

When supernatural Battles 9 Became Commonplace

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Illustrator
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The Twelve Wings of Fallen Black

Ancient Lucifer **Kiryuu Heldkaiser** **Luci-First**

STORY

While the superpowered members of Senkou High's literary club live out their days in idyllic peace, one man puts his life on the line in a world of true supernatural battles! His name: Kiryuu Hajime, aka Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. His mission: to do as he pleases alongside Fallen Black, the eclectic band of ruffians he leads, and exult in the glory of all the brutal and gruesome supernatural battles he could ever ask for!



Zigzag Jigsaw
Toki Shuugo



Eternal Wink
Saitou Hitomi



Sex Eclipse
Yusano Fantasia



Dead Space
Akutagawa Yanagi



White Rulebook
Tanaka Umeko



Head Hunting
Natsu Aki

Prologue

The prelude to ruin resounds ever softly.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

A harsh, grating noise reverberated throughout the oceanfront factory. Cacophonous though it was, the noise did, in fact, originate from an instrument—specifically, a Gibson Les Paul. The guitar’s elegant silhouette was tragically mismatched with the discordant din it was producing.

The instrument itself wasn’t to blame. The problem was how it was being played...or rather, how it *wasn’t* being played. This wasn’t the tone of a guitar being strummed—it was the crash of a guitar being smashed to pieces against the ground. It was a sound that could not, by any means, be called music.

“Hya ha ha haaa! All right, *now* we’re cookin’ with gas! *That’s* what I call *music*! Rock ‘n’ roll, motherfuckers!”

The guitar’s owner, however, cackled wildly, elated by his own performance. He was a young man somewhere in his early twenties. His bleached blond hair was spiked with a gratuitous amount of wax, and he had a pair of sunglasses perched on his face. A thin chain linked the piercings in his ear and his nose, which dangled from his face in the same arc as the guitar strings holding the body of his shattered Les Paul aloft—the instrument’s impact with the ground had snapped its body off its neck, so now the strings were all that was connecting the two halves.

That guitarist’s name: Hanamura Haruto. His dream: to make it *big*.

“Hya ha ha! Come *ooon*, my dude, *enough* with all the dodging! I can’t get into a *groove* slamming the goddamn ground! I won’t hit the right *note* unless I smash my axe into that deadpan mug of yours!” Haruto shouted, grinning ecstatically as he stared down the man before him.

That man clicked his tongue. “You never shut’cher damn trap, do you?” he

muttered irritably. He wore a black tank top, military-style slacks, and a pair of steel-toed boots. His bare shoulders sported sinister flame-shaped tattoos, and he held a heavily weathered knife in his hand—a jackknife, specifically, whose blade was jagged and worn down, a misshapen zigzag that would never fold into its handle again. Just a glance at him would tell you he was ill-tempered and violent, but Haruto seemed downright delighted to talk to the man anyway.

“Please, my dude, stop harshing the groove! What, your group got some sorta policy ’bout acting all *chill*? Is *that* why you’re *Fallen Black*’s assault leader, *Toki Shuugo*?”

“Wouldn’t have to harsh your groove if it weren’t so obnoxious. That screeching why they let you into Hearts, Hanamura Haruto?” Shuugo countered.

“Uh-uh,” said Haruto with a wave of his finger. “No calling me *that* name, thank you very much. Nah, you can call me HARDO!”

“You really piss me off, y’know that?” Shuugo sighed. Haruto’s ever hyper persona and Shuugo’s simmering, restrained disposition mixed about as well as oil and water. “Never met a blabbermouth that didn’t turn out to be a piece of shit.”

“Huh? That so?” said Haruto. “Then I guess that makes good ol’ HARDO the first blabbermouth who’s *worth* a damn you’ve ever met!”

Shuugo rolled his eyes, ignoring Haruto’s nonsense and glancing at his broken instrument. “A *guitar*,” he said. “I’ve been through my fair share of fights, but I gotta admit...taking on a guy who uses a guitar as a weapon’s a first for me.”

“Hya ha ha! This Les Paul’s not my weapon, my dude, it’s my *partner*! If I don’t fight with it, then what the hell *am* I supposed to fight with?!”

“If that thing’s your partner, then try taking better care of it.”

“Eh, whatevs. It’ll go back to normal anyway,” Haruto said. No sooner had the words left his mouth than his Les Paul began to shift. Its ruined body and the parts that had snapped off it drifted toward the guitar neck in Haruto’s hand, slotting themselves together once more. It was like time was being rewound, and in the span of just three seconds, the guitar had regained its original

elegant silhouette.

Shuugo's eyes widened ever so slightly, and he let out a sigh. "So that's your power, huh?"

"You know it!" said Haruto. "As long as I've got this power, then no matter *how* rough I get with my Gibson Les Paul, it and the thirty-six payment loan I took out to buy it'll be safe and sound!"

"..."

"I get to remake anything that gets broken. That's my power: *Encore!*"

The very instant Haruto proudly declared his power's name, Shuugo scowled. "So, you named your power." He made no attempt to hide the scorn he felt as he replied, his voice dripping with contempt.

"Yeah," said Haruto. "One of our folks is into that sorta stuff."

"Can't believe there's another dumbass like our boss out there somewhere..."

"Huh?"

"Forget it. Not your problem," Shuugo said, then he dashed forward without warning. He leaped at Haruto, slashing forward with his knife in an underhanded grip.

Haruto raised his newly restored guitar and intercepted the attack. The jagged wreck of a knife bit into the guitar's neck, producing another grating screech. "Aww, *hell* yeah, I like it! That's good ol' HARDO's Les Paul for ya—making music no matter *what* it's doing!" Haruto shouted.

The clash between knife and guitar lasted a matter of seconds, after which the two men broke apart, distancing themselves from each other...only to dash forward and clash again mere moments later.

The Fifth Spirit War was nearing its climax, even in the face of the machinations of Zeon, a spirit who had chosen to rebel against the War's organizers and had plotted to bring it to an early end. Zeon had founded an organization called *F* and had engineered the creation of *System*, an ultimate Player who could bring the whole War to a close single-handedly. Zeon's

rebellion had ended in failure, however—Kiryuu Hajime and the organization he led, *Fallen Black*, had wiped *F* off the playing field with ease and had stolen the ultimate Player away to join them.

In no time at all, the story of that disturbance had sent waves throughout the bulk of the War's remaining Players.

F's destruction had been no secret. The War Management Committee had sent out a request to all active Players to aid in an all-out attack on the organization only shortly beforehand, and as a result, it hadn't taken long at all for the tale of *Fallen Black*'s achievement to make the rounds. Kiryuu Hajime had already earned a reputation for being incomprehensible while also powerful and extremely dangerous, and now he had the officially proclaimed ultimate Player on his side to boot. It was only natural that he and his allies would draw more attention and demand more caution than ever.

With *System* added to their roster, *Fallen Black* now found itself in the eye of the storm. The Spirit War seemed to be centering upon them, as not a Player was left who didn't know the name Kiryuu Hajime—or rather, *Ancient Lucifer*. Most of them chose to keep a safe distance from him and *System*...however, Hanamura Haruto and the organization he belonged to, Hearts, were an exception. *They* chose to walk straight up to *Fallen Black*'s doorstep and pick a fight.

“C'mon, my dude, *c'mon*! Show me whatcha *got*, Shuugo!”

The sun was beginning to set, and Toki Shuugo was struggling. *I really can't stand this asshole*, he thought bitterly as he dodged the guitar that Haruto was swinging about like a sledgehammer. *The worst part's that even though he fights like a dipshit, he's actually tough!*

Anyone with sense would say that in a battle between a knife and a guitar, whoever had the knife had the upper hand. Haruto, however, was an exceptionally skilled guitarist—not in the sense that he could *play* the instrument well, but rather, in the sense that he could wield it as an irrationally effective weapon. Its reach was impressive, for one thing. Compared to the twenty centimeters or so that Shuugo's knife gave him, Haruto's Les Paul was

over a meter long. That, needless to say, meant that as long as Haruto stood at the edge of his guitar's effective range, Shuugo's knife would never so much as touch him...and that was only the beginning.

"Hya ha ha! I can tell you're pretty used to fighting, my dude, but I'mma bet you've never taken on a guy who fights with a guitar before, huh?!" Haruto shouted.

Shuugo clicked his tongue with irritation. He'd rolled with a biker gang back in the day, and he had been through more than his fair share of full-blown, no-holds-barred throwdowns. As a natural result, he'd fought toe to toe against all sorts of opponents wielding all sorts of improvised weaponry. He'd dealt with baseball bats—both metal and wooden with nails driven through them—pipes, combat knives, cooking knives, batons, souped-up air guns, modified stun guns...the list went on and on, yet Haruto was right. He'd never gone up against anyone with the gall to bring a guitar to a brawl before.

"C'mon, my dude! Let's make some *music*!" Haruto bellowed as he swung his Les Paul with all his might in an overhead arc. Shuugo just barely dodged the blow, and once again, the guitar shattered against the concrete floor.

"Think you could just shut up and fight for a bit, you phony-ass guitarist?" Shuugo growled. He'd been waiting for that moment, and as soon as Haruto's weapon was broken again, Shuugo rushed forward. Haruto's power could mend his guitar as soon as it broke, but the process wasn't instantaneous, and in the moment it took to restore his weapon, he was defenseless...in theory.

"Nooope!" Haruto shouted. He'd seen Shuugo's attack coming—in fact, he'd been counting on it. The moment Shuugo stepped forward, Haruto swung his guitar's neck once more with a heavy *whoosh*.

The neck on its own couldn't do much damage, no matter how hard he swung it. It'd be like swinging the handle of a sledgehammer that was missing its head. Unlike a sledgehammer, however, his guitar wasn't a bludgeoning instrument—it was a *stringed* instrument. In other words, even after the body broke away from the neck, it was still connected by six steel cords.

Shuugo let out a grunt of shock. He hadn't anticipated this avenue of attack at all, and his eyes widened as Haruto's bizarre, irregular movements sent the

body of his guitar crashing into Shuugo's side. Haruto had essentially used his guitar as an improvised flail, and the force its body had built up over the course of the swing was great enough to send Shuugo to his knees.

"*Hyaaa* ha ha ha! *God*, you're boring! A hit like that, and you couldn't even give me a scream or two?!" Haruto cackled triumphantly as he flourished his guitar, swinging it in circles through the air.

"Peh... If you wanna hear a scream, why not listen to your guitar?" Shuugo spat, pressing a hand to his side as he staggered to his feet. "You're abusing the damn thing. Makes me feel sorry for it."

"*Huh?* Like hell I am!" said Haruto. "I'm playing music with it—*HARDO*-style music! If my Les Paul's screaming, it's screaming with joy!"

"Trying to talk with you was a waste of time."

"You know it! Why use words when we can speak with music?"

Shuugo didn't bother replying, though he *did* nearly burst a blood vessel. The look on his face as he readied his knife and charged in once more spoke of pure and unbridled irritation. Haruto, in contrast, wore a delighted smirk as he swung his guitar about like it was a sickle on a chain. His control was appalling, and the guitar's body flew with an almost entirely random trajectory—making it all the harder to predict where his next blow would land.

Son of a bitch! Shuugo thought. Try as he might to seize the initiative, he found himself constantly on the defensive. Haruto had already had a leg up in terms of range, and his improvised flail technique had only exacerbated that problem.

That was not, however, to say that Shuugo had no way of fighting back. Haruto's newly increased reach carried with it a fatal flaw: it left him entirely incapable of defending himself up close. If Shuugo could find a way to slip past the guitar body and close the gap, a knife-wielder like him would have the upper hand and then some.

"Hraaah!" Haruto shouted as he swung his guitar in an especially wide, crushing arc. Its body flew toward Shuugo from the side, but he nimbly ducked beneath it, avoiding the strike and giving himself the chance to rush forward,

still stooped over. He bore down on Haruto like a wild beast charging its prey, and in the blink of an eye, he'd closed within reach of his foe.

Now that I'm in close—

"Lemme guess: you're thinking, 'Now that I'm in close, I have this in the bag,' right?" Haruto taunted. A wet, sickening thud rang out, and Shuugo grimaced as pain shot through his abdomen. "Hee hee, hyaaa ha ha ha! I *told* you, my dude! You shoulda kept your guard up! You're up against a guitar, remember?!" He'd been holding his broken guitar by the neck, swinging its body about by its strings. That neck was made out of wood, and the end that had broken away from the body was splintered and jagged—in other words, a rather dangerous weapon in its own right. Shuugo had charged in at full speed, leaving himself open to a guitar neck to the gut, and a crimson stain from the stab wound was already starting to spread across his tank top.

"Heh... Figured that's what you were going for," Shuugo grunted, smirking even as his blood dripped down the guitar's neck. "Didn't bother dodging 'cause it'd be a pain in the ass, though."

It was true. Shuugo really *had* anticipated that Haruto would go for a stab with the broken end of the neck. Not only that, he had allowed the attack to land intentionally. In his mind, a piece of jagged wood to the gut just wasn't that big of a deal. It was dangerous, yes, but not dangerous *enough* to be particularly lethal. No matter how much strength you put into the stab, a weapon like that wouldn't be able to pass cleanly through the human body and would be totally incapable of inflicting an instantly fatal wound. Thus, Shuugo had taken the blow on purpose—all for the sake of sending his own, *far* more lethal weapon streaking toward his foe's breast.

"See you in hell, you phony-ass guitarist," Shuugo spat, a cold determination glinting in his eyes as he delivered the killing blow. He'd flipped his knife into an overhanded grip and stabbed it directly toward Haruto's heart—but then, an instant before the attack landed...

"Y'know the thing about declaring victory early, my dude?"

Schkrughhk!

A tremendous impact rocked Shuugo to the core.

“It makes you look *real* goddamn stupid when you screw the pooch.”

“Ugh... *Aaaaaagh!*” Shuugo screamed as blindingly intense pain shot through his back. The knife he’d intended to skewer Haruto’s heart with froze midair as the strength drained from his arm.

“Hya ha ha! Now *there’s* the scream I was looking for! Kinda weak, though—you could’ve put a bit more emotion into it, y’know? Hyaaa ha ha ha ha ha!”

Shuugo tuned out Haruto’s ear-piercingly shrill laughter and desperately attempted to figure out what had just happened. *God dammit—he had backup?* he thought for an instant, but when he pushed through the agony in his back to look over his shoulder, his eyes shot wide open. The object that had struck him from behind was none other than the guitar’s body.

“Son of a...did you—”

“I sure did. I fixed it...or, really, I’m *fixing* it.”

Encore was the power to repair physical objects, and... *This asshole used his power on his guitar while its neck was still stuck inside me?!*

When Haruto had activated his power, the guitar’s body traveled back to the neck it had snapped off from. If that neck happened to be embedded in Shugo’s gut at the time, there was only one thing the body could do: pierce through him from the other side, taking the shortest path available to restore itself. The neck and body’s drive to come together drove each half further into Shuugo like a pair of incredibly powerful, splintered magnets.

“Agh! Gahhh...”

“Bet you thought a broken guitar neck couldn’t do *that* much damage when you charged in, eh? You set yourself up for this real nicely, y’know?”

Slowly, excruciatingly, the two halves of the guitar ground their way into Shuugo’s back and abdomen, gradually digging into his flesh. They twisted like a pair of screws, tearing him apart in their effort to put themselves back together. The pain was almost unbearable.

“You...son of a...*bitch!*” Shuugo roared.

“Whoa, there!” Haruto yelped. Shuugo had gritted his teeth and thrown out a single slash, but Haruto released the guitar’s neck just in time, stepping backward and dodging the knife with only a slight graze on the upper arm to show for it. “Yeesh, close one! Ha ha—one last try for the road, eh? Too bad it didn’t work out,” he said as he glanced at the trickle of blood running down his arm. “Oh, and just so you know, just ‘cause I let go doesn’t mean my power’s gonna stop working!”

That fact was already abundantly clear. The two pieces of the guitar were still actively attempting to run Shuugo through, and while the power that drew them together wasn’t strong enough to do the job instantly, it was only a matter of time.

“Hyaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha! Too bad, so sad, my dude! You just weren’t man enough to take down good ol’ HARDO! Hya ha ha!” Haruto bellowed, letting out his loudest cackle yet. It was the laugh of a man who was absolutely confident that he’d already won.

Toki Shuugo: assault leader of *Fallen Black*. His weapon of choice: a knife.

The second most dangerous direct combatant in his organization, bested only by Kiryuu Hajime himself, Shuugo had taken down countless Players, yet he made only extremely sparing use of his own power. Most of his fights were won through pure brute strength and overwhelming knifework, leaving the details of his power a mystery...or so Hearts’s boss had claimed when he’d given Haruto the rundown on Shuugo’s capabilities.

Guess he wasn’t that tough after all, Haruto thought as he basked in his victory. The fact that the battle had ended before his opponent could show off his power was a slight fly in the ointment, but it wasn’t a large enough concern to really bother him much. In a few seconds, his Les Paul would pierce Shuugo clean through, and it wouldn’t matter anymore.

Hya ha ha! Wonder how much I’ll get for this guy? Bet he’s worth a pretty penny, Haruto considered as he looked down at Shuugo, who had fallen to his knees. In any case, it was time for the curtain to fall on the battle, which meant

it was time for him to deliver his signature line.

“Sorry to say it, but good ol’ HARDO’s solo concert’s wrapping up! If you want an encore—”

“My bad,” Shugo grunted, quietly cutting off Haruto’s triumphant declaration.

“Huh?” Haruto growled, less than amused to have his big moment interrupted. “Oh, for the— You seriously trying to beg for your life *now*, dickweed?”

Shuugo, however, carried on with his apology. “Yeah, this is on me. I underestimated you. Figured if it talks like a dipshit and fights like a dipshit, it’s probably, well, you know...and honestly, I let my guard down.”

“Hya ha ha! Well, isn’t *someone* being nice and honest all of a sudden? Seriously, *are* you begging for your life here, or what? Not gonna do you any good, just so you know—good ol’ HARDO’s power’s gonna make you a Les Paul sandwich one way or another!”

The viselike pressure on Shuugo’s midsection was indeed continuing to escalate. His breathing had grown rough and ragged, but there was a coldness to his gaze that seemed rather mismatched with the dire straits he was in.

“Oh, c’mon,” Haruto grumbled. “The *hell’s* that look supposed to mean? You *lost*, my dude! Losers are supposed to *crawl* and *grovel* and shit!”

“Then you’d better start groveling,” Shuugo said with a bitter smirk. “I don’t use my power much...but that’s not because I have some sorta *policy* against it. I just don’t use it ‘cause it’s not useful most of the time. Doesn’t suit my style,” he added as he glanced at the knife in his hand—the jagged, worn-down, misshapen jackknife that looked so dull, it probably couldn’t cut through paper. “But just now? I used it.”

A dangerous bestial glint began to shine in Shuugo’s eyes as he raised his knife, pointing it at his foe—specifically, at Haruto’s upper right arm. The arm that Shuugo had inflicted the tiniest of cuts on moments beforehand.

“When I cut someone with this knife...it leaves a piece of its blade behind.”

“It...huh?” Haruto grunted. A shiver shot down his spine, and he reflexively

clasped a hand to the cut on his arm.

“No nerves in your veins, so it’s probably not gonna hurt...but I bet you can feel that *something’s* in there, eh?”

Haruto didn’t say a word. He *could* feel something. He’d been too worked up to notice before—something about the adrenaline from the battle, most likely—but now that he could stand still and focus, something felt distinctly off about his injury. *Did he really...?* thought Haruto. *Did he seriously leave a piece of his knife in me after that last attack?*

“So, what do you think that piece is gonna do?” Shuugo asked with a slight but wicked smile.

Haruto broke out in a cold sweat. He shifted his hand away from the cut to take a closer look at it—then gasped as he felt something *move*. Something small and sharp was inside his arm, wriggling its way through his blood vessels, and the sensation was instantly repulsive.

“It’s gonna take you apart from the inside, that’s what,” said Shuugo. “Long story short, it’ll ride your blood vessels all the way to your heart, then tear it to shreds. Doesn’t matter where I hit you—it’ll make its way there eventually.”

In other words, even the slightest flesh wound could prove fatal. Just as the mightiest of walls could be brought down by the tiniest of cracks in just the right place, so too could Shuugo’s power trace his opponent’s life back to its roots and sever them. *Zigzag Jigsaw* was a power that brought certain death in a single hit.

“G-God dammit! Y-You son of a bitch!” Haruto shrieked in a panic. All traces of the joy and confidence he’d displayed just moments before had vanished from his face, replaced with pure frustration.

A single minuscule scratch had just evened the odds—or, really, had tipped the scales entirely. Haruto’s Les Paul needed time to finish Shuugo off, while the fragment of Shuugo’s knife traveling through Haruto’s veins would probably only take a few seconds to reach his heart, at most. He’d been cut in the worst place possible, in that sense. If the fragment had entered him through one of his extremities, it would’ve taken longer to make the trip, but his upper arm was dangerously close to its ultimate destination. The thought of a foreign

object slipping through his veins, making its way closer and closer to his heart, was horrifying beyond measure. Second by second, an invisible blade was closing in to claim his life.

“L-Like *hell* I’m going down that easy, god dammit!”

In a split second, Haruto made his call and gouged into his upper arm with his left hand. He pushed his fingernails into his own flesh with all his strength, clawing at the place where he felt the intruding object traveling through him. Pain racked his arm, but he couldn’t let that stop him and kept digging, a ghastly look of agony coming across his face as he tore into himself.

“Agh! *Gaaahhhhhh!*” Haruto wailed, jamming his fingers into his arm as he desperately searched for the fragment of Shuugo’s knife. The pain grew stronger with each movement—strong enough to nearly make him pass out on the spot—but it wasn’t enough to stop him. “I’m *not* dying here!”

And then, barely a second later...

“Hraaahhhhhhhhh!”

...with a spray of blood, Haruto pulled his left hand free, a tiny fragment of metal clutched between his fingers.

“H-Heh... Ha ha... Hyaaa ha ha ha ha ha! How’d you like *that*?! I did it, god dammit!” Haruto cackled. Blood was pouring down his arm, but he was grinning anyway—a grin of victory and, at the same time, of relief. He’d averted certain death, and in just a few seconds more, he knew his guitar would make short work of his foe. Shuugo would die like a comically morbid piece of modern art. *I win!* Haruto thought—prematurely.

“So, my power lets me leave a piece of my knife in anyone I cut that travels to their heart and tears it to shreds,” Shuugo’s voice rang out, breaking through Haruto’s moment of celebration. Said voice sounded almost bored...and *very* close by.

“And y’know, I had a thought when I first got that power...”

Not just close by. It was right next to him. While Haruto had been distracted, occupied entirely by his desperate race to extract the knife fragment from his arm, Shuugo had closed the gap between the two of them.

“I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be faster to just stab ’em?’”

A look of confusion passed across Haruto’s face as he looked up—and then, with a heavy *thud*, Shuugo thrust his dull, jagged knife directly into Haruto’s chest. He punched right through Haruto’s ribs, jamming the blade through his heart, then wrenching his wrist to the side like he was turning a doorknob.

Haruto didn’t even have the time to scream. He fell still in an instant, and at the same moment, the guitar pieces that had been boring into Shuugo’s body lost their attraction to each other and dropped to the ground with a pathetic clatter. It was an empty sound—one that could not, by any means, be called music.

“Listen up, Toki. If there’s one guy in Hearts you should watch out for, it’s Hanamura Haruto.”

A few days earlier, Toki Shuugo had received a personal lecture about his soon-to-be opponent from Kiryuu Hajime. The goal had been to ensure he was prepared to cope with Haruto’s abilities, if they ever ended up clashing.

“Trust me on this—that guy’s *wack*.”

“Wack how?” asked Shuugo.

Kiryuu, of course, was all too ready to explain. “There’s a very high probability that that man—Hanamura Haruto—is a Martial Maestro.”

Shuugo said nothing. He just grimaced.

“He always carries a guitar case around, see,” Kiryuu continued in a deadpan that told Shuugo he was, in fact, *completely* serious. “That’s some *ideal* Martial Maestro stuff there, no doubt about it! Bwa ha ha! Can’t believe I get to see one of those guys in real life!”

“What the *hell* is a Martial Maestro?” Shuugo asked with an air of intense unenthusiasm.

“It’s right there on the tin, man, keep up. Martial Maestros are fighters who use music to manipulate their opponents’ minds and send ultrapowerful vibrations through the air and junk. And that, Toki, is why I’m about to give you

a crash course in how to deal with fighters like them. Hope you're ready for this!"

Then Kiryuu went off on an extended tirade based entirely on his own self-indulgent fantasies. He explained how you could wet your clothes with your own saliva and stuff them in your ears to block out noise, how deep into your ears you had to pierce if you needed to rupture your own eardrums, and even what to do if it turned out that the guitar case contained an assault rifle instead of an actual instrument. He went over the subject in *exhaustive* detail.

Not a single goddamn bit of that ended up being worth jack, Shuugo thought to himself as he used a boxer's hand wrap as an improvised bandage to patch up his bleeding midsection. He tied off the wrap, then he heaved a heavy sigh.

Hanamura Haruto's corpse was nowhere to be seen—the Spirit War's system had already taken effect and vanished it away from the factory. He was already alive and well somewhere else, lacking both the injuries he'd sustained and all memory that any of it had ever happened.

So the guy who lost gets to come back untouched, and the winner—me—just has to deal with being torn to pieces... Makes you wonder who's the real victor here, Shuugo thought as he cringed down at his midsection. He stood up, only to find that each step he took brought with it a fresh burst of pain. It wasn't anything he couldn't deal with, at least. He could drive a motorcycle just fine—all that was left to do was make the short trek to his beloved VMAX, which was parked out behind the factory.

However, as Shuugo neared the building's exit, a new noise rang out. It was the sound of clapping—someone giving him a polite round of applause.

"Well done! That was quite the display," someone with a clear, refined voice said, followed by the slender man the voice belonged to stepping into view. His bleached hair was carefully styled and waxed, and he was wearing a very expensive-looking suit that almost certainly came from some big-name brand. At a glance, you'd think he was the sort of man you'd see working at a host club, but perhaps thanks to the softness of his gaze and the dignity of his features, he didn't give the impression that he was a cheap womanizer like so

many of that type did.

“Toki Shuugo, right?” the man asked. “Really, that *was* an impressive battle! You made a real show of it, especially considering that neither of your powers have much to offer in the way of spectacle. I certainly enjoyed myself!”

“Who the hell’re you?” Shuugo asked, shooting the interloper a glare as he reached for the pocket he kept his knife in. “Can’t say I’ve ever liked the sorta guys who peep on other people’s fights.”

“Peeping? No, no, I was *spectating*,” the man said with an air of utter shamelessness.

Shuugo scowled. It wasn’t hard to guess what his feelings about the new arrival were, and the man clearly picked up on them.

“Whoa now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves! I’m not interested in fighting you,” the man explained. “Why don’t we take a moment to introduce ourselves?” he said, raising his hands in a calming gesture as Shuugo drew his knife. “My name’s Habikino Hatsuhiko, and I’m the leader of Hearts.”

Shuugo furrowed his brow and shot Hatsuhiko a glare of pure hostility. “Hah! I see how it is. I cleared out the opening act, so now the main performer’s taking the stage, eh? Must be rough, bossing around clowns like that asshole,” he scoffed. As aggressive and inflammatory as he was acting, though, Shuugo was barely keeping his cool. *I’m in it deep now*, he thought to himself. The fight he’d just been through had left him wounded and exhausted. Jumping right into *another* fight right after would put him at an unmistakable disadvantage.

Whether or not Hatsuhiko saw through Shuugo’s act, he kept up his nonconfrontational demeanor. “Okay, calm down! I can already tell that you’re one prickly guy,” he said, then let out a sigh. “In case you didn’t hear me the first time, I’m not here to fight with you—and in fact, there’s a very real chance that we may never end up fighting at all.”

Shuugo raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Won’t you join me?” Hatsuhiko asked out of the blue. *That* earned him nothing but stony silence in reply, so he carried on, looking Shuugo straight in the eye as he spoke. “I was watching your battle with Haruto, like I said, and I

can already tell you have what it takes. I'd be more than happy to bring you into the fold as a member of Hearts. I guess you could say I'm headhunting you, to put it simply."

"Are you fucking with me, or what?" asked Shuugo. "Or maybe you're just plain nuts?"

"It's a better deal than you think, believe me! You'd be shifting from fighting solo like you did today to fighting as a team. Seeking out stronger allies and a stronger organization to belong to's a necessity for people like you. Unless," Hatsuhiko said as he took a step forward, "there's some reason you're obligated to follow Kiryuu Hajime's orders?"

Shuugo paused for just a moment. "Did you set that phony-ass guitarist up to take a fall? Sent him at me as a test, or something?"

Hatsuhiko let out a laugh. "Well reasoned!"

"You're one sick sack of shit."

"Not so! If he'd beaten you, I had every intention to pay him the reward I'd promised."

"Whaddya mean, 'reward'?"

"That's how things work in our organization. Each Player defeated earns the victor compensation, paid by me, their leader. It's a much more straightforward motivation than bonds of trust or teamwork, wouldn't you say? After all, there's nothing more trustworthy than cold, hard cash," Hatsuhiko said as he reached into his pocket, then tossed three small objects at Shuugo's feet—three bundled-up stacks of banknotes.

"The hell's this supposed to be?" asked Shuugo.

"It's cash," said Hatsuhiko. "Three million yen, in total. I'd like to commission you for a job, you see—your first mission with Hearts. See it through, and I'll accept you as a full and formal member of our organization, then pay you another three million on top of what you've already received."

"What do you want me to do?"

Hatsuhiko smiled.

“Kill Kiryuu Hajime.”

He said it like it was nothing—like he was talking about the weather—his placid smile never faltering.

“It’s a pretty simple proposal, honestly. He believes that you’re his ally, which means you’re in the perfect position to stab him in the back. All you have to do is take him out, and you’ll be six million yen and an entire organization of allies richer,” said Hatsuhiko.

“...”

“Oh, don’t worry! This is all completely legitimate currency that came from a reputable source. I have a lot going on—stocks, a company, you name it. There’s a whole mountain of cash where this came from.”

Shuugo didn’t say a word. He simply scowled at the three million yen lying at his feet. Eventually, though, he let out a breath, said, “The answer’s no, asshole,” and stepped on the bundles of cash, trampling them underfoot. Then he walked out of the factory, passing right by Hatsuhiko as he left.

“Is Kiryuu Hajime really the sort of boss who inspires that much loyalty?” Hatsuhiko asked.

“That dipshit’s got nothing to do with this,” Shuugo spat without even turning around. “I just can’t stand condescending pricks like you. You act like it’s a given that everyone’s gonna shut up and do what you say, and that attitude pisses me the hell off.”

“Welp, guess you got turned down, Hatsuhiko,” observed a girl with a cheerful feminine voice, stepping out of her hiding place after Shuugo made his exit.

Her sense of style was, simply put, fashionable to the point of excess. She wore a school uniform so loosely it was practically falling off her, making her look simultaneously alluring and like a total slob, and while there was still a hint of youth to her features, the sheer gaudiness of her makeup and accessories

made her appear anything but childish. She practically sparkled from head to foot.

“Meh, you win some, you lose some! Buuut anyway, are you, like, doing anything with the three mil over there? Can I, y’know, go ahead and nab it? Hey, you’re cool with that, right?”

“I see you’re as unscrupulous as ever today, Happa,” said Hatsuhiko. The girl—Happa—trotted over to his side and gave him her best puppy dog eyes as she clung to his arm, causing him to let out an exasperated chuckle. “Go ahead, then. You’ve been doing good work lately, so think of it as a bonus.”

“Woo-hoo, thanks! Love ya, Hatsuhiko! I’ll show you an *extra* good time tonight, just wait!” Happa said as she scooped up the bills and did a happy little dance. “But for reals, though, you sure you wanna let that knife dude walk out alive? Isn’t this, like, the part where he says no and we bump him off for it? I can still blow him to itty-bitty piecies if you want!” she added, a belligerent glint beginning to shine in her eyes.

“No need for that. I’m perfectly all right with letting him roam free for the time being. Bringing him into the fold was a long shot to begin with,” Hatsuhiko replied quietly. “Shuugo didn’t turn down my invitation out of a sense of loyalty or camaraderie, after all. This was a matter of honor, in his eyes.”

“Whaddya mean by that?”

“Call it a masculine sense of pride, if you will. Come to think of it, he got his start in a biker gang, didn’t he? Those types tend to live and die by their pride, so I suppose it’s no surprise. In his mind, betrayal and treachery are probably some of the worst taboos one could violate.”

“Huuuh. Sounds stupid, but okay. Not like honor or manly pride can put food on the table,” Happa grunted disinterestedly. “And, like, way I see it? Doing some guy’s dirty work when you’re *not* getting paid’s just *nuts*! That, like, Kiryuu Hajime, or whatever? Their boss? Is he some sorta crazy incredible dude, or what?”

“Not at all,” said Hatsuhiko in a very definitive tone. “He has a strange way of drawing people to his side, but when all’s said and done, he doesn’t have what it takes to bring them together—nor is his reputation much to speak of. All we

have to do is throw a wrench in the works like we did today, and his little sham of an organization will fall to pieces on its own.”

“Huh?” Happa blinked. “Hey, do you know this Kiryuu guy, or something?”

“We went to the same college. I’m told he dropped out in his second or third year, though.”

“Huuuh.”

“Now, then,” Hatsuhiko said as he turned to gaze out the factory’s doors. “I wonder how the candidate I *do* have high hopes for will work out?”

At the precise same moment, in an abandoned stretch of woodland a short way outside of town...

“All right. Sure.”

...a boy with a rather gloomy presence made a clear and instant decision. He was short and conspicuously young, with a pair of headphones perched upon his head and a handheld game console in his hands. His eyes were the color of a stagnant marsh, and he displayed exactly none of the youthful vigor one would expect from someone his age. His name was Akutagawa Yanagi, and his power was called *Dead Space*.

“I’ll take your job. It looks like this three million yen is real, so...I’ll kill Kiryuu Hajime for you,” Yanagi said with a faint smile as he looked over the bills he’d been given.

“You made that decision rather lightly, didn’t you?” the man he was talking to—who just so happened to *also* be Habikino Hatsuhiko—said with a look of mild surprise.

“I was getting sick of working for an idiot like him anyway... If he ends up dead and I get paid for it, then honestly, I call that two birds with one stone.”

“And you don’t feel even a little guilty about betraying him?”

“Not really,” Yanagi said, sounding like he couldn’t have possibly cared less. “None of them matter to me. Not our lunatic of a boss, nor the rest of the crew either...”

In some woods far away from the factory where Shuugo had had his fight, Yanagi had found himself in strikingly similar circumstances to his fellow *Fallen Black* member. The contents of the proposal, the payment that was offered, the date and time it happened, and—of course—the person they'd spoken with were all identical. Both of them had defeated a member of Hearts, only for Habikino Hatsuhiko to appear out of the blue and propose a betrayal that would culminate in the murder of Kiryuu Hajime.

Similar as the circumstances were, the responses that the two men gave were plainly different. Toki Shuugo had turned the proposal down, while Akutagawa Yanagi had accepted it as a matter of course. That, however, only accounted for their responses on a surface level.

Why on earth are all of these people putting so much effort into this, honestly? Yanagi thought to himself after he'd finished exchanging contact information with Hatsuhiko. *And come on...kill Kiryuu Hajime? Who would be stupid enough to try that?*

Yanagi had never had any intention of betraying Kiryuu. His reply to Hatsuhiko's proposal had been a shameless lie.

Guess it's true that I don't care about those people though, Yanagi reflected. He hadn't chosen to feign compliance and not follow up out of a sense of loyalty or camaraderie. He'd made his decision by simply considering what he stood to gain and lose. He'd pretended to accept the offer because it'd benefited him, allowing him to make off with the three-million-yen advance. He would take what he could get, then back out of the deal without a second thought. The contact information he'd given Hatsuhiko was fake, and he saw no point in keeping a verbal promise. In his mind, Hatsuhiko was in the wrong for taking an enemy's word at face value in the first place.

If any of the other members of *Fallen Black* learned what Yanagi had done, they might have been disappointed in him...but he didn't care about that either. Maybe the right thing to do in a situation like that was to stand firm and insist that you'd never betray your friends, no matter how much money was thrown at you. Maybe that was the choice that would make you come out looking like a

hero. Akutagawa Yanagi, however, did not make that choice. After all, he...

“...was trying to make the most rational choice possible, I imagine,” Habikino Hatsuhiko, who had remained behind in the forest after Yanagi had left, said to the ally who had accompanied him and had just recently stepped out of hiding. She was a rather small girl who kept her bangs brushed down over her glasses, making it difficult to look her in the eye. Her clothes were black and plain, and at a glance, she looked like a rather dull and gloomy person.

“Wh-What do you mean...?” the girl asked anxiously.

“He’s smart, and he knows it,” Hatsuhiko explained. “That means he’s gotten used to looking down on the people around him. He thinks they’re all idiots, and he doesn’t care in the least what a bunch of idiots think of him.”

“That’s...amazing,” said the girl. “I’m not like that at all... I-I’ve always worried so much about what people think of me and tried really hard to not make anyone hate me... But then everyone started calling me creepy... They always did...all of them... I just annoyed them...”

“No, Haneko. He isn’t amazing at all,” Hatsuhiko said, smiling at the girl beside him before she could sink too terribly deeply into the depressive state she was working herself toward. “People like him are the simplest to manipulate. Nobody’s easier to read than a person who’s fallen prey to the conceited belief that they’re smarter and more rational than everyone else.”

“O-Oh, okay... Sorry. I was getting the wrong idea again...”

“No need to apologize.”

“S-Sorry!” the girl yelped reflexively.

Hatsuhiko sighed. “You should try to be a little more confident, Haneko. This plan would never have come together without you. Your power’s a hundred times more helpful than my *Hundred and One Wolfies*, in this case.”

“Okay...”



“By the way, Haneko,” Hatsuhiko said after a moment of silence. “Has your power already come into effect?”

“No... Not yet. But are you sure he...I mean, Akutagawa...really did lie to you? Is there a chance he really does want to join us after all...?”

“No, there isn’t. You can bet on it. He’s the sort of person who thinks that keeping promises is for idiots.”

The instant those words left Hatsuhiko’s mouth, a perfectly blank look came across Haneko’s face. All emotion drained away from her expression, along with the fearful aura she’d once held, replaced by something...different.

“Then he should drop dead,” she muttered under her breath, her gaze fixed on an indeterminate point in the middle distance. “Die, die, die... All those liars should just die. People who break their promises are trash. Garbage. Stupid, stinking garbage. Die, die, die, just *die*... Hee hee, hee hee hee... Every last liar should go straight to hell... Hee hee hee hee hee!”

Haneko’s expression spoke of an unsettling mixture of sorrow and delight as she muttered her ominous, grudge-driven ramble of a curse. She was smiling, but it was a twitching, unstable smile that perfectly represented her state of mind.

“Hee hee... Hee hee hee! It’s all right, Habikino. If he lied, then my power won’t let him get away with it. I’ll never let *anyone* get away with lying in front of me. Promises are meant to be kept, and I’ll make sure that’s exactly what happens to them,” she said, her smile growing still more twisted. “Thanks to my power, *Two twool...Two...Too...*”

Hatsuhiko broke eye contact. Haneko paused, then started over like nothing had happened.

“Thanks to my power, *Twool true too... Too trool two...*”

“Haneko?” said Hatsuhiko. Two failures, it seemed, was more than he could bear to let slide without comment. “Far be it from me to cast doubt on the names you came up with for our powers, particularly considering that using your names is our official policy...but don’t you think it might be easier to at least give your own power a name you can say *without* stumbling over it?”

Haneko's shoulders drooped. Her unstable, ominous persona had melted away in an instant, overridden by the shame of having flubbed the most important line of her big scene. If, however, Hamai Haneko *had* been capable of articulating herself clearly in the heat of a dramatic moment, this is what she would have said:

“Thanks to my power, *Two Tool to Too True*, I can make that happen.”

Haneko despised lies and loathed those who told them with a fervent passion—and so, she had been given the power to turn falsehoods into binding contracts. In short: her power allowed her to *force* those who made promises to keep them.

Toki Shuugo and Akutagawa Yanagi. A belligerent young man and a gloomy boy. A man who might as well have been a delinquent, and a boy who might as well have been a shut-in. When each of them was offered the same choice at the same moment, each decided to give the opposite answer.

On the one hand, a man who, out of pride and honor, said no.

On the other, a boy who, through a process of logical reasoning, said yes.

This is a story of choices.

In this tale, a man and a boy—these wings of a fallen angel embroiled in an era of strife—will come to face the choices they make. One might say that life itself is nothing more than an extended sequence of choices, but unlike a quiz, there's no checking your answers, and unlike a visual novel, you can't save, load, and try again.

For better or for worse, the two of them will be forced to stumble their way forward, never knowing whether the choices they made were for the best and unable to go back and make a different decision. Caught between the regret and responsibility brought on by those choices, they will walk the thorny path that's been laid out before them...just like everyone the whole world over walks their own.

Chapter 1: Saitou Hitomi

You who wish to change, have already begun to do so.

You who wish to remain the same, have already begun to change.

Nothing in this world is unchanging—not a thing.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ”

“ ”

“ ”

“ ”

“ ”

“ ”

Look. I get it. It’s *really* not a good look to be padding out the character count by playing “How many ellipses can we fit on a page?” when we’ve literally only just gotten started...but that’s honestly the only way I could ever get the idea of what’s going on here across. If I, Saitou Hitomi, were to attempt to explain the current state of affairs in my apartment, it would by necessity turn out like, well...*that*.

It was an early afternoon in August, a time of the year when the bulk of students were on summer vacation. The weather outside was so sunny and cloudless it was honestly a bit much—the blue sky so perfectly clear that it felt a little irritating stretched overhead, and the chirping of the cicadas that was so indicative of the season was becoming a major racket.

In sharp contrast to the height-of-summer environment that dominated the outside world, the climate within my room was silent and frigid. If I wanted to draw an easy comparison to characterize the current atmosphere, “the Cold War” would fit the bill nicely. The apartment’s current inhabitants had their backs turned to each other in a display of “I don’t even want to *look* at your stupid face” energy, lending the overall mood a sense of incredible tension.

One of them—needless to say—was me, the fourth-year college student whose student-tier apartment we were sitting in. I was only renting the place, so it wasn’t technically *mine*-mine, but I was, nevertheless, its current occupant. This is important, so I’m going to say it one more time just to be on the safe side: this was *my* room, *my* name was on the lease, and *I* paid the rent, making *me* the one who held indisputable power over it.

Then there was *him*, the other person in the room: Kiryuu Hajime, aka Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. About a year beforehand, he’d barged his way into my apartment for an extended stay, over the course of which he’d never helped with the chores, never chipped in for rent or food, and generally acted like he owned the place, spending each and every day lazing around like a self-indulgent slob. In other words: he was a total freeloader.

To make matters worse, he wasn’t even *doing* anything, in a broad sense. He didn’t have a career, and he wasn’t looking for one either. He’d dropped out of college partway through, and he’d gotten fired from his job at a convenience store a little while back. He wasn’t studying for any sort of professional qualifications, and he hadn’t even bothered visiting an employment office. He was, in other words, not in education, employment, or training: a genuine NEET, as the expression goes. Possibly a name change was in order—Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-NEET had a certain ring to it.

“Hey,” a frightfully low voice grunted from behind me as I gazed out the window. It was, of course, Kiryuu (etc.)-NEET himself. “Food?” he continued, without even looking at me. His irritation and anger were very clear to hear in his curt one-word request, which just pissed *me* off even more than ever.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. *I’ll* have food soon, but I’m afraid that none of it will be available to you,” I said, channeling all the passive-aggression I could into an excessively polite reply. I was just as upset as he was, and there was no way I’d

be backing down that easily.

“Huh?” Hajime grunted indignantly.

“I sent Umeko out with some money to buy a meal for me—*just* me. She won’t be getting anything for you. If you’d like to eat today, then please feel free to go buy something for yourself!”

“Oh, you little...” Hajime growled as he turned to face me. The ever-present glint in his eyes took on an even sharper, more dangerous edge than usual, and his color-contact-enabled heterochromia tripled the effect.

I, however, was *not* going to let him get the better of me today. I was *mad*. To use a bit of slightly dated slang, I pitied the fool.

“What’s up with the petty harassment crap?” asked Hajime.

“What’s up with it? Maybe you should press your chest to your hand, gaze deep into your heart, and ask yourself that!” I sarcastically shot back, then I turned away again with a huff. I was usually way too much of a chicken to be that openly incendiary, but today was an exception. I’d be as snide and petty as I had to be until that stupid NEET finally got it through his thick skull that the world did *not*, in fact, revolve around him!

“Yeah, uh, Hitomi?” said Hajime. “It’s ‘press a hand to your chest,’ not ‘chest to your hand,’ isn’t it?”

“...”

C-C-Craaaaaap! Of all the stupid screw-ups! The tension had been so thick you could cut it with a knife, and then I just *had* to go and screw up an idiom in the dumbest way imaginable. *God, the shame! And the fact that things were feeling pretty serious for a second there makes it so much worse too!*

“Wow, looser! You were totally proud of that one before you realized you’d screwed it up, weren’t you? Talk about *lame*! God, I’m embarrassed just looking at you!” Hajime jeered with a sneering smirk, salting the wound with brutal efficiency.

My inner shame meter jumped straight up to eleven, and I felt my cheeks flush. “I-I did *not* screw up anything!” I shouted. I couldn’t back down, which

meant the only option left was to *double* down. “I said what I said, and I meant it! You wouldn’t *believe* how much I didn’t screw that up!”

“You did, and you know it.”

“That’s just how people say it back where I grew up!”

“We grew up in the same place, numbnuts!”

“And *anyway*, they mean the same thing! Hand to chest, chest to hand—what difference does it make?! You’re still touching the same spot with the same appendage!”

“Feels pretty damn different to me. ‘Press your chest to your hand’ makes it sound like your hand’s sitting still in space and you’re thrusting your chest into it. Whole other nuance.”

“Wh-What’s so weird about thrusting your chest into your hand?!”

“Like. Everything? Are you seriously asking that? It’s stupid unnatural.”

“It is *not*! See?!” I shouted, then I thrust my chest into my hands. I really do mean I *thrust* it too, full force, sticking it as far out and as smooshed into my palms as I could manage. Well, I *was* just thrusting at first, but then I got sort of fired up and it turned into more of a rubbing that eventually ended up as something closer to full-blown groping.

Hajime cringed, hard. “What the *hell* are you doing?”

“Gah!” I yelped as I snapped back to reality. *Wh-What the hell was I doing just now? Did I really just grope my own b-b-boobs in front of Hajime...? Oh god, what should I do?! If I just accidentally turned him on, I’d...be pretty okay with that, actually... No! No, no, no! Get it together, Hitomi!*

“If you wanna pull off that sorta fanservice, try growing an actual rack first.”

“Bwah?!”

“Sheesh—it’s already stifling in here, so think you could try *not* making it even more uncomfortable with whatever the hell that was supposed to be?”

“...*Graaah!*” I roared. My rage *and* shame levels had both surpassed their limits, and I actually went “Grah,” straight-up. It turns out that you really *can*

lose the capacity for speech if you get angry enough.

“I— You— Agggh! A-Anyway!” I shouted, then I pointed dramatically at the floor—which was, by the way, the reason I was so irate in the first place. “Absolutely all of this, from start to finish, is *your* fault for turning my room into your personal pigsty!”

The floor was almost entirely covered by a tremendous quantity of manga, in both volume and magazine form. The situation was so bad you literally couldn’t walk across the room without stepping on one. I could *barely* even see the carpet I kept on my floor beneath them all.

“I told you to get them cleaned up by the time I got home, no matter what it took, and you didn’t even *try*... Actually, I think it’s even worse than it was before I left!”

“Well, what do you expect?” asked Hajime. “I *started* cleaning up, but then I took a break to read a volume, got hooked, and I had totally swapped over to reading mode before I knew it.”

“Why do you think *that* gives you the moral high ground?! That’s the most played-out cleaning mistake you could possibly make!”

Hajime was an avid weekly manga magazine reader. He’d been buying one in particular on a weekly basis ever since we were in high school, and he still hadn’t kicked the habit. And, I mean, that wasn’t a problem in and of itself. He bought them with his own money, and I wasn’t about to call him out for reading a magazine named Weekly Shonen Whatever even though he wasn’t part of its clearly stated age demographic anymore. As such, I hadn’t complained at all about him buying *Jump* every week after we started living together. If anything, it was kind of charming how little he’d changed since we’d parted ways after high school.

When his magazines started dominating my living space, though? *That* was a different question entirely. Even the smallest things add up over time. If you put enough grains of sand together, you’ll have a beach, and if you put enough copies of *Jump* together, you’ll have a mountain...and if that mountain collapses, you’ll have a disaster.

That’s precisely the situation I found my room in about a year after Hajime’s

freeloading began. The towering pile of magazines in the corner of my apartment had been growing more and more mountainous week by week, and last night, the slightest touch had knocked the whole thing over. My place wasn't big to begin with, and needless to say, the tower's collapse had left the room buried in magazines. To make matters worse, Hajime had been buying magazines other than *Jump* recently as well—in his words, “*Young Jump* and *Bessatsu* have been killing it lately”—making the sheer volume of magazines just plain overwhelming. I had a small sea's worth of books covering my floor.

“For crying out loud... What am I even supposed to do about this? Magazines pile up so quickly when you read them week by week,” I muttered.

“Yeah, that's the one big downside to those things,” said Hajime.

“Actually, wait a second—the online edition of *Jump* goes on sale at the same time as the physical one these days! Can't you just start buying it digitally? If you got it as an ebook, it wouldn't have to clutter up the place!”

I thought that was a great idea to keep my apartment clean and junk-free, but Hajime had other ideas. “Hitomi... You just don't get it,” he sighed with a disgusted, condescending scowl. It was like he was simultaneously looking down on me and pitying me.

Huh? What? Was that really that out-there of a suggestion?

“You don't buy weekly manga magazines *just* to read the series you like. You buy them for the feel of their paper, for their heft, for all the other random series that're serialized in them, for the ads... *All* of that crap comes together to make them what they are, and the experience is made complete by the act of going out to a store to buy them. It's a *ritual*. When you follow a weekly magazine, you actualize the connection between your personal identity and the world around you. Going out to a store to buy the book at the same time every week or month allows you to simultaneously appreciate both the fluidity and the immutable nature of reality in one fell swoop. It's a cyclical routine *and* a source of incredibly varied psychological stimuli all in one—truly, the spice of life! How could I even describe the sense of elation that going to the convenience store on Monday and setting my sights on a pile of brand-new *Jump* magazines brings? How could I explain the skill needed to slip your hand

between the legs of the layabouts who're loitering around the store to read them just to snag your own copy? Where do you vent the rage you feel when you end up making it to the store too late and have to settle for the one remaining copy that's all beaten up after being read cover to cover by who knows how many unpaying customers? And what else... Oh, then there are those moments when you casually walk into a convenience store on a Saturday, only to catch sight of a new double issue of *Jump*. How do you characterize the complicated mixture of joy from knowing you'll get to read an issue you thought you'd have to wait until Monday for and irritation with yourself for having forgotten that it'd be going on sale on Saturday? That's a truly special feeling—one you can't get in any other way! And, really, what's the *point* of digital copies, anyway? I know they have their merits, of course, but are they worth losing out on the feeling of turning the pages? Not to mention the impact of opening up a two-page spread! I really do think physical media's the superior format here. Oh, and not to change the topic, but nothing pisses me off quite like clerks who decide to put your magazine and the meat bun you bought with it in the same—"

"How are you *still* talking?!" I shouted. I couldn't take it anymore. His response was just too long, no matter how you sliced it! And he hadn't even said anything of any real substance!

Hajime sighed wearily. "Okay, fine, have it your way," he droned as he slowly heaved himself to his feet. "If I bring in any more books, this puny-ass room'll be totally out of space, so fair enough. So it goes. If one is to open up a new door of destiny, one must first cut away the ancient bonds that hold them back."

"Yes! Well said!" I replied, genuinely a little proud of him. Just for that, I'd let him get away with calling my room puny even though he was a freeloader, and I'd even refrain from calling out his cringe-inducingly chuuni choice of wording. On the rare occasion he found his motivation, it was of the utmost importance that I not say *anything* that could damage it...so, basically, I just had to treat him like I'd treat a literal child. "Okay, then let's get cleaning! Tomorrow's paper-recycling day, so we'll have to get all of these gathered up before then."

"Great. Gimme a sec first, though. Gotta cut out all the color pages and one-

shots first.”

“You can’t *possibly* be serious!”

“Hey, some of those one-shots literally never get reprinted! You gotta cut ‘em out and save them or you might never get to read them again. That’s just common sense. I’ve got a whole stock of masterpiece one-shots filed away back at my place—Hoshino’s *Continue*, Fukushima’s *Swimming’s on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays*, you name it!”

“Common sense my *foot*! Quit wasting time on that nonsense and clean up your mess!”

“*Nonsense...?* Look, Hitomi, I’m making a pretty big concession by cleaning this up for you! Is that really the attitude you wanna take with me right now?”

“That’s *my* line!” *Agggh, this stupid, self-centered jackass, I swear! Everything about this situation is his fault from start to finish, and he has the gall to act like I’m imposing on him?*

Once again, the two of us sank into silent rage, and the room returned to its former state of dangerous turbulence—and that’s when the door opened.

“I have returned,” a childlike voice rang out in a distinctly *not* childlike and kind of archaic register. Umeko, it seemed, was back from her lunch run. “I see your chambers are still in disarray,” she muttered as she stepped inside and took in my room’s pathetically uncleanly state. She almost always wore the same surly, unreadable expression, but in that moment, I felt like I could see the slightest trace of exasperation on her face as well.

“Welcome back, Umeko,” I said. “And it’s not what you think! Hajime—”

“Hey, don’t go throwing me under the bus,” Hajime cut in.

“Oh, that’s *rich* coming from you of all—”

“Will you not cease this quarrel?” Umeko asked in a tone that came across as indifferent and admonishing at the same time. She took off her shoes, stepped into the room, hopped through the sea of magazines from empty spot to empty spot, and set the convenience store bag she was carrying down on the table. “I bring your midday meal.”

“Oh, thanks... Wait, huh?” I said. “You got three of them...?”

“Of course. Enough for you, for me, and for First.”

“B-But... I told you to buy enough for *two* people...and I only gave you enough money to get two lunches too, didn't I? Y-You didn't—”

“Fear not. I purchased them legitimately. I keep a modest purse in reserve for such occasions,” Umeko calmly reassured me. Apparently, I'd been worried for nothing.

Tanaka Umeko was once known as *System*, and she currently bore the title *White Rulebook*. She was the ultimate Player, having been created for the specific purpose of bringing down every other participant in the Spirit War, and she'd joined up with our group just recently. At first everyone had been downright terrified of her on account of her power, but surprisingly, I found her fitting in with the group dynamic before I knew it. Her adorable appearance and docile, honest personality had led to us—the girls in particular—treating her as our group's mascot, more or less. We'd even started giving her spending money whenever we had an excuse, though I certainly never imagined that she'd been saving it all up instead of using it.

“You don't mean... You've been saving up this whole time, and you used it for *this*?” I said, horrified. “Look at him—he's a good-for-nothing deadbeat who can't even clean up after himself! He doesn't deserve lunch!”

“Who're you calling a deadbeat?” Hajime piped up. “Though actually, one of my many titles *is* the Heartbeat of Death's Domain. I'll just go ahead and assume you misspoke.”

“Hitomi,” Umeko said, entirely ignoring Mister Literally Zero Remorse and looking me in the eye. “I know well how First's insolence must vex you, but should you respond in kind, your quarrel will continue unabated when it need not persist. It is simply his nature to redouble his rebellion the more you strive to quash it. Like a coiled spring, the sole result of restraining him more rigorously will be that he lashes back more intensely in turn. You must instead treat him with lenience. When faced with one who refuses to grow up, one must act the adult in their place.”

I kinda just...gaped at her. While I was stunned silent, Umeko turned her gaze

to Hajime.

“As for you, First,” she said.

“Yeah?” Hajime grunted.

“While I understand your willingness to avail yourself of Hitomi’s tendency to indulge you, your intemperance is becoming exploitative. You must not forget to express your thankfulness for the benevolence you have been shown. You have utmost faith in Hitomi, so perhaps you believe it safe to act the arrogant boor in her presence as a result...but you must bear in mind that she is neither your mother nor a saint. It is often said that familiarity breeds contempt, and you would do well to bear that concept in mind and ensure you do not effectuate her resentment.”

Now it was Hajime’s turn to gape at her in shock. She had both of us dead to rights, and there wasn’t a thing we could say in our defense. A girl who looked like she couldn’t possibly be older than five or six had just looked a couple of twenty-somethings in the eye and admonished them so thoroughly, they were left chastised and speechless.

“Now then, let us partake of our meal,” said Umeko. “A full stomach will make such petty irritations irk less, I should think, and once we have finished, I shall aid in your cleaning. Between the three of us, the work should take but a moment.”

Somehow, the little girl was far and away the most mature person in the room. All Hajime and I could do was nod, agree, and go along with her suggestion.

In the end, our cleanup did go by remarkably quickly once we’d actually started applying ourselves to it. It turns out that “less talking, more working” really is an efficient way to go about these things sometimes.

“With that settled,” said Umeko, “although it may be somewhat early for the task, I intend to depart to obtain ingredients for supper.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that!” I said. “You went out to get us lunch and everything, so I’ll handle getting us dinner!”

“No need to be bothered. I enjoy such excursions, and I do not dislike errands.”

“Are you sure...? It sort of feels like everyone’s been using—err, I mean, asking you to do *all* their errands for them lately.”

“I do not mind,” Umeko replied indifferently. “Although I may not let it show, I assure you, I am enjoying this so-called ordinary life I have been granted.”

All I could do at that point was take her word for it and accept her offer. I put together a list of the stuff I wanted and handed it over to her along with the money she’d need to buy it all. Umeko grabbed her trusty cloth shopping bag and headed out to the neighborhood supermarket without missing a beat.

“Umeko’s really changed, hasn’t she?” I muttered after she left. “She barely talked at all back when we first met her, and when we asked her to do something, she’d just *do* it without a word of protest. She used to be like a machine, but look at her now...”

Now, she could express herself articulately and showed no hesitation to do so. She made the things she wanted to do clear to us, and if she thought we were screwing up, she would freely admonish us for it, like she’d just demonstrated.

“Oh, but you know...I guess it makes sense,” I continued. “She was only just born about a month ago, after all. Considering that, I guess it’s no real surprise that her personality would go through some big shifts.”

Maybe back when we’d first met, Umeko had been more or less the same as a newborn. She’d known nothing of the world back then, but now, over the course of this past month, she’d learned all sorts of things and grown as a result. *I mean...maybe she’s grown just a little bit too much? She kinda comes across as an elder, actually. It feels like her mental age is way, way higher than mine, even.*

“Bwa ha ha! She’s changed, huh?” Hajime said with a derisive chuckle as he skillfully sorted the manga he’d finished reading. He had the same cynical, posturing smile on his face as always. “Tell me, Hitomi—do you mean she’s changed for the better, or the worse?”

“Huh?”

“Development and deterioration, evolution and devolution—they’re all types of change, aren’t they? If you chart them out on a number line, one and negative one both come out to the same absolute value. A one’s a one, no matter what direction it travels in. Change and the lack thereof is a concept totally disassociated from the question of good versus bad. Saying somebody’s changed can mean two *entirely* opposite things, depending solely on the context you say it in. So, let me ask again, Hitomi,” Hajime said, letting his sunglasses slide ever so slightly down the bridge of his nose and shooting a piercing look toward me. “How, exactly, do you mean that Umeko’s changed?”

“F-For the better, of course!” I replied. “I mean, she talks so much more now, and she’s so much more assertive too! She was like a puppet or a machine just a little while ago, but now she acts... Um, I mean...”

“Like she’s human?” Hajime said, blithely finishing the thought I’d hesitated to express.

“Look... What are you trying to say here?”

“Oh, nothing much. Nothing important, anyway.”

Nothing important, he says. When I really thought about it, of course, it was actually pretty rare for Hajime’s ramblings to be important in any real capacity. Generally speaking, he just liked saying stuff that *sounded* like it was super significant and deep. The actual, practical depth wasn’t really a factor for him.

As I shook my head with half-formed exasperation, though, Hajime continued. “However,” he said, “Umeko *isn’t* a human, or a spirit for that matter. I have to wonder what sort of effect someone like her becoming more humanlike is going to have on this story going forward.”

I fell silent. Tanaka Umeko, the ultimate Player, had been successfully pulled into *Fallen Black’s* roster a month ago, and she had been our unbeatable trump card ever since. She wasn’t just an addition to our fighting force—she was powerful enough to *be* our fighting force all by herself. In truth, however...Umeko had yet to engage in so much as a single battle. She’d chipped in a little while we’d wiped out the remnants of *F* in their hideout, but that aside, she hadn’t used her power at all.

A Player powerful enough to earn the title of “ultimate” had spent her days contributing nothing in particular to our fight. She’d gone out to handle chores that literally anyone could do, hung out with the girls on our team, and lived a life entirely unassociated with battles on the whole. Why? Simple: it was our boss’s orders.

For whatever reason, Hajime had expressly stated that Umeko was not to participate in any battles until further notice. Umeko never questioned any of our direct orders, as a rule, so she had gone along with this one without so much of a word of complaint as well, but to the rest of us, it was an unfathomable mystery. We had the most powerful ability in the whole War on our side, one that was practically cheating, so why weren’t we using it for all it was worth?

Maybe his goal was to reinforce the idea of her supremacy by conspicuously *not* making use of her power? It seemed likely that every Player in the War knew that we’d taken down *F* and recruited the ultimate Player they’d created, but that being said, we were probably the only ones who actually knew specifically what her power did. It seemed plausible that Hajime was going out of his way to keep those particulars secret. After all, nothing was more terrifying than an enemy who wielded a completely unknown power. With no specifics available beyond the simple fact that she was unbeatable, it would be shocking if Umeko *didn’t* become the subject of our enemies’ dread.

Of course, there was also always the possibility that Hajime was simply holding her in reserve, waiting for the perfect, most effective opportunity to play our trump card...but, I mean...would he really? *Hajime*? It seemed way more likely that he’d decided that using her would give him less time in the spotlight, or that he couldn’t let anyone other than himself get called the “ultimate” anything.

“Oh, right. Hey, Hitomi, heard anything from Toki and Akutagawa?” Hajime asked, seeming to remember he’d been meaning to inquire about them as he finally finished organizing his manga.

“No, not yet,” I replied. “I’ve tried to get in contact with them, but neither of them have replied so far.”

Toki and Akutagawa had both dropped out of touch over the past several days. Neither of them were the sort to check in on a daily basis to begin with, but both of them going off the radar simultaneously was enough of a coincidence to make me worry that something might have happened.

“Leatia said they were going up against a couple of Hearts’s people, but who even knows what they’re thinking, really,” said Hajime.

“And Leatia hasn’t said anything else since, so I can’t imagine they *lost*, but still...”

I couldn’t help but worry, especially considering which two members of our team we were talking about. *Fallen Black* had always been a group that valued not interfering in each others’ business any more than absolutely necessary. Our team spirit was as weak as could be, and those two were the most extreme examples thereof. They always held themselves at a distance from the rest of us, refusing to let anyone into their figurative territory. From my perspective, both of them lived by terribly practical sets of values.

“Maybe they just have personal crap to sort out,” Hajime said with a somewhat faraway look in his eyes. “Those two’re a couple of brats, after all.”

“I don’t think that a guy who’s unemployed, living off the allowance he gets from his parents, and freeloading off a girl he knows has *any* right to call them brats.”

“Looking back on it, they did sorta just fall into the team by happenstance. They’re not loyal, and they don’t really think of us as a team either. It’s nothing more than an alliance of convenience for them.”

I hesitated to reply.

“*But*,” Hajime said before I could find the right words, his tone powerful and confident, “even if their intent wasn’t clear, those two still chose me. That’s a fact, and nothing can change it. Even if it was a choice they sleepwalked into on a whim, it’s still a choice they made by their own will.”

“A choice...” I repeated.

“And, hey—if this means they’re learning to look the choices they’ve made before now in the eye, then maybe they’re growing up a little too.”

Growth—in other words, change. Had some form of change come to Toki Shuugo and Akutagawa Yanagi as well? For all I knew, the two of them *were* beginning to shift, just like Umeko had gone through her own shockingly high-speed transformation.

That being said...whether you were talking in terms of development or deterioration, evolution or devolution—really, no matter *what* form of change under the sun—Kiryuu Hajime remained ever unchanging. I was no Professor Anzai, but I still had to steal one of his most famous lines when it came to Hajime and say that he hadn't grown in the least. Hajime had remained stubbornly consistent ever since we were students. He was so unchanging, it was as if time had stopped for him and him alone.

Our world was in a constant state of flux, but Hajime was the one person who could reject that reality and remain as he always had been. If “You’ve changed” can be a compliment or an insult depending on the context it was said in, then the same is true of “You haven’t changed”—and Kiryuu Hajime hadn’t changed a bit, for better or for worse.

“Hm? What?” asked Hajime.

I sighed. “Nothing, really. I’ll try giving them a call again.”

I pulled out my smartphone and looked up our two missing members’ numbers, starting with Toki.

Chapter 2: Toki Shuugo

If your fangs have chipped, pull them.

If your claws have dulled, shed them.

For a disgraced and damaged blade that's lost its place

Will cut nothing—not even itself.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

The text Saitou Hitomi had sent was incredibly gentle in tone and content. She'd gone out of her way to not come across like she was blaming its recipient for not having contacted her in days, and she'd focused solely on her concern for his safety. It was a text that made it very clear how kindhearted a woman she was.

Toki Shuugo, however, clicked his tongue with irritation as he read the message, then shoved his phone back into his pocket without bothering to reply. He scowled, lowered his helmet's visor, and pulled his motorcycle back onto the road from the shoulder where he'd momentarily come to a stop.

The hell's she want from me? Shuugo thought as he raced along precisely at the speed limit, weaving cleanly between the cars ahead of him. The smooth, consistent movement of his motorcycle stood in sharp contrast to the disordered mess of his thoughts. His mind was sluggish and stagnant—and above all else, he was just plain pissed off.

Son of a bitch!

Shuugo was annoyed. He was *really* annoyed. He didn't understand what it was he was so annoyed about, but that just annoyed him more than ever. All he knew was when it had started: upon Habikino Hatsuhiko's recent invitation. Ever since then, a distinct sense of inexplicable discomfort had lingered within his gut.

Shuugo had immediately and unambiguously shot the offer down. He had nothing to feel guilty about and no reason to hesitate to reply to Hitomi's message. He could have simply reported his victory to her and waited for further orders from Kiryuu Hajime, just like always—

Ah, okay. I get it now. That's what I'm so pissed off about, Shuugo thought, his expression twisting into a grimace behind his visor. Why the hell am I acting like it's totally natural for me to be pals with those people?!

“Unless there's some reason you're obligated to follow Kiryuu Hajime's orders?”

Shuugo hadn't had an answer to Habikino Hatsuhiko's question. Why was he following Kiryuu's orders? Why had he become his underling? What chain of events had led to him becoming a “wing of a fallen angel,” of all the stupidly cryptic nonsense? Kiryuu gave orders like it was only natural, and Shuugo followed them as if it were a matter of course. There was a clear and present pecking order to their relationship. One was the boss, and one was the follower—the hierarchy was plain to see.

Over the course of the Fifth Spirit War, Shuugo had taken on and laid low a multitude of Players. In terms of pure kill count, he might well have been *Fallen Black's* top achiever. That being said, Shuugo had never had a clear motivation to fight in the War. He had no wish he hoped to fulfill, and he didn't feel any sense of duty or obligation toward Kiryuu or any of his other teammates. He simply received his orders and carried them out without protest. It was almost like...

“It's like you're some sorta mercenary, y'know?” the tall man sitting on the parking lot curb said matter-of-factly as he looked Shuugo straight in the eye. He had the air of a calm, mild-mannered individual, judging by his features, and his black biker jacket and stiffly spiked hair did surprisingly little to diminish that image. Nothing about him gave the impression that he was gruff or wild. It might've been the look in his eyes. His gaze gave a gentle, almost docile impression.

The atmosphere in the parking lot was downright boisterous. Raucous, youthful laughter and the clamorous din of running engines rang out freely with complete disregard for the fact that it was the middle of the night. The parking lot in question belonged to a twenty-four-hour convenience store set up beside a highway. Most customers arrived in cars, so the parking lot was much larger than most convenience stores' to accommodate them—but on that night in particular, the entire lot had been occupied by a single group, their flashily modified motorcycles lined up in a row.

The group's members were a bunch of young, vulgar thugs. You could tell at a glance that they were the sort of troublemakers who'd never amount to anything, and as a result, anyone who *wasn't* part of their gang didn't dare to approach the store. Every once in a while a car would pull up close enough for its driver to see the state of things in the lot, only to pull a U-turn and speed off just as quickly as it had arrived.

"You tryin' to pick a fight, Yousuke?" Shuugo asked with a glare.

"Ha ha! Nah, I'm not making fun of you or anything. Guess I'm not exactly complimenting you either though," the man in the biker jacket, Kurumaya Yousuke, replied with a flippant laugh before pulling out a pack of cigarettes and slotting one into his mouth. "I forget—you don't smoke, do you, Shuugo?"

"Nah. Still a minor," Shuugo replied.

"Not every day you hear *that* from the second-in-command of a gang. You're one conscientious guy when it comes to stuff like that, huh?" Yousuke said as he lit his cigarette up with a cheap disposable lighter.

Yousuke's gang, Cruise, was made up of a couple dozen motorcycle-loving juvenile delinquents. They would blaze down the highways, feud over territory with the other local gangs, and didn't shy away from violence and crime when the moment called for it. From the perspective of society at large, they were very much the bad guys, and Shuugo served as their second-in-command.

"Anyway, what was I saying...? Ah, right, I was talking about how it feels like you're some sorta mercenary," Yousuke said, not sounding particularly serious about the theory. In spite of his flashy appearance, he came across as an oddly calm man—subdued, even. No one would be likely to pick him out as the gang's

leader when the rest of their rowdy band of ruffians were present, that was for sure. “I mean, I’m not trying to make a big thing out of it or anything, but, like... Okay, y’know how we just kicked the living hell outta the Underdogs? At this point, there aren’t any other gangs out there that could pick a fight with us and get away with it, right?”

“Right,” said Shuugo.

“Well, when all’s said and done? *You’re* the one who did most of the work taking the Underdogs out. *You* charged in right outta the gate, and *you* threw them off their game so much that the rest of us could sweep in and mop up. You’re the one who took out their boss too.”

“Quit kissing my ass, okay?”

“Hey, Shuugo,” Yousuke said, throwing an abrupt swerve into the flow of the conversation. “Why *did* you go out and fight all those guys?”

Shuugo blinked. “Huh? What’re you talking about? I did it ‘cause you told me to, no shit! And you’re the one who said I should lead the charge, for that—”

“Right. That’s what I’m talking about.”

Shuugo fell silent.

“I told you to do it, yeah. I was acting as Cruise’s head honcho and gave you an order. I’d call it a pretty crazy and reckless order, actually, but I had faith that you’d be able to pull it off. The thing is, though,” Yousuke said, pausing to take a drag on his cigarette and breathe out a cloud of white smoke, “it’s not like *you* have faith in *me*, do you?”

“...”

“You didn’t even consider it, did you? You just shut up and followed my orders. That’s not having faith in someone—that’s giving up on thinking, period.”

Shuugo didn’t say a word. Or, really, he *couldn’t* say a word.

“The rest of our boys all have some sorta motivation to fight, y’know? Some of them can’t stand the other guys, some of them want revenge, some of them love a good brawl, and some of them just like how it hypes up our team. But

not you, Shuugo. You're the only one who went out into that battle totally hollow."

"Hollow...?"

"Ahh, nah, that's going a little too far. It's not quite that you're a mindless puppet or whatever. You'd probably run away if your life was at risk, my orders be damned, and you'd bite back if I told you to do something impossible. You've just got no initiative, that's all—and that's what makes you a mercenary," said Yousuke, giving Shuugo an uncomfortably earnest look. "In terms of toughness, you're probably the best of us. I bet not even I could go toe to toe with you...and yet, I'm the boss anyway."

Of course you are, Shuugo muttered internally. Kurumaya Yousuke had built Cruise up from nothing. All of its members, Shuugo included, had gathered up under his command out of admiration for him. They were men who'd never fit in with their families, at their schools, or in society in general, and Yousuke had given them a place where they felt like they belonged.

"And if I ever decide to retire from the team—just hypothetically, y'know—I probably wouldn't make you the next leader," Yousuke continued. "Even if the others wanted you to take over, I wouldn't let it happen."

"Isn't that supposed to be how it works? If the leader quits, the second-in-command takes over," Shuugo fired back. He wasn't actually interested in the position, but being told he wouldn't be getting it to his face made him want to object on an instinctual level.

"No matter how strong he is, a mercenary can never be king," said Yousuke. It didn't *quite* make sense to Shuugo, but nevertheless, it struck home with him on a very deep level. "Ha ha ha! 'Course, this team's gonna have to get a lot bigger if I wanna talk about naming a successor without sounding dumb as hell," Yousuke said with a laugh a moment later.

Around that time, the rest of the crew started to gather up around him.

"What're you two talking about? And why the hell're you acting like such downers?" asked one of the bikers.

"Right? Live it up a little, come on! We finally took out those Underdog

assholes—it's time to celebrate!" shouted another.

"Oh, and hey, Yousuke, can you come take a look at this? I snagged one of their carburetors, and it's not working out like I figured..."

"Hey! Dammit, Mitsuru, whose bike're you experimenting on this time?!"

The party was in full swing again, and this time, Yousuke was at its center. It was now very clear that he stood at the top of Cruise's pecking order in both name and substance. There was something about him—some strange appeal that drew people to his side, something that Shuugo lacked entirely.

A mercenary. Shuugo didn't like it, but he had to admit that the word suited him to a T. He waited for orders, then carried them out to the letter. He'd never felt reluctant to live that way either. If anything, it granted him a sense of fulfillment. If he wanted to sound cool, he'd have said he was the quintessential professional, doing the jobs he was given and nothing else, but he knew that there wasn't *really* anything cool about the way he lived at all.

The truth was that Shuugo just wasn't thinking—about anything. The world sorta just pissed him off, society vaguely got under his skin, and all that ambiguous and sourceless irritation made him all too willing to go on a rampage on command. Yousuke had said that he'd given up on thinking, and when all was said and done, Shuugo couldn't argue against that.

"Hey, Shuugo?" Yousuke whispered, as if he was slipping the word through a crack in the wall of laughter and celebration that surrounded them. "If you wanna be a mercenary, then that's fine. You do you. The problem's that you don't *know* that's what you're doing. Doesn't it feel pathetic to just go with the flow and follow orders for no real reason?"

Shuugo didn't reply, and Yousuke shrugged. "Meh, I mean, you might as well just keep following my orders like always for now, I guess. Just try to start using your head a bit more. You get me? You're my second-in-command, and that means that part of your job's to punch me the hell out if I start to lose my way, y'know?"

"Peh!" Shuugo spat. "Better watch yourself, then. You never know when I might stab you in the back."

“Ha ha ha! Oh, I’ll be careful, all right!” Yousuke chuckled, then he stood up and made his way into the crowd.

As Shuugo watched him go, a thought occurred to him. *Yousuke’s...different*, he thought. *He’s not like all the rest of the stupid assholes I’ve met.*

At the same time, Shuugo realized that Yousuke had something that he didn’t. Maybe, just maybe, something would change if he stuck with Yousuke. Maybe this team could change something for him. Maybe he’d be able to find that *something* he’d always been missing.

“Uhh, excuse me?”

That’s when it happened. Suddenly, a single man called out to Yousuke’s band of lawless troublemakers.

“So, sorry, but, uh...do you think you guys could keep it down a little, please? You’re, you know...sort of getting in the way of our business, I guess...? The other customers can’t come in with you all partying out here,” said the man. His blue-striped shirt identified him as one of the convenience store’s employees in an instant. “I mean, if you ask me, not getting customers is a perk, but my manager’s being a real pain in the ass about it,” he added half-heartedly.

“*Huh?* Who the hell’re you supposed to be?” grunted one of Cruise’s bikers. In no time at all, he and his fellow delinquents had circled up around the convenience store clerk.

“You think you’re some pretty hot shit, huh?”

“You know we’re paying customers, right? See, look at all the crap we bought from you! This the sorta store that drives away its clientele?”

“You get the picture, right? How ’bout you hustle back into your little store and restock some shelves, Mister Part-Timer?”

The bikers sneered and jeered at the unfortunate young man. None of them were listening to a word he said.

“Oh, for the... Come on, people, the guy’s just doing his job! Give the poor man a break,” Yousuke sighed, stepping toward the rapidly brewing conflict. Reining in his followers when they went overboard was part of his job as their

leader, and he probably intended to reprimand them. It happened all the time, and Shuugo watched with an air of detached nonchalance.

Until a chill shot down his spine.

Shuugo's gaze had met the convenience store clerk's. He'd looked into the young man's eyes, one black, and the other—the right one—a deep, unnatural shade of crimson. The mismatched color of his eyes was beyond bizarre.

"Ahh...whatever. Screw it," the clerk sighed listlessly. "I'm sick of this crap. It just isn't in character for me at all."

It was like a switch had been flipped, changing his presence in an instant. His unobtrusive demeanor vanished into thin air, replaced with a haughty, overblown persona. It was such a dramatic shift that, for a moment, the delinquents surrounding the man stiffened up...and he laughed at them, sweeping a hand through his silver hair.

"Bwa ha ha!" the man cackled. It was a dry, peculiar sort of laugh—not to mention unnatural and outlandish, given how he went out of his way to carefully pronounce its every syllable. "So, all I have to do is drive these fools off, and I get an extra fifty yen an hour? My manager might be an insufferable nag, but I have to admit, this *is* a pretty fun idea!"

"Wh-What the hell're you laughing at, asshole?!" one of the delinquents shouted. It seemed the man's insolent attitude had touched a nerve, and the young biker reached out to grab him by the lapels.

"Oh, I'd let go if I were you," said the man. "This coat's got anticorporeal and antimagical defensive enhancements worked into its design. Touching it for long's bad news for an ordinary human."

"Huh?! You're wearing a convenience store uniform, dipshit!"

"Ah. Right. Sorry, lemme take that back," the man said after glancing down at the striped shirt he was wearing. Judging by his profoundly regretful grimace, he'd made some sort of terrible mistake.

"What're you even *talking* about, dumbass?!" the delinquent roared. He let go of the clerk's shirt, clenched a fist, and sent it flying toward his victim's face...but the instant before the punch landed, the delinquent let out a

wheezing gasp and crumpled to the asphalt.

He hadn't stumbled—that much was obvious. It was nowhere near that gentle of a fall. It was like an enormous, invisible hammer had fallen upon him from overhead, flattening him to the ground in a single, crashing blow.

“Bwa ha ha... So, tell me: how's it feel to kiss asphalt?” the man mocked as he watched the young delinquent moan with pain. Then he unbuttoned his convenience-store uniform, sweeping it off his shoulders to reveal the purple T-shirt beneath.

“Mitsuru! Are you okay?!”

“The hell did you do to him, asshole?!”

In an instant, Cruise's members boxed the man in. They were openly wary of him now, not to mention enraged and bewildered. The man, however, remained totally composed in the face of their glares and spread his arms in an exaggerated pose.

“Come at me, tough guys! I'll teach you that we're operating on totally different levels— Ah, nah, scratch that,” he said with a quick shake of his head. “I'll teach you that we're operating in totally different genres!”

What...the hell?

Shuugo couldn't believe his eyes. The scene playing out before him was just too absurd, too inconceivable for him to accept, and it left him frozen stock-still.

“Y'know, I actually like reading a delinquent manga or two every once in a while! Everyone loves a good bromance, and all those twisted values and out-there codes of honor that only people who live on the wrong side of society could ever understand? Good shit, right there! But y'know...there's one thing I think whenever I read one of those,” the man said, speaking clearly and loudly to nobody in particular. “No matter how cool, how strong, how outright crazy and badass the characters in those manga are...”

The man flung his arms wide open, turning his gaze to the night sky.

“...they'd never cut it in the world of a supernatural battle story.”

It was a scene that the word “carnage” did remarkably decent justice to. Dozens of delinquents lay sprawled out on the asphalt, moaning in pain and unable to stand. They’d been annihilated. They’d rushed a single man en masse, and he had turned the tables on them, wiping them out till only one remained.

Who... Who the hell is that guy?!

Even Cruise’s leader, Yousuke, had been laid low in a single blow. Out of their whole crew, the only member who remained standing was Shuugo, and he’d escaped harm through sheer dumb luck. It had just so happened that the curb he’d been sitting on had placed him farther away from the man than everyone else. He’d been seconds late to the brawl as a result...and those seconds were all it had taken for the rest of Cruise to be decimated. In an instant, the place where Toki Shuugo had felt he belonged had crumbled before his eyes.

“What the fuck...did you just do...?” Shuugo asked, his voice trembling as he focused his attention upon the man before him. The man was slender—a twig, really—and didn’t *look* like he’d be a capable fighter at all, in terms of pure strength.

Appearances, however, couldn’t have been more deceiving, and the man had proved himself tough enough to take out several dozen battle-hardened ruffians. Shuugo hadn’t been close enough to have any clue how he’d pulled it off. One second the fight was beginning, and the next, everyone except for him was on the ground. Not only was their foe unharmed, he hadn’t even broken a sweat. Whatever had happened could only be described as supernatural.

“Guess that just leaves...one guy, huh? You’re last, shoulder-tattoo,” the silver-haired man said as he looked over toward Shuugo. “What’s your move? If you wanna run, that’s cool with me, but if you wanna make like your buddies and dance the hard luck waltz, then be my guest.”

Shuugo’s gaze shifted from the man and his sneering smile to the rest of Cruise’s members laid out on the ground, Yousuke among them. The leader had gone down just as easily as his men had, and he was just as firmly incapacitated. The man Shuugo had followed—the man he’d decided to stick with—had been curb-stomped like any other schmuck in a matter of seconds.

“What? Can’t throw a punch without your boss giving the order first?”

Shuugo took in a sharp breath. There was no telling why the man had picked that taunt in particular, but whatever the reason, it'd sent Shuugo's emotions into a seething boil.

"Like *hell*, asshole!" Shuugo shouted, his hand dropping reflexively to his back pocket. He pulled out his jackknife, flicking it open in a flash and holding it at the ready. It was a sharp, keenly honed knife, and the light glinted off its carefully maintained body.

That knife was Shuugo's favorite weapon, but in all practicality, he carried it for self-defense purposes and rarely ever used it in actual combat. Shuugo had no compunctions against getting violent when the need arose, but he also had enough common sense to not come out stabbing in a street fight. He was a brawler, not a killer. Now, however, he was bringing it out without hesitation. A deep, instinctual fear drove him to pull out all the stops—even the potentially lethal ones.

"You're *dead*!"

A flash of light streaked through the air. Shuugo shot forward at a near superhuman speed, closing in on his target and stabbing in the same motion. It was the fastest, most direct line of attack he could have chosen—and it didn't work.

"Wha—" Shuugo gasped, his eyes widening with shock. Before he'd even realized what was happening, the man he was trying to stab had leaped into the air...and landed *on the blade of his knife*.

"You're pretty fast! Decent aim too. Too emotional, though. Getting that worked up makes your attacks stupid easy to read," the man lectured from atop Shuugo's knife. His arrogant tone probably would've pissed Shuugo off to no end if it weren't for the fact that he was so stunned and bewildered, he didn't even hear what the man had to say.

What...? No, this doesn't make sense. This shit doesn't happen in real life!

Moves like that came up all the time in manga. A fighter would take a swing, only for their foe to effortlessly dodge the attack and land on their opponent's weapon. The goal, typically, was to show off how incredibly fast the dodger was, but anyone with an ounce of sense could tell you that the fighter who was

apparently strong enough to not even *notice* that a human's worth of weight had suddenly been added to their weapon was the really impressive one. In any case, it was one of those classic manga techniques that had absolutely no real-world application under any circumstances.

But he's...not heavy at all?

Shuugo was in exactly that sort of situation—holding a human up one-handed—and he felt nothing. His knife didn't feel any heavier than it ever did. It was as if the man had discarded his body weight entirely.



“Lucifer’s Strike.”

“Huh?”

“Such is the name of the profane power I call my own.”

“Power...?”

“You should feel honored to fall victim to this technique. Your very body will become a warning—a sign to inform all and sundry of my dominance!” the man said, heedless of the fact that Shuugo hadn’t understood a single word that had come out of his mouth.

The man leaped off the knife’s blade, soaring gently through the air before touching down without a sound and stepping toward Shuugo once more. The man’s hands had never left his pockets throughout that whole display, yet something about his approach gave off an intense, intimidating pressure. Shuugo’s legs felt like they’d been nailed to the ground. He couldn’t move an inch.

Son of a bitch! Shuugo shouted internally, his grip tightening around his knife’s handle.

“Oh? That’s a good look in your eyes,” said the man. “You haven’t given up yet, have you? Pretty impressive.”

“Like hell I’d let this end before I give you what you’ve got coming!” Shuugo spat back.

“I see I’ve found another hopeless fool who lives under the misapprehension that he has a chance of standing up against my power... Heh! It’s tragic, really.”

The silver-haired man stepped closer. The distance between the two fighters shrank. Then, as the man finally pulled his hands from his pockets...

“S-Stop, please...”

A faint, strained voice rang out through the space between the two, and the silver-haired man stopped in his tracks.

“Yousuke,” Shuugo whispered. And, indeed, that voice belonged to Cruise’s leader. He still couldn’t stand, it seemed, but he had dragged himself across the

ground, slowly and painfully making his way to the man's feet.

"You win. I'm sorry," Yousuke said. He pushed himself up to his hands and knees, just enough to press his head to the ground once more in a deep, supplicating bow of apology.

"*Hey! The hell're* you doing, Yousuke?! Why would you bow down to this asshole?!" Shuugo bellowed.

Yousuke didn't so much as budge. "I'm begging you," he said. "Stop hurting my friends, please!"

"What the *fuck?!'*" Shuugo shouted, desperate to bring an end to his boss's stubborn effort to apologize. "Stand up, god dammit! Are you really gonna let him look down on you like this?! Fight, Yousuke! *Fight!* We're... We're better than this..."

"Man... Yeah, I'm not feeling this anymore," the silver-haired man said with a deep sigh. "C'mon, man, quit groveling. You're making me look like the bad guy here. Give me a break, honestly—none of this would've happened if you people hadn't decided to whoop it up in a public parking lot and kill all our business, y'know?" he said, scratching his head and already sounding like he was bored with the whole encounter. "Guess I did it again, huh? I came out here to protect the store's peace, knock some bad guys' heads in, and get myself a raise, but I just had to go and get carried away... Might've been kinda immature to go all out on a buncha unpowered scrubs."

"Say *wha—'*"

"Don't even try it, shoulder-tattoo. You don't stand a chance against me."

Shuugo choked on his words, and the man continued.

"In my world, punks and thugs like you get treated like dirt. They exist to be all 'What the hell're you lookin' at, asshole?!' or 'Hey, hot stuff, how 'bout I show you a good time?' or whatever, then they get slaughtered by the main character and never turn up again. It's a role for losers," he rambled incoherently as he picked up his discarded convenience store uniform, patted the dust off it, and pulled it on again. "Anyway, try to learn a thing or two from this, ladies and gentlepunks. Do yourselves a favor and never kick up a fuss in

our parking lot again. If you're gonna be a problem, do it in our rival store's lot. It's about three hundred meters down thataway or so. Like, seriously, go nuts."

With those apathetic parting words, the man stepped back into the convenience store. He'd been so sloppy, so purely half-hearted with his lecture, it was plain to see that he didn't give the slightest hint of a crap about Shuugo or his teammates. Shuugo was left standing there, unable to do anything but clench his fist around his still-drawn knife.

And so, the biker gang Cruise had been completely annihilated on the whim of a single convenience store clerk. Some time afterward, a spirit named Marilino who'd witnessed the supernatural battle that had gone down that night contacted Shuugo, revealing to him both the existence of the Spirit War and the identity of Kiryuu Hajime. Shuugo accepted the invitation that the spirit extended to him, and thus he set foot into the world that Kiryuu had cryptically alluded to.

One might think that Shuugo was driven by a desire to take revenge on Kiryuu...but that wasn't the case. Kiryuu's reputation had been beginning to grow, and Marilino had apparently chosen to act as Shuugo's Spirit Handler specifically because the biker seemed likely to pick a fight with—and maybe even take down—the now infamous Player, but in the end, that plan had failed spectacularly.

Shuugo felt no drive to avenge his old gang, nor did he resent Kiryuu for its destruction. The moment he'd witnessed Kurumaya Yousuke, the man he'd respected above all others, suffer a humiliating defeat and beg the man who'd beaten him for mercy, something inside him that he couldn't put a name to had broken with a violent, almost audible *snap*. For the briefest of moments, it had felt like he'd found something to fill the void within him, but now it was back, and emptier than ever.

When Shuugo and Kiryuu eventually reunited in the world of supernatural battles, Shuugo found himself lacking any sense of duty or desire for revenge to drive him to fight the man. Kiryuu soon invited Shuugo to join his team, and Shuugo let himself be swept along. Before he knew it, he was fighting under Kiryuu Hajime's command. The only thing that had changed was the man whose

orders he carried out.

Really, though... I have no idea what the hell that moron was thinking.

Why had Kiryuu decided to recruit Shuugo? It seemed plausible that he hadn't had a real reason to begin with, though if he had, it was almost certainly a steaming pile of chuuni bullshit. Knowing what a lost cause Kiryuu was made that easy to predict.

To hell with that guy, though. No point trying to figure out what he's thinking. The real question right now is: what the hell am I thinking?

Shuugo had accepted the invitations he'd been offered, obeyed the orders he'd been given, and gone with the flow no matter where it took him. He might have looked free and unfettered to a casual observer, but the truth was quite the opposite. His own will had never played a factor in anything he'd done. He was always carrying out the will of someone else, fighting their fights like a true mercenary. There was no telling what he, himself, was thinking—assuming he was even thinking anything at all.

“Agh, whatever! Who gives a damn?!”

Shuugo brought his motorcycle to a stop and pulled off his helmet. His eyes flashed with a dangerous glint as he glared at the building he'd come to pay a visit.

“I'm through with thinking about all that stupid crap. If I find someone I can't stand, I'll beat the hell out of them. That's all that matters.”

He had arrived at a seaside factory—the very same factory where he'd crushed Hanamura Haruto a few days beforehand, and the same factory where he'd encountered Hearts's boss, Habikino Hatsuhiko.

“This place is the only lead I've got. Dammit—should've asked them where their hideout was before I said no,” Shuugo grumbled as he stepped into the factory grounds. He didn't get far.

“BOMB Voyage! ♪”

At the exact moment a cheerful feminine voice rang out, a small explosion burst into being directly in front of Shuugo's face. He flinched back with a grunt of shock as crimson sparks flew around him and a blast of intensely hot wind rushed past. He'd managed to cover his face with his arms and leap backward on reflex, but the blast's shock wave was still intense.

"Ah-haa!" The excessively cheerful voice rang out again, this time a laugh with a sluggish drawl. Shuugo managed to push through the pain and looked up to find a gaudily dressed girl standing before him.

"Bingo, bingo, that's a *bingooo*! Guess the perp really *does* come back to the scene of the crime, or whatevs!" the girl said as she practically hopped her way toward him. "You're, uhh, Toki Shuugo, right? Kiryuu Hajime's flunkie? The knife dude?"

"And who the hell're *you* supposed to be?" Shuugo growled.

"Oh, me? I'm one of Hearts's head honchos! Name's Hachisuka Happa!"

"You? Hearts put some random brat in charge?"

"*Huh?* Try looking in a mirror before you start calling people brats, 'kay? And anyway, I'm, like, suuuper tough! You saw that big ol' boom just now, right? That was just a li'l ol' hello explosion, so I dialed it *way* down! If I'd actually tried, you'd be a charcoal smear right about now!" Happa said, punctuating her claim with a derisive cackle. "So anyway, whaddya want? Having second thoughts about Hatsuhiko's offer? Ha ha ha—after you already turned him down? Talk about *lame*!"

"Not even close, dipshit," Shuugo said as he drew his chipped, jagged, entirely unfoldable jackknife. "I'm here to take you and the rest of Hearts down."

In an instant, all traces of amusement vanished from Happa's expression. "Hmph. I get it now. You're here on Kiryuu Hajime's orders, aren't you?"

"Hell no. That asshole has nothing to do with this. I just got pissed off and decided to crush you, that's all."

Shuugo wasn't operating under anyone's orders this time. He'd acted of his own free will.

“I’m no goddamn *merc.*”

“Uhh, duh? Your name’s Shuugo, not Mark. I, like, totally knew that already.”

Shuugo winced. “Shoulda known better than to waste time talking to a dumbass.”

“Say *what*?! Think you can look down on me ’cause I dropped out after middle school?! Think again, shit-for-brains!”

Happa raised her arms before her, and Shuugo brandished his knife. As sparks flew and crimson flames raged, the curtain opened on the Spirit War’s next battle.

At the same moment that *BOMB Voyage* and *Zigzag Jigsaw*’s clash was beginning in all of its flashy and overblown glory, another wing of *Fallen Black* was fighting his own battle in an entirely different location. His was a solitary affair, carried out in a cramped room, and it wasn’t going well for him. In sharp contrast to the extravagant conflict playing out in the seaside factory, the battle between *Two Tool to Too True* and *Dead Space* was almost disappointingly lacking in spectacle.

The loud whirring of a smartphone’s vibration resounded. A text had arrived from Saitou Hitomi, but the phone’s owner was in no condition to check it, much less actually read the message. It was the middle of the day, but he had all of his curtains drawn, leaving his apartment in a gloomy partial darkness.

“Ugh... Agggh...”

The groaning of the phone’s owner quickly drowned out the sound of its vibration.

“Gah... Hah, hah, hah, ugh... Mngghaaahhh!”

That owner, a young boy, clutched his head and writhed upon his bed. He was drenched with cold sweat, his face was deathly pale, and he had dark, pronounced bags under his eyes. His name was Akutagawa Yanagi.

Yanagi reached for the headphones by his bedside, put them on, queued up a

track, and cranked the volume to an outrageously high level. An explosive blast of music pierced his eardrums.

“Ahah hah hah hah hah! Nooope, nope nope nope nope! That’s not gonna work! You can’t drown out my voice that easily!”

The voice was right. Not even turning up the volume to eardrum-bursting levels did anything to blot it out. No amount of external noise could ever overwhelm a sound that was coming from inside his own mind.

“You knew that already, though, right? How could you ever drown out the voice of your own heart?”

Shut...up... Yanagi silently repeated, over and over. The voice in his head felt like it was pounding on the inside of his skull. *Just shut the hell up already...*

“Hah hah hah hah hah! You’re looking pretty tuckered out, O master of mine! No surprise there, eh? Three days without sleep will do that to a guy! Not like you’ve had a real meal in days either!”

And whose fault...is that...?

“Yours. I’m you, after all.”

...

A vague image began to arise in Yanagi’s mind—or rather, from the depths of his heart. It seemed humanoid at a glance, and when he focused a little harder, Yanagi could tell that it was his own silhouette. It was some other Akutagawa Yanagi, wearing a smile that the real Yanagi would never display, and it laughed derisively at him.

“Or, really, if I’m gonna be exact about it,” said the voice of the other Yanagi in his mind, *“I’m your sense of guilt!”*

Chapter 3: Akutagawa Yanagi

A lack of a solution is an answer

And a lack of a decision is a choice

But a lack of a meaning is never meaningful.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

Akutagawa Yanagi was a sensible young man. His thought process sprinted where others' strolled, his memory and judgment were both outstanding, his IQ was astonishing, his wits were swift, and his creativity knew no bounds. All in all, his intellect was unimpeachable.

Yanagi had never felt challenged in school. A single read-through of a textbook was all it took for him to fully grasp the subject it covered. He'd been given an IQ test in elementary school, and his score had been so unthinkably high it'd sent his school's staff room into an uproar. When he'd learned to play chess, shogi, and other such board games, he would go from having no understanding of their rules to competing on even terms with top-class players in online matches within a day. Nobody had ever taught him how to use a computer, but he excelled with them anyway, and he'd taught himself the ins and outs of not only legitimate financial affairs—from stocks to the foreign exchange market to affiliate marketing—but also illicit skills like hacking and cracking.

He was, in short, a genius. No other word could do his exceptional powers of intellect justice.

And yet, from the perspective of the world at large, the name "Akutagawa Yanagi" was a complete unknown. None of the students or teachers at his school were aware that he was smart. Not even his own parents had the faintest inkling that he was at all clever. If even a trace of his talent had ever

been discovered, he would have found himself revered as a prodigy and a child genius before he knew it, his name praised to the high heavens across all corners of the world...but Yanagi lacked two essential factors that were needed to allow that to happen: a sense of intellectual curiosity and a desire for attention.

For all Yanagi's exceptional intellect, he was critically lacking in motivation. He felt no drive to learn nor any need to be recognized for his abilities. *Sensible* though he was, he was by no means *sensitive*. He didn't want to stand out, and he had no interest in being complimented. He had no desire to do his best at anything, and he had never felt the need to help others. Whether the people around him lauded him or disavowed him, he would react in the same particular fashion:

...It's all pointless anyway.

Around the time he'd reached the later years of elementary school, Yanagi had all but entirely lost interest in the world at large. His peers had all had a sense of purpose—some had wanted their parents to praise them, or their classmates to recognize their talents; some had been told to work hard by their parents or teachers; some had simply liked to study, or had enjoyed their sport of choice. Their reasons had been myriad, but one way or another, they had all ended up applying themselves to their chosen fields. Yanagi, meanwhile, had put in the bare minimum of effort to get through to graduation and had brushed off the rest with casual indifference.

It's strange, really, Yanagi reflected. This wasn't a matter of him seeing the people around him as idiots—it had long since surpassed that level. In his mind, the people around him might as well have been from a different dimension entirely. *How do they do it? How do all of them get by in life, day after day, without a single thought passing through their heads?*

Yanagi wasn't looking down on people, per se—or at least, not intentionally. He was just confused by them. He found the humans that surrounded him, so thoughtlessly driven by the desire to ingratiate themselves with society, as peculiar and incomprehensible as could be. As an inevitable consequence, he found himself living in a state of perpetual isolation—he had no friends, and he didn't want any either.

“Hey, Akutagawa! Come have lunch with us!” a girl had said to him once in elementary school. There would always be certain people who didn’t know not to meddle where they weren’t welcome, and she’d been one of them.

At first, Yanagi had attempted to display the bare minimum of courtesy. “No thanks. I like being alone,” he’d said.

“Oh, don’t be like that! You’re lonely deep down, aren’t you?” the girl had replied. In that instant, Yanagi had given up on hoping that the people around him would ever understand him. He also wasn’t interested in carrying on the exchange any longer.

“...You know what you’re doing, right? You’re acting like everyone who doesn’t share your sense of values has to be unhappy by default. You might think this makes you look kind, but it actually just seems condescending. A simpleminded girl like you who thinks that acting like she’s some sort of saint makes her superior is a lot worse off than I am, in my opinion. And anyway...”

Yanagi droned on and on, shutting the girl down with an exhaustively thorough explanation of what she’d done wrong and how she could do better. As a sidenote, the girl had burst into tears partway through his lecture and their teacher had decided to intervene, making the situation into more of a mess.

After that, Yanagi found that his position in class had shifted from that of a plain and unobtrusive student to one whose teacher would scold him whenever she had even the slightest excuse to do so. Whether she’d thought that she was watching out for him or keeping watch *over* him was rather hard to say.

“Oh, no you don’t, Akutagawa! Sit back down and finish your food,” she’d said once when Yanagi, who had always been a light eater, had failed to polish off his school lunch. “Don’t you know there are tons of people out there who can’t get the food they need, no matter how much they want to eat? Do you really think it’s okay for you to waste your lunch while they’re starving?”

Yanagi had been so astonished and exasperated by her logic, he’d very nearly fainted on the spot. Her argument had been nothing *but* fallacies. Perhaps arguing on a level that a child could understand, appealing to his innate sense of right and wrong, had been a sound decision for an educator like her...but to Yanagi, it’d come across as the most tiresome sort of moralizing imaginable.

“...What about diets?”

“Huh?”

“...Have you ever gone on a diet before?”

“W-Well, yes,” Yanagi’s teacher had admitted, looking a touch uncomfortable. She might have thought this was Yanagi’s roundabout way of calling her fat, but whatever had been going through her mind, he’d paid it no attention and carried on without pause.

“All that taking in more energy than you need does for you is build up an excess of body fat that you’ll have to do otherwise pointless exercise to burn later on. I don’t think that’s any different from throwing your food away, aside from it taking more steps... If me not finishing my food is an insult to the people around the world who suffer from starvation, then by extension, wouldn’t the starving be even more offended by the people who stuff themselves until they end up overweight only to waste time and money burning off the fat they’ve built up for no particular purpose? That feels like a worse insult, if you ask me. Don’t you know there are tons of people out there who can’t get fat, no matter how much they want to?”

Yanagi, in his indifferent, emotionless drone, had turned his opponent’s argument back around on her and argued her into submission. She hadn’t been able to come up with a counterpoint, he’d left the remainder of his lunch untouched...and from that day onward, he’d become the target of his peers’ bullying.

The girl he’d made cry some time beforehand was the ringleader. She and her friends started hiding Yanagi’s belongings and defacing his desk and textbooks. They *might* have also tried to ostracize him, but since Yanagi had never made any effort to interact with his classmates to begin with, any such efforts had gone totally unnoticed. He’d always been isolated, but now, he had finally begun to be persecuted as well. Under normal circumstances, it would have been his teacher’s job to put an end to the bullying, but instead, she’d joined in on it. She’d grown just as frustrated as his classmates at his steadfast refusal to play nice.

Even in the face of all that bullying, though, Yanagi had remained indifferent. /

can't believe they have the patience to keep up with this pointless nonsense was the most he'd ever thought of it. He'd briefly considered trying to figure out why he was being persecuted, but he'd concluded that it would be pointless before he'd put any real effort into it. Such assessments were emblematic of Yanagi's perspective on the whole: the world, in his eyes, was overflowing with pointless wastes of time.

Beating someone in an argument, it seemed, didn't mean you were right. "Reading the room"—a skill so vague it was practically undefinable—was respected above all else, and those who couldn't do it were outcasts. The course of the world was determined by majority rule, and the majority was *stupid*. Nobody cared about what was actually right. Instead, people at large would find a solution that the majority could be satisfied with and declare it to be right, regardless of whether it was truly just. Anyone who stepped out of line and threw that balance off was considered intolerably evil.

But, honestly...who even cares? Yanagi thought. By the time he'd graduated from elementary school, he'd already considered his life to be over. *This world wasn't made for me, and I wasn't made for this world either.*

Yanagi's exasperation with the world had reached its peak, and he'd simply given up on life. At the time he should have been starting middle school, he'd instead shut himself up in his room. He couldn't see the value in going to school, so he didn't.

His parents were so ashamed of him that they rented an apartment for him to live in, far away from their home, in order to hide him from their neighbors and relatives. Yanagi didn't feel anything in particular about how they treated him, though. Whether his family loved or loathed him was, to him, a meaningless distinction. Love and affection, family and friends, hopes and dreams—he saw all of them as pointless, worthless, useless, and needless. Such things were irritating, plain and simple, and he preferred to avoid them whenever possible.

Yanagi spent his days in his one-room apartment, earning the bare minimum he needed to live with his computer and killing the rest of his time with video games. Killing time...or rather, killing himself: for all his god-granted intellect, the boy genius Akutagawa Yanagi had found nothing of meaning in life, and had

thus concluded that all he could do was sit around and wait to die.

“Jerk! Freak! Prick! Gloomy-ass loser!” bellowed the voice in Yanagi’s mind. “What the hell’s your deal, anyway? How do you even turn out that friggin’ creepy? I’m you, and you make me wanna lose my lunch! I cringe so hard watching you it makes me wanna curl up and die, you self-centered, bratty little bitch!”

The voice was so absurdly loud it felt like a dagger stabbing repeatedly into Yanagi’s brain, and it had been shouting nonstop for days on end. All he could do was shut himself up in his apartment and writhe on his bed, clutching his head and trying desperately to endure the mental noise.

...If it’s that hard to watch, then stop looking into my memories.

“I’m not looking into them, I’m remembering them!” said the voice. “I’m you, remember?”

...

“Hmm? What, did you actually forget? Guess I should explain it all over again! I’m the embodiment of your sense of guilt. I didn’t just spring up from the depths of your mind naturally, though. One of Hearts’s members, Hamai Haneko, used a power called Two Tool to Too True to plant the seed that grew into me. Her power lets her force people to keep promises, you see, and you promised Habikino Hatsuhiko that you’d kill Kiryuu Hajime, knowing perfectly well that you had no intention of following through. The guilt you feel over that lie is what gave birth to me as a distinct personality!”

As the voice in his head screamed point-blank into Yanagi’s mind, he slowly forced himself into a sitting position. Dark, heavy bags hung under his eyes. Thanks to the unending mental clamor he’d been dealing with, it had been days since he’d gotten a decent night’s sleep.

...You’re giving away an awful lot about how her power works, thought Yanagi. Whose side are you on?

“Hah hah hah! Good question, actually. That’s a toughie. I am you, so I’d love to say I’m on your side...but you know how often people talk about being their

own biggest enemy.”

...

“So really, I’m not on anyone’s side. I’m just here to fill my role as your sense of guilt. If you can wipe the knowledge that you did something wrong from your mind, I’ll disappear too. If you can’t pull that off, though, then it’s only a matter of time before I overwhelm you. That’s right—you’ll be crushed by your own sense of guilt,” the voice said, sounding truly delighted by the prospect. *“Guess I probably need a name, huh? How about...oh, how’s Nega-Yanagi sound to you?”*

...I couldn’t care less, Yanagi replied. Nothing could have been more tiresome to him than having to deal with the voice’s—or rather, Nega-Yanagi’s—attitude. He’d gotten more or less used to the mental conversation aspect by that point. For that matter, talking with Nega-Yanagi was actually a helpful distraction, considering that when Yanagi ignored him, he’d prattle on and on without end. As such, Yanagi had turned the inner dialogue into something of a question and answer session with himself. It was an eternal, compulsory soliloquy.

...I still barely believe it. Who knew I even had the capacity to feel guilt?

Yanagi had indeed broken his promise to Hatsuhiko. He’d planned on agreeing to kill Kiryuu, taking the three million yen, then acting like the deal had never happened. Even now, he didn’t believe on any level that his choice had been inherently mistaken. He’d made the most rational decision available to him. Actually keeping a promise with an enemy would be a far more outlandish thing to do, and above all else, the idea that he’d feel guilty about deceiving *that* man in particular was inconceivable.

“Naaah, I don’t think so! You’re taking all this way too lightly, Yanagi!” said Nega-Yanagi. *“There’s no such thing as a person who feels no guilt whatsoever! I mean, you’re one cold-blooded son of a bitch, don’t get me wrong. It takes a real piece of work to look down on companionship and trust the way you do, you sad little brat! You can take my word for that too—trust me, I’d know. But the thing is, that doesn’t change the fact that on an intellectual level, you still know when you’ve done a bad thing, don’t you?”*

Evil was evil. Crimes were crimes. Yanagi really did have the capacity to

recognize that.

“You don’t have to feel bad about it to know that you’ve done wrong, right? When you do stuff that society thinks of as evil, you know exactly what you’re doing. And that’s all it takes! Hamai Haneko’s power can work on even the slightest hint of guilt, making it grow and develop at an explosive rate until it takes on an ego of its own!”

By that definition, at least, Yanagi did indeed have a sense of guilt. He didn’t regret the things he’d done, and he had no intention of changing his ways, but he was also intellectually aware that he’d done wrong.

“Hah hah hah! Suck it, Akutagawa Yanagi! You thought you were screwing your enemy over, but the truth is, they totally set you up instead! What’s the point of that big brain of yours if you’re not even gonna use it?”

...I couldn’t have said it better myself, Yanagi agreed readily with a bitter chuckle. I completely let my guard down. Three million yen is chump change, and picking it up just because I could was a mistake.

“Chump change, huh? Y’know, there’s a lot of people out there who’d straight-up kill themselves for that sort of money!”

...I screwed up. I screwed up badly. I wish I could go back and do it all over, right now.

“Y’know what’s just like you? The fact that even now, after all this, you’re not even a little bit sorry for selling out your friends. You’re not even pretending to regret it! Hah hah hah!”

Yanagi, in truth, hadn’t even considered that until Nega-Yanagi pointed it out. The fact that he’d sold his friends out just hadn’t been on his mind.

...Those people aren’t my friends, Yanagi thought. I only stick around them because they’re useful. No other reason.

Whether comrades, friends, lovers, or family—any form of human connection whatsoever—Akutagawa Yanagi had given up on them. They were complicated, depressing, and irritating, not to mention tiresome, dubious, and meaningless. They were simply unnecessary for the rational life he strove to live.

“God, you’re one boring guy.”

...Being interesting isn’t a priority for me.

“Yeah, well, what is? You don’t do jack! You sit around playing video games, day in and day out. You get all your food delivered, and even when you’re playing online, you always run solo. Hah hah hah—seriously, how bad at being social can you get?!”

...It’s not that I’m bad at being social. I don’t talk with people because there’s no point.

“There you go again, squandering away those smarts of yours. Talk about pearls before swine! Haven’t you ever thought about spreading your wings and getting out there a little? Like, y’know that big math problem you solved a while back? If you just told someone about that, you’d be famous overnight! Not to mention all the skills you’ve been using to make money online. If you really marketed those, you could make a killing! And hey, you’re not exactly bad-looking—why not find yourself a woman while you’re at it?” said Nega-Yanagi, in spite of the fact that he almost certainly already knew the answers. He was going out of his way to pick the topics that would irritate Yanagi the most. *“Honestly, you could do anything! Why’re you sitting around doing nothing?”*

...Just because I can do anything doesn’t mean I have to do something, Yanagi mentally droned. I don’t care whether or not people appreciate me. It’s pointless. What do I gain from people liking me, or praising me, or anything like that?

Yanagi could be famous, wealthy, and loved by everyone—but then what? None of those things, the things that normal people strove for, held any value in his eyes. He believed that living one’s life in pursuit of such meaningless goals was irrational, plain and simple.

“Okay, so what are you living for?”

...I’m living because I don’t have a good reason to die. And believe it or not, I enjoy my life. I have nothing, so I don’t have to worry about anything. I’m comfortable and carefree. It’s nice.

Yanagi whiled his days away playing video games, stopping to make money

whenever he needed it and sleeping and waking whenever he felt like it. He'd joined the Spirit War with the same capricious, half-hearted attitude. His lifestyle was as self-indulgent and solitary as could be, and as it so happened, Yanagi actually quite liked that. That, above all else, was why Nega-Yanagi and his sleep-disturbing ways were a problem that Yanagi felt a dire need to deal with.

...The question is...what should I do now? Yanagi wondered. The wild shouting of his new inner voice had left his capacity for thought at an unprecedented low, but at long last, he'd started getting used to the abnormal situation he'd landed himself in. At the very least, his thought process had recovered enough to let him start trying to work out some countermeasures. *Hey, Nega-Yanagi.*

"Oh? The name stuck already, huh? Nice!"

...If I kill Hamai Haneko, will you disappear?

"Oooh, somebody's a big, scary killer! Not even a little hesitation to murder a girl, really? But anyway, yeah, that's right. She's the source of her power, so if you take her out, I'll go with her," Nega-Yanagi freely admitted. His tone and attitude didn't change in the slightest, in spite of the fact that he was talking about his own erasure. It seemed that the thought of being destroyed didn't bother him.

...I guess I'm not even sure if he's really alive to begin with, come to think of it.

"Hah hah hah! Trying to define life? Now that's a tricky problem if there ever was one!"

...Stop commenting on my inner monologue.

"Hey, not my fault! I can't help but hear the whole thing, like it or not."

In any case, a potential solution was clear: if Yanagi could defeat Hamai Haneko, the whole irksome situation would be resolved.

...Next question. What happens if I go kill Kiryuu Hajime?

"Not a doubt in your mind you could do it, huh? Kinda goes without saying, but that'd work just fine too. It'd mean you kept your promise, after all, so it'd do away with your sense of guilt, no issues."

...Next. Is Hamai Haneko capable of canceling her ability by choice?

“The fact that that wasn’t the first thing you asked says a lot about you, y’know? But no, sorry, no dice there. Once she’s set her power off, she can’t stop it anymore. I’m out of her hands now, basically. I mean, killing her aside. Like I said, that’d totally work.”

...I think I get the picture, Yanagi said, accepting Nega-Yanagi’s story without argument. He knew the information wasn’t completely trustworthy, of course—it was perfectly possible that everything his new personality had said was leading him into another of his enemies’ traps. Last question, then. What if I—

Yanagi explained the plan he’d come up with. He’d taken everything he knew into account, including his current state of affairs, Nega-Yanagi’s claims about Hamai Haneko’s power, and Kiryuu Hajime’s traits as an individual, and he had come up with what he believed was the most efficient means of resolving the problem available to him.

“Hah hah hah... Hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah haaah!” Nega-Yanagi laughed. For a moment he’d seemed taken aback, but that had quickly devolved into a full-blown cackle. *“Hah hah hah hah hah! Okay, no, but seriously—are you really me? Because I don’t think I could come up with a worse plan than that if I tried! Do you have literally no pride? I knew you were a piece of shit, but I didn’t realize you were this putrid!”*

...Would it work, or not?

“It’s possible! Totally depends on the other guy, though.”

Yanagi sank into thought once more.

...Right, he finally responded, then sprang into action. He would seek out the quickest, most rational means to bring his predicament to an end.



In the end, I never got a reply from Toki or Yanagi. *Those little punks, I swear! They’re not even pretending to take me seriously!*

I was worried about them on a multitude of levels, but for the time being, I decided to interpret no news as good news and assume they were safe at the

very least. I just didn't have the time to be fretting over them at the moment. I shoved my phone into my pocket...then hid myself once again by a nearby utility pole to readjust the mask I was wearing, which had slipped most of the way down my nose, and push up my sunglasses while I was at it.

"Hitomi... Would you please explain to me why we are wearing such peculiar outfits and undertaking such an inexplicable set of actions?"

"*Shhh!* Keep quiet, Umeko! He'll notice us!" I shouted—but, you know, in a whisper, which was actually really hard when it came down to it—at the very confused little girl who was accompanying me. From an outsider's perspective, of course, that little girl probably looked like a little boy, on account of her outfit: a pair of shorts, a T-shirt, and sneakers, with her long hair bundled up and hidden away in a baseball cap. I'd also had her carry a bug net and a cage as accessories. She looked like an elementary school kid on his way into the mountains to catch some bugs over summer break, nothing more and nothing less.

"Your notions about this attire appear to overlook a glaring flaw: it is less than likely that any child would wander into the mountains in this weather," Umeko noted dryly as she gestured toward the sky. It was, unfortunately, deeply overcast. Thick, heavy clouds clogged up the sky, and according to the weather forecast we were due for rain starting in the evening.

"N-Nah, I'm sure people will still buy it," I said. "Keep in mind that elementary school boys are basically all idiots! We're talking about the sort of creatures who wear shorts and T-shirts every single day, all year round!"

"A remarkable display of petty prejudice."

"And hey, I bet there are types of bugs that only come out in this sort of weather, most likely!"

"For the sake of argument, I shall concede that my garb may, perhaps, escape suspicion. *Yours*, however, is outlandish by even the most lenient of standards."

"Ugh!" I grunted for lack of anything I could say in my defense. I was wearing a relatively unobtrusive coat, Hajime's spare sunglasses, and a face mask, along with a knitted hat of the sort you usually only saw in wintertime. I have to admit...I looked like a total creeper. Stalker-chic, if you will.

“W-Well, what was I supposed to do?! You have to wear this sort of disguise when you’re tailing someone! It’s...I mean, it’s a rule, you could say?”

“If you wished to know where First was going, you need only have asked.”

I sighed. *Imagine how much easier my life would be if that were actually an option...*

At the present moment, Umeko and I were engaged in a high-stakes covert operation. Our mission: tail Kiryuu Hajime. He was strutting his way through the cloud-shrouded city streets, clad in his trademark all-black attire in spite of it being the middle of summer. He was also carrying an umbrella—one of the ones modeled after the classic Japanese design—so apparently, he’d bothered to check the forecast...and while I thought that an umbrella like that was hopelessly mismatched with his outfit, he was really fond of the thing, and I’d had no intention of calling it out. He’d gotten it into his head to modify it to work as the sheath for a hidden sword at one point, and he had worked really hard on it until technical setbacks had put the project permanently on ice.

Anyway, Kiryuu was walking along like always, seemingly unaware that we were following him. As to why we were following him to begin with... Well, that traced back to the start of the whole affair, beginning with him leaving my apartment just after lunch.

Being the freeloader he was, Hajime had no compunctions about leaving the house without notice. Up until a half year beforehand—that is, until I was pulled into the Spirit War—most of his unannounced outings were on account of War-related circumstances. You’d think that my participation in the War, then, would have changed things for us, but no, he still up and vanished on a semiregular basis.

Now, I didn’t have the right to tell him *not* to go off on his own, of course! What he did was his own business, and I respected his privacy. Meddling in his affairs could only end poorly. Today, though, something about him had seemed...a little off. Normally he would’ve said something like “My evil eye...it *throbs!*” or “The wind is calling me” or “This presence...!” or something to that effect. Today, however, he’d told me “I’ve got something to take care of” and left, as simple as that. I actually *had* asked where he was going, but he’d

stubbornly refused to explain himself.

It'd felt weird. Hajime *not* being weird was as weird as he could possibly be. It'd bothered me so much that I'd immediately pulled out my phone, brought up Line, and gotten into contact with Aki and Fan. We had our own private group chat there, just for the girls in our team.

Hitomin: Hajime just went out and wouldn't tell me where he was going. Where do you think he's headed?

Kiki: idk to see a girl?

Fanfan: To a d-dirty store, maybe...?

Hitomin: ?!

...Teens these days sure are precocious, huh? I have to admit, I was a little ashamed that I hadn't even begun to consider that sort of adultlike explanation for his behavior. If he really *had* left to do something like that, in any case, then it would have been down right inexcusable on his part! An unreliable bum like him—a guy who couldn't even be bothered to chip in for rent—had no right to be buying the services of a sex worker...not to mention that him seeing some other woman was just outrageous on a basic level.

I mean, I'm not his girlfriend, of course, and I know I have no right to have such expectations of him... But, I mean... I just... I just don't like it, okay?!

And that, in a nutshell, is how Umeko and I ended up following after him in secret.

"Hmm. It seems First intends to take a bus," Umeko murmured.

Hajime had just come to a halt by a bus stop ahead of us, and he was now waiting there alone. I wanted to get on the same bus as him, of course, but if we went up to the stop now, then it would have been incredibly easy for him to notice us. We ended up waiting for a few more people to arrive at the stop first, watching from a safe distance as Hajime reversed his grip on his umbrella and started swinging it repeatedly.

"What is he doing?" asked Umeko.

“He’s practicing his golf swing,” I explained.

It was one of those image training things, basically, using the umbrella in place of a golf club. It would’ve been a huge nuisance if he’d done it when other people were around, but considering he was alone, I was willing to give him a pass.

Really, though, that’s such an old man sort of thing to do! I wouldn’t have expected it from Hajime, that’s for sure. Actually, does he even know how to play golf? I guess he read Rising Impact, I’m pretty sure? I thought idly as I watched him swing away. He was doing the full motion, following through with his swing in a complete arc...then releasing his right hand, moving it up to support the upper portion of the umbrella...

“Ryuushousen!”

...and shouting at the top of his lungs.

“...”

It was a Ryuushousen! He wasn’t practicing his golf swing—he was practicing the freaking Ryuushousen!

“Is that a commonly used technique in golf, Hitomi?”

“Uh...no, that wasn’t so much golf as it was a Hiten Mitsurugi-ryuu technique,” I uncomfortably clarified as Hajime moved on to perform several more Ryuushousens, followed by a few Gatotsu San Shikis—another upward-striking move. Apparently, he was on an anti-air kick that particular day. Maybe he was lashing out at the bad weather?

Meanwhile, people were beginning to gradually gather up at the bus stop. Once a crowd of around ten or so had formed, I decided it was our time to make a move and led Umeko to the back of the line. The bus arrived moments later, and thankfully, Hajime chose to move up and take one of the seats in the front of the bus, near the exit door. That meant that Umeko and I could sit in the back without having to pass by him or risking being spotted.

I guess Umeko and I probably look like sisters when we sit like this...? Actually, no, probably not. Not with how we’re dressed right now, anyway. We might look more like an elementary schooler who’s enjoying his summer and the

kidnapper who swooped in to spoil it, actually...

“So *this* is a bus,” Umeko muttered with an air of keen interest as I writhed in suddenly renewed shame beside her. She was firmly clasping the ticket she’d been given when she’d boarded. “I must admit, I’m surprised by how comfortable it is to ride...and the seats are fluffy too.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “I guess this *would* be your first time riding a bus, wouldn’t it?”

“Indeed.”

“Well, be careful not to lose that ticket! You give it to the driver when you pay your fare as you’re getting off.”

“Noted,” Umeko replied, as steadfastly expressionless as ever.

For all her interest in the bus, I couldn’t quite tell if she was *enjoying* the outing or not. I, at the very least, enjoyed giving her the chance to experience all sorts of new things, especially considering how few opportunities she’d had to get out in the world so far. It felt a little fulfilling, I guess? I had to wonder if it was some sort of maternal instinct at work, though given I was just a little over twenty and childless, I felt a little silly for even considering the possibility.

“Hey, Umeko,” I said.

“What is it?”

“So, umm... I know that today ended up going kind of wrong in a bunch of ways—like, with the tailing Hajime thing, and our outfits, and all...”

“A question, on that note: would our behavior not be better described as ‘stalking’ rather than ‘tailing’?”

“Let’s try not to think about that part, okay?” I said, then I made to move the conversation along before she could protest. “What I’m getting at is that I know it’s been a sort of awful outing, but next time, we should make a real plan and go somewhere for fun! It can be just the two of us, or we can invite everyone else along too if you want!”

“If you should so order it, then I shall follow you wherever you wish.”

“No, no, it’s not an order! It’s an offer—I want *you* to decide for yourself,” I

explained. “I’ll take *you* anywhere you want me to, and if you’d rather not go anywhere at all, then that’s okay too. I want you to try living the way *you* want to live a little more, Umeko.”

I tried to make my position as clear as I could, and Umeko fell into silence.

Tanaka Umeko, aka *White Rulebook*, had been brought into being for the sole purpose of defeating every other participant in the Spirit War. She was the ultimate Player, and a single use of her power was all it would take to bury the vast majority of those who would think to challenge her.

When we met her, she was the greatest enemy we’d ever faced—and she’d also tried to kill me, by the way—but that was all in the past now. Over the past month, Umeko had changed so much she was almost unrecognizable from her former self. Hajime had taken to grumbling about her shift in character for his usual incomprehensible reasons, but in my opinion, the fact that she had become more humanlike in demeanor was without question a good thing. I didn’t want her to go back to being the way she’d seemed before, an emotionless machine who only knew how to follow orders. I wanted to treat her like the person—the girl—that she was.

“A place I would like to go, you say...?” Umeko muttered. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then she quickly gave me a nod. “I shall consider the matter.”

“Sounds good! Give it some thought, yeah.”

“If that is your order, then I shall obey.”

“I-I didn’t mean it like that!”

“I jest,” Umeko said in a nonchalant deadpan.

Sheesh! Somebody’s been getting awfully glib lately.

We kept chatting as the bus drove on. Eventually, I noticed Hajime reach up and press the button to request a stop.

“Hitomi,” said Umeko.

“Yeah, I saw. Looks like the next stop is, umm... Huh?” I grunted as I read the

electronic stop display, taken aback by what I'd read. A moment later, the stop announcement confirmed that I wasn't just seeing things...but what did it *mean*? Why would he have business *there*?

I shook my head. *No, it's still too soon to say for sure. Maybe he's going somewhere else, and this just happens to be the closest stop!* While I sat there in bewilderment, the bus trundled along to the stop, and Hajime got off alongside a small cluster of other riders. Umeko and I waited until the very last second to follow them.

When we finally disembarked, we found ourselves at a sort of fancy bus stop, complete with a roof and barriers to block the wind. We waited there for a moment longer, hiding while Hajime went ahead of us. As we stood there, practically holding our breaths while the other riders went on their way, I double-checked the stop's sign just to be absolutely sure I wasn't mistaken. Sure enough, it read:

General Hospital

I could see a large white building just a short walk away from the bus stop—one I'd heard about before. It was supposed to be the biggest hospital in the local area, featuring all the facilities you could need, plus state-of-the-art medical equipment. It looked relatively modern, judging by the design of its exterior, and somehow you could tell how cleanly the place was just by looking at it. A number of trees planted nearby gave the area a verdant feel, enhancing the immaculate impression and lending the facility a rather pleasant atmosphere.

Hajime, meanwhile, walked right down the path between those vibrantly green trees—a man in black bearing straight toward a building of white. The first thought that crossed my mind was that he was going to see an ophthalmologist, but I ruled that out just as quickly. I knew for a fact that he frequented a place by the station called Sasaki Ophthalmology. He would've gone there if this was about his contacts.

So then, why? Why had he chosen to go to a hospital that was so far out of his way? Was there some reason he needed to visit such a particularly huge facility? Just what on *earth* was the “something” he had to take care of here?

Chapter 4: Habikino Hatsuhiro

Money makes the world go round.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

Three years earlier, the season had arrived for an event that college clubs all across the country made a point of throwing: the annual welcome party.

Strictly speaking, welcoming their college's new students was only part of the reason most clubs chose to throw their parties. Drawing in new recruits with the promise of a good time was more often than not the actual primary objective—these welcome parties were more or less especially boisterous recruitment drives.

Most such events took place in bars, and alcohol tended to flow freely with no regard for the fact that the vast majority of first-year college students were underage. Underage drinking—often to excess—was a common occurrence, and, like clockwork, every year a number of clubs would end up making headlines after getting themselves wrapped up in some manner of alcohol-related legal trouble. Thus, to many new students, the club welcome parties would serve as the first taste of their new college lifestyles as well as a sort of rite of passage.

One day, in April of that year, a club known as Win-Wing, operating out of an especially well-known private university, had done as most clubs did and gathered up a group of new students for their annual welcome party. One aspect of their party was entirely unlike other clubs' events, however: their venue. Rather than one of the usual bars or karaoke joints, Win-Wing's party was being held in a luxury hotel's banquet hall.

"All right, everyone—a toast, to your admission into our fair university and to our club's continuing growth and prosperity! Cheers!" the man who was acting as the party's host proclaimed, his voice cheerful and welcoming. The close to a

hundred men and women in attendance raised their glasses in unison and echoed his call.

The banquet hall was large enough to accommodate all hundred of Win-Wing's guests with plenty of room to spare. A magnificent chandelier dangled from the ceiling, bathing the room in gentle light, and the expansive window that occupied one of the walls offered a breathtaking, uninterrupted view of the nighttime cityscape. The party's buffet offered delicacies from all corners of the world, and the bar in the corner of the room provided a steady stream of cocktails to the waiters who were distributing drinks throughout the room.

The sheer luxury of the event was on a level one would normally only expect from galas hosted by large business owners or politicians, yet everyone in attendance was in their late teens or early twenties. They were college students, nothing more, and a full half of them had been high schoolers just a month ago. It was such an excessive display of wealth that a fair number of those new students quickly grew uncomfortable, but the club's upperclassmen skillfully brought them around, improving the mood in the venue in the blink of an eye.

Win-Wing's leader, Habikino Hatsuhiko, watched cheerfully as the new students gradually grew comfortable with their lavish surroundings. He kept to the outskirts of the party, leaning against one of the walls and looking out over the whole venue.

Just as he snagged an olive-garnished cocktail from a passing waiter and was about to take a sip, a man approached him.

"Hey, bossman! What're you wallflowering it up for? You're the head of the club, for crying out loud! Shouldn't you be out there making some connections?!" said the man, who happened to be the same one who'd offered up the toast shortly beforehand. Everything about him was dazzling, from the color of his hair, to his attitude, to his tone of voice. You could tell at a glance that he was the sort of college student who'd entered higher education to have a good time first and study second—if ever.

"I prefer to drink in peace and quiet," said Hatsuhiko. "I'll leave the connecting in your capable hands, Takurou."

“Hah! You never change, Hatsuhiko. Crazy how a guy with pockets as deep as yours could be so gloomy, honestly. But that’s cool! I’ve got livening up this party in the bag, so just sit back and watch me work my magic!” said Takurou, head held high in a jovial display of confidence.

A moment later, his gaze dropped to the small glass in Hatsuhiko’s hand. “You’re drinking one of those little prissy things again, really? What’re they called? Marinies?”

“Martinis,” Hatsuhiko corrected. “A mixed drink comprising gin and vermouth. The name is an abbreviation of ‘Martinez cocktail.’”

“Oooh, right! I get it now,” Takurou replied with a laugh.

“H-Hey, Takurou?” a somewhat feeble voice rang out, cutting into the two men’s conversation. A cluster of young women had gathered up behind Takurou and were currently staring a hole in his back.

“Whoops! My bad! Kept you girls waiting, haven’t I?” said Takurou. “These lovely ladies are new students who I just got to know a moment ago! Seems they’d love a chance to talk with our beloved leader.”

Takurou introduced the women to Hatsuhiko one by one. They were all clearly a little nervous about meeting him, but Hatsuhiko’s mild smile and welcoming demeanor had them relaxed in no time. It wasn’t long before the social dam burst and they began barraging him with questions.

“U-Umm, so, I heard that your family manages this hotel! Is that true?”

“That suit’s an Armani, isn’t it? I’m actually really into fashion, and—”

“They say you already help manage a bunch of companies—”

“Is it true that *everyone* who joins this club gets to—”

Their envious gazes and nonstop queries were relentless, but Hatsuhiko addressed them one by one, politely and courteously.

As far as the university was concerned, Win-Wing’s purpose was to enable its members’ collaborative study of economic principles. In actuality, it was a club dedicated purely to real-world financial management. Its members helped manage and direct all kinds of assets, from business enterprises to real estate

and everything in between.

Ordinarily, leaving that sort of management in the hands of college students would be unthinkable. Win-Wing, however, had such a consistent and undeniable track record of success that it had earned the trust of clients far and wide. Only three years had passed since the club had been founded, yet the sum total of all the assets under its control was worth well over ten billion yen.

The organization had appeared out of nowhere, grown at an explosive pace, and was now the center of attention across a massive variety of fields and industries...though to be more precise, it wasn't the organization that had garnered all that attention at all—rather, it was its founder, Habikino Hatsuhiko, who had made it all happen. At the end of the day, Win-Wing's success had been entirely enabled by his sharp instincts and business acumen.

"I'm telling you, you've *gotta* join! I didn't know a thing about funds or investments or any of that stuff at first either, but Hatsuhiko taught me everything I needed to know, and look at me now! I'm the honest-to-god president and CEO of my own company, for crying out loud!" said Takurou.

"Of course, considering you can found a company without a single yen in actual capital these days, being a president on its own isn't much to boast about," Hatsuhiko chimed in.

"*C'mon*, you didn't have to tell them that!" Takurou groaned. The little comedy act he and Hatsuhiko were putting on sent the people around them into hysterics, and Takurou seized that opportunity to whisper into Hatsuhiko's ear. "Okay, I'm gonna go do the rounds and check in with the other newbies! You take care of these kids here, all right?"

"Right," said Hatsuhiko. "And thanks for keeping the party running smoothly for me."

"Hey, don't worry about it! What're friends for?" Takurou shot back with a winning smile and a thumbs-up. Then he slipped out from the group that had clustered around Hatsuhiko, moving on to meld with a different circle of partygoers. It was clearly a well-practiced move on his part, and it went to show how finely developed his communication skills were.

Hatsuhiko spent some time carrying on his idle conversation with the

girls...until a bespectacled man surreptitiously approached him from behind. Hatsuhiko quickly picked up on the man's presence, politely excused himself from the first-year girls, and joined up with the man before exiting the banquet hall and making his way to a nearby smoking zone.

"So, Yoshiki—did you track him down?" Hatsuhiko asked as he lit up a cigarette. His tone of voice was so cold and detached it was hard to believe it was coming from the same man who'd been chatting away so amiably just moments before.

"Yes. You were right about everything. Takurou's the one who's been skimming off the membership fees. I had one of my underlings investigate his office, and to make a long story short, we have all the evidence we need now. He falsified the numbers, pocketed the difference, and used it to pay off the debts he incurred to form his company."

"So, just as I expected. Honestly...this just goes to show that no good ever comes from an *idiot* deciding to start his own company," Hatsuhiko grumbled, letting out a disgusted sigh along with a cloud of cigarette smoke. Just minutes ago, he'd treated Takurou like the young man was his best friend on earth, and now, he seemed to hold him in the purest of contempt.

"What's our move?" asked Yoshiki. "This was straight-up theft. Do we take him to court?"

"No, not yet," said Hatsuhiko. "In fact, let him keep doing his thing."

"*Huh?* But...*why?* That's insane! Why would we—" Yoshiki began, only to cut his own outburst off before it went anywhere. Hatsuhiko hadn't said a word...but the glare he'd shot Yoshiki was colder than ice. That one look made Yoshiki stiffen up then glance away. "O-Okay, then. You've been right about everything else so far, so consider it done," he said, then he practically fled from the smoking area.

Hatsuhiko finished his cigarette, then he headed back into the banquet hall. The moment he stepped inside, his expression reverted to the same calm, people-pleasing smile he'd worn before he left.

Habikino Hatsuhiko loved money.

No, that's not quite right. His feelings toward money had long since transcended the realm of mere likes and dislikes. In Hatsuhiko's mind, money drove the world forward, propped it up, changed it, and formed it. Money *was* the world itself.

The club he had founded, Win-Wing, was officially an organization intended to enable its members' collaborative study of economic principles, while behind the scenes its *true* purpose was to manage financial assets...but unbeknownst to its members, the club had a third, *actual* purpose even aside from that—to serve as a factory in which Hatsuhiko could mass-produce slaves to do his bidding.

Hatsuhiko firmly believed that money was the great motivator. Money was all you could ever need. It drove people more so than anything else on the planet—and that didn't just apply to money that you could *provide*. Debt was just as capable of moving people to action as the promise of money could be, and a vast number of Win-Wing's members were indebted to Hatsuhiko. None of them, however, held that fact against him. Far from it—some of them even idolized him.

Whenever Hatsuhiko's clubmates would find themselves in financial trouble, he would be there to lend a helping hand in the simplest way possible, lending them the money they needed. Their debts would have crushed them unless someone had stepped in to help, and he did just that, asking for no interest on *his* loan and setting no deadline for repayment. They revered him as a god, or perhaps a Buddha. Their gratitude could hardly be overstated...and none of them so much as suspected that Hatsuhiko himself had engineered their debts to begin with.

Take, for instance, the case of Mukaibara Takurou. He had founded a company recently, only to find himself in dire straits when its financial situation went south...but the person who had spurred him into making said company and who had pulled every string available to ensure that it wouldn't come together successfully was none other than Hatsuhiko himself. All Hatsuhiko had to do at that point was wait for Takurou to come to him, desperate and in tears, then offer him a few kind words and a paltry sum of money. With that, yet another obedient slave would enter Hatsuhiko's service. The matter of the

embezzled club funds was nothing more than a handy bargaining chip that he could tuck away for future use.

Using those general methods, Hatsuhiko had seized control of the lives of a sizable number of his club's members. He then proceeded to use them freely, building up even more funding and recruiting more slaves in the process. That's all the club meant to him, really. It was a tool he could use to make "connections"—in other words, slaves—nothing more and nothing less.

The evening's welcome party served the same end. All he wanted out of it was the chance to bring more workers into his roster, and he'd intended to spend the whole evening acting the part of the perfect upperclassman while he searched for potentially useful attendees...until, that is, a certain word had happened to reach his ears.

“‘Rich’?”

In spite of himself, Hatsuhiko had found his emotions instantly riled. The one single word he detested above all others had just cropped up in casual conversation, right in front of him.

“Tell me...do you want to be rich?” he asked the girl who had uttered the offending word, flashing her a carefree smile.

“Yeah!” the girl replied, her eyes sparkling with admiration as she looked up at him. “I want to be rich just like you!”

Hatsuhiko paused for just a moment. “I have to admit...I've never been fond of that word. *Rich*, that is.”

“Huh? Why? Everyone wants to be rich!” said the girl.

Hatsuhiko's poker face was perfect. He didn't let the slightest hint of the revulsion and irritation that was brewing within him show on the surface, and his attitude remained as warm and hospitable as ever. His words, however, ever so slightly betrayed his true feelings.

“I like money, yes, but I don't like the idea of being rich. Or, more precisely, I don't like the *word* ‘rich’ itself. A rich person is someone who *has* lots of money, and that fails to express the ideal that I aspire to,” Hatsuhiko said, much to the immediately visible confusion of everyone around him. They obviously didn't

get it. “Hmm. This is a little hard to explain, but... Well, think of it this way: being rich means that you *have* money, but for the word to really describe what I find aspirational, it would have to mean that you *use* money. Just think about it—the people we generally describe as rich aren’t those who hoard their money. They’re the people who *use* it, and use it effectively.”

“But, wait...isn’t that the same thing?” asked one of the new students. “Like, you have to have money if you wanna use it, right?”

“Wrong,” said Hatsuhiko, shutting the student down outright. “You *don’t* need to have money to use money. Debts, loans, stocks, investments...there are all sorts of means available, really. If you don’t use money, you’ll never earn it either. Only idiots spend their whole lives diligently budgeting and squirreling away their savings. In fact, keeping savings is a phenomenal waste of money in and of itself! Why would you let all that value slumber away in a bank account? It’s pointless. Our government has sticky fingers, after all. Whether you keep it in the form of land or liquid assets, just having money alone gives them the right to tax the shirt off your back.”

Hatsuhiko knew what he was talking about. Asset management was his bread and butter, and as he carried on, the people around him became more and more invested in his lecture.

“Money makes the world go round—in other words, money is only meaningful when you *spend* it and keep the cycle going! That’s what allows you to insert yourself into the cycle’s center, and once you’ve made it there, you can use all the money you could ever desire. When I hear people boast about their savings and assets, all I can do is laugh at them. They don’t get it—*using* money is what really matters. It’s not about having the most; it’s about *moving* the most.”

That, in Hatsuhiko’s mind, was why wanting to be “rich” meant you’d missed the mark entirely. When the peasants, in all their pathetic jealousy, called someone *rich*, they were invariably talking about the sort of person who knew how to use money, not how to hoard it. The idea that only those who had money could use it was a foolish, tragic misunderstanding, and it was why the poor would remain poor forevermore, forming the base that the rest of society could stand upon.

“That, you see, is why I chose to go all out and throw such a lavish party to welcome our new members. I’m spending freely to invest in *you*, in the hopes that you’ll provide big returns in the near future,” Hatsuhiko concluded. He’d noticed that his lecture had ended up coming across as a little stiff, so he decided to wrap things up on a positive note.

Just as he’d expected, that last line had lifted the new students’ spirits. They were all smiles, and the party returned to its former festive atmosphere.

Nobody present had figured out Hatsuhiko’s true motives. They were far too wrapped up in the truly unfamiliar world of luxury they’d stumbled into to suspect for so much as a moment that he had every intention of turning them into his slaves. He would use money to use people, and use people to use money. All in all, Habikino Hatsuhiko’s life was coming up roses...

“Bwa ha ha!”

...until that very moment. Until the moment a dry and seemingly sourceless laugh echoed through the hall. It was a scornful laugh—a laugh that made it very clear you were being looked down upon in every possible sense.

“Ahh... My bad, honestly. This is supposed to be a whole occasion for you, so I was *trying* to hold it in, but I just couldn’t manage it. It’s no use... I can’t... Bwa ha ha! Bwaaa ha ha ha ha!”

Hatsuhiko’s gaze finally landed on a man who wasn’t even so much as attempting to restrain his loud, raucous laughter. He was a man of contrasts, his black coat offset by his silver hair. His eyes, partially hidden behind a pair of round sunglasses, were mismatched as well—the left eye black, and the right a shade of crimson. The party was taking place at a luxury hotel, and everyone in attendance had dressed as formally as college students were capable of, but *he* was an exception that stood out like a sore thumb. In one hand, he held a plate, and in the other, a pair of tongs. It seemed he’d been partway through piling a mountain of cake from the buffet onto his dish when his laughter had gotten the better of him.

“Who is that man?” Hatsuhiko asked a nearby clubmate.

“A new student. His name’s, uh...Kiryuu, I think. None of us invited him, but he showed up anyway, and he hasn’t talked to anyone since he got here—he’s just been eating. I’m pretty sure he only came for a free meal.”

New students showing up to a club’s welcome party for a free lunch was hardly unheard of. Generally speaking, those sorts of parties were paid for by the club’s upperclassmen, so there were always a few opportunistic first-years who decided to hit up as many welcome parties as possible and eat for free for the better part of April.

“Hello there, Kiryuu,” Hatsuhiko said, keeping up his agreeable front as he approached the thoroughly eccentric man who’d crashed his party.

“Bwa ha ha! ‘Kiryuu,’ huh...? Sure, let’s go with that. It’s a decent enough name for a place like this.”

“You certainly seem to be enjoying yourself! Out of curiosity, what exactly are you laughing about?” asked Hatsuhiko, his persona unbudging even in the face of Kiryuu’s flagrantly disrespectful attitude. Hatsuhiko was determined to act the gentleman to the bitter end.

“Oh, nothing major,” said Kiryuu. “It’s just...this whole farce has been so downright unsightly, I couldn’t help but crack up.”

Hatsuhiko fell into an intense silence. Had Kiryuu caught on? Had he realized the true intent behind this joke of a welcome party? All signs seemed to point to the man in front of him being very aware that Hatsuhiko’s only motive for throwing the event was to gather up a stock of useful pawns. With that fact in mind, the event took on a new light. It was nothing more than a cluster of gormless youths, lured in by the promise of a free party at a luxury hotel only to be cajoled by the club’s members into joining, never suspecting the grief it would bring them in the long term.

Yes, he has a point. It really is an unsightly farce, Hatsuhiko admitted to himself. This was not, however, the first time someone had caught on to one of his welcome parties’ true designs. People who were quick-witted enough to pick up on that sort of thing had just as many uses as the unthinking dullards who were lured in unawares. *The question is, how will I make this man into my slave?*

For just a moment, the wheels in Hatsuhiko's mind began to turn, his calculations hidden by his ever-radiant smile...but it wasn't long before he realized his own mistake.

"Bwa ha ha!"

Kiryuu's derisive laughter wasn't directed at the clueless throng of new students, or at the club members who swarmed to Hatsuhiko's side, ready to do his bidding.

"Honestly...there's nothing more unsightly—and nothing funnier—than a man who's under the misapprehension that he's something *special*."

Kiryuu sneered with contempt, with disdain, with an arrogant air of superiority...and he directed every bit of it toward Habikino Hatsuhiko himself.

"Are you...referring to me?" Hatsuhiko asked, his smile growing ever so slightly strained.

"That's right. You," said Kiryuu. "Who else would I be talking about?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow. Please, enlighten me—in what way do I strike you as 'funny' and 'unsightly'?" Hatsuhiko pressed, his tone taking on a note of insistent emphasis. Kiryuu's scornful sneer, however, didn't fade. The look on his face was starting to prick at Hatsuhiko's pride, and a sense of indescribable discomfort and rage began to build within him.

"*Money*," said Kiryuu. "You really talked our ears off about it, huh? All that stuff about how to use it and whatever. I'm sure you thought you were dispensing some eminent advice from up on that high horse of yours, but from *my* perspective it was a joke—and a damn funny one. You don't know the first thing about money."

"You think...I don't understand money?"

"That's right. You're convinced you're a master when it comes to using money...but the truth is the exact opposite. From my perspective, it's money that's been using *you*."

Hatsuhiko fell silent, aghast at the accusation, and Kiryuu smiled.

“You know what you are, deep down? A slave to money,” Kiryuu declared with a look that made Hatsuhiko feel like he’d seen right through him.

With that, Kiryuu spun about on his heels, his long coat whipping around behind him with a snap, and he strolled away.

“A slave to money, and that slave’s slaves. Looks like *everyone* here’s a slave in one way or another,” Kiryuu said, completely indifferent to the fact that the atmosphere in the room had turned cold as ice. He headed over to a seat where he’d left his personal effects and a paper bag, collected them, then made for the exit. “It’s tragic, isn’t it...? Seems everyone’s a slave to something, at the end of the day. And I’m no exception, slave to my destiny that I am,” he muttered in a melancholic tone as he bade the party farewell...only to be stopped by a waiter stationed by the banquet hall’s exit, who politely explained that bringing food home was against hotel policy and confiscated the impressive number of Tupperware containers Kiryuu had hidden in his paper bag, much to his dismay.

That comical conclusion to Kiryuu’s gatecrashing adventure, however, escaped Hatsuhiko’s notice entirely. His fury, roiling away within him like a sea of magma, had reached its peak. He wasn’t registering anything he saw at all, and his hands shook with such potent rage that the olive in his cocktail glass spilled to the floor, taking most of his martini with it.

Three years later—that is, in the present day—the sun shone on Hatsuhiko through a massive window almost the size of the wall it’d been built into. It had been designed to allow visitors to enjoy an unrestricted view of the nighttime cityscape, and it was the very same window in the very same banquet hall that Hatsuhiko had thrown frequent parties at when he was in college. Hatsuhiko stood alone in the center of the hall, dwarfed by its immense scale. He’d bought the hotel from his father some time ago, banquet hall and all, rendering it his private property and enabling himself to use it however he saw fit.

After graduating from college, Hatsuhiko had turned his efforts to expanding his already impressive enterprises. He’d founded countless companies, gotten

his feet wet in all corners of the business world, and accumulated a vast fortune in the process. The connections he'd formed in Win-Wing had indeed proved helpful out in the real world. His clubmates had gone on to work in banks, as government officials, at major food manufacturers, in pharmaceutical companies, as doctors...and every one of them bore the misapprehension that Hatsuhiko was their benefactor, meaning he could effortlessly use them however he pleased. Many of them still hadn't paid off their debts to him, and he used that leverage to force them to leak confidential information to him.

Hatsuhiko was walking the path to greatness. He'd been featured in magazines and on TV as a young and brilliant entrepreneur over and over. He was the subject of envy and admiration from all and sundry. He had it *made*.

“...”

And yet...Hatsuhiko was unfulfilled. There was an emptiness within him—a void that had been sitting vacant since three years beforehand. No matter how much money he made, no matter how many achievements he racked up, that empty space was never filled. Quite the contrary, in fact. The more money he spent, the larger the hole seemed to grow.

“A slave to money, am I?” Hatsuhiko muttered, mulling over the phrase that had been thrown at him three years prior in that very room. To this day, he still didn't understand the meaning of Kiryuu's words or the intentions that had led him to say them. What he did understand with painful clarity was that they had been a rejection. Kiryuu Hajime had disavowed Hatsuhiko's lifestyle, his values, his identity, and the very world he'd lived in, from start to finish. He'd disavowed him, mocked him, and laughed in his face.

Hatsuhiko sat in a corner of the room. Still and silent though he was, an inferno of violent emotions blazed within his eyes.

“I have to get back at him. I'll never be satisfied otherwise,” Hatsuhiko said to himself. “I'll never be able to move on...until I make Kiryuu Hajime submit to me.”

It was for that purpose alone that Hatsuhiko had agreed to join the Spirit War. He'd already made his fortune, and a man of his capabilities could grant his wishes by his own power. He didn't desire anything from the spirits. He was

fighting for one purpose: to settle the score with Kiryuu.

That grudge was what had led him to buy the hotel from his father as well. He wanted something to remember his meeting with Kiryuu by—to make sure that blot on his history would never fade. Even now, the humiliation he'd felt that day still festered within him. Hatsuhiko had lived his entire life looking down at the people around him, and when it finally came time for him to be looked down upon himself, the experience had left him shaken to his core like nothing else before or since.

That was when the door to the banquet hall opened, and a visitor stepped inside.

"Hello there. Nice to see you," said Hatsuhiko, the indignation vanishing from his expression in an instant, replaced by his usual smile so smoothly that it was like he'd swapped one mask for another. "It's a good thing that at least one of us gave his actual contact information, isn't it? I had a feeling that you'd use it to get in touch if, say, something unexpected happened to you."

Hatsuhiko's visitor didn't say a word. His dismal scowl made it clear how terribly ill he felt, and if it hadn't, the dark bags under his eyes and his deathly pale skin would've done the job nicely. There was barely a trace of vitality to be seen in him, and he tottered across the room, his steps dreadfully unsteady.

"So, what's wrong? You certainly look like you've seen better days...Akutagawa Yanagi."

It was Yanagi indeed. The boy whom he'd tasked with the assassination of Kiryuu Hajime had made his way directly to Hatsuhiko's doorstep.

Chapter 5: Kiryuu Rei

**If you can claim with all your heart to not want to die,
Then what more proof do you need that you're alive?**

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

I found myself in the second ward of the local general hospital. Hajime hadn't headed toward the diagnosis and treatment building where they conducted tests and outpatient examinations, but rather to a separate building a short distance away where the inpatient facilities were located. Apparently, the second ward was dedicated specifically to long-term patients.

"Do you think he's here to visit someone, maybe?" I wondered out loud.

"It seems the only rational explanation," said Umeko. "Though there is always a slim chance he may be acquainted with a doctor or nurse who works here."

"Yeah, but...meeting up with a patient really does seem like the obvious option."

"Indeed. Especially considering that he stopped to purchase something from the hospital's shop. I would presume it was a gift for the person he came to see."

"Right...though giving someone something you got *from* their hospital as a get-well gift's pretty out there as far as faux pas go, if you ask me."

The hospital's second ward featured a rest area on its second floor, right near the reception desk. Umeko and I had sat down on one of the sofas in that vicinity, and we were currently speculating about Hajime's visit. Hajime himself had quickly stopped by the receptionist's desk, checked in, and headed farther into the facility. Tailing him past that point would've been rough, unfortunately. We would've had to have checked in as well to move any farther ahead, for one thing, and even if we'd found some way to sneak past, the hospital's corridors

were narrow and wouldn't have provided any decent places to hide as we followed him. For the moment, we'd decided to stand by in the reception area and keep an eye on things while we planned our next move.

"So then, Hitomi—what shall we do now?" Umeko asked.

"Hmm. Good question... Wh-What do you think?"

"If you truly intend to take my opinion into consideration, then so be it: I believe we should return home without delay."

"O-Oh, come on, don't be like that!"

I understand why you want to go home, don't get me wrong! But, I mean, we've come this far, haven't we? We should at least stick it out for a little while longer! In any case, as Umeko's tone had implied, asking for her advice had probably been a mistake on my part. I was the one who'd come up with this whole tailing operation in the first place, so it was only fair for me to take the initiative when it came to making our plans.

"Anyway, I'm just relieved that Hajime *isn't* here because he's sick, or hurt, or something," I said. That wasn't something I could be *completely* certain about yet, technically, but enough signs pointed to him being here to visit someone that I felt safe in my relief. I'd become so worried I thought I might drop dead on the spot when I'd realized he was going to the hospital, honestly, but it seemed my fears had been groundless and he wasn't suffering from any sort of malady himself after all.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, Umeko looked over at me. "You care dearly for First, don't you, Hitomi?" she quietly commented. Her expression was as blank as ever, but I felt like I could make out a slight trace of exasperation in her tone.

"N-Nah, no way! Who'd care about a guy like *him*?"

"Do not lie to me. Until you realized that First's purpose here was to visit a patient, you had the countenance of a woman who had just learned the world was about to meet its end. Surely your own panic did not escape you?"

Ugh! W-Well, what was I supposed to do? As soon as I learned he was going to the hospital I started thinking about how he might've been horribly hurt or contracted a terminal illness! I couldn't stop my pessimism from spiraling out of

control!

“A-Anyway,” I said, steering the conversation in a new direction, “the real question is *who* Hajime would be here to visit!”

“Have you heard aught of any such matter?”

“...Nope. Not even a little.”

I’d known Hajime for a pretty long time, and he’d never said anything that even hinted he might know someone who was hospitalized. To be fair, that was a really private sort of matter, so it only made sense that he wouldn’t have spread the information around willy-nilly even if he had known someone who was in that sort of situation. What really made me curious, though, was the fact that he was clearly a *regular* here. Hajime had gone through the procedure at the reception desk with perfect efficiency, and he’d plainly had the layout of the hospital memorized. There was no doubt in my mind that he’d been here many times before, and if he’d been visiting this person on the regular, it implied that whoever they were, they were someone quite special to him.

“First returns,” said Umeko, whose powers of perception were really quite exceptional. She could tell it was him from the sound of his footsteps alone.

I held the newspaper that I’d bought at the hospital’s store in front of my face, and tipped Umeko’s straw hat at a downward angle to hide hers. Then I glanced over the top of the paper, just as Hajime stepped into view. Umeko had been right, and once again, I was deeply impressed by how capable she was.

Meanwhile, Hajime passed by the receptionist’s desk and got onto the elevator that led back to the first floor. I waited until the elevator doors closed, then I put down my paper.

“I guess he’s going home, then,” I said.

“So it seems. What shall we do now, Hitomi?”

Hmm. That’s a good question. I’d kicked off our little covert operation because I was curious about what exactly Hajime had had to “take care of,” and for all intents and purposes, I’d already accomplished that objective. I would’ve *liked* to have figured out who exactly he was visiting, sure, but that was way easier said than done. The only sources of that information available were the

receptionist or maybe one of the nurses, and they weren't likely to share it with a couple randos like us. It was a patient's private info, after all. Plus—and honestly, this was the biggest factor—I was at long last starting to feel awfully guilty about this whole affair.

At first, I'd been tailing him under the suspicion that he'd gone off to see some other woman or to hit up a sketchy store...but as it'd turned out, he was visiting someone in the hospital. That was just about as proper and reasonable as a task could be—not to mention that if that person had been sick or otherwise hospitalized for an extended period, it was probably for something pretty serious. I'd gone and found out about something he hadn't told me—something he'd wanted to keep secret—and I was beginning to feel a definite sense of regret for having done so.

"Let's go home, Umeko," I finally sighed.

We stood up from the couch and began making our way toward the elevator. I paused by the window we'd passed by on the way, which offered an unbroken view of the tree-lined path that led up to the hospital's entrance. There was Hajime, walking along toward the bus stop with his umbrella held up above him. Apparently, it had started raining...and that's when a voice from behind me shocked me senseless.

"Do the two of you know Hajime?"

I fought through my astonishment just enough to turn around, and found that one of the nurses who'd been working by the reception desk had approached me. "Eep!" I squeaked. "U-Umm, I, well..."

"Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to startle you," the nurse said with a quick chuckle. She was slender, with eye-catchingly beautiful black hair, and looked like she was in her thirties...or forties, maybe? I'd never been very good at judging how old women were, but I certainly didn't get the sense she was in her twenties. "It's not every day we get someone acting *that* suspiciously in here, and I couldn't help but get curious," she continued.

That hit me right where it hurt. I'd been sparing no effort to ensure that Hajime didn't notice me, and apparently, that level of caution had backfired and made me look like a creeper.

“S-Sorry, but it’s not what you think! I’m not up to anything suspicious at all, really,” I said, though if I were being completely honest, I sort of was. I mean, I’d gone out in a trench coat, sunglasses, and a mask for the specific purpose of tailing someone, not to mention Umeko’s shorts, T-shirt, and bug cage getup, or the fact that we’d apparently come all the way to the hospital for the sole purpose of hanging out in the waiting room.

Yeah. Okay. We’re suspicious, all right. Unambiguous creepers, even. Are they going to drag us into a back room and have the police question us...? I fearfully wondered, until the nurse smiled at me.

“So, do you know Hajime?” she repeated. “You seemed to be paying awfully close attention to him, so I just assumed. Sorry if I was wrong, though! Maybe I’m just jumping to conclusions.”

“Ah! Umm... Y-Yes, I do! We know each other,” I answered. This was all happening so suddenly that I didn’t even consider trying to make up an excuse.

“Aha! I had a feeling,” the nurse said with an elated clap. “Are you his *girlfriend*, maybe?”

“N-N-No! No way! We’re not like *that* at all yet!”

“‘Yet,’ huh?”

“Agh! N-No! Not yet, not *ever*! I’m-holding-an-everstone levels of never ever! I, umm,” I floundered helplessly.

The nurse let out an amused little giggle. It really was *little* too, from its volume to the expression she made as she laughed. It was a very subdued laughter, all around. “Well, in any case, this is nice to see! Hajime’s never brought friends with him before,” she said.

“Well, actually...he didn’t really *bring* us. The thing is...”

I explained what had happened, framing it as Umeko and I having tailed him as a practical joke. I also claimed that Umeko was my little sister, for convenience’s sake. She was clever and quick enough on the uptake to figure out what I was going for in a flash, and she backed me up by saying, “Indeed—I am this woman’s brethren.” I would’ve preferred if she’d been a *little* more inconspicuous with her phrasing, but beggars can’t be choosers and all.

“Hitomi and Umeko. Got it! Well, thanks for putting up with Hajime,” the nurse said.

I *almost* replied “He doesn’t make it easy!” on reflex, but I managed to hold it back and say, “Oh, no, it’s no trouble at all,” instead, which was definitely the more diplomatic option.

In any case, that exchange drove home something that I’d been noticing all throughout the conversation: she was acting *really* familiar with Hajime. It wasn’t every day you met someone in a position like hers who would talk about a twenty-something-year-old man with that sort of tone. For a moment, I wondered if she was just a much more overfamiliar person than her trim and tidy appearance would suggest...but then a much more believable explanation struck me.

It wasn’t that she’d specifically decided to be overly familiar with Hajime, in all likelihood. Rather, I figured that she’d known him since he was young enough for that sort of tone to be appropriate, and she had simply never broken the habit. It was perfectly natural for adults to never quite internalize the fact that the kid they’d known since he was in elementary school had grown up into a full-fledged adult himself. If that’s what had happened, it would explain the slight affectionate familiarity in her tone very easily.

“So...does Hajime come here often?” I asked.

“He does,” the nurse confirmed. “His timing’s sort of all over the place, but he makes a point of stopping by at least once every three months or so, and he has been since he was in elementary school.”

Just as I’d suspected, Hajime was a hospital regular. Him having picked up the habit in elementary school matched up with my impression of the nurse’s tone toward him perfectly as well. As I nodded in satisfaction, however, the nurse muttered one last thought, seemingly to herself.

“I guess even a kid like him feels like paying his mother a visit every once in a while,” she said, a faint smile spreading across her face.

His...mother? As in, Hajime’s mom? As in, Kiryuu Hajime’s birth mother?
“Umm... You said that Hajime started coming here when he was in elementary school, right?” I asked.

“Right.”

“So...I’m guessing the patient he’s been visiting has been hospitalized nonstop since then?”

“Yes, that’s right,” the nurse confirmed with a stunningly casual nod. “She’s one of the patients I’m responsible for, actually. It must’ve been...almost exactly a decade ago, actually. She was caught up in a major accident—a truck crashed head-on into a bus—and she ended up in critical condition. She made it out alive, thankfully...but she’s been unconscious ever since.”

I was speechless, and gaped as the nurse spoke on. “She was out shopping with her son when the accident happened, apparently. It’s just horrible to think that, well...a boy may have seen his own mother fall victim to a terrible accident right before his eyes,” she said, her voice quiet and somber. I, meanwhile, felt a deep, dark sense of discomfort begin to brew within me.

Hajime’s full name was Kiryuu Hajime...but he lived in the Kanzaki household. He lived with his biological father, his stepmother, and his half sister, from what I’d heard. I’d never been privy to the details, but considering he still used the Kiryuu surname to this day, I’d sort of surmised that he hadn’t been living in the Kanzaki household since he was an infant. Most likely, he’d moved in with them at some point in his early childhood. I had the impression that his biological father had done a perfectly good job of taking care of him, of course, but it still seemed natural to conclude that some unfortunate set of circumstances had led to Hajime leaving the Kiryuu household and ending up in his father’s care instead.

“Whoops—you probably didn’t need to know all that, did you?” the nurse said with a rueful smile. “Sorry about that! Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Right, sure! Of course,” I replied.

“I guess I was just so happy to meet one of Hajime’s friends, I went and ran my mouth a little.”

“You...really care about Hajime, don’t you?”

“Well, of course I do! I’ve known him since he was *thiiiis* little, after all!” the nurse said, holding her thumb and index finger *maybe* three centimeters apart.

Well, someone sure is exaggerating! Then again, for just a moment I thought that maybe even Hajime could be cute if he really were that tiny...but I dismissed the thought as soon as it sprang into mind. Even if he *were* three centimeters tall, I knew for a fact he'd find some way to spoil the effect.

By the time we left the hospital, a light drizzle had begun to fall. Umeko and I shared an umbrella as we walked to the bus stop, and when we arrived, we found that Hajime was already gone. It seemed a bus had already been by to pick him up.

"So, then...First's mother fell unconscious when he was a child and remains so to this day," Umeko said abruptly as I shook the water off my umbrella, her tone as casual and matter-of-fact as ever. "It would stand to reason, then, that the desire First seeks to fulfill through this War would be—"

"*Umeko!*" I snapped, then took a deep breath. "Sorry...but please. Let's not talk about that, okay?"

"Very well," Umeko agreed, then let the subject drop, just like that. I really had to appreciate how understanding of a kid she was.

The Fifth Spirit War, a battle royal in which individuals like us known as Players were granted supernatural powers and tasked with fighting each other, offered a clear reward for its victors. The *Final Eight*—in other words, the last eight Players to remain in the running—would each be given the opportunity to have one wish granted.

The beings who orchestrated the War—known, appropriately enough, as spirits—bore powers far exceeding the realm of human imagination. They could restore leveled buildings in the blink of an eye, freely manipulate people's memories, and even grant people powers of their own. As such, when they told us we could have any wish granted, I got the impression they really did mean *any* wish at all. No matter what we desired, they would grant it for us. For a spirit, bringing someone out of a decade-long coma would be like taking candy from a baby...not that I knew for sure whether candy was even a thing in spirit culture.

I had no proof...but I was still more or less convinced. I finally knew why

Kiryuu Hajime was participating in the War, for better or for worse. Hajime was fighting for his mother's sake.

I took in a sharp breath as a tremendous pang of guilt pierced through me. If I said I hadn't wanted to know Hajime's motives, well, I'd have been lying. I'd always been curious, and a part of me was even happy to finally have my answer. That happiness, however, was *vastly* outweighed by my regret. This was something he'd never talked about—something he hadn't wanted to share—and I'd gone and dug it up without his permission. What I'd done was no different than eavesdropping or cheating off someone else's test. It was shameful and cowardly. And, above all else...

"Hey...Umeko? Let's keep what happened today a secret from Hajime, okay? I mean the part about us tailing him, of course, but also everything we learned at the hospital. Let's just...keep it all between the two of us."

"Understood."

"If I ever learn about this officially, I want to hear it from Hajime himself."

Above all else, I was hurt—hurt that he'd never shared something this incredibly important with me. I was ashamed that I wasn't someone he felt he could depend on. Was I really that unreliable in his eyes? Did he not trust me? Weren't we friends? Weren't we partners? After all this time...was I still not one of Kiryuu Hajime's trusted wings?

"I wish he'd just told me," I muttered, so quietly my words were drowned out by the sound of the ever intensifying rain. By now, it had turned into a genuine downpour.



The rain had finally decided to pick up in earnest, which was something of a blessing for Toki Shuugo. If it hadn't been raining at all, the odds were good he'd already be dead. His opponent would've picked him off, and he would've dropped out of the Spirit War, just like that.

Shuugo gasped for breath. The seaside factory he'd been fighting in was barely even standing anymore. Most of its outer walls, a number of support pillars, and the machinery inside had all been blown to flaming pieces. The

whole place had more or less been one big inferno a short while ago, but the rain pouring through what little remained of the roof had extinguished the better part of the blaze, leaving an excess of charcoal behind.

Shuugo was currently leaning on one of the pillars that, while singed, had largely survived. He was covered with burns, his arms having been particularly scalded, and he was very clearly in a terrible state overall.

“Ugh... Dammit all... That little *bitch*,” Shuugo growled as he gritted his teeth.

The battle between Toki Shuugo and Hachisuka Happa had been hopelessly one-sided so far, dominated by Happa from beginning to end. Shuugo had sustained injury after injury, his condition worsening the longer the fight went on, while Happa had yet to take any damage worth noting. It seemed safe to call it Shuugo’s total defeat. His power just wasn’t a match for hers in terms of sheer firepower—not to mention that their respective natures put him at a terrible disadvantage.

BOMB Voyage allowed Happa to manipulate explosions as she pleased, and the destructive force behind the blasts was truly intense when she wanted it to be. She could generate an explosion powerful enough to send people flying through the air with all the effort it took to light up a lighter. There just wasn’t much that you could do when you were being harried by one explosion after another. Tactics failed in the face of her overwhelming firepower.

Shuugo had managed to figure out that she was probably making something in the air around her explode, given that she hadn’t simply blown him up from the inside and always seemed to generate her blasts in midair, but that didn’t change the fact that the gulf between their respective reaches was impassable. A knife fighter like Shuugo was hopelessly mismatched against her power.

It certainly didn’t help that Shuugo had always relied more on his own physical capabilities than on his power. Ever since he’d gotten wrapped up in the War, his preferred fighting style had been to overwhelm opponents who would rely on their powers’ petty tricks with his sheer speed and might, crushing them before they could become an issue. As such, a simple but wide-scale power like Happa’s was the sort he had the most trouble dealing with. In a sense, Players like her were his natural enemy.

Under ordinary circumstances, Shuugo would've decided to pull back the moment he realized he was at a disadvantage. He would've run away, or otherwise taken the time to work out a countermeasure for her ability. This time, however, he just ran straight in in a planless suicide charge. His irritation and desperation had driven him into a foolhardy frenzy, so he rushed forward, intent on stabbing and stabbing until there was nothing left for him to cut. And, as a result...he'd been crushed. He'd made it out alive thanks to the sudden rainstorm and his foe's subsequent disappearance—she'd chosen to make her exit when the storm had picked up, it seemed—but if the rain had been even a few minutes later, there was little doubt that he wouldn't have lived to see it.

“To hell with this *bullshit*,” Shuugo spat as he powered through the pain and forced himself to stand.

She ran when the rain started...which must mean that something about the rain makes it hard for her to fight, he thought. As he took one painful, plodding step after the next, he considered his next move...but, no, “considered” wasn't the right word. There was nothing careful about Shuugo's thought process—he was being driven by pure impulse.

Maybe rain makes the power of her explosions drop, or maybe she can't make them at all when there's too much moisture in the air...? Doesn't matter. I just have to chase her, one way or another. No way in hell am I letting it end before I get her back for this!

Shuugo was driven by a mixture of irritation with his foe and fury with himself. Hachisuka Happa's openly dismissive attitude had gotten under his skin, and knowing that he *hadn't* been able to teach her a lesson, and in fact had gotten the crap kicked out of him, left him enraged at his own failure. He couldn't accept this outcome. He couldn't accept *anything* about it.

And yet, deep within the reaches of his mind, some small part of Shuugo *wasn't* letting his rage overtake him. Ever so slightly, part of him was starting to question his decision to take on Hearts single-handedly, without even a plan to back him up. When that part of him asked what he was even fighting for, he felt so unstable it was like he'd suddenly stepped onto a patch of ice.

Shuugo wasn't acting under anyone's orders. He'd started this fight on his

own, and so far, he'd had yet to figure out what—if anything—it all actually meant. Shuugo wasn't violent enough by nature to let his fury entirely take the wheel, nor was he benevolent enough to brush off his rage and let it all go. His nature had left him in limbo, and in the meantime, his irritation grew ever stronger.

“Oh, for the... Are you *kidding* me?” Shuugo moaned as he reached the area he'd parked his motorcycle in. Somewhere along the way, his beloved bike had toppled to the ground—most likely, it had been hit by one of the chunks of rubble Happa's explosions had blasted all over the place. Its headlight was cracked, its body dented, and its handlebars hopelessly crushed.

“Son of a *bitch!*” Shuugo spat, then he set off on foot, leaving his wheels behind. He still didn't have a clear reason to fight, of course. He just chased after his foe because, in his mind, this was a chance he couldn't miss. He was a bared blade, without a purpose and without a scabbard to return to, left to aimlessly wander the battlefield.

Chapter 6: Nega-Yanagi

Life is irrational.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

A little less than an hour beforehand, Akutagawa Yanagi arrived at a high-rise building. He stepped into a hotel lobby devoid of both staff and guests, made his way into one of the elevators, and pressed the button for his desired floor.

A moment later, the elevator lurched as it began to rise. It wasn't a particularly noteworthy shudder—the same as any other elevator, really—but several days without sleep had rendered Yanagi so weak that it was enough to knock him off-balance and force him to lean up against a wall.

“Hah hah hah hah! Talk about a high-class joint to have a meeting in, huh?!”

The cause of his sleep deprivation—the voice of his sense of guilt, aka Nega-Yanagi—was still as skull-splittingly loud as ever.

“I mean, god damn, right? Habikino Hatsuhiko's supposed to own this whole friggin' building, isn't he? And this is just one of Hearts's hideouts, so...just how much money's that guy even have?”

...

“Y'know, if you put in some actual effort to make a bit of dough, I bet you could have a building like this too before too long! Don'tcha think?”

Why bother...? What would I do with it?

“Uhh, whatever the hell you want to? Enjoy the views, use 'em to net you a girl or two, that sorta stuff.”

That's just stupid.

“You've got no ambitions, man.”

Your ambitions have no point.

The elevator slowly rose toward the building's upper floors.

"Honestly though, this is one hell of a shameless plan you've cooked up. Your best idea to clear out your guilt is to just walk right up to Habikino Hatsuhiko and apologize, seriously? Hah hah hah hah hah!" Nega-Yanagi cackled with an air of utter contempt.

An upfront apology to Hatsuhiko was the method that Yanagi had come up with to eliminate his feelings of guilt. It wasn't the *only* method, to be sure, but...

It's the quickest and easiest way of dealing with the problem, Yanagi explained. If he wanted to do away with his predicament and reclaim his ability to sleep, then this would be the most efficient means of doing so. *Hamai Haneko doesn't seem like a fighter, so I could probably take her out in single combat easily enough...but she's probably going to be watching out for me, which complicates that option.*

If Yanagi could kill Haneko, then the whole matter would be resolved, but the fact that she knew that and would be on guard meant it wouldn't be that easy. It was hard to imagine that she'd be easy to find, for one thing, and the odds were good that she'd have a plan in place to deal with an attempted assassination, making Yanagi's chances of pulling it off even lower. As such, he'd ruled the option out.

Then there's the option of killing Kiryuu Hajime, like I promised... And, well, I considered it...

Since breaking his promise with Hatsuhiko was the source of Yanagi's guilt, killing Kiryuu would instantly wipe that guilt away.

But...no. I'll pass on fighting that guy.

In a contest of Kiryuu Hajime versus Akutagawa Yanagi—*Lucifer's Strike* versus *Dead Space*—it seemed very likely to Yanagi that he would lose. The two of them had never actually clashed in any real capacity, so that was just conjecture on his part, but he felt certain nonetheless. He'd simulated battles with his boss in his mind a number of times just for the hell of it, and he'd never been able to

find a method that would guarantee his victory. Even if Yanagi took advantage of his status as one of Kiryuu's allies and staged a surprise attack, it didn't seem like it would up his odds by all that much. Most people would probably be irked by that understanding, but Yanagi, of course, didn't have it in him to be bothered at all.

So in the end...apologizing to Habikino Hatsuhiko is my quickest and easiest option.

"I guess I have to give it to you—in some ways, it's probably your best possible move. He's the guy you made the promise to and the guy you feel guilty about, so if you apologize to him and he agrees to forgive you, then all that guilt would go away, just like that. It feels like a loophole for sure, but compared to your other options, it's probably the sanest choice you could make," said Nega-Yanagi. *"But, then again...do you seriously have no shame at all, or something?"*

What's that supposed to mean...?

"You thought you'd pulled a fast one on your enemies, only for it to turn out that you'd actually walked right up into a setup and put yourself into a corner, right? And now you're planning on just walking up to those same people, bowing down, and saying, 'I'll give you all your money back, so please forgive me and let me join your team after all'? You know how pathetic that's gonna make you look, right?"

Nega-Yanagi was certainly right about one thing: Yanagi had utterly underestimated Hatsuhiko during their first encounter. He'd taken him lightly, assuming that he was the sort of idiot who'd take a simple promise as binding and think that anyone would do his bidding if he waved a big enough wad of cash under their nose...but all of that had been a trap on Hatsuhiko's part. Yanagi had been spectacularly set up—he'd failed to think the situation through and stumbled right into his current predicament in a comical pratfall. He'd been too busy laughing at his opponent's stupidity to notice that his opponent was laughing right back at him. It was a humiliating position to be in, plain and simple. And yet...

If bowing isn't enough for him, I'll get down on all fours.

...Yanagi felt nothing. He acknowledged his mistake, but that was the end of

it. He didn't find anything about his situation humiliating, and he felt no shame for the groveling he intended to do in the immediate future.

"See? Totally shameless. How about manly pride? You got any of that?"

None of that's rational. Shame this, pride that...it's all just emotional nonsense.

"Huuuh."

Habikino Hatsuhiko probably has a good idea of what my power and I are capable of. That means he'll be more eager to use me than to kill me...well, as long as he's not an idiot. He wouldn't gain anything from leaving me debilitated like this.

Yanagi was aware that he was a capable person. That wasn't him being vain—it was him making an objective assessment of his own worth. He looked at himself like he'd look at a total stranger, and per his evaluation, he was useful. That meant that to Hatsuhiko, there'd be value in keeping him around.

So, in the end, the apology is just a formality. A formality, or rather, a ceremony intended to make their relative standings clear and explicit. It would be a necessary step in a larger process. Following through with this will mean becoming his subordinate. And, really...that's probably the whole reason he set things up to get you planted in my head in the first place.

"All that just to recruit you, huh?"

Following through with all these formalities will prove that he's mentally superior to me, and put him in a position to use me...specifically, to use me to kill Kiryuu Hajime. He has some sort of obsession with the man, apparently.

"Hmm. So, long story short, you're gonna let him use you and betray your boss, right? And you're okay with this?"

How many times have I told you...? It's the most efficient option available to me.

That was to say, of course, it was the most efficient way for Yanagi to do away with both his sense of guilt and Nega-Yanagi at the same time. Everything he did, he did to break out of his current deadlock and regain the ability to sleep.

Becoming Hatsuhiko's underling was just the next logical step in the most efficient route toward that goal.

"Hah hah hah hah! Just how badly do you want to sleep, seriously?!"

Thanks to a certain someone, I'm so tired it feels like it could kill me... This is a living hell, and I'd do anything to break out of it and sleep again.

Yanagi didn't balk for a second at the thought of betraying his friends and serving a man he couldn't stand. Attachment and sentiment played no part in his thought process—he was driven solely by cold, hard logic. He'd always been that way, and he had no intention to alter his lifestyle.

Soon, the elevator arrived at its destination. As Yanagi stepped out into the banquet hall and caught sight of Habikino Hatsuhiko, who stood at its far end, the first words that came out of his mouth were "I'm sorry," coupled with a deep, polite bow. It came across as a gesture of purest sincerity, coming from a place of purest exhaustion. The exhaustion was real—he was, after all, so terribly tired that he could barely even walk straight—but the sincerity, needless to say, was entirely faked.

Yanagi acted like his life depended on it, playing the part of the tragic, pathetic loser. He apologized over and over, throwing in a few hacking coughs while he was at it and begging for mercy. He pleaded for his life, promising that he'd become Hatsuhiko's most loyal lackey and do everything he was told without question. He returned the three million yen immediately as well, of course, with an extra two million on top of it to serve as compensation for the damages and nuisance he'd caused. He chose his words with incredible care, ensuring that nothing he said would sour Hatsuhiko's mood, while at the same time subtly implying what a useful pawn he would be and throwing in a few scathing critiques of Kiryu Hajime while he was at it.

"I see," Hatsuhiko said with a satisfied nod after Yanagi had finished his remarkably convincing performance. He began flipping through the stack of bills, counting them up with the sort of practiced ease you normally only saw from bank employees. "Yes, I understand *very* well how you feel. I can't say I'm particularly impressed to hear that you intended to deceive me and steal the money I offered you...but then again, my whole goal was to engineer precisely

that situation, so I suppose I can't exactly hold it against you. In fact, I should apologize to *you* for setting you up, Yanagi."

The dry flipping of bills accompanied Hatsuhiko's calm, genial voice as he spoke on. "I was somewhat hopeful that you'd kill Kiryuu Hajime for me, I'll admit, but my most important goal was to draw you onto my team. You would be useful— Oh, excuse me. That's not the nicest way of putting it, is it? What I mean to say is that you would be a powerful ally. With you by my side, defeating that man would be the simplest of tasks," he said, then finished counting with one final flick of the banknotes. Hatsuhiko smiled. "Five million yen, on the dot. I really have no choice but to acknowledge such a clear show of sincerity on your part, don't I?"

"Do... Do you mean it?" Yanagi said, his eyes sparkling with hope—entirely feigned hope. He made himself look genuinely relieved to hear Hatsuhiko's response, even as internally, he let out a scornful laugh at Hatsuhiko's willingness to play into his plans.

"I *did* consider the possibility that you're a double agent. Maybe you're only pretending to sell out Kiryuu, and in truth, you plan on selling *me* out to him...but, no, that doesn't seem likely. You had an awful lot of less-than-kind words to say about him a moment ago, and I really don't think you were faking that."

That went without saying, seeing as Yanagi really *hadn't* been faking that part of his speech at all. In the heat of the moment, he'd let his true feelings about Kiryuu slip out—and said true feelings had turned out to be surprisingly emotionally driven.

"But, in any case," Hatsuhiko said as he walked over to Yanagi, who was still prostrating himself on all fours, "you're on the team, Akutagawa Yanagi. Welcome to Hearts."

As Hatsuhiko's brand-name shoes came into Yanagi's line of sight...he allowed himself a smile. Not just a smile, even—it was a full-blown sneer, obscured from Hatsuhiko's vision by Yanagi's current posture. It was an expression full of derisive scorn, as well as a touch of relief.

Good...I can finally sleep now, Yanagi thought. Any joy he might have felt at

having deceived his opponent or anguish at having betrayed his friends was overwhelmed by the pure and simple desire for rest. In Yanagi's mind, that was more important of a matter than anything to do with any of his friends or enemies.

"Feel free to stand up, new team member."

Yanagi tried to do just that...but couldn't. The back of his head bumped into something, and an instant later his face was shoved downward, grinding his nose into the floor. A gush of blood welled up from somewhere deep within his nostrils.

"Ugh! Ah," Yanagi gasped. That pathetic little yelp of pain was all he could manage to spit out with his face pressed into the carpet. He quickly figured out what had happened: as he'd tried to stand up, just like Hatsuhiko had told him to, Hatsuhiko had grabbed him by the back of the head and forced him down again, violently slamming him into the floor. That floor was covered in relatively soft and shaggy carpeting, so the damage hadn't been nearly as bad as it would've been if he'd been standing on dirt or concrete, but it had still been quite the impact. His nose might very well have been broken—blood flowed freely from it, staining a patch of the carpet red.

"What's wrong, Yanagi?" a soft, calm voice rang out from overhead. "I told you that you could stand up, you know?"

Hatsuhiko didn't let up even an ounce of pressure. He was leaning onto Yanagi's head with the full weight of his body, pressing him further into the floor. His strength was nothing to scoff at, and Yanagi could hear an ominous creaking noise coming from his own skull.

"Wh-Wh... Why...?" Yanagi groaned. The pain in his nose and head was nothing compared to his utter confusion. Why would Hatsuhiko attack him? Yanagi couldn't even begin to understand.

"Why? It's simple: because you irritate me," said Hatsuhiko. It was as plain and straightforward as a reason could be, yet so profoundly irrational that Yanagi could never have possibly understood it. "Akutagawa Yanagi. You like to think that you always make the most rational choices available to you, don't you? When you first tried to swindle me out of three million yen, and when you

came to me today to return it with interest and beg me to take you in as my ally, you thought you'd done so by throwing away all traces of self-respect and emotion, choosing the most coldly logical and efficient path possible, didn't you?"

Akutagawa didn't say a word.

"I'll take that as a yes—and you weren't wrong! In both cases, you did indeed make a logical, rational decision. You really would be quite useful to me, and if I were looking at this from a purely utilitarian perspective, seeking only to maximize my own personal benefit, then bringing you onto my team would be the right call. I don't know how much of your apology was sincere, but it's very obvious that you're no big fan of the other members of *Fallen Black*, nor of Kiryuu Hajime himself. If I took you in, I seriously doubt you'd so much as hesitate to help me wipe them out. You're exceptionally capable in combat, and you have a wealth of information regarding our enemies, making you an incredibly valuable asset," said Hatsuhiko. "*But...* I don't want you."

"..."

"Why? Because you *annoy* me," Hatsuhiko said, putting it so plainly it was almost nauseating to hear. It was maybe the most irrational, subjective reason he could have picked, and now that all the cards were on the table, he made no attempt to restrain his disgust from creeping into his tone.

"Your impertinent attitude grates on me. The fact that you show no deference to your elders infuriates me. The way I can look into your eyes and barely even tell if you're alive or dead repulses me. Your habit of keeping your headphones on even when people are talking to you is appalling as well. You're nothing more than a child who delights in looking down on everyone and everything around him, and I can't *stand* that," said Hatsuhiko, his cutting words icy, scornful, yet also totally detached. "In terms of pure merits and demerits, I really should join forces with you—but I don't want to. I just want to *hurt* you. I want to show you how it feels to be looked down on by someone who's far, far above you. I want to bask in the knowledge that you tried to outwit me, only for *me* to thoroughly play *you* instead. And it's *entirely* because you get on my nerves," he said, driving his point home further still as he drove Yanagi's skull into the ground.

“Do you understand now, Yanagi? *This* is how humans are. We’re driven by self-interest, yes, but at the same time, we’re just as driven by our likes and dislikes. Nobody lives purely to maximize merit.”

“Ugh... Ahh... Agggh...” Yanagi moaned.

Hatsuhiko responded by pushing down harder than ever. “Humans just aren’t always rational beings,” he growled.

Yanagi had made the most rational choice available to him. He’d detached himself from emotions that he’d seen as pointless and chosen the most efficient means he could find. And yet...he’d failed. The situation he’d found himself in was beyond his wildest expectations. The idea that Hatsuhiko would completely disregard the potential for benefit, let his emotions take the wheel, and torment Yanagi for no good reason at all had never crossed his mind. He couldn’t comprehend how anyone could act in a manner so profoundly illogical.

“Generally speaking, I act to further my interests,” said Hatsuhiko. “I’ll always prioritize putting money in my pocket over the lives of strangers, and I fully believe that money *can*, in fact, buy love and loyalty with ease. That’s just the sort of person I am. However, unlike you, I *don’t* make any pretense of acting in a pure and rational fashion absolutely all of the time.”

Yanagi didn’t say a word.

“After all, the way I see it, constant rationality is an impossibility. People aren’t built that way. If you’re alive, you can be sure that you’re abandoning logic and rationality in some way or another. Life is full of futility, and futility is the essence of life.”

His words flew in the face of Yanagi’s very nature as a human being. It was a humiliation so intense, it felt like it might upend the very core of Yanagi’s identity. For as long as he could remember, Yanagi had detested the inefficiency of the world around him. Everyone was obsessed with pointless and meaningless nonsense, living their lives in the least efficient manner possible. The world was full of broken-down junk and wastes of flesh...and so, he’d decided to be the one and only person who would live a purely rational life. He’d live comfortably and quietly, without letting himself be tied down by meaningless trifles.

But now, that very lifestyle—his whole sense of values—had been denied outright. Hatsuhiko had confronted his ideals directly and declared them impossible to achieve.

“If you really want to live a purely rational life...then die,” said Hatsuhiko. “Kill yourself. Just end it. Jump out that window, here and now. *That* is far and away the most rational way to live.”

To live rationally is to die. It was, admittedly, a theory that Yanagi could understand. If your goal is to eliminate all of life’s inefficiencies and irrationalities, then ultimately, you’ll be faced with the inevitable conclusion that life itself is inefficient, and be left only with the decision to die. Being as living rationally was Yanagi’s ideal, it was, in some ways, an unresolvable paradox inherent to his lifestyle—a paradox that, deep down, he’d already been dimly aware of. And, when it was finally pointed out to him in plain and clear terms...

“...Aaaaaaaggghhhhhhhhh!”

...Yanagi flew into a rage. He let out a bellowing scream, louder than he’d ever shouted before, and pushed himself upward with all his strength, fighting Hatsuhiko’s grip. The effort he put into that burst of movement sent a stream of blood gushing from his nose, but he didn’t even notice—and, happily enough, the waterfall of blood made the carpet just slick enough to allow Yanagi to slip his head out of Hatsuhiko’s grasp and free himself.

“What?! Oh, shi—” Hatsuhiko gasped, but by that point, it was already over. Yanagi had staggered forward, blood still dribbling from his nose as he leaned into Hatsuhiko, at the same time jabbing the fingers of his right hand into his torso. Yanagi’s eyes were wide open now, and a gloomy, dismal, pitch-black sense of deadly malice dwelled within them.

The power of *Dead Space* pertained to gaps. It was not the ability to alter them, but rather, to *create* them. Akutagawa was capable of creating any form of gap conceivable. Be it a joint, a crack, a tear, a seam, a chasm, or a crease, he could use his power to generate a gap within anything even esoterically line-like, forcing it open and building a world of his choosing in between. The true essence of his power could be seen when he used it for the sake of

defense...but that isn't to say that it couldn't be used to truly devastating effect offensively as well.

“...You're wide open.”

With the slightest of motions—like the gesture one would use to zoom in on a smartphone's screen—Yanagi spread apart the fingers of the hand he'd pressed into Hatsuhiko's midsection, opening them up...and, at the same time, activating his power.

The human body is a veritable treasure trove of gaps. The average adult male has 206 bones, 365 joints, and 650 distinct muscles. In other words, the human body is *riddled* with dividing lines, to the extent that you could even say we're made up of them entirely. And, if Yanagi chose to, he could use *Dead Space* to wrench each and every gap in one of those cobbled-together bodies open with immediate, violent force...to predictable results.

“...Gwaughph!”

A horrible garbled failure of a scream issued from Hatsuhiko's dislocated jaw, and an instant later, he crumpled to the ground in a heap. He couldn't stand back up—in fact, he couldn't even *try* to stand back up. His limbs were bent and twisted like the tentacles of some deep-sea invertebrate, splayed out in all directions.

Yanagi, who'd been in terrible condition even before Hatsuhiko's beating, collapsed backward to the floor and gasped for breath. He tilted his head upward, trying to slow the flow of blood from his nose, then glanced at the octopus-like mess that was Hatsuhiko's body and flashed a wicked grin. “How do...you like that?” Yanagi wheezed. “How's it feel to have every joint in your body dislocated and every bone detached from its tendons, all at once?”

Every joint between the bones in Hatsuhiko's body and every tendon that connected those bones to his muscles had, by way of Yanagi's power, been torn open. By creating gaps between each and every one of those dividing lines, he had severed their connections, and in the aftermath of the attack, Hatsuhiko was left in a state that could barely even be described as human. The pain was almost assuredly unimaginable, but with his joints and tendons having lost all function, he couldn't even writhe.

The only part of the flabby pile of meat Hatsuhiko had been reduced to that could work at all was his muscles, which spasmed wildly and ineffectually. His dislocated jaw prevented him from speaking, though a guttural moan still leaked out from somewhere deep in his windpipe. Yanagi had lost himself to his anger and unleashed the full, horrific potential of *Dead Space*, leaving Hatsuhiko pitifully paralyzed, able to do nothing but lie there and suffer.

“Ha...ha ha,” Yanagi chuckled. His heart leaped with the thrill of his victory. The man who’d looked down on him, who’d lectured him from up on high, was now twitching on the ground like some sort of cephalopod or worm. The sight was equal parts pathetic and hysterical, not to mention delightful above all else.

“Ha ha... Haaa ha ha ha ha ha! Serves you right... Ha ha ha ha ha...”

Yanagi had yet to notice something very important. He had just betrayed his own principles. He’d lost himself to rage, brutalized his opponent, and in doing so, strayed *far* from the realm of the rational. The one thing Yanagi despised above all else was the idea of being driven to acts of stupidity by pointless emotions, which was *exactly* what he’d just done. By defeating Hatsuhiko in that moment, he’d proved the very point that the man had tried to make to him: that people were, on a fundamental level, incapable of acting on a purely and consistently rational basis.

Yanagi was still too caught up in the joy of his victory to register that fact. It wouldn’t be long at all before it sank in, however. After all—that victorious joy would not last.

“Ha ha ha ha... Ha ha... Ha... Huh?”

Yanagi blinked, then let out a rather undignified grunt of confusion. It was gone. The octopus-like body of Habikino Hatsuhiko had vanished into thin air, leaving not so much as a trace behind. It was like it had turned into a puff of smoke and dispersed into nothingness.

“The other mes are made to vanish after they’ve sustained a certain amount of damage, if you were wondering,” said a thoroughly relaxed voice from directly behind Yanagi. He spun around in shock...only to be shocked all over again when he found that Hatsuhiko was walking toward him. He’d strolled in through the banquet hall’s doorway and was now advancing through the room

with a casual, unconcerned air. Everything—from his voice, to his appearance, to his tone—was precisely identical to the man Yanagi had defeated a matter of seconds earlier.

“What...the hell?” Yanagi stammered. Was it a body double? A clone? A twin? All sorts of possibilities raced through his mind, but it wasn’t long before he reached what was overwhelmingly the most likely answer. “Is that your—”

“Yes, exactly. This is my power,” Hatsuhiko said as he came to a stop just a few steps away from Yanagi, who was still seated on the floor. He towered over Yanagi, his hands in his pockets and a look of imposing disdain in his eyes. He looked like a king staring down at a vile criminal he’d just decided to sentence to death. “There are a hundred and one of me. That’s the nature of my power, *Hundred and One Wolfies*.”

“That’s...a pretty cutesy name.”

“That would be because Haneko named it, not I. By which I mean Hamai Haneko, of course, the team member of mine whose power is currently making you suffer. She names all of our abilities.”

“So then...the other guy was a fake?”

“Correct. As am I, needless to say,” Hatsuhiko casually admitted. “Though considering that every me shares the same collective memory, it isn’t precisely accurate to call us *fakes*. Rest assured that you have indeed been speaking with the real and genuine Habikino Hatsuhiko this whole time.”

If every one of his duplicates shared their memories with one another in real time, then it stood to reason that every one of them—including the one with Yanagi in the banquet hall—was, indeed, the real Hatsuhiko. The exception, of course, being their bodies. No matter how many of them Yanagi defeated, the effort would be meaningless.

“So... I guess your real body’s watching all this from somewhere safe and far away?” said Yanagi.

“Precisely. Regrettably, I wasn’t blessed with the sort of potent and multipurpose power that you were given. I’ll take the liberty of cowering off in my little hidey-hole, ironing out my plans where you’ll never find me.”

“That’s a pretty off-putting power... Are you some sort of narcissist?” Yanagi spat. Hatsuhiko shot him a glare. “You don’t trust anyone except yourself, right? That’s why you ended up with a nasty power like that.”

“I really don’t think you have any right to level *that* criticism in particular,” said Hatsuhiko. “You have the ability to enlarge gaps...or, in other words, the ability to sever bonds. Perhaps deep down, you’ve always longed for the sort of bond you were never able to make? Are you jealous of people who can find deep, genuine connections with each other?”

“Talk all you like,” Yanagi said dismissively as he stood back up. “Cannon fodder’s cannon fodder, no matter how many of them there are. This is pointless.”

If their individual powers were ineffectual enough, not even a hundred foes would pose a serious threat to Yanagi. A feeble man with no abilities other than the power to make copies of himself stood absolutely no chance against *Dead Space*. However...

“Yes, you’re exactly right. This *is* utterly pointless—and by this, of course, I mean *your* power,” Hatsuhiko said with a grin of pure, unbridled confidence. “You’re strong. I’m weak. Even if I used my power to its full potential and sent all one hundred and one of me at you at once, you would decimate me effortlessly...and that’s exactly why I have no intention of fighting you. I’d much prefer to watch you suffer from a safe distance through my doubles.”

Yanagi took in a sharp breath.

“Come on, then! If you want to kill me, then feel free,” Hatsuhiko said, spreading his arms in a flippant show of his own defenselessness. “Go ahead and reuse that absurd ability you pulled out a second ago, or maybe try a new one, if you feel like it! Oh, I know—why not channel your rage to help you awaken to a whole new power? Not that it’ll make any difference, of course. I won’t feel a thing. Not even a tickle.”

Yanagi clenched his teeth so hard, he could feel them creak under the pressure. He would’ve liked nothing more than to kill the man before him that very instant, but he knew it would be meaningless. Hatsuhiko had made it clear that no matter how much he made a duplicate suffer, that pain wouldn’t make

it back to the original.

“If you want to defeat me, then you’ll just have to figure out where I’m hiding. Search thoroughly enough, and I imagine you’ll track me down eventually! You’re clever, after all. I’m sure I’ve slipped up somewhere along the way, and it’s totally believable that you could pick up on my mistakes and track down my safe house. Of course...” A triumphant grin spread across Hatsuhiko’s face. “...that’s assuming you can think clearly at all, in your current state.”

That was the moment when Yanagi came to a single inescapable conclusion: he couldn’t beat Habikino Hatsuhiko. He felt that truth on a deep, profound level, and as the realization sank in, something within Yanagi *snapped*. A muddled mess of feelings—regret, horror, despair, shame, and on and on—welled up from the deepest reaches of his heart, only to be consumed by his sense of guilt as it grew to an unprecedented scale.

“Ahah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah!”

“Agh?!” Yanagi grunted with pain.

“Ahah hah hah, god, how are we this big of a loser?! We couldn’t have lost harder here if we’d tried, and you know it! You’re even admitting it to yourself this time!”

“Ugh... Aaaaugh...”

Nega-Yanagi’s voice had been amplified to such an intense degree, it didn’t even compare to its previous volume. His scornful laughter wasn’t just ear-piercing anymore—Yanagi could *feel* it, physically. It was a physical and psychological indignity, and it brought jolts of pain shooting through his head. It almost felt like someone had reached into his brain and given it a vigorous stir—like his eyeballs were being plucked out of his skull with a spoon. His own guilt was destroying him.

Yanagi clasped his hands to his ears. He knew it was pointless, but he couldn’t stop himself. A waterfall of cold sweat poured down his body, and his vision grew unfocused. Violent waves of nausea crashed over him, again and again.

Meanwhile, the fake Hatsuhiko barely bothered to give Yanagi a sidelong glance as he strode over to the place where the first fake Hatsuhiko had died.

“I’ll be taking this. My thanks, Yanagi,” he said as he picked up the five million yen he’d dropped before, flaunting it in Yanagi’s face. “I turned three million yen into five million yen, *and* I got to watch a pathetic brat bow down and humiliate himself in the process. I’d call this an excellent way of using my money, if I say so myself!”

Neither Hatsuhiko’s taunting nor his disgustingly satisfied smile registered to Yanagi at all. He didn’t have the time for it.

Dammit... Stop... Don’t think...

Yanagi did everything he could to rein in his mental state, but it wasn’t going well. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t suppress the sense of defeat that was growing within him, and his sense of guilt still loomed large, consuming all of his other emotions. It was like a black hole in his mind, feeding off his feelings and enlarging itself in perpetuity. Nega-Yanagi’s presence in Yanagi’s mind, it seemed, would soon overwhelm his own.

“Ahah hah hah hah hah! Come on, O master of mine, get a hold of yourself! You seriously call yourself me?! I don’t remember being this much of a wuss-ass loser!”

...

Finally, Yanagi lost the willpower to even respond in the form of thought. He was simply too weak, unable to escape the pair of voices that mercilessly ridiculed him.

“Ahah hah hah!”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Ahah hah hah hah hah hah!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Ahah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Two voices, internal and external, flanked Yanagi’s mind and battered it into submission. Their laughter was as perfectly derisive as laughter could be, and Yanagi cowered from it, trembling with his eyes shut and his hands clasped over

his ears. He was like a child hiding from an imaginary ghost, unable to do anything but utter a broken scream-like groan.

In the end, against all odds, Yanagi managed to flee the building. He had put everything he had into running away, crashing into walls and tumbling down stairs, registering nothing but what was directly in front of him.

It had started to rain by the time he got outside, but Yanagi didn't have the presence of mind to bother with an umbrella. He just ran. His running form wasn't pretty, by any means—in fact, it wasn't even decent. It was a downright pathetic flight, but at the very least, he managed to get away...thanks entirely to the fact that Hatsuhiko hadn't tried to stop him. He hadn't blocked Yanagi's path or even attempted to pursue him. He'd just watched Yanagi leave, smirking all the while, as if to make it clear that to him, Yanagi wasn't even worth wasting time on.

Dammit... Dammit, dammit, god fucking dammit!

As the rain pounded down on Yanagi, he turned off the main street into an alleyway, hoping to avoid any prying eyes. An inferno of shame and humiliation blazed inside him, burning away at his sense of reason. He was more exhausted than he'd ever been, and all that was keeping him going was the burning rage he felt toward Habikino Hatsuhiko.

Screw this... To hell with him! He thinks he can do this to me...? He'll pay... Oh, will he ever pay... Dammit, god dammit!

This was a first for Yanagi. He had never been this angry before in his life. He'd danced in the palm of his opponent's hand, had his whole lifestyle denounced, had his face ground into the floor...and after all that, Hatsuhiko hadn't even bothered to finish him off. It would have been astonishing if Yanagi *hadn't* been furious. And yet...

"Ahah hah hah hah! You'll make him pay? You? Are you serious...? Ahah hah hah hah hah hah!"

...Nega-Yanagi reacted to his rage with a burst of elated laughter.

"Come on, since when were you the sort of person who went around declaring

death-grudges? Isn't this exactly the sorta angry outburst you'd usually complain about as being irrational? I thought you didn't give a crap about other people? What're you doing, getting mad like some sort of normal person?"

...

"And anyway," Nega-Yanagi continued, "you went on and on about how apologizing to Habikino Hatsuhiko was your most efficient way of solving your problem...but there was another, even more efficient method that you came up with ages ago, wasn't there?"

...

"Ahah hah hah hah! Don't even bother—I'm you, remember? You can't lie to yourself! No secrets here!"

It was true. The apology *was*, of course, the most efficient means available to Yanagi, in a sense—that being that it was the most efficient means available to him as an *individual*. If he wanted to solve the problem on his own, then that had been his easiest option.

"You should've just asked your pals to help!" said Nega-Yanagi. That was it. That was the one more efficient method Yanagi had managed to think up. *"You could've broken down in tears and been all 'I'm sowwy, I screwed up, help me, pweeease!' at them, and they would've helped, easy peasy! Seriously, do you even have any idea how powerful of a group you belong to?"*

Shut...the hell up. As if I...could ever do that...

In Yanagi's mind, his so-called friends were only worth keeping around for the sake of their utility. That's precisely why he wouldn't hesitate for so much as a second to agree to sell out or betray them, as he'd just demonstrated with Hatsuhiko. How could a person like him *rely* on his allies? How could he go to them, without any sort of plan or calculation, and ask them to just *help* him? It was impossible, plain and simple.

Wouldn't that be pathetic...? After all this time, how could I bow down to them and ask for help?

"Why not? 'Cause your pride won't let you?"

...

“Ahah hah hah! Yeah, I guess that would be how it goes, huh? That’s all there is to you, in the end. You’ll bow and grovel for all you’re worth if it’s to trick someone, but if you have to be sincere about it, you can’t even make the simplest request! Ahah hah hah hah! And think about it— isn’t that sort of pride one of those things that would usually piss you off more than anything?” Nega-Yanagi pointed out with a sneering chuckle. *“Look at you. You’re not rational at all! When all’s said and done, you’re just a sad little brat who gets off on looking down on people!”*

...

“I guess humans really can’t ever be purely rational after all, huh? Ahah hah hah hah! That skinny-ass rich guy was right, and you—your very existence—proves it better than anything else!”

A boy who had gone to greater lengths than anyone to live in a purely rational manner was now being consumed by the flames of rage. The one clear path out of his predicament—simply asking for help—was not an option, thanks entirely to the interference of a sense of pride he thought he’d discarded long ago. Part of Yanagi was tempted to just get it over with and die already...but his instinctual attachment to life and fear of death ate into him, preventing him from doing so. The emotions that he’d believed he’d abandoned were now dominating his world. Before he knew it, he’d become what he’d detested most: a living embodiment of waste.

“So, then—what’re you gonna do next, O master of mine?”

I’ll... I’ll find him, and—

“Who, Hatsuhiko? And do what? Beat him? Why? How? Wasn’t your whole goal supposed to be dealing with me, not him?”

U-Ugh... Sh-Shut up...

“Ahah hah hah hah, seriously?! Is your goal falling apart at the seams just as badly as your personality, big shot?”

U-Uggggh...

The insults and laughter endlessly echoing within Yanagi's skull were wearing away at him, and his psyche was beginning to creak and scream under the pressure. The repeated psychological blows he'd taken and his intense sleep deprivation were overwhelming him. He was so thoroughly cornered that it wouldn't have been a surprise if he'd broken down entirely at any moment, and his sense of guilt hounded him still, preventing him from dealing with the cause of his anguish. All he could do was wander aimlessly through the rainy alleyways without a purpose or even the mental capacity to find one—he'd come as far from his ideal, rational lifestyle as he possibly could have.



Whether the events that followed were brought about by coincidence, by the will of some almighty god, or perhaps by the gravitational force of a fallen angel, none could say.

The boss of Hearts, Habikino Hatsuhiko, had attempted to recruit two young men: Toki Shuugo and Akutagawa Yanagi. One of those two was a warrior without a cause who had been driven to pick a fight out of pure irritation. As a result, he'd sustained terrible injuries for no real purpose and had accomplished nothing to show for it. The other looked down on everyone around him and tried to conduct his life in a purely rational manner, in the hopes that it would allow him to come out on top of any situation. As a result, he'd had the tables turned on him in every way imaginable and had found himself driven to the brink of total mental collapse.

The two young men were left battered and broken, aimlessly wandering the city streets as rain poured down upon them...until their drifting came to an end when they both ran into the same pair of people: their own organization's second-in-command, Saitou Hitomi, and its newest member and the strongest Player among them, Tanaka Umeko. The two of them had finished stalking Kiryuu Hajime and were on their way home when they just happened to cross paths with Shuugo and Yanagi.

Perhaps it was destiny at work. Or perhaps it was something else entirely...

Chapter 7: Delinquent and Shut-In

Mankind is driven to grow by envy or repulsion.

Their envy is born by ambition—by a yearning toward their betters.

Their repulsion is born by disgust—by a fear of being like those they despise.

And for better or worse, the majority of those who truly grow are driven by the latter.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

“Wh-What *happened* to you two?!”

Umeko and I had gotten off the bus and were walking home, sharing an umbrella as the rain came and went in an inconsistent cycle, when two boys whom I happened to know showed up right in front of us. We’d run into Toki Shuugo and Akutagawa Yanagi.

Toki was walking down the same street in the opposite direction we were, and he was covered from head to foot with burns and cuts. His clothes had a few holes burned through them, and they were singed all over. He was in a pretty terrible state, all around—he looked like he’d stumbled across a house fire and charged in headfirst to haul the building’s residents to safety.

Akutagawa, meanwhile, stumbled out of an alleyway just ahead of us. He didn’t look as overtly injured as Toki, but just a glance at his face told me that he was in terrible condition as well. He was deathly pale, and while he wasn’t exactly a bright and sunny kid on even the best of days, right now he looked so positively dismal he might as well have been a walking corpse. All together, the two of them looked completely and utterly exhausted.

“S-Seriously, what’s going on...? Did some of Hearts’s people jump you?” I asked. Both of them had battled with Players from an enemy organization a few days beforehand, and I hadn’t heard from either of them since. They weren’t

the sort to keep me constantly updated to begin with, so I'd taken the stance that no news was good news, but it seemed that might have been too optimistic of me.

Toki clicked his tongue. "Of all the pain-in-the-ass people to run into," he spat with an irritated scowl.

Akutagawa put on much the same expression for just a moment, but then he clasped his head and leaned against a nearby utility pole. It seemed he had a pretty nasty headache. "Shut up... Just shut up... Now? Really...? How could I ask her *now*, of all times?" he barely audibly muttered, his eyes unfocused. I got the feeling he was talking to himself, but at the same time, it was almost like he was arguing with someone.

"Toki, Akutagawa... Just what happened to you two?" I asked again.

"None of your damn business," Toki snapped, his attitude as sharp and biting as a knife's edge.

"Leave me alone," grumbled Akutagawa, *his* attitude as dull and lifeless as a slab of dead meat. They could hardly have been less alike, but at the same time, both of them were making it clear that they had no intention of letting anyone else meddle in their affairs.

"None of my business...? You can't be serious! Did the two of you team up to...no, of course you didn't. That'd be ridiculous," I said, rethinking my guess midsentence. I knew very well just how poorly those two got along. Delinquents and shut-ins were like oil and water. There was a *slight* chance that they'd cooperate out of pure necessity if a powerful enough enemy came along, but their injuries were too distinct from each other for that explanation to hold up. As best as I could tell, they'd each battled with different opponents, and they'd each either barely pulled off a hard-won victory or possibly even lost. "Well, umm... A-Anyway, we need to get you patched up! We should head to the hideout... Or, actually, my place is closer to here, I gue—"

Before I even finished, Toki and Akutagawa both stepped past me and Umeko, ignoring me entirely. Their faces looked as strained as could be, and the aura of hostility and murderous rage they exuded was powerful enough to make me swallow my words. And yet...strangely enough, in spite of their

dreadful bearings, they looked incredibly *small* to me as they walked away. They were tottering along, covered in wounds and barely able to keep upright, like a pair of dogs that had been abandoned by their owners. There was something sad about the sight of them. It was like they'd lost their faith in humanity, lost the people they could call friends, and had been left to wander aimlessly for lack of anywhere clear to go...and that, perhaps, is why I found myself shouting before I knew it.

“Umeko!”

“Understood.”

Barely an instant later—practically the same moment her name left my mouth—Umeko shot forward at an astonishing speed and, in an impressive series of leg sweeps and joint locks, apprehended both of the boys with ease. Before I knew it, she'd dragged them over to me, twisted their arms behind their backs, and pinned them to the ground by my feet. It had probably only taken around two seconds for them to go from walking away to lying prone on the wet pavement.

I was...well, flabbergasted. *H-Hooooly crap, Umeko's tough! I mean, really, really tough!* I'd had *no* clue it would be over that quickly when I gave her the order. The fact that both of her victims were exhausted had probably played a big factor in how easy she'd made it look, of course, but it had still been an incredibly impressive display. It seemed they didn't call her the ultimate Player for nothing.

“Ugh... The hell?!”

“O-Ow...”

Toki and Akutagawa moaned with pain and humiliation, glaring up at me from the ground.

“My apologies, Shuugo, Yanagi,” Umeko said, not loosening the arm locks she held them in for an instant. “I would have preferred not to resort to violence, but it was necessary. I am bound to obey Hitomi's word, whatever she may ask of me.”

“Now wait just a second—I didn't say anything about going *that* hard on

them!" I yelled. *I would've been perfectly happy if you'd just grabbed them by the hand, for the record! I didn't want you to take them down like a cop capturing a pair of fleeing fugitives!*

"Be that as it may," Umeko continued, "Shuugo, Yanagi. Your efforts to resist me were woefully lacking. I know not what extenuating circumstances you may be facing, but regardless, it should have been far more difficult to subdue you. It is plain to see that you have pushed yourselves beyond your limits. Do you understand now that this is precisely what Hitomi sought to teach you? She would not stoop to such a flagrant use of force, nor to using me to dispense said force, were it not such an important truth to impart. Can you even begin to understand the internal turmoil—the *anguish*—she must have felt when, by necessity, she was required to exercise coercion?"

"No, seriously, you have it all wrong! I didn't think it through that deeply at all!" *It was just a whim, honestly! A totally thoughtless call! Stop acting like I'm some sort of tough-love manager who only abuses her subordinates because of how much she cares for them!*

"Now then—raise your heads and listen well, Shuugo, Yanagi. Hear what Hitomi has to say to you, and know that it is a message of such grave import, she would sully my hands to see it delivered. She has long since grasped the totality of your situations, I assure you. Heed her words, and you will come to understand what it is that you still lack."

Oh god, Umeko, could you possibly raise the bar for me any higher?!

"O lost and wounded whelps, cast to the wayside and drenched by the rain—harken to the proclamations of Hitomi, proxy of the divine! Her words shall be as the light of genesis, guiding you down the proper path with all the wit of a master tactician and all the mercy of the Holy Mother!"

In what universe is it okay to talk someone up this much?! And when the heck did I become the proxy of the gods?! I desperately wanted to start screaming about how over the top all of this was getting, but Umeko just looked so darn serious about all of it that I couldn't quite figure out how I should actually react. Hajime's definitely been influencing her, hasn't he? The way she talked was pretty archaic from the very beginning, but now she's started throwing the sort

of flowery metaphors and silly vocabulary he loves into the mix as well!

Meanwhile, Toki and Akutagawa still lay at my feet, gazing up at me in silence. *Wait, no, don't look at me like that! Keep your expectations low, please! You know I can't actually bless you with the light of genesis, right?*

I cleared my throat a time or two, did my best to calm down, then spoke to them in as normal of a tone as I could manage. "Toki, Akutagawa...what happened? Please, just talk to me," I asked, but...nothing. Silence. Their mouths remained firmly closed and they appeared unflaggingly irate, their fists clenched with frustration and irritation in the puddles they lay in.

"You really don't want to tell me anything, do you?" I sighed. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Still you choose silence? Very well, then—you leave me no choice..."

"*Gah!* Umeko, no, none of that! This isn't an interrogation, okay?!" I shouted, intervening before she could *actually* dislocate their shoulders. "A-And actually, you should really let them go already! We can't keep them lying on the ground in the rain forever... I'd feel bad, for one thing, and I'm a little worried that people might be staring at us too."

"Hmm. You are ever merciful, Hitomi...or perhaps the correct term is 'lenient,'" said Umeko. Honestly, though, I just didn't want to draw the wrong sort of attention to us. In any case, Umeko released Toki and Akutagawa immediately, then she returned to my side, gave me an expressionless stare, and added, "Someday...that lenience will be your undoing."

I...didn't know what to say to that. *Ooof—now there's a line that sounds like it could've been plucked right out of a manga! One of those things that an enemy or one of the main character's friends tells them when they just can't bring themselves to be merciless enough. She probably didn't even mean it either—she just said it because she could! Hajime really is becoming a huge influence on her, and a really, really bad one! This is exactly why I've been trying to keep him from talking to her as much as possible!*

Toki and Akutagawa climbed to their feet, and I turned to face them once more. "So, umm...if you don't want to talk about it, then I understand. I won't ask you what happened, even though I'm really, *really* curious," I said. "*But*, will

you at least tell me what you're planning on doing from now on? I won't ask you *how* you got hurt, but can you please tell me what you were trying to accomplish when it happened?" I asked as I took another look at the battered and beaten state they were in, then I stepped closer to shield them from the rain with my umbrella. "We're all friends, aren't we? We're a team, right? So please, just try and rely on us a little more!"

No sooner had the words left my mouth than I felt a slap on my hand and my umbrella flew from my grip. It danced through the air, still open, and fell to the ground without a sound. The rain grew a little stronger, dampening my head and shoulders.

"Shut it," said Akutagawa, his hand still raised from swatting mine away. It was hard to imagine him looking any less pleased than he already did. "Friends...? Really? I'm not buying that garbage. I've never thought of any of you people as my friends. You're useful, so I decided to stick with you to kill time. That's literally it..."

"Akutagawa..."

"Not to mention that a team with *that* dipshit in charge is a team that ain't worth shit," Toki added indifferently. "He put this group together 'cause he felt like it, and he only bothers with it when he wants to mess around. This team's trash, if it even counts as a team to start with. I know you fight like hell to keep us together, Hitomi, but you get that none of us *ever* had any team spirit to begin with, right? Our boss just does whatever the hell he wants to, and we return the favor. That's all we are."

I looked away, then Toki added, "And anyway, I don't wanna hear any of this crap from *you* in the first place. Remind me who it was that stabbed our supposed boss in the back just a little while ago?"

I'd certainly earned that callout, and I found myself at a loss for a response. A few months beforehand, during our conflict with *F*, I had betrayed Hajime. I'd staged an attempted coup, leading the rest of our team in an effort to dethrone our boss. I hadn't thought of it as me betraying the team on the whole at the time, but it wasn't hard to imagine how, from a certain perspective, I'd stabbed the whole group in the back, Hajime included.

A direct mutiny against the boss was, in terms of an organization's long-term survival, the stupidest move you could possibly make. That's not even considering the fact that I was the organization's second-in-command and Hajime's personal aide—by all rights, I should've looked up to him and supported him more than anyone. No matter how foolish a king might be, you still have to treat them as the king they are; if the person closest to the king winds up plotting treason, it forever sullies their majesty and prestige. I had betrayed Hajime and thrown the organization into chaos, so what right *did* I have to go talking about friendship and teamwork, really?

"This is my fight... Stay out of it," Akutagawa all but groaned, one hand still pressed to his head. He sounded like he was having an awful time, but there was a certain spark in his eyes—a gloomy but very present flame of rage and resentment. Compared to the cold, judgmental stare he usually gave just about everyone, it almost felt like he was a totally different person. I'd certainly never seen him express that much open emotion before. "I'll make him pay, I swear... I swear... I'll get him, no matter what it takes... I'll grind his face into the ground... I'll crush his nose, gouge his eyes, smash his ears, then cut his gut wide open... I'll watch him beg for his life, then stomp on his stupid head..."

Akutagawa was like a man possessed. His eyes were still unfocused, and his murderous, vengeful muttering made it extremely clear to me that the kid wasn't in his right mind. I could hardly even bear to look at him in that abnormal state...and when I shifted my gaze, it happened to meet Toki's. He was glaring at me, and the heat of his contempt was almost intense enough to singe me.

"I'm not taking any orders from you, Hitomi," said Toki. "I'm not a mercenary, and I'm no damn puppet either. I do what I want, and that's final."

His refusal couldn't have possibly been clearer. He had no interest in taking orders, or even suggestions. He was rejecting any goodwill or helpful intentions I had to offer. He was excessively, even unnaturally, opposed to the idea of following anyone's lead.

"I'll kill all those motherfuckers that looked down on me. Every goddamn one..." said Toki, a palpable aura of murderous rage exuding from his lanky form.

“To hell with this... Dammit, god dammit!” muttered Akutagawa, his curse-laden rambling carrying just as intense a fury as Toki’s in spite of his much smaller stature.

Both of their hateful glares felt like they pierced right through me. Their wounds would have put just about anyone down for the count, but they were being driven to move forward anyway by the uncontrollable surges of emotions within them, from what I could tell. It was really obvious that they were enraged, and just as clear that they weren’t thinking straight, but that just made them all the more overwhelming. The glints in their eyes were razor-sharp, and the terrible, merciless fury within each of them seemed as deep as the pits of hell. Their emotions were burning so brightly, it felt like they could evaporate the rain pouring down on them in an instant, and in the face of all that, I just couldn’t bring myself to try to stop them.

I hesitated for a moment, closing my eyes. “All right,” I finally said, then stooped over to pick up my umbrella. “I won’t ask any more questions, and I won’t give any more advice. You were right... This really *is* none of my business. Whatever you two decide to do, it doesn’t matter to me at all.”

Nothing I could say to the two of them would convince them to change paths, and even if I could get them to alter course, I didn’t have the right to. My teammates were, by all appearances, about to throw themselves into a darkness so deep and vast there was no telling what lay within, and I didn’t have what it took to stop them by force. And yet...before I knew it, I was smiling. It wasn’t a disdainful smile, toward them or myself. It was a smile of pure exasperation. They were just so, so profoundly childish, I couldn’t help myself.

“Toki, Akutagawa,” I said, lifting my umbrella back overhead and turning to look at them once more. “Go ahead. Go out and give them hell.”

I wasn’t capable of stopping them...but I *could* urge them forward. I had no idea what I was pushing them toward, so it might’ve been awfully irresponsible of me to go through with it, but I knew that this was just something that boys like them went through sometimes. The childish, tactless drive they were displaying was important to them. Toki Shuugo was nineteen, and Akutagawa Yanagi fourteen. For someone like me, teens like them really *were* still just

children at heart.

“You want to settle the score without relying on your allies, is that it? Yeah, I get it. Good for you. That’s exactly how guys like you are *supposed* to act, isn’t it? Look at you—you’re so darn *cool*, huh?”

That’s just how guys—how *boys*—were. Stubborn to the bitter end. Vain and pretentious as could be. Prideful about the stupidest things. And—of course—prone to showing off whenever they possibly could.

“I don’t know who put you two through the wringer, but get out there and do it right back to them! A pathetic crybaby of a man who can’t give as good as he gets doesn’t deserve to be a wing of *Fallen Black*!” I said with an exaggerated grin.

Maybe it was a stupid decision. Maybe it was an outright mistake. One way or another, however, it was *their* choice. They were going to make their own decisions and fight their own battles, so I just had to sit back and see them off. Clearly these were *men*, fighting *men’s* battles and living in a *man’s* world, so a woman like me had no right to butt in. I understood that very well, thanks to a certain self-proclaimed fallen angel who shall not be named.

“All right! Let’s get going, Umeko,” I said. Toki and Akutagawa were staring at me in wide-eyed astonishment, but I had nothing left to say to either of them and just walked away, sharing my umbrella with Umeko. Well...nothing but one last comment, which I muttered to myself as I passed by them.

“You’re both egotistical, you never let anyone in on what you’re thinking, you never listen to anything anyone tells you, you never pay attention to other people, you don’t bother telling your allies what you’re going to do next, you’re *completely* irresponsible, you have no interest in seeing the world from any perspective except your own, you’re vain and self-obsessed, and you fight exclusively by rules that literally nobody ever asked you to follow, picking pointless battles in the tiny little reality that you refuse to share with anyone,” I muttered in a quiet little singsong voice, just loudly enough for them to hear, then flashed my brightest smile yet. “You know, when all’s said and done, you two and Hajime have a lot in common!”

In my own sort of way, those words were both a distinct compliment and the

best way to cheer them on that I could offer.



Saitou Hitomi and Tanaka Umeko went on their way, leaving Shuugo and Yanagi on their own. For a moment, they simply stood there, unmoving and silent as the rain pounded down on the pavement around them. Eventually, though...

“Hey, shut-in.”

“What, delinquent?”

“I’m in deep shit. Lend me a hand.”

“What a coincidence... I was about to ask you for help as well.”

It was easy—shockingly so, even. Just like that, two young men who had displayed an almost pathological unwillingness to rely on their friends went to each other in search of help. In a flash, the seething rage that had burned within their gazes had vanished. And not just that—the atmosphere around them, which had felt so tense that it had been like a length of piano wire stretched to its absolute limit, had eased, and the intense, murderous hostility they’d each been directing at anyone who crossed their paths was gone without a trace as well. To an almost comical, almost laughable degree, Shuugo and Yanagi had cooled off and regained their composure.

“Those burns look nasty... Did you take on someone with a fire-based power?”

“Yeah. Well, more explosions than fire, really. Looks like I’m not a good match for that sorta thing, so how ’bout you deal with her instead?”

“Fine with me... Taking on that sort of Player is child’s play for me. But... I’m in a bad way, as well. I hate to admit it, but I walked right into a trap, and they put something in my mind...”

Shuugo and Yanagi, who had fought like cats and dogs for as long as they’d known each other, were now freely exchanging information and working out a plan like it was only natural. They made no attempt to hide their weaknesses and failures, each striving instead to compensate for what the other lacked. It

was almost like they were friends. Almost like they were brothers-in-arms.

“In your mind, huh...? I figure Fantasia’d be able to do something about that.”

“Yeah... I’ll get in touch with her.”

“Then I’ll go ahead and give Natsu a call. Probably a good idea to take a step back and analyze what we’re up against.”

“You’re good with meeting at the hideout, right...? We should both probably get our injuries looked at. Plus...I don’t think I’ll be doing much of anything until I try to sleep for a bit...”

They talked. They collaborated. And what was more surprising than anything was that that was all it took for them to click together, suddenly working in perfect harmony.

“Of course, if *System*...if Umeko would join in the fight, that would be far and away the most efficient way of dealing with it,” Yanagi noted.

“Yeah, that ain’t happening. She won’t do anything unless Hitomi tells her to.”

“And Hitomi only does whatever Kiryuu tells *her* to...”

“No point calling in *Lost Regalia* either, huh? Hinoemata wouldn’t bother showing up, and even if he did, he wouldn’t be worth a damn here.”

“Okay... We could call Kiry—”

“Fuck that guy.”

“...I couldn’t agree more.”

Before they knew it, the two of them had set off together. They lived in different worlds, and they were aiming for different destinations. The motives that drove them to step onto the battlefield were dissimilar, and their lifestyles could hardly have been more different. The gap between shut-ins and delinquents was so marked and so vast that you’d think they would never see eye to eye, yet they’d managed to bridge it through one single powerful sentiment: a mutual loathing of a third party. More powerful than their pride, their obstinance, their self-importance, their desire to get even, and their hostility toward their enemies, the truly deep-seated hatred that filled their hearts left no room for anything else.

“No way we can take this lying down...right?”

“Damn straight we can’t. This goes beyond humiliating...and y’know, nothing else seems to matter anymore.”

“There really couldn’t be anything more humiliating, when you put it that way...”

And then they spoke in unison, their voices and minds uniting in one single powerful expression of distaste:

“I’d rather *die* than let anyone say I’m like *that* dumbass!”



And so, Saitou Hitomi's earnest attempt to cheer her teammates on had had its desired effect—albeit in a totally different manner than she had anticipated. Kiryuu Hajime, aka Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, was unpopular and had no innate leadership skills. He was broke, unemployed, homeless, and completely incapable of living independently. He had no common sense and no charisma. He *did* have self-importance and chuuni power in spades, for whatever that was worth, but nothing else.

A person as unique as him could never hope to serve as a half-decent leader, even of an organization that he'd founded himself, and as a natural result, his allies had virtually no faith in him. He didn't have what it took to serve as a boss in any capacity whatsoever...except in one way. There was just one single aspect of a leader's role at which he excelled.

When it came to serving as an example of how *not* to behave, Kiryuu Hajime surpassed all others.

Chapter 8: Fallen Black

Oh, how happy we'd be if money could buy happiness.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

"Hey, Shuugo! Sure has been a while, huh?"

Toki Shuugo was sitting atop an air conditioner unit on the roof of a multiuse building he'd trespassed his way into, gazing up at the sky as he pressed his phone to his ear.

"So, what the hell convinced *you* to call *me*? Kinda surprising to get a ring from a guy who's been ignoring all *my* calls for who even knows how long."

"...It's been a while, Yousuke," said Shuugo. He had indeed called up the leader of the biker gang Cruise, Kurumaya Yousuke...or rather, the *former* leader. For that matter, Cruise was a *former* biker gang as well. "And it's not a big deal or anything. I was just hoping you could fix my wheels up. You're working at a motorcycle shop these days, right?"

"Close—I'm *managing* the shop, actually! And okay, you got it. Bring it in whenever you've got time, and I'll cut you a steep discount for the repairs."

"Thanks. And...Yousuke?" said Shuugo. "Sorry."

"Huh? What's this all about?"

"When Cruise got taken down..." Shuugo began, then he hesitated. It had been about half a year since Cruise had gathered together in a convenience store parking lot to throw a celebration, only to be wiped out on the spot by a silver-haired convenience store clerk with heterochromia and a strange, inexplicable power. "You bowed down to that guy because you wanted to protect the rest of us, and I...I thought that made you a loser, and I really tore into you for it. So...sorry."

“Ha ha ha... Okay, but seriously, where *is* all this coming from? Pretty sure this is the first time you’ve ever straight-up apologized to me.”

“It just hit me the other day. I realized that thinking you were acting like a loser made *me* the biggest loser of all.”

“Somebody’s really turned a new leaf, huh? Did something happen? And actually, the hell’re you up to these days, anyway?”

“Same thing as always,” Shuugo said with a bitter chuckle. “I’m rolling with a buncha dipshits, getting in stupid fights with stupid people, just like I did when I was a biker.”

Shuugo hung up, then he stood up from his seat on the air conditioner. As he walked over to the rail surrounding the side of the building, a girl with braided hair and glasses—Natsu Aki—lowered the binoculars she’d been peering through, looked over at him, and smiled mischievously.

“I heard that, Toks,” said Aki. “You just called us a bunch of dipshits, didn’t you? Rude!”

“Your fault for eavesdropping.”

“That Yousuke guy you were talking to was the leader of the gang you were part of, right? And you were his second-in-command, or something?” asked Aki.

“Right,” Shuugo grunted.

“Huuuh. So I guess that means he’s tougher than you, right?”

“Nah. We never threw down for real, but I probably would’ve won if we had. Being the boss ain’t all about being the best fighter.”

“Oooh, yeah, I gotcha. All that stuff about having to be a natural leader, or whatever?”

“Something like that. Yousuke’s...yeah, I’d call him a natural leader. He’s got what it takes. Might just see it that way ’cause my new boss is such a jackass, though.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Yeah, no kidding,” said Aki with an uproarious laugh.

“So, how’s the peep show going?” asked Shuugo.

“A-okay! I finally got a nice, long look at the real one,” Aki said with a victorious smirk, gesturing with her thumb toward a notably tall building behind her. That building was the property of Habikino Hatsuhiko, and one of Hearts’s many hideouts. “*Hundred and One Wolfies*: the power to make duplicates of himself. The duplicates are exactly as strong as the original, and once they take a certain amount of damage—enough to make ’em pass out, basically—they go poof.”

Aki explained the particulars of Hatsuhiko’s power in intense, specific depth. Her power, *Head Hunting*, allowed her to learn everything there was to know about a Player’s power if she caught so much as a glimpse of them. No matter what trump card her opponent might be holding in reserve, she would always see through it, peering into the deepest reaches of their heads and analyzing everything about their powers that could be found in their minds.

“Then it sounds like everything Akutagawa said was right on the money,” said Shuugo.

“Ah, well, *most* everything. Y’know how Gawanagi said that this Hatsuhiko guy claimed he could make a hundred and one of himself? Turns out his actual max is more like one-twenty-five.”

“Then why the hell’d he name it that?”

“Probably to trick people, I guess? Like, wait till they take down a hundred and one of him and think they’ve won, then have the hundred and second sucker punch ’em right when they least expect it. Talk about a cheap trick, huh? Though, then again, maybe he just got really fussy about making the name sound good,” said Aki before going on to spoil all of the remaining details of Hatsuhiko’s power with a stunningly casual air. It was almost like she was reading the strategy guide for a video game.

“Your power’s as wild as ever, huh?” commented Shuugo.

“C’mon, Toks, what’re you buttering me up for?” said Aki with a slightly bashful shrug. “And it’s not exactly all-purpose, y’know? I’m totally useless in a fight, my power’s got a buncha downsides, and it doesn’t even work on folks with really out-there abilities like Fanfan... Ah, right! Speaking of, how’re things going down on that end? We should probably give her a call, or— Huh? Wait,

Toks? You're leaving already?!"

"Yeah," Shuugo replied offhandedly as he walked away. "I've got all the info I need."

"Oh? In that case, guess my work here is done! Man, I'm tired—my eyes *and* my brain're totally pooped! Stakeouts just aren't worth the effort," Aki said as she stretched, binoculars still in hand. Then she took a moment to grab the convenience store bag that was lying by her feet and shove all the pastry wrappers and empty plastic bottles scattered about the vicinity into it.

"Yeah, thanks," Shuugo grunted.

Aki's eyes widened. "*Whoa*, what's the deal? You *never* say thank you, Toks!"

"Yeah, don't read into it."

"Well, no need to thank me, anyway! We're a team, right?" Aki said with a grin as she gave Shuugo a spirited thumbs-up.

"A team, huh...? Seems like people throw that word around so much, it barely even means anything," Shuugo grunted.

"Ha ha ha! Yeah, I know, right?" Aki said with a chuckle, not even trying to argue against Shuugo's cynical perspective. "I mean, it hasn't even been a year since we all met, we've got no team spirit, our goals are all over the place, we barely know anything about each other's tastes or how we think, and considering who our boss is, calling us a team's probably wrong on a *super* basic level. I'm gonna be real here—if one of you guys died tomorrow, I wouldn't shed a tear. But, y'know...when all's said and done, I want our team to win."

For a moment, Shuugo paused.

"That's what being on a team's all about in the end, isn't it?" asked Aki.

"Hah! You got that right."

With that, Shuugo departed from the rooftop. He set off, jackknife in hand, to take on his enemy—a shared enemy that he and his teammates had decided he'd be best suited to dealing with.

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of town, another member of *Fallen Black* was

keeping up his end.

A short distance away from a seaside factory—or rather, what remained of it after it'd been reduced to little more than a scorch mark on the landscape by Toki Shuugo and Hachisuka Happa's battle—was an area that had been used to store an incredible quantity of shipping containers. Said area was, at the moment, an actively raging inferno. The massive stacks of shipping containers had turned the plot of land into something of a maze, and the concrete paths that ran between them were filled with goutts of flame and plumes of black smoke.

In the middle of the conflagration, perched atop a particularly tall pile of containers, the girl who'd transformed the area into a sea of flame stood and looked out over her handiwork. She was Hachisuka Happa, a high-ranking member of Hearts, and her power was *BOMB Voyage*: the ability to spontaneously ignite any air that she had exhaled, transforming it into a massive midair explosion. Excelling in firepower, range, and pure lethality, her power and the skillful manner with which she used it had allowed Happa to take down numerous Players and become Hearts's most capable fighter by an astonishing margin. Scores of Players had fallen before her, unable to fight back against the one-sided, long-distance barrage of explosions she subjected them to. Even Toki Shuugo, *Fallen Black*'s assault leader, had lost without ever managing to so much as close in on her.

Rainfall was Happa's one weakness, but the sky on that particular day happened to be as clear and cloudless as could be. It was a bright, beautiful, sweltering summer day. Happa could hardly have asked for better conditions for using her explosions to their fullest effect—the only thing that could've made it better for her would've been an ideal arena to fight in. And, well, what do you know, that's precisely what she'd had set up.

The maze of shipping containers before her was owned by a trading company that was financially backed by Habikino Hatsuhiko, and he had arranged it specifically for Happa's sake. That was why a number of the containers scattered about the field had been stuffed with gunpowder. Happa's explosions were powerful enough on their own, and if she set one off in the right place, it would be supplemented by a secondary, even more powerful explosion as one

of the containers was blown to pieces. Fighting there made her already potent abilities an order of magnitude scarier. This was her territory—a sanctuary made just for her—and any foe foolish enough to take the bait and set foot within it would be blown away, their corpse incinerated by a hellish inferno. Here, she was unbeatable...

“God *dammit*! What’s *with* this kid?!”

...at least, in theory.

Happa gazed out into the raging flames beneath her with a look of irritation on her face. In spite of the stifling heat of her surroundings, a bead of cold sweat ran down her cheek. She was looking at one point in particular—a person. He had strolled into her territory on her invitation, unarmed and alone...so of course, she’d blown him the hell up, unleashing a one-sided salvo of fiery death, just like she always did.

She’d set off blast after blast, holding nothing back from the very start of the fight, even igniting a gunpowder-packed shipping container right next to her target, just for the sake of overkill. The resulting inferno had been so vast, you’d think a napalm bomb had been set off. It had been such an intense display that it had felt like Happa was trying to *melt* her opponent rather than burn him. Her offensive had been so overwhelming that taking it at point-blank range would evaporate anyone, erasing them from the world without a trace...again, in theory.

What happened instead left Happa speechless. Within the inferno, she could just barely make out the outline of a person—a small-statured boy. He had a pair of headphones over his ears, their cord plugged into a handheld game console. The heat around him was so overwhelming that the shipping containers near him, and even the asphalt beneath them, were beginning to melt...but he was just standing there, placidly playing a video game.

“What the hell, seriously...? This is, like, *not* what I signed up for! I thought Haneko’s power was supposed to be melting that guy’s brain right about now!” Happa muttered with a mixture of rage and despair. She just couldn’t reach him. The flames, the explosions, the hot air—everything she threw at him, all the combined powers of science, finance, and the supernatural she had at her

disposal—all of it had proved incapable of making him so much as break a sweat. It was like he'd slipped into a gap in reality itself, rendering himself untouchable.

“Yeah...I remember now. This is... How to put it...? This is the sort of character I am, I guess,” the boy quietly muttered to himself from his isolated pocket of calm within a world dominated by flame and heat. “I’m the sort of ultra broken character who barely takes his battles seriously and crushes his opponents’ spirits without even trying.”

Akutagawa Yanagi was the wielder of *Dead Space*: a power that put the spaces between to work, a power that displayed its true essence when used for the sake of defense. No matter what sort of attack was thrown at him, he could perceive a gap in it, tear it open, and slip right through unscathed. As such, the moment the flames and explosions *should* have touched him, they emerged on his other side as if the space he occupied didn’t even exist, or as if he were surrounded by an invisible barrier made of impossibly sharp blades, incessantly slicing everything that tried to touch him.

“Getting pissed off and throwing a fit really wasn’t like me at all...but now that I’ve gotten some real sleep, I can finally think again. Yeah...this just goes to show how important proper rest really is,” Yanagi muttered disinterestedly, still focused on his game.

Happa, meanwhile, was getting desperate. She set off even grander explosions than before, practically carpet-bombing the whole area, but she couldn’t singe even a single hair on Yanagi’s head. The flames and explosions went without saying, but it didn’t end there—he was so cut off that not even the deafening roar they caused reached his ears. Yanagi hadn’t heard a single sound from the outside world since the battle had begun. He’d been listening to his game’s music the whole time, and nothing else. Happa had been desperately screaming and shouting from way up above about her reasons for staking it all on the War, her tragic history, and the cause behind her attachment to money, but Yanagi didn’t hear a word of it.

“No high score this run, huh?” Yanagi mumbled as he reached a stopping point in his game, then looked up, glaring with irritation at Happa. She was still standing atop her pile of shipping containers, putting her heart and soul into

shouting at him.

She spoke of her grudge against the father who had abandoned her, leaving a mountain of debt behind. She spoke of her disdain for her fool of a mother, who'd worked herself to the bone trying to pay that debt off. She declared that she would never let herself be like her parents, that she still wore her school uniform after dropping out for personal *and* practical reasons, and so on and so forth. She screamed her heart out, and Yanagi heard precisely nothing. He could see her shouting, but he had no interest in what she was saying, and simply stretched a hand out toward her.

"...You're wide open."

With the slightest of motions, Yanagi spread his pointer and middle fingers apart. In that same moment, a roar rang out as the air in the direction he gestured at was sucked into a vortex. He had forced open space itself, dislocating the air within and twisting it into a raging whirlwind—localized in just such a way as to slam into Happa's back, pushing her with incredible force and knocking her off the tower of shipping containers. She'd been so preoccupied recalling everything that had led her to this point that she hadn't noticed what was happening until it was far too late to stop it. Gravity took hold at once, pulling her down into the still blazing inferno that awaited her below.

"You know...the moment you decided to go somewhere high up and far away before you started attacking, you basically told me that you could make explosions and fire, but couldn't control them," said Yanagi.

He had heard all about Happa's power from Shuugo, and knew that Happa always made a point of generating her explosions from a distance, taking great care to never make any too close to herself. That led to the clear conclusion that her power let her *generate* explosions, but not manipulate them after the fact. All the aftereffects and collateral damage they caused were just as dangerous for her as they were for her opponent.

"You're the one who set this whole place on fire. You should've known what would happen if you fell. It's blazingly obvious...literally, I guess," Yanagi muttered, still sounding utterly disinterested.

The nature of his power had made defeating Happa the simplest of tasks. In

fact, he could hardly have been better suited to taking on an opponent with intense firepower like hers. He could've made it a lot flashier, certainly—there were a thousand ways in which he could have overwhelmed her—but instead, Yanagi had chosen to defeat his foe in the manner that required the least effort on his part. That was, after all, the most rational strategy for him to choose, and he strove to live a rational life.

“People can’t be purely rational. I get that...but there’s no real need for it to be *pure*, is there? The way I see it, going far out of your way to force yourself to live purely rationally is irrational in and of itself,” Yanagi mumbled as he turned his attention back to his game. Chiptune music rang out from his headphones, and Happa’s agonized wailing didn’t so much as register to him. He showed no respect for his opponent, no interest in the backstories or growth of others, no sympathy for his foe’s loss, and no pride in his own victory. To him, such matters were nothing more than a bothersome waste of time.

“Hooray! You did it, Akutagawa! You won!” a voice shouted from the depths of Yanagi’s mind. He scowled as it seemed to reverberate through his skull, realizing with no small amount of distaste how familiar he’d become with hearing other people’s voices speaking to him in his mind.

Don’t talk to me, Fantasia, he replied reluctantly. *I just started a new game.*

“Wh-Why do you have to be like that?! That’s so mean! I stayed quiet through the whole battle, didn’t I?!”

...

“You’re ignoring me?! Really?! Wh-Why are you being so nasty to me?! Haven’t I been keeping Nega-Yanagi under control for you this whole time?!”

The voice in Yanagi’s mind—the voice of Yusano Fantasia, which had been transplanted into him—was noisy, to be sure, but it was nothing compared to the discomfort that Nega-Yanagi’s mental voice had caused.

“If it weren’t for me, you’d still be a sleep-deprived zombie right now, you know?”

Right... Thanks for that.

"I sang you lullabies and everything!"

I'm...not going to thank you for that part. At all.

"Huh? W-Wait, why not?"

...Because you're completely tone-deaf.

"N-No way... You're kidding, right? Nobody's ever said that to me before! It can't be true, right...?"

...Society's been pretty gentle to you, hasn't it?

"H-Huh? You mean...wait, no waaaaaaaaaay?!"

Judging by Fantasia's wail of horrified confusion, it seemed likely she'd been under the impression that she was a good singer. Yanagi just ignored her and started walking away, the inferno before him parting like the Red Sea with each step.

Come to think of it...this might be a stupid question, but, Yanagi said internally without bothering to pause his game, *Fantasia...how exactly are you keeping Nega-Yanagi "under control"?*

Fantasia's power, *Sex Eclipse*, was a power of fragmented identities. It had allowed the personality known as Yusano Fantasia to inhabit Yanagi's mind, where she'd suppressed Nega-Yanagi. It was the one manner she'd been able to propose to treat the symptoms of his condition, though it didn't serve as a complete cure.

"Huh? I mean, nothing that fancy, really... I just sneaked up behind him and put him in a sleeper hold, that's all."

...

Apparently, the process was a lot more physical than Yanagi had anticipated. Nega-Yanagi was "under control" in the "caught in a literal submission hold" sense of the phrase. Yanagi's only perception of the world that Nega-Yanagi inhabited—that is to say, his only perception of his own mindscape—was auditory, but by using her power to visit it, Fantasia had apparently stepped into it in a physical sense and had engaged in actual close combat. It had been a physical battle in a mental world...whatever that even meant.

“Oh, and he looked like he was going to wake up a little while ago, so I gut-punched him and put him right back out again.”

A gut punch...? Seriously?

“Yup! Like, wham! Wham! Wham!”

So, multiple gut punches? Was that necessary?

For some reason, the idea of a personality that had been born from his own consciousness being brutally beaten by a middle school girl within his mindscape was difficult for Yanagi to accept. Nega-Yanagi had put him through hell, but when Yanagi imagined him being treated so roughly, he couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy.

“S-Sorry for being rough, okay...? I couldn't make him go away, so it was my only choice! How else was I supposed to make him be quiet?” Fantasia pouted, apparently picking up on Yanagi's discomfort. Her power could fragment her own personality, but it *couldn't* wipe away the personality that was Nega-Yanagi, so she'd needed to enter Yanagi's mindscape to shut him up personally instead. It was a stopgap measure, at best, but it had bought them the time that they needed.

So, unless I keep my promise or somebody kills Hamai Haneko, he won't go away entirely... Speaking of, how are things going on the other side, Fantasia? Yanagi mentally muttered.

“Moving along pretty well! Moving along, and moving ahead,” Fantasia proudly replied. *“Trust me, we have it totally under control!”*

For the past several weeks, Hamai Haneko had been staying in a top-class luxury hotel—the sort where a single night's stay cost somewhere in excess of a hundred thousand yen. That being said, in truth, it might have been more accurate to say she was being confined there.

Hatsuhiko had arranged the room for her so that she could hide away from Akutagawa Yanagi and the rest of *Fallen Black*. Her lodgings were spacious and luxurious, featuring the finest of furniture and appliances, and she could have any meal she desired delivered via room service by placing a single phone call.

The hotel even featured a pool and a spa, both of which she could make use of whenever she pleased. It was almost too opulent to count as a hideaway. Haneko was living the sort of hotel lifestyle that would make anyone jealous...or at least, she could've been.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's...okay... I'll be okay, for sure..."

Haneko was curled up in a corner of her room, her blankets pulled over her head, muttering in a low, disturbing tone that made it sound like she was chanting a curse. She told herself that she'd be fine over and over again, desperate to convince herself it was true. It was the middle of the day, but her curtains were shut and the room was dark and gloomy. The windows offered an unobstructed view of the cityscape and the ocean beyond, and the room's rate had been set at an exorbitant price on account of that scenery, but she hadn't opened the curtains even once since she'd taken up residence there. She hadn't visited the pool or the spa either. She'd almost entirely isolated herself from the outside world, living her days in fear.

"It's okay, it's okay... Hatsuhiko said I'd be safe here no matter what... I have guards, and he said we have fake safe houses everywhere... It's okay, it's okay, I'll be okay..."

To put it frankly: Haneko was a coward. She was as timid as could be, prone to overthinking, and incredibly pessimistic to boot. Although Hatsuhiko had told her that she'd be fine as long as she hid in the hotel, Haneko had immediately jumped to the conclusion that if she had to hide at all, it was all but guaranteed she was going to be targeted. As soon as she'd had that thought, her mind had latched onto it and wouldn't let go.

"It's okay... Hatsuhiko said my power was strong... My *Two Twoool Two... Two Tool Tool...* My power is still active," said Haneko, giving up after the second strike. "That means I'll be okay, for sure... And that *liar* will suffer for not keeping his promise... Hee hee... Hee hee hee!"

Preoccupied as she was by the danger she felt was imminent, Haneko's faith in her power was all she had to rely on. *Two Tool to Too True*, the power to make a promise binding, had served her well. She'd used it time and time again to drive her enemies into a corner, always under Habikino Hatsuhiko's orders,

and in doing so, she had contributed greatly to Hearts's cause.

No Player could stand up to their own hyperenlarged sense of guilt, no matter how powerful they were. Some caved under the pressure, choosing to make good on their ill-advised promise. Others voluntarily resigned from the Spirit War, just to escape their guilt. Those who chose neither of those paths and instead struggled on did so to their last breaths, inevitably being crushed by their guilt when all was said and done.

The ability to manifest one's guilt as a distinct personality made Haneko's power a rather rare one, by the War's standards. Its combat potential simply didn't compare to her fellow Players' powers, and its strength was in an entirely different dimension. Forcing the creation of an alternate personality within one's mind was as tricky as a power's effect could be, and Haneko was convinced that no one would have the capacity to cope with it.

"Hee... Hee hee... It's okay. I'll be okay. I'm special, after all..."

Haneko's irregular power and the victories it had won her served as a tranquilizer, soothing the terror that beset her. Her blind faith, however, also blinded her to the truth. In trusting her power so thoroughly, she'd let her perspective narrow to a dangerous degree. If she'd stopped to really think it through, she would've eventually realized the obvious: if she could have a power of that nature, other Players could too. In fact, it was practically a guarantee.

Suddenly, Haneko jumped as a knock rang out from her door. She fearfully tiptoed toward it, sheets still draped over her head, and glanced through the peephole.

"O-Oh... It's just Hanji," Haneko sighed with relief. Haimura Hanji—a young man with a perpetual squint and a toned physique—was the member of Hearts who'd been assigned to watch over her. Haneko quickly undid the chain and opened the door up, ushering him inside. "It's good to see you, Hanji... And really, thank you so much for wasting your time on me like this. So, umm...did something hap—"

The moment Haneko gave Hanji a subservient bow—before she'd even finished her sentence—Hanji's thick muscular arm shot forward. Before she

knew what was happening, he'd grabbed Haneko's neck in a strong one-handed hold.

"Ghaugh! Agh, ahhh!" Haneko gasped, her eyes wide with shock and intense confusion. "H-Hanji... Why...?"

Is this a joke? A betrayal? Did I offend someone without even realizing it again? Haneko's mind raced as she tried to figure out what was going on...but Hanji just laughed.

"Hya ha ha ha haaa! Hyaaa ha ha ha!" the muscle-bound man cackled. The way he laughed was as vulgar and ill-refined as a laugh could be. "Hya ha ha ha! I was *wondering* what you'd look like, and god *damn*, if you aren't the dullest little drip I've ever seen! Dull face, dull clothes—even your *vibe's* dull as dirt! How boring can you *be*? And this *room*, god, it's so *dark*! Seriously, what are you even *doing*? You're *wasting* your one chance to shack up in a luxury suite like this! Open up those damn curtains, girl! If you get to stay in a place like this, the *first* thing you do should be to throw 'em wide open in the middle of the day and prance around the place in the buff! You've gotta enjoy the *freedom*, not to mention the sexy, sexy danger of it all! Hyaaa ha ha ha ha!"

Hanji's voice came out shrill and grating, like the cawing of a crow, and something about his verbal mannerisms came across as distinctly feminine. Haneko was more confused than ever. Hanji had always been a man of few words who'd spend most of his free time lifting weights. He certainly wasn't the sort of person to go off on a hyper, blathering ramble like this—and that's not even starting on how out of place his effeminate tone of voice was.

"Hanji...a-are you...training to be a drag queen...?"

"Dead wrong, dipshit," Hanji spat scornfully, then he released his grip on Haneko's neck. She fell to her knees, coughing and sputtering for breath as he laughed once more.

"You know what I *am*, though? I'm Yusano Grotesqua, that's what!"

"...Huh?"

“Hya ha ha ha ha!” You *still* don’t get it? Kinda slow on the uptake, aren’tcha? What I’m *saying’s* that your macho man here’s personality has been upstaged by li’l ol’ me!”

Haneko gaped in disbelief. It was a preposterous, outright unbelievable claim, and yet some part of her was immediately able to understand it. Haneko’s power functioned in much the same way, so it wasn’t all that difficult for her to accept.

“Y-You mean...you used your power to...?”

“Biiingo!” said Hanji—or rather, Grotesqua, the mouth of the man she’d possessed twisting into a big, vulgar grin. “We’ve got, y’know, one of those multiple personality thingamajigs going on, right? One body, buncha different people inside? And the thing is, we can take those personalities and put ’em in other people whenever we want! Hya ha ha! Feels just a liiittle like *your* power, don’t it?! It’s like, wow, we’re real turds of a feather, huh?!”

“E-Eeek!” Haneko squealed. She was far too busy crawling away from Grotesqua in a blind panic to call out her uninspired wordplay.

Just as Haneko was about to make it out into the hallway, a familiar individual came into her view: Hasegawa Hazuki. Hazuki was an athletic woman with a firmly toned build, a distinct tan, and a rather short haircut. She was wearing a tracksuit, which reinforced her sporty image—an image that was entirely accurate, given that she was a former decathlete. She had that keen atmosphere about her that professional athletes tended to develop, and she was the other member of Hearts who’d been tasked with serving as Haneko’s guard.

“Hazuki! W-W-We’re in trouble! An enemy’s used their power on Hanji, and he’s—” Haneko began, practically begging Hazuki to save her...but to no avail.

“I apologize for the confusion, but I’m afraid I must offer a correction: I am not Hasegawa Hazuki,” Hazuki said in a tone entirely unlike her own. She usually spoke in a gruff, almost mannish manner, but now her word choice was as polite and courteous as could be. “My name is Yusano Mysteria, and I’ve supplanted this individual’s personality,” she explained as she pressed a fingertip into the side of her face, just beside her eye—almost as if she were

adjusting an invisible pair of glasses.

“Oh, yes—this individual isn’t wearing glasses,” observed Hazuki—or rather, Mysteria—as she reached toward Haneko, who was still frozen with shock. After offering a courteous “Pardon me,” Mysteria proceeded to pluck the glasses right off the bridge of Haneko’s nose, popped the lenses out like it was the most natural thing in the world to do, then put on the lensless frames.

“Hmm. These aren’t flattering by any means, but I suppose they’ll do well enough. Better than nothing, in any case,” Mysteria muttered as she adjusted her new glasses. The fact that she had no qualms about complaining about the item she’d just stolen was a clear sign that while her tone was cordial, her behavior was anything but.

“Oooh? What’re *you* here for, Mysteria? I could’ve *sworn* I told you that li’l ol’ Grotesqua the Ultra Invincible had things totally covered? Think you could *not* turn this into a surprise threesome, thanks?”

“Leaving the job to someone as crude as you was making me anxious.”

“Hya ha ha! You’re *so* full of it, girl! Be honest—you’re doing it for your darling li’l Akutagawa, aren’tcha? I know you just looove that kid to bits, after all!”

An instant change came over Mysteria. She had seemed like a calm, collected intellectual right up to the moment Grotesqua had decided to poke fun at her, at which point she grew very conspicuously shaken.

“Wh-Wh-What on earth are you talking about?! F-For your information, I have no feelings of any such nature for that boy whatsoever!” Mysteria babbled at a breakneck pace as she readjusted her glasses.

Grotesqua smirked and let out her loudest laugh yet. “Well, *I* can’t stand the little shit,” she said. “He’s a cocky, saucy asshat, is what he is.”

“You can’t possibly be serious! He’s *adorable*, for one thing, and his cocky, condescending attitude is just... Oh, it’s *perfect*! Ahh... If only he’d turn his icy glare toward *me*... Gah! U-Umm... Well, as I said, I don’t have any particularly noteworthy feelings for him. I just think he’s ever so slightly endearing, that’s all.”

“You’d seriously go for a kid who looks like he hasn’t even grown his first pube?”

“The moment those start to grow is precisely the moment men stop being worth your time! Ah. Uh, no, I mean...”

“*Ugh*, Mysteria, *gross* to the *max*! You belong on a *list*, girl! Keep those feelings repressed where they belong! Seriously, I’m starting to think you might be even more of a freak than I am! Hya ha ha!”

“Heh... Heh heh heh! Well, I’m just pleased to see you haven’t lost any of your usual pep, Grotesqua— Oh, excuse me. I meant *Nurse Piss*.”

Grotesqua let out a strangled gasp. “O-Oh, you did *not* just go there, bitch! Say that again, I dare you!”

“Nurse Piss. A nickname well suited for the woman who was so scared by Kiryuu Hajime’s bluff she wet herself.”

“Did *not*! That was Fantasia, not me! I’ve told you a *billion* times that we’d already swapped out by that point!”

“And Fantasia insists the opposite. I don’t think I need to bother saying which of you I’m more inclined to take at her word. Surely you recall the conclusion we reached at our meeting the other day? ‘Grotesqua wet herself after being intimidated by Kiryuu Hajime, then swapped Fantasia in moments later in an effort to foist the blame of the *accident* onto her.’”

“Wha— No I— I didn’t! Seriously, I didn’t, I friggin’ didn’t!”

Grotesqua and Mysteria’s shouting match continued to devolve—though of course, anyone observing them would have seen Haimura Hanji and Hasegawa Hazuki carrying out the argument instead. The spectacle was so surreal that Haneko found herself petrified, just watching them in a dumbfounded daze. It was like her soul had departed her body.

What’s going on...? What even...? she thought vacantly, half convinced that this was all just a nightmare. The two guards who were supposed to be protecting her had turned into entirely different people. That’s not to say they’d been impersonated—rather, they were still themselves, just being controlled by total strangers. They were completely out of character, in a very unusual sense

of the phrase.

“Oh, how careless of me. This is no time for me to be arguing with a strumpet. Finishing *her* off comes before anything else,” said Mysteria, bringing the dispute to an abrupt close as she turned her glare toward Haneko.

“Hya ha ha! Riiight, good point. Gotta take care of her for your cute widdle Akutagawa’s sake, eh?” commented Grotesqua.

“A-As I’ve said, I have no particular feelings for him whatsoever... I just don’t like leaving a job unfinished for long.”

“Can’t argue with that—I wanna wrap this up nice and quick too. Just *finding* this basic-ass bitch was a pain, and I wanna be done with her ASAP. I can’t even *remember* how many Hearts members I had to go through to figure out where she was!”

That comment finally clued Haneko in to how her whereabouts had been compromised. *If they can take over people’s bodies, and there are a bunch of them working together...then finding me would be a snap for them*, she realized.

Hatsuhiko had done everything he could to hide her, but preventing information leaks entirely was simply impossible when you were dealing with someone who could claim the identity of your allies at the drop of a hat. All they would have to do was take over one of your people, assume their role in the organization, and proceed to snap up all the info that was available to them—and that was assuming that they couldn’t read their victim’s memories upon possession, in which case they wouldn’t even have to go through the trouble. If anything, the fact that Grotesqua had described finding Haneko as “a pain” was an incredible compliment toward Hatsuhiko’s ability to obfuscate sensitive information, considering just how capable Grotesqua seemed to be.

That’s not fair... That’s not fair at all! thought Haneko, her expression twisting into a grief-stricken grimace. *Her ability’s like mine, but more amazing in every single way... It makes mine totally obsolete in comparison!*

Haneko had thought she was different. She’d thought she was unique. Her power was the one thing about herself that she saw as having merit—the one thing she could take a degree of pride in and feel superior toward others thanks

to. It was her pillar of emotional support, and she cared about it so much that she'd spent ages racking her mind for a name that felt *just* right to give it. Now, however, that pillar of support seemed so terribly unstable it could crumble at any second.

"So, how're we gonna do this, Mysteria? How 'bout I let you do the deed and claim the credit this time around? Use that nasty power of yours to kill the crap outta her, and your precious little Akutagawa might even give you a thank-you smooch!"

"Wh-What?! I'd never dare to presume... B-But, y-yes, if you insist! I must agree, finishing her with my power *would* probably be for the best. *Yours* is a little too flashy for this venue, most likely."

Once again, her foes' conversation plunged Haneko into still deeper depths of despair. *Her personalities all have their own individual powers?* she realized, horrified to find that her power didn't even come *close* to standing on the same level as her foe's. Her ability to implant alternate personalities into her opponents' minds didn't have any direct combat capabilities whatsoever—theirs was in an entirely different dimension compared to hers.

"Hee... Hee hee... Hee hee..."

At that point, all Haneko could do was laugh. She didn't know what name to call the fragmented girl who stood in multiple forms before her, but one way or another, that girl had torn the idea that Haneko was special—the idea she'd been clinging to so desperately—to shreds.

"Oh, whoopsies! Did we already break her? Hya ha, that's *hilarious*! Could she *be* any more of a chump?! Eh, might as well take the chance to mess with her a little before—" Grotesqua began...but then, in a split second, her leering smile vanished. She spun about on the spot, and Mysteria did likewise, ignoring Haneko's slumped form entirely as they looked to the door.

"Hya ha ha... Well, *this* is rare! Not every day *you* come out to play," said Grotesqua.

"Indeed," Mysteria agreed. "In fact, I'm not even certain how long it's been since the last time."

The two of them watched intently as a girl walked into the room. Her hair was a dazzling shade of golden blonde, and her eyes were a vivid blue. She was wearing an eye-catchingly pink nurse's uniform, and she had the jacket from an also-pink tracksuit draped over her shoulders. Her features still betrayed distinct traces of her youth, but her expression could only be described as an archaic smile. It was a blank smile that carried no emotion—a gentle curve of the lips that *resembled* a smile more than it embodied one.

"I assume that your presence here means what I think it means?" asked Mysteria.

"Hya ha ha! Can't say I think Lil Miss Boring here's worth it, if you ask me," commented Grotesqua.

And then, without any further preamble, Mysteria and Grotesqua just...vanished. One moment they were there, and the next—without a trace of protest or resistance, as if it was perfectly natural—they were gone. The unconscious bodies of Hazuki and Hanji slumped to the carpeted floor, and the woman in the nurse uniform strolled past them without sparing them a glance, smiling like a broken puppet as she crouched down beside Haneko and gently brushed her cheeks with her fingertips.

"It's a shame," said the girl with the archaic smile. Her voice itself sounded perfectly unremarkable for a middle-school-aged girl, but something about its tone carried a profound, mystical air. "We've met as enemies, which means I'm going to have to kill you. Before I do, however...would you care to speak with me for a moment? I would like to impart meaning to this meeting of ours. I would speak with you, connect with you, and learn of you as a person—and, in doing so, bring another mind into being within me."

Without changing her tone or turning away, the girl spoke on—but it seemed clear she was speaking to herself now rather than Haneko.

"This War nears its climax...and the time has come for me to make my move. If I am to bring to light all that has been consigned to oblivion, then my only choice is to bring the War to a close," the girl said, still wearing that hollow smile.

Her name was Yusano Genre. All the individuals, all the characters that

dwelled within her—Fantasia, Grotesqua, Mysteria, and many others—were mere aspects of her, the core personality.

The jagged edge of a chipped and pitted knife tore through the air in a sweeping horizontal slash that Habikino Hatsuhiko just barely managed to backstep away from at the last second. The blade had only scratched him—far from a lethal wound, despite the blood trickling down his chest. Or at least, the wound *wasn't* lethal, not until Shuugo invoked his power.

Zigzag Jigsaw came into effect, and the fragment of metal that had been left in Hatsuhiko's body sprang to life, burrowing its way into his blood vessels. It reached his heart in moments, then went on a savage rampage, tearing his most vital of organs to shreds—the lethal consequence of merely being grazed by Shuugo's attacks. Hatsuhiko let out a pained groan as he collapsed to the floor, then vanished into thin air. That particular duplicate had exceeded its damage threshold.

"That makes sixty," Shuugo muttered to himself with a scornful chuckle. He was on the sixth floor of Hatsuhiko's high-rise, and paused for a moment to scratch "60" into a nearby wall with his knife.

No sooner had he finished than one of the three Habikino Hatsuhikos still standing in front of him shook his head. "I know that knife of yours is already a wreck, but you really should try to take better care of it anyway," he sighed.

"I gotta write my kill count down somehow. Otherwise I'll forget how many of you bugs I've squished so far," Shuugo shot back. His attitude was as inflammatory as ever, but he was panting conspicuously as well. That was no surprise, really—he'd just fought sixty people in a row.

"In any case, I'm astonished," said one of the Hatsuhikos. "I thought you were an idiot when you charged in here on your own, but lo and behold, you've actually managed to make it past the halfway point. It'd be one thing if you had a long-ranged power suited to taking on groups, like Happa's, but you've been fighting—and *winning*—almost exclusively in hand-to-hand combat. I'm genuinely impressed by your strength and fortitude, I have to say. However...it's not hard to tell that fatigue is taking its toll on you."

“Shaddup. I’m just getting warmed up,” Shuugo spat, then dashed forward, closing in on the three Hatsuhikos in the blink of an eye.

It seemed that Hatsuhiko had undergone some basic martial arts training, and the copies made an effort to resist, but their capabilities paled in comparison to Shuugo’s brute strength and combat instincts. He ran one copy through with his knife, sent another crashing down the nearby staircase to the floor below with a well-aimed shoulder throw, then skimmed the third with his knife once more, dealing the finishing blow by way of his power. All three copies vanished moments later.

“That makes sixty-three,” Shuugo muttered as he caught his breath, then carved the new number into the wall.

According to the information Natsu Aki had obtained with her power, the maximum number of clones that *One Hundred and One Wolfies* could create was one hundred and twenty-five. Counting the original, that meant that Shuugo had one hundred and twenty-six Habikino Hatsuhikos in total to deal with, meaning that he’d just passed the halfway mark in a literal sense.

That wasn’t all that Aki had told him, of course. *“I guess the most important takeaway’s that the number of copies he can make’s, like, inversely proportional to how far away he is? So if there’s only one or two of him, they can operate from a couple dozen kilometers away, no sweat, but if he brings out all hundred and twenty-five, that means they have to be within a radius of two hundred meters from him, maximum.”*

From that piece of information, along with the fact that Hatsuhiko had been able to send forth so many copies of himself presently, Shuugo could extrapolate that the original was definitely close at hand. After all, when Shuugo had first stormed into the otherwise abandoned high-rise, dozens of Hatsuhikos had appeared to attack en masse, all at once. There was no doubt left that the real Hatsuhiko was somewhere in the building, and that knowledge was all Shuugo needed to keep himself fighting to the end.

“Graaaah!” Shuugo roared as he charged up toward the next floor. Four Hatsuhikos leaped out in front of him, weapons at the ready, but Shuugo dealt with them in the blink of an eye through keen knife work and overwhelming

brawling ability.

Even if tens or hundreds of foes came at Shuugo at once, there were only so many who could actually engage in close combat with him at a time. That fact was his saving grace. A horde of Hatsuhikos was ready to bar his path, but he dealt with them a handful at a time, soon cutting down his seventieth challenger, followed shortly by his eightieth. His movements grew duller as his stamina depleted, however, and he'd taken a number of scrapes and flesh wounds over the course of the drawn-out battle...but lessened or not, his strength was still overwhelming.

By the time Shuugo reached the ninetieth Hatsuhiko, he was a worn-out mess—and ten foes after that...

“Congratulations! You’ve found the real me.”

...the hundred and first Hatsuhiko appeared, shamelessly declaring itself to be the real deal. Shuugo cut it down without so much as pausing, and that self-proclaimed original, of course, disappeared like all the other copies.

Now, Shuugo paused to catch his breath. “That makes...a hundred ‘n’ one,” he said to himself. He had reached the building’s tenth floor, which was largely occupied by a banquet hall. A massive window took up one of the room’s walls, offering an unimpeded view of the surrounding cityscape. Shuugo leaned on the room’s doorway, covered in wounds and gasping for breath, then staggered over to a nearby wall and carved “101” into it with his knife.

“Man...really makes you think,” Shuugo muttered between gasps. “There’s that one game series where Warring States-era generals or whatever beat down mountains of random trash soldiers, and it’s supposed to be all fun and exhilarating and shit...but it turns out taking down an army of small fry in real life’s just a goddamn drag. I sure as hell don’t feel exhilarated, anyway.”

“Well, that was a letdown. I went out of my way to tell Akutagawa my power’s name in the hopes it would make you assume my hundred and first copy was the final one, but I suppose that was a waste of effort. It would’ve been so funny too,” said yet another Hatsuhiko, who appeared out of nowhere toward the far end of the banquet hall.

“What sorta dumbass would fall for a stupid trap like that?” growled Shuugo.

“Ha ha ha! It *was* rather stupid, I’ll admit, but you’d be surprised by how many people get taken in by that sort of thing. My understanding is that giving your power a deceptive name is something of a taboo relative to battle manga standards,” said Hatsuhiko. He seemed remarkably calm and composed for a man who’d already had a hundred of his duplicates get defeated. “To be completely honest, my actual maximum number of copies is one hundred and twenty-five. In other words, there are twenty-four more of me somewhere in this building, counting the original.”

“Twenty-four, huh?” Shuugo muttered. He knew from Aki’s report that Hatsuhiko was telling the truth this time, and he took a deep breath before raising his knife and assuming a fighting stance. “Yeah, I can handle that. Looks like my playthrough of this shitty-ass *Samurai Warriors* knockoff is finally gonna be over soon.”

Shuugo could taste his imminent victory, and a spark of vitality returned to his eyes...but it didn’t last for long.

“Heh... Heh heh... Ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Before Shuugo could make his move, the Hatsuhiko clone in front of him burst out in a fit of cackling, irrepressible laughter. Shuugo furrowed his brow in confusion, but Hatsuhiko just kept laughing. You’d think he’d just heard the funniest joke he’d ever been told.

“Ha ha ha ha ha, haaa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ahh... I can’t... I just couldn’t hold it in. I was planning on dragging this out at least a *little* longer before dropping the big twist, but...I just couldn’t stop myself from cracking up! It’s just so *comical*, I can’t take it...”

“The hell’re you talking about?”

“You see, Toki Shuugo,” said Hatsuhiko, tears pooling in the corners of his eyes from the sheer force of his laughing fit, “you’ve been confronting my power head-on with the purest and simplest of tactics imaginable. I fielded an army, attempting to overwhelm you with sheer numbers, and you broke through with nothing more than a single knife to your name. Your ability to bring down a hundred men single-handedly is truly something to admire...but I’m sorry to inform you that it was all *completely pointless*.”

Shuugo paused, scowled...then noticed that something was wrong. The two of them, he realized, were not alone. His eyes were still locked on the Hatsuhiko before him, but he realized he could hear footsteps, breathing, clothes rustling—clear and undeniable traces of an incredible number of people who had not been in the room moments before, but were certainly there now.

“Wha—?!” Shuugo gasped as his mind caught up with reality.

Before he even realized what was happening, he had been surrounded by Hatsuhiko clones. In fact, “surrounded” failed to do the scale of the scene justice. It would be more accurate to say that the area around him had been inundated with Hatsuhikos. The banquet hall was so packed with identical copies of the same suit-clad man that they spilled out into the elevator, the escalator, and even the fire escape. This wasn’t in the realm of ten or a few dozen copies. Even at just a glance, Shuugo could tell there were over a hundred of them.

“What the hell...? I thought you only had twenty-four left,” said Shuugo.

“Isn’t it obvious? I brought them back,” said Hatsuhiko, sounding thoroughly amused by Shuugo’s bewilderment. “I wasn’t lying when I told you my limit, for the record. I’m genuinely only capable of bringing out one hundred and twenty-five copies of myself, and once they take a certain amount of damage, they disappear...but I never said that I couldn’t just make them again right after, did I?”

Shuugo drew in a sharp breath, and Hatsuhiko grinned.

“No, I didn’t—you just *assumed* that if you defeated all of my copies, everything would work out, as if it were a matter of course. In truth, though, I can revive my copies whenever I wish. So long as the real me is safe, I can *always* have one hundred and twenty-five of me ready and fighting fit.”

“...”

“Heh heh, ha ha ha ha ha ha! You were fighting so *heroically* I couldn’t stop myself from playing along, but it was all perfectly pointless from the start,” said Hatsuhiko with a scornful smile packed full of perfectly genuine contempt.

Shuugo stood there stock-still. He’d put his life on the line, fighting and

defeating a hundred men in sequence, only for all of them to be brought back anew. It was like battling the final boss in an RPG down to the last sliver of its health bar only for it to pull some technique from out of nowhere that healed it back up to full. All of Shuugo's efforts, all of his resolve, had been rendered meaningless.

"God *dammit*!" Shuugo shouted as he lunged for the Hatsuhiko before him—but before he could make contact, one of the other Hatsuhikos to his side brought a police baton down on his arm. The attack came from Shuugo's blind spot, and he was unable to pull back in time. The baton scored a clean hit on his forearm, with an impact great enough to make him drop his jackknife.

"Ugh!" Shuugo grunted.

"You're slowing down," said Hatsuhiko, moments before every one of him descended upon Shuugo like a human avalanche, tackling their prey in unison.

Shuugo managed to beat back a number of the Hatsuhikos with his fists alone, but he was as outnumbered as he'd ever been, and before long, his foes had overpowered and immobilized him. Soon enough, he had Hatsuhikos holding on to each of his limbs, keeping him standing up like a prisoner awaiting a crucifixion.

"Without this knife, you're powerless," Hatsuhiko said as he scooped Shuugo's jackknife up off the ground. "The power to leave a fragment of metal in your enemy's body, transforming a scratch into a fatal wound... It's hardly the most frightening power in terms of scale, but in single combat, it really is quite terrifying," he droned in a haughty, condescending tone as he strolled up to Shuugo, then drove his fist into his captive's gut without hesitation.

Shuugo let out a spluttering gasp as pain shot through his torso. The other Hatsuhikos were still holding him upright, so he couldn't even crumple over in agony.

"Phew! Now *those* are some impressive abs! I think that hurt my fist almost as much as it hurt you! Goes to show that if you want to hurt someone, you really ought to use a weapon," Hatsuhiko declared, flapping his wrist like his hand was still smarting. Meanwhile, a cluster of other Hatsuhikos carrying batons, stun guns, and the like began to approach. "Killing you would be easy, but it'd also

be a waste. This seems like the perfect chance to practice a few torture techniques. I always have my people take care of this sort of work for me, but you never know—maybe a time will come when I’m forced by circumstance to handle it myself. Hmm...how to start? Maybe I’ll use this knife of yours to peel your fingernails off, one by one. How does that sound?”

Shuugo didn’t say a word.

“Toki Shuugo,” said Hatsuhiko, the constructed smile vanishing from his face and leaving behind a severe frown as he brandished the knife. “I’m going to give you one last chance. Will you join me? Our numbers have considerably diminished, and I have you to blame for that. I’ll need to replenish my stock of capable fighters if I want to breeze through the rest of the War, and you’re a prime candidate.”

It seemed that to Hatsuhiko, gaining and losing allies was purely transactional. He felt no resistance to bringing people aboard or letting them go, and in fact, it seemed very likely that Hearts only existed as an organization thanks to what effectively amounted to him buying one ally after another. In his eyes, that’s all allies were: assets to be bought, sold, and disposed of. So long as he stood at the head of his organization, he couldn’t have cared less who was doing his dirty work.

“Akutagawa was one thing... I just couldn’t stomach that condescending, impertinent little brat’s attitude on a physiological level. You, however, I would welcome with open arms. I’m certain we could do great things together,” said Hatsuhiko. His words were so perfectly flimsy and weightless, it wasn’t even worth considering the possibility that he truly meant them. “Oh, and by the way—my conditions for you joining my organization haven’t changed. If you carry out the task I ask of you, I give you my word that I’ll pay you six million yen as a reward and formally welcome you into Hearts. All you have to do...is kill Kiryuu Hajime.”

It really was the exact same offer he’d proposed when he and Shuugo had first met. That being said, while the offer was the same, the circumstances in which it was being made were drastically different. This time, Shuugo had been robbed of his weapon, immobilized, and was faced with a one-versus-one-hundred battle even if he managed to overcome the former two obstacles. This

wasn't so much a solicitation as it was outright coercion. If Shuugo refused, he would almost certainly be killed—or perhaps worse. The situation could hardly have looked more grim...

“Heh... Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

...and yet, Shuugo laughed. He let out a sneering, bellowing laugh, as if to mock Hatsuhiko from the bottom of his heart.

“What’s so funny?” asked Hatsuhiko.

“You’re just so damn *desperate*, that’s all,” Shuugo said with a grin. “You’re obsessed with our boss, you know that? Just how desperate are you to watch Kiryuu Hajime get betrayed by his allies and fall into despair?”

This time, it was Hatsuhiko’s turn to clam up.

“I did some research on you, y’know?” Shuugo continued. “Seems you’re a pretty famous guy. The young, handsome prodigy making waves in the business world, or whatever. You’ve been making a killing out there, huh? Heard you’ve got a Harley and a Lamborghini and shit—always wanted to drive one of those, myself. I’m actually jealous. You’re one hell of a success story...but that just makes it weirder. Why’s a guy who everyone and their mother’s jealous of so damn fixated on a single unemployed dumbass? How am I supposed to *not* laugh about that? Heh heh, ha ha ha ha— Ugh!”

Shuugo’s laughter was cut off as one of the Hatsuhikos slammed its fist into the side of his face.

“Shut up,” said Hatsuhiko, his tone low and unnaturally muted. The casual smile he’d had his clones preserve throughout the encounter had vanished. Now, they looked *furious*. Well over a hundred enraged glares pierced through Shuugo from all sides while the Hatsuhiko in front of him reached out, grabbed him by the neck, and squeezed.

“Agh...”

“Yes...that’s correct. You’re right in every way. I really am...*fixated* on Kiryuu Hajime. I joined this pointless excuse of a War just for him. I knew how seriously he was taking it, so I decided to use it as an opportunity to thoroughly *crush* him. By the time I’m finished, he’ll be kneeling before me, begging me for

mercy. That's the only way I'll be satisfied," said Hatsuhiko. His voice was beginning to tremble with rage. "That man...*laughed* at me! With one look, he saw through me—he *looked down at* me—and he *laughed*. I control money, I control people, and *everything* around me is mine to do what I want with...yet he called me a *slave* to money!"

Hatsuhiko's whole persona—the smiling, pleasant, and personable facade he normally put on—had vanished. It was like he'd peeled off a mask, laying bare his true self, a man full of pride and self-important vanity.

"Ever since then...ever since the day he laughed at me...I've never felt satisfied. That mocking laughter made it seem like everything I've done and everything I *am* were sheer folly, and it's been echoing in my mind ever since. No matter how much money I made, no matter how much I achieved, it was always still there!" he rambled, his eyes terribly bloodshot as he exposed the deepest workings of his inner self. His uncontrollable rage and boundless ego were dominating him, driving him to the brink of madness. "'A slave to money'? Like *hell* I am! What about me looks like a slave?! *I'm* the one who uses people! *I'm* one of the precious few who exploits and dominates this world for all it's worth! Money, people, *everything*—I use them all!"

"Heh... Bullshit," spat Shuugo. Hatsuhiko's viselike grip on his neck did nothing to stop him from being as openly defiant as ever. "So, what, one little stain on your record makes you completely lose it? You've got one hell of a fragile ego, Mister Elite."

Hatsuhiko froze...then let Shuugo go. A moment later, he raised Shuugo's own knife, holding it in front of Shuugo's eye.

"I've had enough of this. You've made it very clear that you have no interest in obeying me, so all that's left is for me to make good on my word and get to the torturing," Hatsuhiko said as he brought the knife closer and closer to Shuugo's eye. "I'll be keeping you alive, for the time being. This is the Spirit War, after all, and killing you would just send you back to your ordinary life. I'm going to take my time and make you truly regret defying me—and needless to say, I won't be letting you drop out by your own will until I'm satisfied."

At that, one of the other Hatsuhikos stepped forward with a leather gag in his

hands.

“I imagine you’re already aware, but dropping out of the War requires you to state your intention to retire out loud. The spirits won’t accept anything less. In other words, if you can’t talk, you have nowhere to run. Now then, Shuugo—be a good torture dummy, if you’d please.”

Hatsuhiko copies carrying all sorts of weapons and tools closed in on Shuugo. Just before the one with the gag sealed off his ability to drop out of the War, though, Shuugo managed to say one last thing.

“Great... It’s finally over,” he muttered, then he let out a long, heavy sigh. Oddly enough, it seemed like a fulfilled sigh—as if he’d just accomplished something major.

“It’s over...?” Hatsuhiko repeated quizzically.

“Yeah. It’s all over now.”

“Hmph. You seem rather unconcerned, all things considered. Is keeping up a calm front in the face of a truly pathetic defeat your way of preserving your pride, perhaps?”

“Oh don’t get me wrong. *I* didn’t lose. It’s not over for *me*,” said Shuugo with a dauntless grin. “*You’re* the one who’s finished.”

Hatsuhiko furrowed his brow...and in the next instant, a *crack* rang out and the entire floor shuddered intensely.

“What the—?! Wh-What’s going on...? An earthquake?!” Hatsuhiko shouted.

The shudders came once more, and the whole floor felt like it was swaying violently. It wasn’t an earthquake, though—the rumbling sensation was too irregular for that, and more importantly, too intense. Hatsuhiko’s high-rise had been built to be incredibly earthquake-resistant, and a typical quake could never have shaken it to this extent.

Hatsuhikos all throughout the room began to lose their balance and collapse to the floor. The shuddering wasn’t abating—in fact, it was growing more and more violent, a chorus of rampant destruction beginning to echo throughout the chamber.

“Wh-What the hell is happening?!” one of the Hatsuhikos muttered before turning to glare at Shuugo. Enough of the Hatsuhikos who had been holding him in place had fallen to the ground that he could easily shake the rest free...and a spiteful, sardonic grin spread across his face.

“*You... What did you do?!*” Hatsuhiko shouted.

“*Zigzag Jigsaw,*” said Shuugo. For once, he sounded almost proud to declare the name his organization’s leader had given his power. “You’ve seen it enough to get how it works—I leave a piece of my knife in whoever I cut, and that piece travels to their core and destroys them. In other words, when I cut a person—no matter where the cut is—the fragment I leave in them will tear their heart to shreds.”

And so, a flesh wound would become fatal. The tiniest of injuries ended in the victim being torn apart from the very core of their being.

“But, y’know...I never said I could *only* use it on people, did I?”

Hatsuhiko gaped at Shuugo, his eyes widening in sudden realization. “Y-You’re not saying...you couldn’t! The *whole* building—”

“Yeah, you’ve got yourself a big-ass place here. Took a lot of time, and a lot of effort.”

Shuugo had known from the very start that defeating all of Hatsuhiko’s duplicates was pointless. His desperate battle against them had been for the sake of buying time, and whenever he’d had the opportunity, he’d paused to carve a number into the walls...each time leaving a fragment of his knife behind in the building itself. Those fragments had traveled through the structure’s interior, seeking out the structural supports that served as its core, and carved them to pieces.

A tremendous crash rang out, and the massive wall-sized window shattered. Countless cracks spiderwebbed their way across the walls and floor.

“There’s no way to tell the difference between your copies and the real you, and I doubt you’d ever show your real self to us to begin with...so I decided, fuck it, might as well just bring the whole place down with you in it,” said Shuugo.

Over a hundred Hatsuhiko duplicates' faces spasmed with fear and astonishment. "So then...you're planning on a murder-suicide? You'll sacrifice yourself to bring me down with you?" said one of them.

"Hah! Dunno about that," said Shuugo. "You'd be surprised how good my luck can be when the chips are down. Who knows if a collapsing building's enough to kill me off for good?"

It was an all-or-nothing gambit that Shuugo had put his life on the line to pull off. The man who had spent so long fighting only when he was told to, abandoning all pretense of thought and choice, had taken the information that his allies had given him, racked his mind, worked out a plan, then steeled his resolve and chosen to go through with it by his own will and on his own terms.

"I don't have what it takes to be a leader. I gave it some real thought, and I figured out that if I'm not gonna be a mercenary, then the best I can expect is to end up as a sacrificial pawn, a beaten-down loser, or something along those lines. And so," said Shuugo, his voice carrying a note of self-deprecation along with a very clear sense of willpower, "I decided to throw my everything into a stupid-ass suicide rush and kick the shit outta you in style. I'm the assault leader of *Fallen Black*, and I'm sure as hell gonna act like it."

"Why, you miserable— You're just a tool! How *dare* you!" Hatsuhiko shouted. His face contorted with fury as he glared at Shuugo, and several of him charged forward, weapons held at the ready...but before they could reach him, the floor began to crumble away. A massive fissure-like crack opened up right in front of Shuugo, and some of the duplicates were unable to stop in time, plunging into the abyss.

The building's collapse was accelerating rapidly. The chandelier fell from the ceiling, crushing over a dozen duplicates with its massive weight. In no time at all, the hundred-plus Hatsuhikos had been cut down to fewer than half their original number.

"No..." said one.

"G-G-Gaaaah!" wailed another.

"Dammit! God *dammit*!" shouted a third. One by one, they vanished into nothingness.

“Th-This isn’t happening... How...? If I lose here...then how will I ever bring Kiryuu Hajime to heel?” yet another Hatsuhiko muttered. “There’s no point. If I can’t make him submit through this War—through supernatural battles—then it’s all just pointless...”

In that moment—in the merest of instants before the building collapsed, with his life dangling by a thread—the words that spilled from Habikino Hatsuhiko’s mouth were once again driven by his obsessive fixation on Kiryuu Hajime. His resentful murmur, however, had no hope of drowning out the dreadful cacophony of devastation that still carried on around him. The vast majority of his duplicates had been obliterated, and at some point along the way, Toki Shuugo had vanished as well. In the end, only a single duplicate was left alone in the banquet hall.

“It’s over? Without me ever even seeing him face-to-face...? I’m going to be erased by his underling?” Hatsuhiko whispered. He had finally moved past anger and resentment. Now, his expression was one of exhaustion and grim acceptance of the tragedy he’d found himself in. “I may have brought this upon myself, but still...what a disappointing ending.”

The world collapsed around Hatsuhiko, crumbling to dust. The building he had bought to ensure he would never forget the grudge he held against Kiryuu Hajime, the ever-present embodiment of his rage and humiliation, was falling to pieces. The banquet hall was already all but unrecognizable, and as Hatsuhiko stared out across it, he saw the strangest thing—the illusory outline of a man with mismatched eyes and a long black coat, standing in the middle of the chamber. There he was, just like three years ago, laughing that awful laugh that Hatsuhiko would never—*could* never—forget.

“Please... Tell me, Kiryuu Hajime...where did I go wrong? What was it that made me a slave to money? Tell me, please.”

Those words, full of grief and sorrow, were the last Hatsuhiko spoke before the ceiling caved in, crushing his final duplicate. The whole building followed suit moments later, collapsing in upon itself with a thunderous roar and leaving nothing but a billowing cloud of dust in its place. The real Habikino Hatsuhiko, hidden away in a secret chamber so thoroughly obscured it wasn’t present on any of the building’s blueprints, was caught up in the collapse and perished. His

death was quick, quiet, and observed by no one.

Shuugo opened his eyes to find a bright blue sky stretching out above him.

“Guess I survived, huh?” he muttered to himself as he sat up. He was completely surrounded by the wreckage of Hatsuhiko’s high-rise. It was a ghastly sight, to say the least—almost like the area had been caught up in a horrific natural disaster.

Shuugo took a moment to inspect himself. He still felt all the injuries and fatigue he’d sustained over the course of his battle, but that aside, nothing seemed to be conspicuously wrong with him. He’d been prepared to die to carry out his plan, but when all was said and done, it seemed he’d escaped more or less unharmed.

“Guess my luck might be even better than I gave myself credit for, huh?”

“...Luck had nothing to do with this.”

A listless voice rang out behind Shuugo, who turned to find Akutagawa Yanagi walking toward him, taking care to avoid the mountains of rubble in the area.

“I’m the only reason you’re still alive,” Yanagi added.

Shuugo glanced around again, now realizing that within a single space in the disaster zone of shattered concrete and twisted steel girders—a circular zone centered around him—all signs of devastation were absent. In fact, he was sitting upon a perfectly intact section of the building’s floor. It was like the rubble had gone out of its way to dodge him as it’d plummeted to the ground...or rather, like the space he occupied had slipped into a gap in the building’s collapse.

“All thanks to you, huh?” Shuugo grunted.

“If you’re grateful, then you might as well go with a more formal thank-you,” said Yanagi.

“Sorry, but I just got done having this whole conversation ’bout how you don’t have to say thanks to your teammates.”

“Talk about being a contrarian... But whatever, I guess. Not like your thanks

would earn me a single yen.”

“Hah! Now that’s something—not gonna go on a screed about how we’re not teammates this time?”

Yanagi fell into silence. Meanwhile, Shuugo shoved himself to his feet and glanced around the area.

“So, did he bite it or what?” asked Shuugo.

“Yeah,” said Yanagi. “I found his body a ways over there, crushed by a steel beam. He disappeared right away, though, so he might already be alive again somewhere...”

“Nice. How’d things go on your end, while we’re at it?”

“I crushed Hachisuka Happa, then took out the rest of their combat-capable Players while I was at it. Fantasia’s other personalities dealt with Hamai Haneko as well, apparently... Thanks to that, the guy in my head’s gone for good.”

“Figure that means Fantasia’s not in your head anymore either?”

“Yeah... She already went back to her own body.”

“That girl’s power’s never made a goddamn lick of sense, I swear. Putting her other personalities in people’s bad enough, but sending the original out like that’s just nuts.”

“Fantasia’s not the original, apparently. She’s just the most sociable of them, so she takes control the most often... The core personality’s someone else. I still haven’t seen her, though.”

“Where’d you learn all this crap?”

“The intellectual personality with the glasses—Mysteria—told me about it all...no clue why, though. She pretty much always swaps in when Fantasia and I are alone in the hideout together.”

“She have a thing for you, or what?”

“I seriously doubt it. Mysteria’s mental age is twenty-four, apparently.”

Shuugo and Yanagi started making their way across the rubble pile as they chatted with each other. Although a whole high-rise had collapsed in on itself,

there was no sign of police or firefighters moving in on the scene, nor did the people walking past the wreckage take any notice. The spirits who had been monitoring the battle had kept things nice and convenient—for themselves, that is—by keeping the whole affair under wraps. Just like all battles between Players, it had been concealed from the eyes of human society.

Before long the building itself would either return to its normal, undamaged state, or otherwise be made to have never existed in the first place. How exactly it was processed would depend on which spirit ended up taking on the task, but one way or another, the War was over for the faction that had occupied it. Hearts was no longer a functional organization. With Habikino Hatsuhiko—the man who had thrown his fortune into founding the faction—gone, it could no longer carry on. All of its prominent officers had been dispatched, and while some of its lower-ranking members likely remained in the War, they were very unlikely to take action with the source of their rewards no longer in the picture.

The battle that day had begun thanks to Toki Shuugo's and Akutagawa Yanagi's choices...and at that moment, it had finally drawn to a close.

"Guess it's over, huh?"

"...It certainly is."

"Wrong. This is where it all begins."

It came out of nowhere. A line rang out that was perfectly incoherent, yet at the same time felt somehow profound—a line that one could only assume was intended exclusively to contradict the previous speaker—turning the conclusive air that the two young men had taken a moment to share on its head.

"Bwa ha ha!"

His silver hair glimmered in the sunlight. His color contacts gave his eyes a sharp, distinct contrast with each other. His black coat made you feel like you were boiling alive just *looking* at it. His round, slightly offset sunglasses served no perceivable purpose whatsoever.

"Hey there, *Zigzag Jigsaw* and *Dead Space*," said Kiryuu Hajime, his jet-black coat trailing dramatically behind him—thanks almost certainly to his gravity

manipulation, considering it was a perfectly windless day—as he strolled toward Shuugo and Yanagi. “You’ve been off on one hell of an adventure, haven’t you? Didn’t ask for my permission either.”

Kiryuu tossed the knife he was carrying—the one that Hatsuhiko had claimed during the battle in the high-rise—toward Shuugo. Tossing a bladed weapon to someone was an incredibly dangerous thing to do no matter how you sliced it, but Shuugo caught it with a casual ease, then glared at the man who’d thrown it.

“What’re you here for?” Shuugo grumbled.

“My subordinates were fighting for their lives! What sorta boss would I be if I didn’t make an appearance?” said Kiryuu.

An intense air of fatigue came over Shuugo and Yanagi. It was strange—nothing about what Kiryuu said had been *wrong*, per se, but hearing it from him was intensely irritating.

“But, anyway,” said Kiryuu, “you guys really went out and crushed an enemy organization for me, even though I never ordered it? Bwa ha ha! Looks like you’re finally starting to understand what it means to be my subordinate!”

The distaste on Shuugo’s and Yanagi’s faces slowly turned into something closer to a quiet, murderous rage. The battles they’d just been through had made both of them far, *far* too exhausted to put up with Kiryuu’s obnoxious persona.

Yanagi hadn’t been injured, at the very least, so he was able to suppress the impulse to just murder his stupid boss and be done with it for long enough to muster up a reply. “By the way,” he said, “you knew Hearts’s boss, didn’t you?”

“Nope. Never met the guy,” Kiryuu said indifferently. Yanagi’s and Shuugo’s eyes widened ever so slightly.

“You haven’t...? How does that work?” asked Yanagi.

“Why *wouldn’t* it work? I just don’t know the guy. I know that Hearts’s boss is some dude named Habikino Hatsuhiko, but that aside, no clue what his deal is.”

“Well...*he* certainly knew *you*,” said Yanagi. “Apparently, he met you

sometime in the past and had a major grudge. He was obsessed.”

“Said something about you calling him ‘a slave to money,’” added Shuugo. “Guess he took it *really* personally. Guy had a hell of an axe to grind.”

Kiryuu crossed his arms and closed his eyes. For a few seconds he stood there, searching his memories.

“Oh...*right*, I remember now. *Him*,” Kiryuu finally said. “Yeah, right after I got into college I stopped by a club event, and he was the president of the club that organized it. Totally slipped my mind till just now, but when you put it that way, I’m pretty sure this was actually the building that party happened at.”

Kiryuu glanced upward at where the high-rise would have been, if it had still been standing. “It was one of those bougie-ass parties that elites throw, y’know? Good food, crazy awesome scenery...you’d have to be loaded to throw an event like that,” he explained in a plain, simple tone. “Anyway, I ended up hearing that this president guy was basically the same age as me, but he was some sorta genius when it came to making money...so I think I got kinda pissed, said some random bullshit, and went home, probably.”

Shuugo and Yanagi gaped.

“‘A slave to money’...? Did I actually say that...? I mostly just remember being focused on figuring out how to get away with smuggling food out. Got caught in the end, though.”

Kiryuu sounded perfectly disinterested in his own story, while Shuugo and Yanagi were speechless. It was very literally a jaw-dropping revelation. The two of them had caught a glimpse of Hatsuhiko’s obsessive drive for vengeance—despite his having had the sort of lifestyle that would make just about anyone jealous, he simply hadn’t been able to forget Kiryuu’s scornful laughter, reliving the humiliation of that night over and over again on a daily basis. And yet, the simple truth of the matter was that Kiryuu had only laughed at him because he was being a sore loser. “A slave to money,” the words Hatsuhiko had become so fixated on, certain as he was that they were a savage repudiation of his very way of life, had in truth been completely meaningless.

“Heh. Ha ha ha ha!”

“Hah... Ha ha ha!”

Before they knew it, Shuugo and Yanagi had both cracked up. The whole scenario was so purely absurd, they just couldn't help it. Together, a boy with a perpetually irritated scowl and a boy with a perpetually gloomy frown clutched at their sides and laughed themselves to tears.

At the end of the day, Toki Shuugo and Akutagawa Yanagi hadn't changed at all. The delinquent remained a delinquent, and the shut-in remained a shut-in. They were still in their teens, yes, but they'd also been around the block in their own sort of way. They'd each developed their own sense of values and their own outlook toward life, and it would take something truly extraordinary to convince either of them to change those perspectives.

Deep-seated habits just aren't that easy to amend. The patterns of thought that made Shuugo into a directionless mercenary were deeply ingrained into his mind, and Yanagi was entirely unable to abandon his rationalistic manner of approaching life. They hadn't changed, and the manner in which they approached the decisions they faced hadn't changed either. People simply didn't change that easily.

And yet...if a lack of meaning could be meaningful in and of itself—if a lack of a choice could be a decision in and of itself—then perhaps a lack of change could, in its own sort of way, be an instance of transformation and an indication of development.

Epilogue

Now—let us conclude the beginning of the end.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

Don't ask me to explain how, but apparently, at some point while I wasn't looking, *Fallen Black* had triumphed in our war against Hearts.

When Leatia had told me about our victory, I'd thought, *Oh, that's nice! Toki and Akutagawa must've pulled it off for us. Guess they dug their heels in, manned up, and did what they do best. Heh heh heh—seems my little pep talk was just what they needed!* I'd felt pretty good about myself for a moment, but once I asked for a little more in the way of details, I'd learned that Aki and Fan had apparently participated too.

Seriously, what on earth happened? Hmm... Well, whatever. A victory's a victory, I guess.

In any case, that's how a conflict that'd started without my knowledge ended before I'd even realized it.

A few days later, I found myself driving my car—which, by the way, a certain someone had unilaterally named the White Crow—on a local highway. The sun had already set, and what I could see of the summer sky through the streetlights above was riddled with stars. Hajime was riding shotgun, and Umeko was sitting in the back seat. Our destination: the local water park. That said, the three of us weren't going there to ride the water slides. No, we were picking someone up: the thirteenth wing of *Fallen Black*.

He was our organization's secret member and sole nonparticipant in the War, the bearer of the title *Innocent Onlooker* (no power included): Sagami Shizumu. He'd missed the last bus home from the water park, so we'd come running to pick him up. From what I'd heard, Sagami had spent the whole day tailing and

surveilling a high school girl who'd gone to the park on a date with her unrequited crush...and, well, all I could think was that he was clearly just as much of a revolting creeper as he'd been the last time I'd met him.

To be completely honest, I was so deeply, viscerally repulsed by Sagami that I didn't want to get *anywhere* near him, but Hajime didn't have a driver's license, so taking the car out meant that my presence was a necessity. I would've felt bad about leaving Umeko behind at the apartment on her own, so she'd ended up coming with us. I'd figured that we could take the chance to stop somewhere for dinner on our way home—*after* we dropped Sagami off, of course.

"Thank you very much, Miss Saitou! Boy, was I ever in trouble—this is a huge help, honestly," Sagami said as he climbed into my car's back seat. His smile was as friendly as ever, and his tone was just as ingratiating as always. Judging by looks alone, you'd think he was a perfectly normal high schooler, considering he was pretty handsome in a cute sort of way...until he'd ruin it by opening his mouth.

"Ah. Would you happen to be Umeko? *Very* nice to meet you—I've heard all about you! As for me, I'm Shizumu of the Sagamis, but you can go ahead and call me 'big brother' if you'd like. I know *I* certainly would! Oh, or 'big bro'—that'd be even better! Really, though, I have to say...a little girl like you sitting in the back seat seems awfully dangerous, don't you think? All right, Umeko, go ahead and climb up on my lap! I'll be your personal booster seat!"

I ordered an immediate change of seats. Sagami got to move up to the front, while Hajime took his place in the back.

"Why do I have to sit in back, Hitomi?! There's no ashtray back here!"

"*Excuse* me, you old ha— Miss Saitou! That was the perfect chance for me to talk with a little gi— With Umeko, you know?"

The boys on board lodged their complaints, which I proceeded to summarily discard. *I'll protect Umeko come hell or high water!*

Anyway, with our seats decided, I shifted the White Crow into drive and steered us out of the water park's parking lot and back onto the highway.

“So, Sagami,” I said, “where’s your house? Somewhere near your high school?”

“Actually, Miss Saitou,” said Sagami in a rather serious tone, “I’d prefer if you would drop me off somewhere other than my house, if that’s all right with you.”

The destination Sagami gave me was a shock, to say the least. After all—it was a place I’d been to just the other day.

The four of us chatted about all the recent supernatural battles that had gone down until we finally reached our destination. Incidentally, Sagami’s reaction after he’d finished hearing about the *Fallen Black* vs. Hearts arc boiled down to “Aki and Fantasia didn’t get *nearly* enough screen time, did they? And why would you even bother digging that deep into the characters of a couple random *guys*? Absolute trash-tier waste of time, in my book.”

Great! Didn’t ask, don’t care, thank you very much!

“Thank you again, Miss Saitou,” Sagami said with a polite bow as he climbed out of my car. For a guy who was fundamentally a filterless degenerate, he struck me as being weirdly careful about maintaining decorum when it came to stuff like greetings and thank-yous. Ever since we’d first met, he’d been consistently polite when he’d say hello and goodbye, and literally never any other time. I sort of assumed his parents had brought him up to be conscientious about that stuff.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right here, Sagami?” I asked.

“All right how?” he replied.

“Well, it’s awfully late, so...”

“Oh, no, that’s not an issue. I mean, it would be for most people, but I can just ask an acquaintance of mine to let me inside. This place is practically my home away from home,” Sagami said, then he set off down the tree-lined path that led to his destination: the big white general hospital.

I had to wonder whether this was fate. That was the only explanation I could think of for why Sagami would ask to be dropped off at the very same hospital

we'd tailed Hajime to just a few days beforehand—the exact one where Hajime's mother was hospitalized...

"I wonder what Sagami's doing here?" I muttered.

"Paying someone a visit, probably," said Hajime, puffing out a cloud of smoke. He'd gotten out of the car to have a cigarette before we drove off again. "His mom's hospitalized here, see."

"Wha— Sagami's is too?" I blurted out reflexively...then I instantly realized that I'd screwed up.

"Too?" Hajime repeated incredulously.

"Ah..."

"What do you mean *too*, Hitomi? Who else is hospitalized here?"

"Err... Well, umm... I mean, uhh..."

I was, in a phrase, freaking the hell out. As I racked my mind for an escape route, however...

"Oh? Is that you, Hajime?"

...a woman strolled up to the car. It was the same elegant nurse with the remarkably quiet laugh whom I'd met when we ended up at the hospital the first time. She must have just gotten off work, since she wasn't wearing her uniform this time, but rather a plain white shirt with a cardigan thrown over it.

It wasn't long before the woman noticed me too. "Oh? Aren't you...?" she began.

"Hello! It's nice to see you again," I replied. For a moment I found myself thinking that really, it was late enough that I probably should've gone for a "good evening" instead...but then I realized that I'd made yet another, much larger error.

"Nice to see you again'? What's going on here, Hitomi?"

"..."

Aaaaaaugh! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Just how deep do I have to dig myself into this hole before I'm satisfied?! And after the nurse was nice enough to not finish

her thought and blow my cover too!

It was very clear at that point that I was both a terrible liar *and* terrible at selling other people's lies. I really couldn't have been more disappointed in myself.

"Why do *you* know *her*?" asked Hajime, jabbing a finger toward the nurse as he questioned me. I couldn't even bring myself to look him in the eye, but before I had the chance to try to explain, the nurse spoke up again.

"Now just one minute, Hajime," she said, sounding a little angry with him...before carrying on with a statement that took me from a state of blind, frenzied panic to a state of complete mental emptiness in a single sentence.

"Is that any way to talk about your own mother?"

My mind went blank. I was so stunned, my eyes were probably as wide as dinner plates. I'd lost my vision in one of my eyes after an illness, and I'd made a point of keeping it constantly closed since I didn't like letting other people see it ever since, but in that moment I *completely* forgot that whole aspect of my personality and opened up both of them as wide as could be in a stare of pure wonderment.

"H-H-His mother...? Huh? *Huuuuuuuuuh?!'*" I blathered, turning my gaze from Hajime to the nurse and back again. "W-Wait, so...*you're* Hajime's mother?!"

"Well, yeah," said the nurse. "Didn't I tell you when we met the other day?"

"N-No, you didn't... You *definitely* didn't!"

"Hmm... You know, now that you mention it, maybe it slipped my mind. I only talked to you because you seemed to be his friend, so I guess I must have assumed you already knew! But, I mean...wasn't it sort of obvious from context? You remember the part where I said that I'd known him since he was *thiiiis* little, right?" she said, holding up her thumb and index finger about three centimeters apart again.

Okay, no, wait a second. Are you telling me that when you said "since he was this little"...that wasn't humorous hyperbole?! You actually meant it?! You were

saying that you'd known him since he was small enough that you'd have to take an ultrasound to see him?! That was all completely literal?!

"I guess I didn't get the point across last time, so let me introduce myself," the nurse said, perfectly calm in the face of my bug-eyed panic attack. She let out a very quiet chuckle, then said, "I'm Hajime's mother, Kiryuu Rei. Thank you for being such a good friend to my son."

That was probably my cue to reintroduce myself as well...but I was just plain speechless.

Kiryuu Rei. Rei, written as "zero"—the predecessor to Hajime, written as "one." The number from which one is born. The source of the surname Kiryuu, which Hajime stubbornly clung to instead of taking on his father's surname Kanzaki. It was *her*. The slim, elegant-looking nurse with the quiet laugh...was *her*.

"Wh-Wh-Wha... W-W-W-Wait, wait, wait just a second, hold on." I stammered, reining in a truly unprecedented level of panic and confusion just enough to squeeze out the incredibly pressing question that was now eating away at me. "If you're Hajime's mother...then who was the woman we talked about who he came here to visit back then? The one who's been hospitalized here for years...?" I asked, spitting the question out so quickly I totally forgot to cover up the fact that I'd stalked him to the hospital.

"I guess even a kid like him feels like paying his mother a visit every once in a while," she'd said. Thanks to one unimaginably misleading comment on Rei's part, I'd gotten *completely* the wrong idea about the whole situation, and evidently, Hajime *hadn't* been there to visit his mother after all. But in that case, just who on earth *had* he been visiting?

At that point, Hajime himself spoke up to answer my question. "She's—"



In a room on the third floor of the hospital's second ward, within an undecorated chamber, a woman lay sleeping. She slumbered peacefully, tucked into white covers atop a white bed.

The woman was beautiful. Although her face and the hand that peeked out

from under the covers were emaciated, there was nevertheless something mystically, ephemerally lovely about her features, like she was a fairy or a goddess. A nameplate near her pillow identified her as one Sagami Shizuka.

“Wait a minute... These are the steamed buns they sell at the stall downstairs, aren’t they?” said a boy—Sagami Shizumu—as he inspected the box of sweets that had been left by Shizuka’s pillow. “No doubt about it—only Kiryuu would be thoughtless enough to leave a get-well gift that’s this awful. Hmm. I guess that means he dropped by for a visit recently too.”

Sagami gazed intently at the box as he sat down on a stool by the bed.

“Or maybe...it wasn’t a get-well gift after all? Maybe he meant them for *me*. We used to eat those things all the time, after all. Rei would buy them for us, and we’d share the box,” he muttered to himself, his eyes drifting half closed in a moment of nostalgia as he opened the box of sweets up. “You know, now that I think of it, this is probably the closest thing I have to my mother’s home cooking,” he said in a jocular tone, then he popped one of the buns into his mouth, eating it in a single bite. He chewed, swallowed, then looked back to the bed.

“Listen to this, mom,” Sagami said, taking hold of Shizuka’s hand—the one that didn’t have an IV drip attached to it—and looking at her with a gentle fondness in his eyes. “I went to the pool today with Andou and Takanashi. Well, not *with* them, really—I was spying on them, technically. Ha ha...it sort of feels like I’ve been telling you about Andou every time I stop by, now that I think about it. He’s just such a funny guy, I can’t help but pay attention to him. So right, we were at the pool, and Takanashi—”

Sagami went on to spin his story like a master minstrel, singing the tale of his day at the pool—of the story he’d experienced from a reader’s perspective...



“I’m the Thirteenth Wing of Fallen Black: Innocent Onlooker, or Sagami Shizumu.”

“Kiryuu and I are, well...I guess most people would call us childhood friends.”

“His mother helped me out way back whenever, anyway.”

At first I was so shocked I could hardly even cope, but when I finally managed to calm down and think the revelation through, it turned out to be surprisingly easy to stomach. It felt like I'd been given quite a few hints, even, at least in retrospect. In any case, it was now clear that the woman who had been put into critical condition by a traffic accident and had been hospitalized ever since was none other than Sagami's mother, and evidently the nurse in charge of her was Hajime's birth mother.

As soon as I understood those two facts, everything seemed to fit into place. Kiryuu Hajime and Sagami Shizumu were, according to Sagami, something akin to childhood friends (which, also according to Sagami, was a status "worth less than garbage" if they were the same sex as you). Their relationship had been something of an enigma, but now, it finally made sense. The truth was that we'd maybe, ever so slightly—

"We leaped to a conclusion and missed the mark, when all is said and done. It would seem that First's motive to engage in this War was not to awaken his unconscious mother after all."

"Yeah...looks like it."

Umeko and I ended up driving home on our own, in the end. Hajime had told us to go back without him, and that's exactly what we'd done. Maybe he had something to talk about with Rei, or maybe with Sagami, or maybe he just wanted to take a moment to feel the night air.

Oh, and incidentally, the fact that we'd tailed him the other day had been entirely exposed. Hajime hadn't been even a little bit amused at first, but when I'd said, "B-But, wait, you noticed we were following you, didn't you? You just decided to let us get away with it, right? There's no way you could've missed out on the fact that we were tailing you, is there?" he'd replied, "Bwa ha ha... Well, y'know," and didn't get all that upset after all. Hajime was kind of a sucker, in his own particular sort of way.

Anyway, I had come to the conclusion that the hospital and Rei probably weren't as delicate of a matter for Hajime as I'd initially suspected. In fact, pretty much all of my expectations had turned out to be dead wrong. Kiryuu wasn't fighting to bring his unconscious mother back after all...which begged

the question of what exactly he *was*—

“Cherry blossoms,” Umeko muttered, snapping me out of the daze I’d thought my way into.

“Huh?” I grunted. “Wait, what? What about cherry blossoms?”

“Changing the topic at hand,” said Umeko, “Hitomi. Are you absolutely certain that the trees lining the path to the hospital were, indeed, cherry blossoms?”

“Yeah, they were...but why do you ask? Come to think of it, you were really staring at them a minute ago. Something about them catch your eye?”

“No, I simply found them intriguing. I possess the knowledge that cherry blossoms bloom in spring, yet I have never observed the phenomenon myself. The thought of trees so green having once been covered in pink flowers, gradually shifting to their current visage... I find it most wondrous.”

Umeko had been born just a month before, at the beginning of summer. In other words, she’d come into being after the cherry blossoms had fallen.

“I’m certain that cherry blossoms must be a beautiful sight to behold,” said Umeko.

“They’re really pretty, yeah,” I agreed. “Oh, I know! We should go flower viewing together next year! There’s a shrine near my apartment that holds a whole cherry blossom festival every spring around the time they bloom. It’d be perfect!”

Before I knew it, I found myself grinning. Umeko was so consistently passive, but at long last she’d finally found something she wanted to do, and she’d opened up to me on top of it. I couldn’t have been happier, until...

“Next year, is it? I fear...that will not be possible.”

...just moments later, when I was plunged into the deepest depths of despair.

“I haven’t much time left.”

My mind went blank.

“I have three months remaining... In other words, I will not last beyond the winter,” said Umeko. I was too stunned to speak, and a moment later, she added, “I know well that I should have informed you of this sooner, and I’d truly intended to do so. Forgive me, Hitomi. It was not my intention to hide this from you. I...simply could not bring myself to say it.”

Forgive me, she’d said, but it felt like her apology had passed in one of my ears and out the other. My arms and legs moved mechanically, just barely keeping my car traveling in a straight line down the highway. I couldn’t accept the reality of what I was hearing. *She doesn’t have much time left?*

“But... But why? *Why*, Umeko?!” I finally shouted.

“It is not a matter of why—there is no reason,” said Umeko. “It is simply a matter of my life span.”

“Your...life span?”

“I am an anomaly, brought about by a twisting of this world’s fundamental principles, made by a spirit named Zeon for the sole purpose of bringing this War to an end. I was never intended to last beyond the fulfillment of that purpose.”

Umeko had come into the world as *System*: the ultimate Player who would carve through all others like a farmer reaps grain. The longer she fought, the stronger she would become, and if she’d been unleashed upon the world, it probably wouldn’t have taken her a month to bring the War to its conclusion. That was the only reason she’d been brought into being...and so, her creator hadn’t bothered to give her the capability to carry on *after* her objective had been achieved.

I took in a sharp breath. It was almost stunning how much Umeko had changed over the course of the past month. She’d gone from seeming more like a puppet than a girl to coming across as a full-fledged person. She’d changed—she’d grown—and I’d taken her rapid maturation as a good sign.

I hadn’t thought it through at all. I was truly, terribly shallow. I’d forgotten something important—failed to fully consider what I knew. The incredibly obvious fact that growing and *aging* were two sides of the same coin had never crossed my mind.

“Perhaps my power is too mighty to dwell within a vessel such as mine for long, or perhaps the gods saw fit to grant me such power in light of how little time I was to be allowed. I know not the details...but whatever the case may be, such is simply the nature of my being,” said Umeko, speaking so casually and indifferently it was almost as if she were talking about a stranger. In sharp contrast to my inability to swallow the truth, she seemed to have accepted it in full. She’d looked at reality, at her life span, at her fate, at the whole hand she’d been dealt, and calmly taken it all as a matter of course.

“D-Does...Does Hajime know about this...?” I asked.

“He does indeed,” said Umeko. “First knew from the start. He learned of it the day we met.”

“He did...?”

“One month ago, when I had only just come into being, First and I battled. I did my duty as *System* and brought everything I had to bear in confronting him,” she began, her eyes narrowing slightly as she reminisced about their first encounter. “First is a fearsome man indeed. My power grants me the ability to overcome any foe, no matter how strong, yet he fought me on even footing. As I grew stronger and stronger infinitely, he met me with boundless strength of his own. He matched me awakening for awakening, and as the ferocity of our clash entered the realm of the gods above, I said this—”

“Amusing! You are amusing indeed, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First! To think a man lives who could trade blows with one such as I, whose victory is assured from the outset! Now, come at me! Give me more! Let our duel grow stronger, faster, and farther beyond the realm of man! Let us battle to the death, and let us reach ever greater heights in doing so!”

“W-Wait a second.”

“Yes?”

“You’re saying you actually *said* all that, Umeko? Like, out loud?”

“Quite. I shall confess that I was in a rather excited state at the time—and

moreover, having just been born, I had yet to grasp the particulars of my own personality.”

“I-Is that really how it works...?”

“Pay no heed to the petty details. What matters most is what comes next.”

“Ha ha...ha ha ha ha ha! Such delight! Such rapturous ecstasy! I see now—in battling you, I have finally found something of worth in this meaningless defect of a life I’ve been granted!”

“I suppose I ought to call it a slip of the tongue. Regardless, the instant I uttered those words, First lowered his fists. He questioned my meaning, and I responded with the truth: that my life would last less than half a year longer. He, in turn, declared that he had lost interest and called our battle to a close...then asked me to join him.”

“...”

“Furthermore, he told me that if I did so, he would grant me the miraculous confectionary known as ‘Hi-Chew.’ And so, I accepted his offer.”

“...So he *didn’t* just make that part up after all,” I commented. That moment suddenly sprang back into my mind—the moment when our boss had declared that *System* would be joining our team, and the shock I’d felt as a result. I never would’ve imagined that *that* was how the battle he’d never bothered to tell us about had unfolded. “So then, Hajime hasn’t been having you participate in battles because—”

“He fears the effect that doing so would have upon me, I presume. To use my power places a terrible burden upon my flesh. The more I engage in battle, the more my already limited life span is carved away.”

I never knew. I had no idea that *System*, now known as *White Rulebook*, a power so perfectly unbalanced it could only be described as cheating, required such a tragic price be paid for its use.

“Of course, not using my power does nothing to extend my life span. Three months remain for me, or thereabouts. That is a truth that shall not change.”

“There’s...nothing at all we can do?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Umeko.

“But...*why*?! This doesn’t make sense! It’s wrong!”

“In what manner?”

“I mean...knowing you only had a few months to live from the moment you’re born? That’s... It’s just so...”

“Sad, perhaps?” said Umeko, as if she could see right through me. “Hitomi. To feel pity for the seven-day life span of a locust is nothing more than the arrogance of humanity.”

I fell silent.

“This is the nature of my being. My life has always been a limited one. The fact that I am to live for no more than half a year is, fundamentally, no different from the fact that *you* are to live for no more than a hundred years. And so, I would ask...that you not show me pity.”

Stop, Umeko. Please...stop making it sound like you understand everything so clearly. Don’t just accept this—don’t act like it doesn’t bother you at all! When you look at me like that, I...I can’t...

“Though I may not let it show, I assure you, I am enjoying this so-called ordinary life I have been granted,” said Umeko, repeating what she’d told me just a few days earlier. “I assure you, Hitomi—I am most content. Though I was born to be a weapon, an agent of slaughter, it is thanks to you and First that I have been able to lead a life more akin to that of a human. I could ask for nothing more...and I consider myself fortunate indeed.”

With that, Umeko smiled at me. She’d never been expressive, and this was the very first time I’d seen her with a big, full-faced grin. Her smile was so perfectly beautiful...I couldn’t stop myself from breaking down in tears. I drove on, doing the best I could to keep my car on course as the world dissolved into a blurry mess.

After we arrived at my apartment building’s parking lot, I stayed in my car and

bawled my eyes out. I threw a screaming, sobbing fit, not sparing the slightest hint of attention to how much of a nuisance I was probably being to our neighbors.

Umeko, meanwhile, had quietly climbed out of the car and returned to the apartment the moment we had gotten back. It was so very mature and considerate of her, it just made me all the more distraught. She'd grown up at an unnatural speed, become a full-fledged adult on a mental level, and accepted her fate without protest. It was just so tragic, no matter how I looked at it. I couldn't help but pity her in spite of myself.

"I guess that's the arrogance of humanity coming out in me, huh...?" I muttered after I'd finally cried my eyes out. I grabbed a tissue, dabbed away my tears, blew my nose, then leaned back heavily in my seat. I was in a daze. I'd been subjected to one earth-shattering shock after another, and I just couldn't manifest the strength to move anymore.

"What should I do?" I wondered out loud.

Maybe I should talk to Hajime about it? I wondered, but then decided that no, he would've already done something if he was planning to. The fact that he hadn't, I figured, could mean that he'd decided to respect Umeko's decision when it came to her life. Maybe he'd decided that the life that had been granted to *System* was far from defective—that Tanaka Umeko was not, by any means, a girl deserving of pity—and so, he had chosen not to try to save her. After all, if he did, it would effectively prove that she had been cursed with misfortune.

"But those are all just *words*. It's so stupid... I just... I just want to—"

Right around the time it felt like my mind would rupture under the pressure and deflate like a popped balloon, I heard a *click*. My car's passenger side door opened, and somebody climbed inside without even asking permission.

"Huh? What are— Oh, Fan," I said as I realized who it was—Yusano Fantasia, a girl with dazzlingly bright blonde hair wearing a very pink nurse's outfit with a tracksuit's jacket draped over it. "Wh-What's going on, Fan...? Ah, s-sorry—I'm probably a mess right now, aren't I? I, umm, the thing is," I stammered, turning away in the hopes she wouldn't notice how bloodshot my eyes were...but she

ignored me entirely.

“This War is wrong,” she said. She just...just *threw* that out there so abruptly, the sentence practically bashed me over the head. “I cannot, under any circumstances, allow this War—the Fifth Spirit War—to be carried through to its conclusion. It is a farce. I refuse to so much as accept it as a Spirit War.”

“Huh...?” I grunted. “Wh-Who are you?”

She was definitely Fan, in terms of her body and her voice, but something about the impression she gave was *completely* different. It wasn’t hard to guess that I was talking with some personality other than Yusano Fantasia...but whom? Something about her tone made me suspect that she was actually a he, but the only personality that fit the masculine bill offhand was Adventura, and he came across as more of a rambunctious boy, which was way off. It could’ve been Comedia, whose tone was kind of all over the place, but I would’ve expected at least a joke or two by now if that’d been whom I was dealing with.

I didn’t have to mull over the question for long, in any case. Before I could come to a conclusion, the person in my passenger seat provided an answer that I never would have come up with on my own.

“My name is Zeon.”

My mind went blank...*again*.

Okay, but seriously, how many times can a girl’s mind go blank in a single day? Isn’t this just a bit much? Like...did we really need *that* many shocking plot twists in a row?! Why would you cram that much into the *epilogue*, for crying out loud?! I’ve had *three* mind-blank episodes in this section alone! Dealing with the Umeko issue was more than enough to carry us into the next volume already!

“Z-Zeon...?” I stammered. “You mean, the spirit that—”

“Correct. I take it I won’t have to explain the details to you? Good,” Fan—I mean, Zeon—said in a rather high-handed tone. This was the first time I’d ever spoken with him, but I could already tell that he was a pretty arrogant person.

Some time ago, this rebellious spirit had betrayed the War Management Committee and enacted a plan to force the Spirit War to a premature end. He was the one who had founded the organization *F*, and it was he who was responsible for the creation of *System*—of Umeko.

“B-But...why would *you* be in Fan’s body?” I asked. “Leatia told me that you were locked up in some sort of prison in the Spirit Realm. D-Did you break out?!”

“I did not. Regrettably, the part of me here now is nothing more than a residual, conceptual form of myself. My true self remains imprisoned and is all but entirely incapable of communicating with me,” Zeon explained in a condescending tone, leaving me no room to interject. “I was this girl’s Spirit Handler, and as such, I was aware of her idiosyncratic condition—that is to say, her multiple personalities. One month ago, when you stormed *F*’s headquarters, I was able to transplant my memories into her shortly before I was apprehended by the War Management Committee’s agents.”

“Your...memories...?”

“Call it an attempt to give myself insurance—or rather, a last resort taken out of pure necessity. Now that my attempt to make use of *System* has failed, I am forced at long last to take action myself.”

“B-But, wait. This doesn’t make sense... *You’re* Fan’s Spirit Handler? That’s not what I heard at all! I thought Fan’s was a spirit named Shedrim who looks sort of like a dog...”

“That would be her Spirit Handler for the *Fifth* Spirit War,” Zeon said bluntly. “I was her Handler in the previous War.”

The previous War? So, the fourth one? “You mean...Fan was in the Fourth Spirit War too?”

“Correct—and she came just a step away from winning. She fought through a battle royal of over a thousand Players, surviving until the field narrowed to just her and one other.”

Now *that* was just plain shocking. If she had been one of the last two, that more or less made her the runner-up. The Spirit War wasn’t a tournament or

league, to be fair, and I couldn't see a clear ranking structure necessarily applying well to a lawless battle royal, but surviving all the way to the very end was still a remarkable achievement. I'd never imagined that Fan could've made it that far in a previous War.

"B-But...Fan's never said anything about that at all," I protested.

"Of course she hasn't. She doesn't remember it," said Zeon, disdain for the fact that I hadn't been able to figure that out for myself practically dripping from his tone.

It was pretty irritating to be talked down to like that, but I had to admit, the explanation made sense. Losers in the Spirit War had their memories of their participation stripped away from them, and they were returned to their daily lives—even if they were the contest's runner-up.

"That being said," Zeon continued, "it seems she is dimly aware on some level of what happened. Our manipulation of her memory was incomplete, possibly on account of the peculiarities of her multiple personalities."

"Hold on, though," I said, "if Fan was one of the last two Players in the War, then that means she has to have been one of the Final Eight, right? They erased her memories anyway? I thought the whole deal was that if you stay in the War until you're one of the last eight Players left, you'd get any wish you wanted granted... Do they just erase your memories afterward?"

"The Final Eight?"

In that instant, Zeon's tone shifted. His voice came out cold, harsh, and trembling with an intense, ferocious rage.

"Do *not* speak to me of that *idiocy*," said Zeon. "No such contrivance has ever existed in any of the Wars up until now."

"Wha—"

"Did you never find it strange? Why would a no-holds-barred battle royal end when the field narrowed to eight? Why would the fight not continue until just one Player was left standing?"

When he put it that way...I'd never thought it was strange at all. That was just

how it had been presented to me, after all. The War's rules were absolute, dictated by the spirits—beings who inhabited a realm far beyond human understanding. It had never even occurred to me to question their rules or the motives behind them.

"I'm out of time," Zeon said, ignoring me and my consternation and reaching into his nurse's outfit, from which he pulled an envelope. "I can't manipulate this girl's body any longer. Once her core personality, Yusano Genre, takes action, a lingering concept like me will be erased with ease. Unfortunately...I no longer possess the means to stop this War. And so," he said, shoving the envelope into my hands, "I leave it all to you."

"You...*huh?*"

"I ask you, Saitou Hitomi, to carry out my will and bring this War to an end," said Zeon. I accepted the envelope—mostly on reflex—and the next thing I knew, he had crumpled over in his seat, unconscious.

"Huh...? Wait, wha— I— *Huuuuuuuh?*! W-Wait a second! This makes *no* sense! Zeon? Can you hear me, Zeon?!" I shouted as I grabbed Fan's body and shook her by the shoulders.

"M-Mnhhh... N-No, I'm not... I'm not Nurse Piss... Honest," she muttered anxiously. Considering the content of said sleep-muttering, I knew she was back to being Fan in an instant. Zeon—or the lingering concept of Zeon, or *whatever*—was gone. Either he'd retreated deep inside her to hide, or he had been erased entirely.

"Okay, sooo...what just *happened*, even?" I moaned as I sank into my seat. No matter how you sliced it, he'd just dumped a whole boatload of absurdity onto my head and left me to deal with it. He'd shown up out of nowhere, said his piece, and vanished into the night. "And wait, crap! I should've asked him about Umeko's problem while I had the chance!"

I'd been way too out of sorts to think clearly at the time, but now that it was over, I realized that the spirit who had *created* her would probably have been able to give me all the details about Umeko's life span that I could have ever wanted. I'd just had a truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity dump itself into my lap, and I'd let it pass me by.

I took a moment to sit there in silence, overwhelmed by a potent mixture of regret and bewilderment...then glanced down at the envelope in my hands.

“Nothing to do but open it, I guess,” I said to myself, overcoming my slight reluctance to do just that.

The envelope contained several sheets of printer paper. The message on them was written in Japanese, presumably since he’d intended me to be the one who’d read it, and it was also handwritten, though in such an indistinctly perfect hand I almost wondered if he’d conjured the letters up with magic. As for its contents...

“...?!”

I read the very first page—and my mind went blank. My fourth mind-blank of the day. The fourth earth-shattering twist to present itself to me...but the first three couldn’t even compare to this one. My whole body went limp, with the sole exception of my hands. Those were tensed up so much, I’d clenched the sheet of paper into a crumpled-up mess before I knew it. I could barely breathe. It felt like I was suffocating. It was like a thick, heavy fog had engulfed me, choking my heart.

“This...can’t... N-No way... It’s not true, right...?”

The first paper had listed the winners of all the previous Spirit Wars. The first name was in English, so I could read it well enough. The names of the second and third Wars’ winners were in languages other than English or Japanese, and I couldn’t decipher them...but none of that mattered.

The problem was the winner of the Fourth Spirit War. Seeing his name on the page was a shock like nothing I’ve ever felt before. It turned my story—my world—entirely on its head.

Winner of the Fourth Spirit War — Kiryuu Hajime

Afterword

I believe that, on occasion, the act of making a decision is itself accompanied by a form of responsibility. Take, for instance, if a friend or family member asks you what you want for lunch, and you reply, “Whatever’s fine. I’ll have what you’re having.” At a glance, it would seem like you were accommodating the other person’s preferences, but really, all you did was renounce your responsibility to choose for yourself. Life is a sequence of decisions—in other words, a sequence of responsibilities—and even if you choose *not* to choose, that is a choice in and of itself, and as such is accompanied by its own responsibilities...and the more I talk about this, the more it makes life sound like a massive pain. On the other hand, though, isn’t that sort of thing also what makes life so great in the end?

Now that I’ve forced that philosophizing to wrap up on a positive note, long time no see! This is Kota Nozomi, and this volume was the second side-story installment to this series, following up on volume five. I had a great time finally writing about the shut-in and the delinquent who I barely got to depict at all back in the fifth volume!

And now, a sudden announcement! At this particular moment (that being November 2014), the anime adaptation of *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* has been airing for a month to rave reviews! I hope you’ve been watching it! Kudou was so cute in the show it was almost bizarre, to the point where I’m planning on giving her plenty of screen time in the next volume, which will feature her retirement from the student council...probably. No promises.

Another sudden announcement! Next month, I’ll have an entirely new work published by GA Bunko!

Ikai Shinki to no Reunion —Boufuu Saiai—

The story centers around a protagonist who’s summoned to another world, becomes a hero, and defeats the demon lord with the help of twelve divine

maidens...only to be summoned to the otherworld *again* afterward and forced to fight those same divine maidens who were his allies last time. The protagonist must battle the twelve maidens, speak with them, confront them, and...you'll have to read the book when it comes out in December of 2014—that is, next month—to find out the rest! I hope you look forward to it!

Next, some thanks. To my editor, Nakamizo: thank you so much for your constant guidance, even amid the terrible ordeal that was turning three volumes around over the course of just three months. Next, to 029: thank you again for drawing such adorable illustrations. The way you drew the nurse uniform on the cover was just perfect! I'd also like to thank all the members of the anime's staff for making such a wonderful adaptation. And, of course, I offer my greatest and most sincere of thank-yous to all the readers who've stuck with this series through volume nine.

That's all for now! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

KOTA NOZOMI
ILLUSTRATOR



“Hi-Chew...a treat beyond compare.”



Umeko

Umeko is a character with short reddish-brown hair and a purple headband, wearing a white dress with a red bow.

Akutagawa



“...This is all one big, pointless farce.”

Akutagawa is a character with long blue hair and green headphones, wearing a blue hoodie.

“Let me get a good look at 'em, then you'll be the last thing they ever see!”



Aki

Aki is a character with long brown hair and glasses, wearing an orange top.

“So it finally begins... At long last, the terminal tale has been set in motion!”



Kiryuu

Kiryuu is a character with long purple hair and a black eye patch, wearing a dark purple jacket.

“?????????”



Hinoemata

Hinoemata is a character with a large grey question mark on a dark background.

Fantasia



“We've got this in the bag!”

Fantasia is a character with long blonde hair and a pink headband, wearing a pink top.

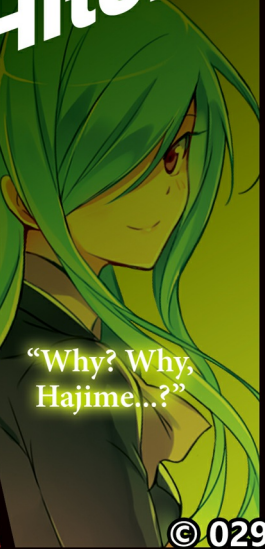
Toki



“All you people can just shut the hell up.”

Toki is a character with long red hair, wearing a red top.

Hitomi



“Why? Why, Hajime...?”

Hitomi is a character with long green hair, wearing a green top.

Bonus Translation Notes: On Profanity

Boy, the characters in this volume sure fuckin' swear a lot, don't they?

Okay, I'll admit it: I just wanted to see if I could get away with opening this section by dropping a contextually appropriate F-bomb. In all seriousness, though, you really may have noticed that the dialogue in this volume goes notably heavier on the profanity than most of the other volumes in the series (with the sole exception of volume five—put a pin in that, we'll come back to it in just a minute). There are good reasons for that, but those reasons are a little less straightforward than you might assume, and for that matter, the use of profanity in Japanese to English translation is a kind of complicated topic across the board. As such, I thought it would be an interesting subject to discuss this time around!

Now, let's start off with a simple question: what sort of curse words are present in the Japanese language?

...Psych! I lied! That's not a simple question at all, and is in fact the subject of no small amount of debate! Some people are prone to asserting that there *is* no such thing as profanity in Japanese, at least in the manner that most Americans conceptualize the concept (i.e., "words that you're not allowed to say on TV"), and while there's a glimmer of truth to that, I personally think it's both reductive and factually incorrect.

I mean it's reductive in the sense that while some words may be perfectly okay to air on TV, those same words can be *extremely* offensive when used in the right—or wrong—context. While many words may lack the inherently offensive nature that many English-speakers ascribe to, say, "fuck," they can still absolutely carry the same weight that it does as a result of how they're used.

As for the factual inaccuracy, let's just say that there are absolutely some words you can't say on Japanese TV! It goes a little weirder and deeper than that, though—for instance, it's very common for certain words corresponding

to human reproductive anatomy to be bleeped out when they come up in the sort of video games that Sagami's a huge fan of. In some cases, it's safe to conclude that the censorship's for the sake of humor, but in others, it just seems downright inexplicable—why would those games' creators feel obligated to bleep out a dirty word when it's being used in literal hardcore pornography?

Is it a legal thing? Maybe contractual on the part of the voice actors? I wish I had an answer for this, but preliminary attempts at research turned up very few good results and a whole lot of links that I did not feel safe clicking, and honestly it's kind of beside the point anyway. The point that I'm trying to make here is that there are definitely words in the Japanese language that are considered inherently dirty—they're just not the sort of words that come up super often in popular media.

So that was a bit of a tangent, but hopefully it got across the idea that profanity in Japanese and profanity in English are both things, but are two very different beasts! That, in no small part, is what makes the use of profanity in translation a topic that's both complicated and very much *not* a solved problem. If you were to ask ten different translators how, when, and why they use profanity in their work, you'd likely get ten different answers. Because of that, I can't tell you with any degree of authority how profanity *should* be used in translation, but I *can* tell you how I personally choose to do so using this series as a case study, so let's take a trip into the Subjective Zone!

First things first, there's one immediate question that I ask myself about every project I work on, the answer to which dictates—among other things—the degree of profanity that I may choose to incorporate into the text: who is the target audience for this piece of media? The importance of that question, I feel, kinda goes without saying. No matter how much of a rough-and-tumble loudmouth a character may be, you can't have them drop four-letter words every other sentence if you're translating for a game that's shooting to get a T rating from the ESRB.

The question of audience demographics is a little fuzzier for media that doesn't have a built-in age recommendation, of course, but it's still very much a factor in how I choose to use profanity. I would be much more hesitant to break out the big swears in a number of the other series I translate with J-Novel Club,

for instance, because they're clearly shooting for a wider age demographic than *Supernatural Battles* is.

What *is* the age demographic that *Supernatural Battles* is shooting for? That's actually another question that I can't necessarily offer a definitive answer to, but what I can say for sure is that Sagami's presence in the novel *immediately* rules out anything even remotely low on the scale. There's a reason the anime toned him down so much—some of the things he says are just so shockingly, egregiously filthy that it's hard to believe they were meant to be read by anyone younger than their late teens at the bare minimum. That fact has very much informed my perspective on the appropriateness of profanity in the series: if you're mature enough to read Sagami describing imaginary sex acts in appalling detail, you're mature enough to handle an F-word or two.

That leads us to a natural follow-up question: why *haven't* we used profanity more liberally throughout the majority of the series? The answer, to put it simply, is that it's a matter of tone. Although *Supernatural Battles* includes themes, concepts, and Sagamicizms that peg it pretty firmly as a series aimed at a relatively mature audience, the tones it usually adopts just don't feel conducive to heavy use of profanity to me. This series tends to veer between moments of lighthearted comedy, in which swears could *sometimes* work when they enhance the comedy but otherwise would feel jarring, and moments of rather intense seriousness and introspection, in which swears could *sometimes* work to drive home a character's mental state but otherwise would feel gratuitous. For the most part, heavy profanity just doesn't suit the vibe of the series, and as such I've chosen to be quite sparing with my use of it.

There's one last question that determines how much profanity I tend to use, though, and it's twofold: what are the personalities of the characters who are speaking, and what sort of word choice do they use in the original text? This is related to the tone question, of course, considering that the word choice characters lean toward has a very distinct effect on the tone of the work, but I consider it distinct enough to list separately because there *are* times when a character's personality and word choice is askew enough from the work's usual tone to make me consider breaking my usual policy and mixing a bit of profanity in.

Volume one of *Supernatural Battles* presents a perfect case study for how this can go down. The very first hard swear in the whole series was said by Kiryuu “Heldkaiser Luci-First” Hajime himself during his conversation in the diner, when he referred to Gatotsu Zeroshiki as “the *coolest* shit.” Having him let the genie out of the swear jar like that was a very deliberate choice that was made in order to communicate distinct differences between his character and Andou’s.

In Japanese, Andou’s tone throughout that conversation is enthusiastic and friendly, but also distinctly polite, using the formal forms of verbs and phrasings in the way you’d expect a young person to talk with their seniors. Kiryuu, in contrast, is as casual as could be, not to mention indifferent to his surroundings. Having him use casual profanity in the conversation was intended to both highlight the fact that the two of them were talking on distinctly different levels of politeness as well as establish a little of Kiryuu’s character early on—namely, that he’s the sort of college kid who would absolutely pepper his speech with random curse words if given half an excuse to do so, largely for the sake of making himself look like a badass.

Speaking of characters who we let swear because it seemed in-character for them to do so, and also characters associated with Kiryuu Hajime, Leatia is noteworthy both for being a very profanity-prone character and for having the honor of dropping the series’ very first F-bomb. As to why we ended up writing her that way, it was actually a very simple choice since the narrative *very* specifically and explicitly calls out the fact that she has a shockingly foul mouth when she’s upset (i.e., whenever she and Kiryuu are in a room together). It would have been difficult to make that description come across as natural *without* working some profanity into her dialogue, and it seemed like an extremely natural, if not necessary, opportunity to do so.

And now, it’s finally time to circle back to the beginning of this ramble, and also time to pluck out that pin I mentioned back when I brought up volume five: why *do* volumes five and nine in particular use so much more profanity than the rest of the series? By now, you can probably put the pieces together yourself: they use more profanity because it’s appropriate for the target audience they’re aimed at, feels natural for the personalities and speech patterns of the

characters in question, and is well-suited to the *jarringly* different tone that those two volumes have when compared to the rest of the series.

I probably don't need to explain this too deeply since you just finished reading the book and all, but volume nine (like volume five) represents a dramatic tonal shift compared to everything that came before it (except for volume five). Suddenly we get actual battles, real stakes, and *no* high school drama whatsoever! Kiryuu *shoves his arm through a man's torso* in one of volume five's early chapters, for crying out loud! The level of drama and violence portrayed in the *Fallen Black* volumes is like nothing seen in the rest of the series, and the tone that the narrative is written in represents just as distinct of a shift. Even the comedic elements of the story take on a different tone, with those two volumes leaning notably less heavily on reference humor (as you'll be made very aware of when you get to the glossary half of this notes section).

Then there's the characters themselves. While some of Andou's crew would totally drop a swear or two if put in the right circumstances (let's be real, it'd probably be Tomoyo), *everyone* in *Fallen Black* is a distinct flavor of likely-to-curse...as long as you roll all the Yusanos together into a single package, anyway. The use of profanity fits both who they are as people and the circumstances they've been thrust into, given, y'know, the constant threat of horrible, painful death they have to put up with. These characters live in a completely different world than Andou and friends—or, rather, in a completely different genre.

(Please don't ask me what genre this series falls into, it's a much more involved question than you might think and would take, like, half a notes section to cover on its own. Maybe some other time.)

I believe that just about covers it! I hope that reading this has given some context to why Kiryuu's band and the foes they face are such potty mouths when compared to the rest of this series' recurring cast. A different translator and/or editor may have chosen to use profanity in a distinctly different way than we have, but personally, I think we've struck a pretty good balance when it comes to staying faithful to the original Japanese's tone and use of language. But, I mean, I *would* say that, wouldn't I?

Now then—it's time to get to the notes part of this TL notes section...which is

actually going to be notably shorter than most of the previous volumes' because, well, there just weren't nearly as many random obscurities worked into the story this time around! It turns out that when the narrative is predominantly centered around the perspectives of two characters who aren't *nearly* as nerdy as the rest of the cast, you get a lot less reference humor worked into the text on the whole. There's still a decent chunk of stuff to go over, though (mostly courtesy of Hitomi's sections), so let's get to it!

Prologue

△ ...*specifically, a Gibson Les Paul.*

Though the Les Paul is a perfectly respectable instrument that long predates any nerdy associations it may have picked up over the years, I feel obligated to note that it's *also* somewhat notoriously the model of guitar that the main character of *K-On!* plays. A sudden boom in electric guitar sales in early 2010s Japan is often attributed to that show, with the Les Paul in particular supposedly having had quite the sales boost. What I'm getting at with all this is that while I can't assert that this was specifically intended to be a *K-On!* reference, I like to think that *K-On!* was at least indirectly responsible for the choice of brand.

Chapter 1

△ ...I wasn't about to call him out for reading a magazine named *Weekly Shonen Whatever* even though he wasn't part of its clearly stated age demographic anymore.

The “Shonen” in *Shonen Jump*—and also *Shonen Sunday*, *Shonen Champion*, *Shonen Ace*, *Weekly Shonen Magazine*, etc. etc.—means “boy” in Japanese. In other words, the target demographic for all of those magazines is very literally right there in the title: they're theoretically aimed at relatively young men/boys. I say theoretically because practically, it's not quite that simple.

Agewise, a survey that Shueisha, the publisher behind *Shonen Jump*, released in 2020 found that over half of *Jump*'s readership was nineteen years old or older, with the largest demographic being the 27.4% of responders who fell into the twenty-five-plus age category. Concrete information on gender demographics is a little harder to come by, and the few sources I found that claimed specific numbers seemed rather spurious to me, but I did track down an article from 2012 that noted that some *Jump* manga at the time—*Haikyu!!* and *Gintama*, for instance—had majority-female readerships, and anecdotally, I think it's safe to conclude that *plenty* of women read shonen manga (and *Jump* manga in particular).

△ ...in his words, “*Young Jump and Bessatsu have been killing it lately*”...

Weekly Young Jump is, ironically, a manga magazine aimed at a slightly older readership than the ones we discussed in the previous note. Being a “seinen” magazine, it's targeted at young adult men, which isn't hard to guess given some of the series it's published. Standout historical examples include *Gantz*, *Elfen Lied*, *Tokyo Ghoul:re*, and *Kaguya-sama: Love Is War*. Currently, the magazine is home to *Oshi no Ko* and *The 100 Girlfriends Who Really, Really, Really, Really, Really Love You*, both of which you may have heard of on account of their recent anime adaptations.

Bessatsu Shonen Magazine, meanwhile, is—as you might expect—aimed at the shonen demographic. It's been home to quite a few popular manga as well

over the course of time, including *xxxHolic*, *Flying Witch*, *The Flowers of Evil*, and this one pretty obscure series you probably haven't heard of called *Attack on Titan*.

△ I've got a whole stock of masterpiece oneshots filed away back at my place—Hoshino's *Continue*; Fukushima's *Swimming's on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays*; you name it!

The Hoshino in question here is Hoshino Katsura, author of *D.Gray-man*! *Continue* is a oneshot that was published in *Shonen Jump* all the way back in 2003 that more or less served as the prototype for the series that would eventually become *D.Gray-man*, sharing a number of broad concepts and even including the Millennium Earl (*D.Gray-man*'s antagonist) in more or less the exact same form he would eventually appear in in the final series.

Fukushima, meanwhile, refers to Fukushima Teppei, author of *Samurai Usagi* (not to be confused with *Usagi Yojimbo*, which is written by Stan Sakai and is something *completely* different). *Swimming's on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays* was published in *Shonen Jump* in 2011, and told a story about a boy and a girl who go to the same swim school. Very little of Fukushima's work has made it to the English-speaking market, unfortunately, and when I say "very little," I mean "none as far as I've been able to find." Hopefully that'll change someday, though!

Chapter 2

△ ...but if you wanna make like your buddies and dance the hard luck waltz, then be my guest.

Buckle up, because this one's a deep cut! In this line, Kiryuu is paraphrasing a character from *Kaze Densetsu Bukkomi no Taku*, a manga that ran from 1991 to 1997 that was drawn by Juzo Tokoro and written by Hiroto Saki. The series has never been published in English, and in fact, the only series associated with either the artist or the author to be brought out over here was Juzo's manga adaptation of the *Spawn* franchise back in 1998 (which isn't even remotely relevant, but I just couldn't resist mentioning it because it came from so very far out of left field for me).

Anyway, the story of *Kaze Densetsu* is centered around the very particular type of biker gang that Shuugo himself ran with in his backstory! Those gangs, known as "bousouzoku" in Japanese, were a presence all throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, but by the early '10s, their popularity and presence were both far past their peaks, and these days, the concept exists more as a kind of anachronistic aesthetic than an actual social issue. What I'm getting at with all this is that in this line, Kiryuu's quoting a classic manga about the exact sort of tough-guy bikers that Shuugo and his gang's members are trying to act like.

Unfortunately, given the intense obscurity (by English-speaking standards) of the manga in question and the fact that the reference is so deeply tied to the very specific sort of biker gang Shuugo is part of, contextualizing the line or swapping in a functional equivalent were both not great options in this instance. Fortunately, the line itself comes across as such a generically tough guy thing to say in isolation that it still felt natural lacking full context when rendered as-is, which is the option we decided to go with in the end. Hopefully, the fact that Kiryuu's talking like a tough guy to make fun of Shuugo comes through clearly regardless!

Chapter 3

△ *I guess he read Rising Impact, I'm pretty sure?*

Rising Impact is a golf manga by Suzuki Nakaba that ran in *Shonen Jump* from 1998 to 2002! It's never been released in English, though that's very much not true for some of Suzuki's later works, given that he went on to create the shonen smash hit *The Seven Deadly Sins* roughly a decade later. English-speaking viewers will have the chance to experience the series soon, however, as an anime adaptation was announced just three days before we had to submit the final draft of this TL Notes section! How's that for a coincidence?

△ *Ryuushousen!*

The Ryuushousen is a technique from *Rurouni Kenshin*, a series that I'm reasonably certain we've covered in a full fifty percent of the TL notes sections for this series so far! You know the drill, at this point.

Chapter 5

△ I'm-holding-an-everstone levels of never ever!

This is another complicated one, and one that we actually did adapt rather heavily for the English rendition! Hitomi's original line here is a play on words revolving around the Alltrades Abbey from the *Dragon Quest* franchise (or the Daama Shinden, in Japanese). The exact function of the Abbey varies slightly from game to game, but broadly speaking, it allows you to change your characters' archetypes (or vocations, to use the in-game parlance).

For our purposes, however, keeping the reference perfectly as-is wasn't a great option since "Alltrades Abbey" just doesn't slot elegantly into the sort of wordplay we could use in this circumstance. Since the exact nature of the reference wasn't really as important as the idea that Hitomi was babbling out a piece of very nerdy, semi-nonsensical reference humor, we decided to shift gears and use a different piece of archetype-changing-adjacent JRPG terminology—everstones from the *Pokémon* franchise—to hit the same broad notes in a manner that much more convincingly fit into English-based wordplay for the line.

Chapter 8

△ ...but her expression could only be described as an archaic smile.

The archaic smile is an expression commonly seen on sculptures from ancient Greece! If you've ever seen an ancient Greek statue with a kind of unsettlingly blank smile, that's probably the one. I've mostly included it here to note that "archaic smile" is being used in the technical, art-theory sense of the term rather than the literal meaning of the words, on account of this reference being pretty far afield from the usual nerdy media references that are this series' bread and butter.

△ There's that one game series where Warring States-era generals or whatever beat down mountains of random trash soldiers...

That being the *Warriors* series! *Dynasty Warriors* is the most successful and widespread branch of the franchise, but given the specific shoutout to the Warring States era, Shuugo's likely talking about the *Samurai Warriors* branch in particular.

...And, that's all we have for you this time around! It feels pretty weird to not hit the maximum page count for this section for once, but seeing as we're returning to Andou *et al.* next volume, I can say with confidence that we'll be right back in the thick of it next time around! Hope to see you there!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 9

Let's look at another time when I had a very rare opportunity to actually talk with a girl when I was a student. The subject at hand: our personalities.

Nozomi: "Hm. You know, I think that the way he and I think is pretty similar."

Girl: "Oh? Maybe the two of you could be friends, then!"

Nozomi: "Impossible. After all...there's nothing in this world I detest more than people who think like me. (/obnoxious smirk)"

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).

I wasted an awful lot of time pondering what cup size to give Fan on the cover of this volume (and never actually came to a clear decision in the end).

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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 9

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by Kota Nozomi

Translated by Tristan K. Hill Edited by Zubonjin

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