covers the broad strokes of his theory pretty decently, and again, his work fell under the umbrella of Confucianism.

△ Socrates's concept of knowing that you know nothing!

Socrates was a Greek philosopher who lived and worked just about a century before Mencius. Technically speaking, the concept in question comes from Plato's account of Socrates, rather than Socrates himself. There's a lot of debate regarding the precise phrasing, and sometimes it's referred to as a paradox, but it seems fairly generally accepted that the point of the concept is to emphasize the importance of acknowledging and accepting your own ignorance.

△ Plato's theory of forms!

Plato was another Greek philosopher, and one of Socrates's students. The theory of forms, meanwhile, is frankly a pretty esoteric philosophical theory that digs into the essence of reality itself, seeking to explain the physical world through ideal, fundamental concepts (or rather, forms). This one's way too complex to sum up in a single paragraph, but it's fascinating to read up on if you're ever in the mood to wrap your head around something pretty

philosophically challenging.

△ *Hobbes's Leviathan!*

We're jumping ahead almost two millennia here, since Thomas Hobbes was an Englishman who lived in the seventeenth century. Unlike Andou's previous allusions, *Leviathan* is a specific book rather than a broad theory or philosophy. That said, it's very much a book that ties in to both! More specifically, it's a fundamental text of social contract theory, which is all about how states function and derive power over individuals.

△ *Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra!*

We're moving ahead another hundred or so years here! Friedrich Nietzsche lived in the nineteenth century and is largely associated with nihilist philosophy. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a work of philosophical fiction that Nietzsche wrote that focuses on a hermit named, well, Zarathustra, who has a lot of ideas that he shares with a lot of people, among which is the ever-famous "God is dead."

△ *Descartes's principle of cogito, ergo sum: I think, therefore I am!*

And now we're going back in time to the seventeenth century! René Descartes was a French philosopher and scientist who is perhaps one of the most influential western philosophers of all time, having established concepts and ideas that are studied to this day. "I think, therefore I am" is a particularly famous and significant concept that many other philosophical theories rest upon, asserting that the thinker's ability to question their existence is, in and of itself, proof that they do, in fact, exist.

△ *The famed eighteenth-century German literary movement: Sturm und Drang!*

The Sturm und Drang movement did indeed occur in eighteenth-century Germany, and it involved a number of significant philosophical figures producing works of music and literature that expressed their ideas. The nature of those ideas is varied and complicated, but it boils down to a reaction against

the Enlightenment-age philosophy that had been prominent in Europe for quite some time beforehand.

△ *That's how they use it in KochiKame, and that's gotta be worth something...*

Oh thank goodness, this one's from an anime! Well, a manga, originally —*KochiKame* was an extraordinarily long-running series in *Shonen Jump*, written by Osamu Akimoto. The series revolves around Ryotsu Kankichi, a police officer in Tokyo, and the various high jinks he gets up to. It was also something of an institution, running from 1976 to 2016, which makes it the longest continuously running manga in history and the third longest by volume count, clocking in at a total of 201 volumes (for context, *One Piece* is at 104 and counting).

△ *I just did a tiny bit of research into it after Nyaruko made me curious, honestly.*

We've covered *Nyaruko* before, but that was way back in volume two, and it bears brief repeating because of how absurd it is: *Nyaruko: Crawling with Love* is a light novel series that portrays the various horrific, mind-melting eldritch entities of the Cthulhu mythos as cute anime waifus. It's worth noting that the works of Lovecraft are actually quite popular in Japan, with the *Call of Cthulhu* tabletop RPG in particular being very well-known and widely played (and is one of the primary sources that informs *Nyaruko*'s humor).

△ *"The avatar of chuunibyou," I repeated. Y'know, that actually has a kinda nice ring to it. Feels like it could play a mean game of Hyperdimensional Soccer.*

In this particular instance, "avatar" is being used in the *Inazuma Eleven* sense of the word! *Inazuma Eleven* originated as a soccer video game created by Level-5 (of *Yokai Watch*, *Professor Layton*, and *Dark Cloud* fame), and it quickly became popular enough to grow into an entire media franchise in its own right. The games are cartoony and over the top, as perhaps best exemplified by the

avatars themselves—introduced in *Inazuma Eleven GO* for the Nintendo 3DS, they can more or less be described as soccer Stands (see the past several volumes’ worth of *JoJo* references for context on that comparison).

Hyperdimensional Soccer, meanwhile, is a term reportedly first coined in the franchise’s first anime adaptation. It’s worth noting that while only one of the games in the series (the original *Inazuma Eleven*) has been released in the United States, almost all of them have been brought out to the UK.

Chapter 2

△ *So hey, Sayumi—how long did you believe in Santa Claus for?*

Given the specific phrasing, this is almost certainly a deliberate shoutout to the opening line of *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, an incredibly influential light novel series by Tanigawa Nagaru that was adapted into an equally influential anime by Kyoto Animation. The first book in the series opens with the main character discussing the very question that Andou asks (and dismissing it as a question so worthless it would never even come up in idle small talk).

△ *Gregor Samsa may have woken up one morning to the sudden realization that he'd transformed into a monstrous insect...*

Gregor Samsa is the unfortunate protagonist of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, who does indeed wake up to find that he's turned into an abomination for seemingly no reason! Spoilers: it doesn't end well for him.

△ *I knew that Araki Hirohiko wasn't a wielder of the Ripple, and I was aware that Kubo Tite and KBTIT were not, in fact, the same person.*

These two seemingly obvious fun facts are in reference to the meme culture surrounding the creators of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* and *Bleach*, respectively! The creator of *JoJo*, Araki Hirohiko, is notoriously ageless. You'd never think he was sixty just looking at him, and since wielders of Hamon in *JoJo* age at a slower rate than most people, the jokes more or less write themselves.

The Kubo Tite and KBTIT connection, meanwhile, is a little more elaborate. Kubo Tite is the author of *Bleach*, while KBTIT is the commonly used fan nickname for a gay porn star (stage name Takuya) whose work was appropriated for meme purposes in the mid-to late-2000s on Japanese forums. The two men share a somewhat striking resemblance to each other, and the meme that they were, in fact, the same person is what earned KBTIT his popular nickname.

△ I knew that Luffy and Krillin were voiced by the same person—same for Usopp, L, and Feitan; Toriko and Nube; Gin, Joseph, and Switch; and plenty of others.

These are all entirely true! Luffy (*One Piece*) and Krillin (*Dragon Ball*) are both voiced by Tanaka Mayumi; Usopp (*One Piece*), L (*Death Note*), and Feitan (*Hunter x Hunter*) are voiced by Yamaguchi Kappei; Toriko (*Toriko*) and Nube (*Hell Teacher Nube*) are voiced by Okiayu Ryoutaro; and Gin (*Gintama*), Joseph (*JoJo*), and Switch (*Sket Dance*) are voiced by Sugita Tomokazu (one of my personal all-time favorite voice actors!).

△ I was just doing some solo Danganronpa role-playing over here, that's all.

Danganronpa is a series of video games that revolve primarily around investigating and solving murders that occur under extremely weird and wacky circumstances! The games involve extended trials and interrogations, and several of Sagami's lines during this sequence are directly quoting things that the characters shout during those sequences.

△ And he's pulling his background music from the Legal High soundtrack.

Legal High is a popular legal drama that was originally broadcast from 2012 to 2013. If you want to hear the theme song that Sagami's humming here, a google search for "Legal High Yuki Hayashi" (Yuki Hayashi being the song's composer) will pull it right up (and you should—frankly, it's kind of a bop).

△ This isn't a Bugs Bunny sketch!

This is one of the relatively rare jokes that had to be significantly adapted for the sake of comprehensibility! In the original Japanese, Andou refers to Dachou Club, a three-person comedy group well-known for a routine in which two members trick the third into volunteering for an undesirable task. Since Dachou Club are entirely unknown outside of Japan and information on them in general is scarce, let alone information on their classic routines, an equivalent was needed. Thankfully, *Looney Tunes* happened to make use of an almost identical comedic bit with some regularity that slotted in perfectly to the context of the

scene and even hit a similar “referencing a comedic but slightly dated TV show that most people would be familiar with” sort of tone.

△ Kakashi once questioned whether there’s anything duller than listening to someone else brag...

That would be Kakashi the *Naruto* character, of course, and the line in question occurs quite early on in the series, in chapter 26.

△ I think she probably would’ve picked a fight with Hanma Yuujirou himself if he’d decided to pick on Sagami.

Hanma Yuujirou is the antagonist of *Baki*, in which he’s referred to as “the strongest creature on earth.” In other words: *not* a guy you’d want to fight!

Chapter 3

△ That would be because the singer's a Vocaloid.

In this context, “Vocaloid” refers to the characters who personify the Vocaloid voice synthesis program! Essentially, the program allows its users to use voice samples to synthesize an artificial lyrical track for music. Each version of the program has an avatar that represents it, the most famous by far being Hatsune Miku, and a whole subculture of music and media has risen up around the software and its avatars since the release of Vocaloid 2 (the version that introduced Miku) in 2007.

△ Sagami suggested that we start things off by all playing a round of Idolmaster...

The Idolmaster (sometimes stylized as *THE iDOLM@STER*) franchise is a series of simulation and rhythm games that kicked off an enormous multimedia franchise that continues to this day! Broadly speaking, the franchise revolves around the player (or protagonist) training a group of pop idols in an effort to raise them to superstardom. The very first version of the game was released as an arcade machine in 2005, and though home console versions came not long after, it maintained a presence in arcades for quite some time.

△ And that's the mindset of a man who's about to lose his shirt at a pachinko parlor.

Pachinko is an extremely popular and omnipresent game in Japan, and pachinko parlors are facilities set up exclusively for the purpose of playing it. The game itself is sort of an odd mixture of pinball and slot machines, with the goal being to send small metal balls into particular holes in a vertical pegboard. Modern pachinko machines are loud, flashy, elaborately designed, and often based on licensed media properties.

It's hard to overstate the popularity of pachinko, which ties directly into the idea of how one would lose their shirt at what's ostensibly just a game:

pachinko is often considered a form of gambling that falls into a legal gray area. While gambling for real money is illegal in Japan, pachinko parlors ostensibly do not pay out in actual money—or at least, not within the premises of the parlors themselves. It’s an open secret that the “prizes” the parlors offer can be exchanged for cash at a nearby, supposedly separate business, and that loophole has led to the game gaining a dominant degree of popularity and becoming a symbol of gambling addiction across the nation.

△ “Maybe I should approach the situation from another angle... Maybe I should pretend to let it have my money!”

This line echoes a piece of advice given to Jonathon Joestar by his father in the early chapters of *JoJo* (though in that context, he was referring to a dog rather than a crane game).

△ Juu’s putting on a performance worthy of Tatsuya Fujiwara!

Tatsuya Fujiwara is an actor, known among other things for playing Yagami Light in the live-action *Death Note* adaptations and Kaiji in the *Kaiji* films. As one familiar with those characters might imagine, he did an awful lot of screaming in those roles and seems to have developed a bit of a reputation for it, at least circa this novel’s release.

△ He’s gone on a binge! Jurai’s binged his way through four thousand yen! Jurai’s filled with regret!

These lines are very closely paraphrasing lines of narration from *Kaiji*, a manga by Fukumoto Nobuyuki revolving around a deadbeat gambling addict who ends up drowning in debt and being forced to participate in incredibly high-stakes gambles, often with his life on the line. Kaiji is prone to bouts of self-destructive indulgence, and this line occurs after he’s tempted into spending money he can’t afford to lose on food he doesn’t need.

△ In this world, the weak are the sustenance of the strong. The strong live. The weak die...

As Sagami notes, Andou's quoting Shishio Makoto here, an antagonist from *Rurouni Kenshin* (who was *also* played by Tatsuya Fujiwara in the series' live-action adaptation).

△ *Phew! I feel better.*

Back to *JoJo*! Andou's quoting Esidisi, one of the villains from Part 2 who at one point throws a screaming, sobbing fit after a minor setback in a battle. Note that only Part 4 of *JoJo* has received a live-action adaptation, which Tatsuya Fujiwara did not have a role in.

△ *I see it now—that flimsy claw is shaped like something designed to take lives...*

We're back to *Bleach* this time! Andou's quoting Hisagi Shuhei here, who describes his zanpakuto (a shinigami's signature weapon) in essentially these same terms.

△ *I'm gonna hit up the Vocaloid game before we go.*

Sagami's referring to the *Project Diva* franchise here, a series of rhythm games notable for featuring exclusively Vocaloid music. The first version of the game came out on the PSP in 2009, and the arcade version followed it a year later.

△ *Guess I'm dealing with a scissor blade or something.*

The scissor blade is an iconic weapon in the anime *Kill la Kill*! It does indeed *look* like it has a double-bladed edge, at a glance, but being one half of a pair of scissors, it's really just single-edged. This reference is especially notable given that the studio that created *Kill la Kill*, Studio TRIGGER, was also responsible for the anime adaptation of this very series!

Chapter 4

△ I'm talking, like, a full-on Veau Shot trajectory!

The Veau Shot is one of Sanji's special moves in *One Piece*! Most of Sanji's attacks (most of which are kicks) are named after food, cooking techniques, or just random French words.

△ I'm not Zura, I'm Jurai!

Andou's shouting out a running gag in *Gintama* here, in which a character named Katsura is regularly referred to as "Zura" and never fails to correct the mistake. In Japanese, "katsura" and "zura" are both words for wig, with the latter being a little more colloquial.

△ This would fetch a good hundred thousand yen if you threw it up on Yahoo Auctions!

Yahoo Auctions is more or less the Japanese equivalent of eBay. The service used to exist in a variety of countries, but it never really caught on in most parts of the world. The Japanese branch is one of the only ones that's stood the test of time, and it's still widely used to this day.

Chapter 6

△ *No, no, this isn't the end! Not by a long shot!*

Andou's directly quoting a gag from *Dragon Ball* in this line! In the original context, it's said by Master Roshi in a cutaway panel right at the end of the Piccolo arc—in other words, shortly before the beginning of *Dragon Ball Z*, by American standards for the series' progression.

Chapter 7

△ After all, what's yours is mine, and what's mine is mine too!

The “Gian” that Andou attributes this line to is specifically the Gian from *Doraemon*! Gian, real name Gouda Takeshi, is the sometimes friend and sometimes bully of the series’ main character, Nobita. ‘What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is mine’ is one of his most famous lines, and it more or less sums his character up.

△ ...if he'd made a Neo Armstrong Cyclone Jet Armstrong Cannon...

This is a reference to another *Gintama* gag, in which a few characters make a conspicuously phallic snow sculpture that they identify as the “Neo Armstrong Cyclone Jet Armstrong Cannon,” sending one of the other characters into conniptions as one character after another shows up and immediately identifies it by its full name.

△ Winter's not ghost season by any stretch of the imagination!

This is an interesting point of cultural contrast! In Japan, summer is traditionally the season for ghost stories and spooky stuff. The most reasonable explanation for that association I’ve heard theorized is that it’s on account of the Obon period taking place in late summer. Since Obon traditionally involves the spirits of people’s departed ancestors returning home for a period of time, it makes a certain amount of sense that it could’ve led to the season on the whole being associated with ghosts.

△ Even Onoda Sakamichi himself would give up and take the train to Akihabara under these conditions!

Onoda Sakamichi is the protagonist of the bicycle racing manga *Yowamushi Pedal*, written by Watanabe Wataru. A big part of Onoda’s shtick is that he’s a huge nerd who loves going to Akihabara, but he doesn’t have much spending money and chooses to regularly bike a preposterous distance to get there

instead of taking the train. In the process, he inadvertently trains himself to be a remarkably capable bicyclist.

△ *Actually, make that a mounted Double-Edge...*

Tackle and Double-Edge are both attacks in *Pokemon*. Specifically, Double-Edge is an attack that hurts both the target and the attacker.

△ *I'm not a cat, though.*

Andou's referencing *I Am a Cat*, a very well-known novel by Natsume Souseki. The novel's first line—"I am a cat; but as yet I have no name"—is extremely famous in Japan and is constantly quoted and riffed on in all sorts of media.

△ *Hearing three Vs in a row took me right back to Valvrave for a second there.*

Valvrave the Liberator was a mecha anime produced by studio Sunrise that aired in 2013! The series has something of a reputation for its over-the-top nature—there aren't that many mecha shows out there that feature body-swapping space vampires and a teenage superspy named L-elf as their main characters, after all.

△ *Nobody beats Softbank when it comes to phone plans!*

Softbank is one of those ultramassive Japanese conglomerates that has their fingers in a little bit of everything! Telecommunications are its bread and butter—hence Tomoyo's mom talking about their phone plans—but relative to these notes, it's most notable for its subsidiary company SB Creative, which runs the GA Bunko imprint, which published—among many other series—*When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace*. In other words, the whole Softbank sequence was Tomoyo's mother breaking the fourth wall to plug the parent company of the book's publisher.

Phew—that's finally all of them! See you in the next volume's TL notes, where I'll finally be digging into *Supernatural Battles*'s anime adaptation and discussing

all the things that make it interesting!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 6

Things I tried to make into my catchphrase when I was a student, #3: "You've dishonored the X family..."

This one mostly got trotted out when my little brother got a bad grade on one of his tests. It was a pretty darn mean thing to say, in retrospect, but at the time, my brother's reaction was an understated "Huh? What're you even talking about?" I'm sorry you had to put up with such a moron of a sibling, little bro.

Illustrator: 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).

Regarding the v6 cover: Attention!

Touching black flames will *not* burn you, but if a protagonist comes into contact with them, there's a chance their chuuni spirit will be ignited. Please exercise all due caution.

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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 6

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by Kota Nozomi

Translated by Tristan K. Hill Edited by Zubonjin

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