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(TRIGGER)

**When  
supernatural  
Battles 10  
Became  
Commonplace**





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Supernatural

Battles

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Volleyball



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The FLAME BLACK

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# CHARACTERS

ILLUSTRATOR: 029



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





**Kushikawa  
Hatoko**

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

**OVER  
ELEMENT**

**Takanashi  
Sayumi**

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



**ROUTE OF  
ORIGIN**

**DARK  
AND DARK**



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

**Andou  
Jurai**

**WORLD  
CREATE**

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



**Himeki  
Chifuyu**



# Prologue

“Oh! Hello there, Takanashi. Your production of *Romeo and Juliet* was wonderfully staged, if I say so myself! I really did quite enjoy it.”

It was the first day of the cultural festival, and I was in the music room. We’d just closed the curtains on our momentous first showing of the literary club’s play, and I was interacting with visitors and keeping the magazines we’d put on display properly arranged when a handsome young man with an amiable smile approached me. I couldn’t help but notice he was holding a marker, and I had to wonder what exactly he’d been using it for.

“And you know,” the young man continued, “it feels like it’s been a pretty long time since the two of us have talked face-to-face like this! I think the last time was back at the water park during summer vacation? You know, I ended up in a pretty big fix after you and Andou went home! It turned out that the shuttle bus you caught was actually the last one, so I was stranded at the park. I had to call in an acquaintance’s older brother to come pick me— Hey, w-wait! Takanashi? I’d really appreciate it if you wouldn’t ignore me!”

I had no interest in talking with—or, in fact, even *looking* at—this particular young man, so I disregarded him entirely and once again focused on sorting the magazines.

*My, what a mess our visitors have made. It’s nice to see people giving our work a chance, but I do wish they’d put the magazines back in their proper place after they finish reading.*

“Heeey, Takanashi!”

I heard a noise of some kind behind me, but I paid it no mind.

“Total silent treatment, huh? That kinda hurts. I may be rotten to the core, but I’m still a pretty sensitive guy when it comes down to it, you know?”

*Pay it no mind.*

“Yup, rotten to the core. So rotten that my personality comes out on the



other side of the fermentation process with a remarkable and distinctive flavor you can't get any other way."

*Do not, under any circumstances, take the bait.*

"Hmm. Looks like I've caught you in a bad mood. Let me guess: it's almost that time of the month?"

*Do not punch him.*

"If you keep ignoring me much longer, I'm going to write 'I talk shit to keep *this* hole free' on a piece of paper and stick it on your as— *Gwahaugh!*"

*Oops! My mistake.* I had intended to keep ignoring him, but his train of thought had proceeded in such an obscene direction that I'd ended up reflexively driving my fist into his gut. I suppose he'd tripped the fail-safe on my vulgarity meter. The boy I was dealing with was, as ever, exceptionally capable of coming up with the least funny dirty jokes I'd ever heard. He was truly a profoundly unpleasant lowlife.

"Oof, ouch... Don't you think a no-warning gut punch is a little beyond the pale, Takanashi? Then again, if you understood what I was getting at with that joke, I guess you really are as mature as you look—you've been doing a lot of *adult* reading, haven't you?"

"I do *not* look 'mature'!"

"I really wish that weren't the only part you'd reacted to," Sagami said with a shake of his head.

I, meanwhile, heaved a sigh and finally turned to face him. After a reaction like that, inadvertent though it was, I could hardly keep ignoring him any longer—no matter how disinterested I was in actually speaking with him.

"What do you want, Sagami?" I asked.

Sagami Shizumu was a boy one year younger than me. He was notable for his long hair, which he tended to keep tied back in a ponytail, and also for *not* being Andou's friend, but rather, his acquaintance.

"Oh, nothing in particular," said Sagami. "I just saw you and figured I might as well say hello, that's all."



“Is that so? In that case, allow me to excuse myself,” I replied.

“How cold! You really *are* in a bad mood today, aren’t you? Did something unpleasant happen?” asked Sagami.

“Anyone would find themselves in a bad mood when someone they don’t even want to look at strolls up and starts talking with them like they’re the best of friends,” I shot back.

“Ha ha ha! Talk about harsh!”

“I believe you were sitting with a girl from another school during the play,” I noted. “Where is she now?”

“Oh, her? She already went home. She came all the way to our festival because it happens to be my birthday today...and then she dumped me just a minute ago,” Sagami said indifferently.

I had assumed that he was in a relationship with the girl he’d been sitting with, but I *hadn’t* imagined that said relationship had already been relegated to the realm of past tense.

“*Apparently*, I was looking at Chifuyu and Kuki like I was ‘some sort of deviant nutjob,’ or something along those lines. She dumped me like a sack of bricks the second the play ended. Wasn’t that terrible of her? And *she* was the one who’d asked *me* out in the first place!”

I didn’t even know Sagami’s ex’s name, but I still felt a deep, *deep* sense of compassion for the poor girl. I could only hope that she would learn from her mistakes and grow into a woman who didn’t pick her partners by virtue of their looks alone.

“Anyway, I think everyone knows that Chifuyu’s *dangerously* adorable at this point, but she was even more charming than ever today, if you ask me! It was like you could see the womanhood beginning to blossom from her innocent little body—there’s nothing like it, honestly. But you can’t go overlooking Kuki either! I’d heard that Chifuyu has a friend her age, but I never imagined that said friend would be *that* top-tier as well! She’s cute as a button, for one thing, and the way she lets her psycho side slip out every— I mean, the way she makes it clear just how much she cares for her best friend every once in a

while's just *perfection*! I wish I could just scoop them both up and take them right home with—”

“What are you playing at, Sagami?” I asked, cutting him off. I simply couldn't stand to listen to that revolting nightmare of a boy wax poetic about the charms of a couple of elementary schoolers for a second longer. I glanced around, made sure that no members of the literary club or visitors to our display were watching, then dragged him off into a more secluded corner.

“I was under the impression that I'd cut ties with you entirely,” I hissed.

Up until just recently, Sagami and I had been collaborators...or perhaps “partners in crime” would be the more apt expression. I had succumbed to my most selfish and base desires, accepting a helping hand offered by the worst possible partner imaginable.

“I'm well aware! You stabbed me in the back and twisted the knife, after all. The point was *very* clearly made,” said Sagami, his expression almost infuriatingly cheerful. It was as if he bore no grudge on account of my betrayal whatsoever. “That's exactly why I came here as a perfectly ordinary reader, not your collaborator. I struck up a conversation out of pure curiosity. After all—you looked rather depressed, and I wanted to know why.”

“Again, that would be because you—”

“You were brooding even before I approached you. Of course, I can more or less imagine why on my own,” Sagami said with a patronizingly knowing air. “You're upset because the cover art this time around isn't of you and Andou, aren't you?”

I blinked.

“I can practically hear your heart's anguished wails! ‘Why is *this* the one time the cover's featured characters were chosen by grade level? Wasn't the whole premise of the second set of covers to have each heroine share the stage with Andou in order? And wait a second, who the hell were the girl in the nurse outfit and the kid with the game console on the last—’”

“What on earth are you talking about, Sagami?”

Sagami's perspective on reality was, clearly, as outlandishly skewed and



incomprehensible as ever. I, for one, would have deeply appreciated if he'd get over his habit of pretending to peer into people's minds and making up absurd falsehoods about what he saw there.

"Anyway, all kidding aside," said Sagami, casually waving off a joke that, by my measure, could *not* be set aside that easily. The majority of his jokes fell into that difficult-to-dismiss category, in fact, to the extent that it was something of a problem. It seemed to me that he was always saying things that pushed certain boundaries to their absolute breaking point. "You looked upset because of the play you just put on, didn't you? The boy you long for had his first kiss stolen away by another girl—and an elementary schooler, at that! Who wouldn't come out of an experience like that a little distressed?"

"...I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't bother playing dumb. I couldn't see what happened from the audience seats...but *you* had a perfect perspective to pick out every little detail, didn't you? And considering how you were tripping over yourself all throughout the narration after the kiss scene, it wasn't hard to put the pieces together. I know *exactly* what happened up on the stage just a moment ago."

I sank into silence. Clearly...I had been careless. My lack of composure had exposed the truth of our play's kiss scene to the worst possible observer.

I had indeed had a clear view of our lead actors' faces from my position as narrator, and as a result, I had witnessed the moment when their lips had touched. The psychological shock that I'd felt in that moment was immense. I had been tremendously, humiliatingly shaken...but at this particular moment, that was of secondary concern to me.

"Do you...really think it was his first, then?" I asked.

"Huh?" grunted Sagami.

"I mean to say...do you, um...think that was Andou's...f-first..."

"Oh, I see now. That sort of thing really is important when you're a maiden in love, huh?" said Sagami. I waited silently, and a moment later, he continued. "I don't have any concrete evidence, but I think that was most likely his first kiss, yeah. He's certainly never told me anything that'd make me think otherwise."

"I...see," I replied.

"You just kept dragging your feet, and Chifuyu stole it right away from you."

"I was *not*—" I began, but I couldn't bring myself to finish the thought. The truth was, after all, that some part of me really did feel exactly as Sagami claimed. I had dragged my feet, and something I'd wanted had been snatched from me as a result. I couldn't deny it.

"In the end," said Sagami, "you couldn't become the main heroine. Actually...you didn't even try."

The main heroine, he said. Did he mean that I hadn't become the star of the play? Or, rather...

"You're in your last year of high school, and this is your very last cultural festival. You had so many chances to use those facts to your advantage and become the main heroine this time around...but you didn't. You fought fair to the bitter end, dedicating yourself to maintaining an even playing field and struggling to claim the main heroine position legitimately. And, surprise surprise, all that those efforts earned you was the experience of having *Chifuyu*, of all the people, end up one step ahead of you."

I didn't say a word.

"Andou hurt Chifuyu's feelings by not playing fair, sure...but don't you think you were being a little *too* fair, Takanashi? You're always holding back, always playing the leader and mediator. That sort of behavior earns you an A+ as a club president, but you're getting a failing grade as a maiden in love."

"What are you getting at?" I asked.

"Exactly what I'm saying! Like I told you a moment ago, I'm not your collaborator anymore. I'm not even really thinking about any of this—I'm just spouting my impressions without a care in the world for what you do with them. Think of it as the conditioned reflex of a single inconsequential reader," Sagami said before turning a bitingly insincere smile upon me. "Frankly, I can barely even stand to watch you like this. You take on all the responsibility of your position as club president, seeing it through without ever using that position to your advantage in the slightest. For someone who can seemingly do



anything and everything to the point of perfection, it seems you're astonishingly inept when it comes to your own personal affairs."

"That's...true, yes," I weakly admitted for lack of a compelling counterargument. "I'm well aware of the areas in which my personality is holding me back. That being said, I have no intention to change the way I live my life. I have accepted the fact that this is simply who I am."

Some might call me honest to a fault for thinking that way, and some may call me downright naive, but whatever the case, I had no intention of using my position as club president to further my romantic ambitions. I believed that bringing one's private life into one's business affairs was indefensible, and I applied that standard to myself more so than anyone else.

I wanted to play fair. I wanted to be the perfect club president—a club president worthy of praise. And to Andou in particular, I wanted to fill that role right up until the very end.

"However—this year's cultural festival marks the conclusion of all that," I said, standing tall as I looked Sagami straight in the eye. "This will be the final cultural festival of my high school career...and also the final activity that I will officiate as the president of the literary club."

I had allowed myself to settle into my position perhaps a little too comfortably, but the fact of the matter was that fall had already arrived. The period during which it was reasonable for a third-year like me to serve as a club's president had long since come to a close.

"It's high time for me to choose a successor and retire from the club," I said.

Then, I would no longer be the president. I would no longer be subject to the duties and responsibilities of the position—I would be nothing more than a woman, plain and simple. No longer would the differences in age and standing between me and my peers provide me with any advantage or disadvantage. I would be free to live true to my emotions, pursuing that which I desired without reservation.

"Sagami," I said, "ever since I cut ties with you, I have thought long and hard about my situation, and I finally came to a decision. After I step down from my position as club president, I will take action."

I clenched my fists, speaking as clearly as I could manage, taking great care not to let my voice waver.

“Once the next president of our club has been decided...I will tell Andou how I feel about him.”



# Chapter 1: Tropicalypse Now

Two weeks had come and gone since the cultural festival had wrapped up. At first, we'd been planning on putting together one of our usual literary magazines for the event and calling it a day, but then one thing had led to another, and we'd somehow wound up staging a full-blown play instead. All sorts of mishaps and hijinks had followed, needless to say, but in the end, we'd somehow managed to pull through it and wrap the festival up on a successful note.

Now, to be fair, I'm not saying it'd been a *huge* success. We hadn't even come *close* to winning the award that the festival's organizational committee gave out to the event's best display or anything like that. Still, to the five of us, the production had become another irreplaceable memory. I knew that I sure as hell wasn't going to forget playing the leading role in *Romeo and Juliet*—excuse me, *Lolio and Juliet* anytime soon. I mean...I'd had my first kiss stolen during a showing, so of course I wouldn't.

...So, moving right along! The atmosphere at our school had quickly shifted from “entirely consumed by the cultural festival” to that very particular sort of wistfulness that always set in after a big event came to a close. Two weeks later, that sense had faded away as well, and things slowly returned to normal. Meanwhile, the rapidly escalating number of leaves dancing through the air signaled to us that fall was settling in in earnest.

The brutal summer heat had vanished away so rapidly you could hardly believe it had ever been a thing to begin with, moving us right along into a season of bitingly chilly mornings and evenings. I would never be like Hatoko, who wore a cardigan over her uniform all year round, but it was getting cold enough that I was starting to consider taking a leaf out of her book and throwing another layer over my uniform's jacket. I'd decided at one point that *this* was the year I'd finally convince my parents to let me buy a black trench coat, by the way, and I took an honest stab at it too, but then my sister barged into the negotiations with guns blazing, shot the idea right the hell down, and

declared that I'd have to wear the gray peacoat that I'd bought the year before again instead.

*Damnations! How long do I have to wait before I'll be allowed to pick out my own clothing? When do I get to abandon subtlety and walk around with silver chains wrapped around my arms like a real ancient Egyptian pharaoh...?*

"Well, anyway, the point is that it's fall! Yup—it sure is fall, all right," I reaffirmed to myself as I gazed out at the landscape before me...that landscape being an ocean.

This wasn't just any ocean either. This was one of those beachfronts with the sort of super clear, faintly green water that you can see right through—that is, the sort found basically nowhere in Japan. The sand beneath my feet was almost stunningly smooth to the touch as well. I'd never actually been to New Caledonia, of course, but this was more or less how I'd always visualized the beaches there would look. The sun shone bright and brilliant in the blue sky overhead, and the air was exactly as hot as you'd expect. It was the sort of tropical atmosphere that Japanese people are trying to evoke when they talk about going on vacation to a southern island, and there I was, sitting smack-dab in the middle of it all, clad only in a swimsuit and a light hoodie.

"It's fall...but it sure as heck doesn't feel like it, huh?" I muttered with a strained smile as I leaned back against the also *extremely* tropical palm tree that stood behind me.

Needless to say, I hadn't been whisked away on a sudden trip to an actual southern isle. This was very much Japan—more specifically, the literary club's room. *World Create*, the power of genesis, was capable of bringing a perfect recreation of a tropical resort into being wherever the user wanted, and that's exactly what'd happened.

"Oh, wow, this is great! Talk about a pretty ocean," a voice rang out next to me. I looked over to see Tomoyo, who had gone off with the other girls to change into their swimsuits in a sorta cabin-like building that'd been set up nearby. Apparently, they'd finally finished.

"I've only ever seen water like this on TV before," she continued. "And we're the only ones here, so it's like the whole place is our own private beach! Gotta



love *World Create*, huh?”

“No kidding,” I agreed.

When it came to enabling fun and games, *World Create* was second to none among the powers that we had awakened to. Through it, we could travel to all sorts of locales from all around the world without ever leaving the comfort of our club room. Blowing off the flow of the seasons to have a mid-fall beach day was child’s play with it on our side. I mean, honestly, who could have seen this coming? Summer vacation had come to a close, the cultural festival had wrapped up, and now we were jumping directly into *another* beach episode, of all things!

“Now that I think about it, why’d we bring our swimsuits with us in the first place?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it have been way easier to just whip those up with *World Create* too?”

Everything in the space we occupied had been brought into being by *World Create*, but for some reason, the girls had unanimously insisted that we bring our own swimsuits from home. I’d already shut mine up deep in my closet after summer break had ended, so I’d had to go through the trouble of digging it right out again as a result.

“Y-Yeah, well,” Tomoyo mumbled, slightly red in the face. “W-We didn’t want it to turn out like the time we all tried cosplaying, that’s all.”

“Oooh,” I said with a nod.

No further explanation was needed. I’d almost forgotten that back when we’d all ended up cosplaying—I mean, deciding on our combat forms together—there had been a bit of an incident, shall we say. Let’s just say it turned out that when Chifuyu made clothes with her power, she could also erase them at will.

*World Create* was as convenient as a power could possibly get, but the flip side of that was that it was also pretty unstable when push came to shove, and accidentally vanishing everyone’s clothes was a mistake that did not bear repeating, especially from the girls’ perspective. I was pretty certain that Chifuyu had learned from her mistake, to be fair, and I didn’t expect that we’d go through a repeat of that disaster regardless, but there was no harm in taking a few extra precautions to ensure it, I guess.

“And I guess the fact that we’re talking about swimsuits in particular just makes it worse,” I continued. “If something happened and they ended up disappearing...I mean, there’s just no recovering from that.”

“Right?” said Tomoyo. “Though, really...there were a few other reasons why I wanted to bring in my own swimsuit today too.”

“Like what?”

“Y-You know! I mean, like...I didn’t end up getting to go to the pool at all this summer, right? We’d had plans for it, but then we got rained out.”

“Oh, right,” I said with a nod.

“I’d bought a new swimsuit and all, so I was kinda disappointed I never got to actually wear it. I figured this would be a good chance to show it off.”

“Wait,” I said, “you mean you went out and bought a new swimsuit just because you had plans to go to the pool with me?”

“Well, yeah... B-But for the record, I didn’t buy it for *you*!” Tomoyo snapped. “I just wanted a new one, that’s all! And I know I said I wanted to show it off, but I didn’t mean to you in specific! I meant, like...like showing it off to the world in general, or something...”

“Y-Yeah, okay, I get it,” I said, flinching away from the sheer force of her motor-mouthed string of excuses. Meanwhile, I took a closer look at the swimsuit in question: a red bikini. It wasn’t super revealing, as far as bikinis went, and it suited her slender build really nicely.

“Q-Quit staring at me like that,” muttered Tomoyo.

“I’m not *staring*,” I replied. “I was just looking, that’s all.”

“H-Hmph! Well, fine—in that case, why not tell me what you think already?”

“Sure, I guess. It looks good on you.”

“...”

“What? Oh, come *on*, you literally asked me for my impression! What’re you getting embarrassed for? You’re gonna make *me* blush at this rate!”

“Sh-Shut up! What do you want from me?! I’m not used to this crap, okay! I’m

not like *you*, Mister ‘I Already Went to the Pool with Hatoko, Chifuyu, *and* Sayumi!’”

“Why’re you lashing out at me now? Jeez,” I grumbled. *Technically, I went to the ocean with Hatoko, not the pool...but anyway, I guess Tomoyo took not getting to go a lot more personally than I expected.* “About that swimsuit, though,” I said as a thought struck me.

“Huh...? Wh-What?” said Tomoyo. “Is something weird about it?”

“Nah, not weird. It just really feels like I’ve seen it somewhere before,” I said as I took another, closer look—though not so close it’d get me slapped with a sexual harassment accusation—to try and jog my memory.

*Hmm. Yeah, I’m definitely getting some sorta déjà vu from that swimsuit. A red bikini... Actually, not just the bikini—it’s specifically the sight of Tomoyo wearing a bikini that seems so darn familiar...*

“Ah, got it!” I exclaimed. “It looks just like the bikini armor you wore that one time!”

“...”

“Man, that kinda takes me back! You remember that whole thing, right? You shot yourself in the foot with your own suggestion when we all cosplayed together and ended up wearing a set of red bikini armor! If you put a couple pauldrons on that swimsuit, it’d look *just* like it!”

“...”

“Oh, I know! Why don’t we take this chance to modify the swimsuit a little and make it into another set of— Wha?!”

The next thing I knew, I’d been taken captive. Specifically, my arms had been wrapped behind me around the palm tree I’d been leaning against, and my wrists had been tied together. As best as I could tell, the hoodie I’d been wearing just seconds ago had been used to bind them up in lieu of handcuffs—and bind them pretty darn tightly, by the way, meaning I couldn’t move an inch.

“Huh? Wha? *Huh?*” I grunted. I’d been apprehended in the blink of an eye, so quickly it was like time had literally leaped from point A to point B without



bothering to go over the process between the two. Which, of course, it had, and the only person who could pull *that* off was the sovereign ruler of time herself. “Wh-What’s the big idea, Tomoyo?!”

“*Hmph!*” Tomoyo *very* pointedly and irritably snorted, then strolled away, leaving me bound to the tree.

“H-Hey, Tomoyo, wait up! Tomoyo?! I seriously can’t move over here!” I shouted. I *tried* to squirm my way to freedom, but it just wasn’t happening.

“Honestly... What on earth are you doing this time, Andou?” sighed another familiar voice. I looked up to find Sayumi, our very own club president, gazing down at me with a look of pity in her eyes. “I never could have imagined that *this* would be among your fetishes,” she added.

“It is *not*! I’m not tied up right now because I wanna be, trust me!”

“How strange,” said Sayumi. “I seem to recall you admitting that you’d always wanted to try on a straitjacket back when we’d all cosplayed together?”

*She’s bringing that up now? Really?!* “I mean, I said that, yeah...but this isn’t the same thing at all! It’s not that I want to be tied up—I want to be *sealed away*! Specifically on account of the monstrous, inhuman powers that dwell within me!”

“I have no idea what you hope to gain by telling *me* about this,” Sayumi said, then she let out a quick sigh before speaking on. “In any case, I think you could have easily predicted that a remark as indelicate as the one you just made would put Tomoyo in a sour mood,” she scolded me. Apparently, she was aware that Tomoyo was the culprit behind my current predicament.

“What indelicate remark...?” I asked.

“You told her that her new swimsuit looked just like a set of bikini armor. That was a horrible thing to say, no matter how you look at it, and all the more so when you consider that to Tomoyo—and, for that matter, to me—the cosplay incident is one best left forgotten in its entirety.”

“Huh? But wait, didn’t you two get pretty into the whole cosplay thing in the end? I remember you striking poses after Chifuyu suggested that we all take a picture together and everything...”

“That was an anime-original moment.”

*Oooh, right. Guess it was—we didn’t really take many pictures in the original book. We’d talked about it, but Tomoyo and Sayumi shut it down before it could actually go anywhere, I think.*

“This was Tomoyo’s first time wearing her swimsuit, and she seemed very happy to have the opportunity. Then *you* came along,” Sayumi said with a glare.

I was starting to feel awfully ashamed of myself. Apparently, I’d accidentally said something pretty darn terrible. I decided to apologize whenever I got the chance.

“Speaking of swimsuits, that’s not the one that you wore back in summer vacation, is it?” I asked.

This time, Sayumi was wearing a black swimsuit with a really mature vibe—the sort that you could imagine some foreign celebrity wearing to a beach. It wasn’t quite a one-piece, but it wasn’t quite a bikini either. I’m not really sure how to put it into words, honestly—it was sorta like if you took a one-piece then cut out a bunch of bits and pieces from it. It was less revealing than a bikini, in any case, but it somehow managed to feel weirdly sexy in a way that bikinis didn’t.

“Yeah, that’s right! Didn’t you wear a white bikini back when we— Whoa, Sayumi?!” I yelped. Just as I was starting to remember our trip to the pool, Sayumi had crumpled to the sand. She was down on her hands and knees, and I could practically see the gloomy storm clouds descending upon her. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d actually sunk straight into the ground. “Wh-What’s wrong, Sayumi...? You look like you’d finally decided to sink some real money into your favorite gacha game only for it to announce that it was shutting down the very next day!”

“I-I’m fine, thank you,” Sayumi said as she staggered to her feet. She wore the expression of a woman whose heart and soul had been shattered to pieces. “No need to worry. Just an old wound opening back up ever so slightly...”

“An old wound? What are you talking about? Was there something about that white bikini that I didn’t—”

“Augh!”

“Sayumiii?!”

It was like someone had just socked her straight in the solar plexus. Sayumi didn’t so much double over as *quadruple* over—like, you’d think she was trying to touch her toes the way she lurched.

“A-Andou,” said Sayumi, “I think everyone has one or two memories that they would very much prefer *not* to be dragged back into the light of day...”

“Right.”

“Therefore...I would like to ask you to never bring that bikini up again. For that matter, I’d prefer if you would scrub that entire incident from your memory, effective immediately.”

“...Riiight.”





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I couldn't explain why, but clearly, Sayumi considered that bikini to be a topic that must not be broached—a full-on taboo, if you will. *But seriously though, why? It looked like a totally ordinary swimsuit to me. I guess she was acting kinda weirdly sketchy the whole time she was wearing it, in retrospect.*

“The truth is that I had actually intended to wear *this* swimsuit to the pool, initially,” Sayumi explained. “Unfortunately, however, mistakes were made, and I wound up wearing the white swimsuit instead, and ultimately summer came to a close before I had the chance to wear this one at all. I’m glad an opportunity has arisen for me to correct that mistake.”

I nodded with newfound understanding. It looked like Sayumi had just as many swimsuit-related regrets as Tomoyo did.

“Huh? Whatcha doing, Juu?”

A new voice, this one cheerful and casual, caught my attention. I turned to see Hatoko strolling toward us. She was wearing the same swimsuit she’d worn when our families had gone to the beach together, though she’d ditched the sunglasses and flower this time around, it seemed.

“Why’re you all tied up?” asked Hatoko as she walked up to me.

“That’s kind of a long story. Forget that, though—what’s going on with *you*?” I asked as I looked up at Hatoko’s face, then turned my attention a few inches to her side, where Chifuyu had her chin resting on Hatoko’s shoulder. Apparently, Hatoko had carried her over on her back.

“Oh, you mean Chifuyu? I guess she’s not feeling super great right now,” Hatoko explained as she gently set Chifuyu down on the beach. Chifuyu clearly wasn’t up to standing at the moment, and she slumped prone on the sand like a withered piece of half-dried seaweed.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Chifuyu?” I asked.

“Andou... I don’t think I’m gonna make it...” Chifuyu weakly droned without budging an inch.

She was never the most energetic conversationalist, but she sounded even less spirited than usual now. Even Squirrely, who she was clutching in her arms,

looked a little droopy. Chifuyu was wearing a school swimsuit, by the way, which, I mean... On the one hand, it was a perfectly appropriate choice of swimwear for an elementary schooler, but on the other hand, something about it just felt faintly *wrong* to me. Weird, that.

“You’re not gonna make it...?” I repeated. “Why, do you feel sick? Did you get sunstroke? Actually, no, it can’t be that. The suns that *World Create* makes are an ultra convenient model that don’t generate any harmful UV radiation at all, so it’s gotta be something else.”

“I’m not sick. I just...feel...bad...”

“Oh, wait...is it because of, y’know, *that*?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Chifuyu grunted. “It’s *that*.”

I’d sort of seen this coming, and apparently I was right after all—a certain aspect of today’s outing had Chifuyu feeling thoroughly drained.

That’s when, just a few feet away from us, space itself seemed to suddenly distort. It was a plainly supernatural phenomenon that would make an ordinary person collapse on the spot out of sheer shock...but we, of course, had awakened to our own supernatural powers and were totally used to it. It was just a Gate—that is, a shortcut through space brought into being by *World Create*.

Chifuyu used Gates to get around on a regular basis. In fact, that was how she usually made her way to the literary club’s room after school. The first time she’d made one, right after our powers had awakened, I’d been all “Wh-What the heck is *that*?! What’s going on inside of it?! Are you seriously telling me that the power of genesis can make friggin’ *warp gates*?!” and stuff. It had thrown me for a serious loop, but nowadays, I was completely desensitized to them...at least, under normal circumstances. *This* Gate was pretty different from the ones I was familiar with—or, really, it was the person who’d passed through the gate that I wasn’t used to. She was, after all, obviously *not* Chifuyu.

“Hmm—I didn’t know this power was capable of this sort of thing. That must come in handy,” said the Gate’s user—a girl wearing a fairly modest one-piece swimsuit—as she stepped onto the beach. She vanished the Gate away, then took a moment to let out an admiring coo as she looked out over the stunningly



clear sky and the perfectly translucent seascape before her. “This is incredible! The ocean and the beach look exactly like I imagined them—actually, they’re even more amazing than I was picturing! I never realized that, uh... What was it called? *World Create*? Anyway, I never knew it gave you *this* much freedom to make things. What a power, honestly!”

Indeed. The person who had created the beach we were standing upon and the tropical scenery surrounding us was not, in fact, Chifuyu. Someone else had brought it into being—someone who had stolen *World Create* away and who had, seemingly, mastered it in an instant.

“All right, everyone! Let’s enjoy today, and our powers, for all they’re worth!” the girl—Kudou—exclaimed with a truly elated smile.

So, yeah. That’s about the size of it. Today, the literary club would be hanging out with the newly retired and now significantly less busy former president of the student council, Kudou Mirei.

Half a year ago, we’d awakened to supernatural powers...is the line I’ve been using for a good long while now, but at this point, saying that it’d happened “half a year ago” is starting to really strain credulity. To be technical about it, we’d awakened to our powers in September of last year...and right now, it’s October. In other words, it’d actually been over a year since our awakenings occurred.

But, I mean, it’s not like our momentous one-year superpower anniversary was marked by any change in particular. Our powers hadn’t disappeared, and we hadn’t suddenly awakened to any new ones either. It’d been more of a “Oh, hey, it’s been a year since we got our powers!” “Oh huh, you’re right,” sort of deal, at most.

In any case, I suppose that from now on, I should put it like this: a year ago, we’d awakened to supernatural powers. But of course, that phrasing leaves out one very important factor—or rather, one very important person. Another student at our school who was *not* a member of the literary club had awakened to her own power at a completely different time than the rest of us.

“Mwa ha ha... I see that *Grateful Robber* is as terribly potent a power as ever,

Kudou. I really am grateful we aren't enemies," I said, praising her from on high metaphorically as I literally stood up, freshly freed from the tree I'd been tied to. She really did deserve the praise too, considering how quickly and completely she'd mastered *World Create's* many uses.

Kudou Mirei was a third-year student in the same class as Sayumi, and she was also the former president of our school's student council, a position she'd held until very recently. Her power, which she'd awakened to in the spring of this year, was truly fearsome: the ability to rob others of their powers!

"Potent? Do you really think so? I've always thought of it as being pretty useless, honestly, considering I literally *can't* use it on its own," Kudou replied.

"What are you talking about?! Don't you have *any* idea how tremendously overpowered your ability is?!" I shouted, fists clenched with righteous fury. Kudou let out a frightened little yelp of shock, but that wasn't even close to enough to quell the roiling sea of flaming-hot pathos within me! "The power to steal other people's powers is so top-tier it should already be straight-up banned, and the requirement for you to use it is as lax as they come! And on top of all that, there's no limit to how many powers you can keep in stock? 'Overpowered' doesn't even begin to do it justice!"

Kudou was widely acknowledged (by me) to be the strongest character in our story. Whenever an argument arose (in my mind) about who would win in a no-holds-barred fight, she would always end up vying for the top spot. I had given her power the name *Grateful Robber* out of respect for its sheer, awe-inspiring potential, in fact!

There was, of course, a very good explanation for that name's intended meaning: it was supposed to express both the power's capacity to viciously and unilaterally tear its victims' abilities away from them—hence, robber—while at the same time conveying its wielder's pride and respect for those who became the targets of her conquest—hence, grateful. It was a *deep* friggin' name, if I do say so myself, and one that had most definitely *not* come about because I'd screwed up my English and wrote "grateful" when I meant to write "great." Nope. Never happened.

"I mean, if you say so, I guess...but honestly, it doesn't really matter to me

whether I'm overpowered or not," said Kudou.

"It doesn't *matter*?!" I gasped. "Don't tell me...you're so almighty that you've already ascended to a higher realm where strength and weakness are meaningless concepts?! Oh, the pride! The sheer arrogance of it all!"

"No, that's not what I meant at all. I just don't care," Kudou said with an uncomfortable shrug. "I really don't see why it even matters who has the strongest power or whatever."

"...Right," I weakly grunted.

I was feeling something close to vertigo—like I might fall over backward at any second. She didn't care who was the strongest. It was just...just a *complete* denial of so many things that mattered to me. It was like she'd taken the values—nay, the *dignity*—of those precious few men such as myself who possessed the sort of warrior's spirit that society at large had forgotten and she'd severed them cleanly in two with a single stroke of her blade. If not even *this* mattered, then how big of an idiot was I for stepping beyond the bounds of my own series and constantly pondering who the strongest manga or light novel characters were in general? Was this one of those gender gap things? Who could even say?

"Okay, look. This is very important, Kudou, so I need you to listen closely," I said. "Having the power to steal your opponent's powers—or copy them, or anything in that general category—means you're one of two possible archetypes."

"'Archetypes'?"

"Either you're an outrageously potent powerhouse, or you're a hilariously pathetic joke character. No other options."

This is all just my personal opinion, of course, but the way I see it, the manner in which characters who steal or copy powers in supernatural battle stories are treated tends to swing to one of two wild extremes. Sometimes they're the single most powerful character in the series, and sometimes they get instantly curb-stomped the second they steal a power because they don't know how to use it properly and self-destruct as a result.



Characters that fall into the former category are usually either the protagonist of the series or its final boss. It's easy to see why—the power to steal powers is so profoundly appealing, it seriously gives me chills. As for characters who fall into the latter category, well...let's just say it usually doesn't end well for them. They generally end up stealing a power only to find that they can't use it well, or when they steal the protagonist's power it causes the protagonist to awaken to some mightier hidden potential that still slumbered within them, or something to that tune. One way or another, they get thrashed so thoroughly, you kinda have to feel bad for them. It's a really heaven-or-hell sort of archetype to get depending purely on which story you happen to be in.

“And that, Kudou, is why you can't take *Grateful Robber's* ultra-broken capabilities lightly! Rest on your power's laurels, and it's only a matter of time before you'll find yourself becoming the sort of character who gets constantly dunked on for cheap laughs. You have to keep up a strong, dignified image and make it clear to the world at large that you *are*, in fact, the mightiest—”

“I think it's time for you to give it a rest, Andou. You're making her uncomfortable,” said Sayumi, shutting down my impassioned speech midsentence before turning to Kudou. “I take it you've had no difficulties learning how to use Chifuyu's power, Kudou?”

“Nope. It was a piece of cake, Takanashi,” Kudou replied with a satisfied nod. She took a moment to look out over the surrounding landscape—the world that she'd manifested from her imagination—once more. “I was so busy with preparing for the cultural festival and touring colleges that I didn't get to go out and enjoy myself at all over our break. This feels like the perfect chance to make up for that and get the most out of summer!”

That, apparently, was why she'd decided to make a tropical paradise in particular. The part about touring colleges made sense, but I was a little surprised to hear her cite the cultural festival as part of her motivation as well. Our club had only started getting ready for it well after summer break had ended and the second semester had begun, but it seemed being the student council president had meant that Kudou had needed to start working on the festival before summer was even over. Maybe that was why the event had been such a roaring success—I'd heard that we'd had something to the tune of three

times the usual number of outside visitors this year compared to our school's average.

It struck me all over again that Kudou really was a student council president that our school could be proud of...but as of the other day, that role had come to an end for her. The cultural festival's stunning success had been the previous student council's last shebang, and Kudou had handed off her post to the second-year student who'd won this year's election just the other day, stepping down after having carried out her duties to perfection. For the past year, she'd spent every afternoon working for the sake of the school as a whole, but now she was finally free to spend her after-school time for herself instead.

"I appreciate this, Andou," said Kudou as she looked me squarely in the eye. "I was really happy to hear that you'd decided to put this event together just for me."

"I-I mean, it's not like this was for *you* or anything," I stammered. "I've been wanting to conduct a thorough inspection of *Grateful Robber's* capabilities for a while now, actually!"

"O-Oh, really?" said Kudou. "It lined up so perfectly with me retiring from the student council that when you told me about your plans for today, I just assumed that it was supposed to be a celebration of all the hard work I did or something. I was really happy about that, but...I see. I guess I was just jumping to conclusions..."

"Gaaah! No, no, I lied! We really did put this whole event together for you! That was the point from the very start!" I rattled off in a panic. Kudou had taken my awkward denial completely at face value and had started to seem genuinely disappointed for a second.

*Hmm. This isn't the first time this thought's crossed my mind, but man...Kudou's really bad at picking up on when people joke around or aren't perfectly straightforward with her.*

She was serious to a fault, in a sense—she'd treat everything that people told her with the utmost sincerity, but as a result, she had a bad habit of taking anything and everything completely seriously even when she really shouldn't. As a direct result, she had a tendency to find herself the victim of some pretty

intense misunderstandings, and one of those misunderstandings had once led to, well...let's just say it wasn't pretty and move right along.

"But anyway, if you want to thank someone for this, it should be all of us, not just me. We all planned the event together. Actually," I added, as I glanced at the ground, "Chifuyu could probably use a bit of gratitude right about now. Lending you *World Create* hasn't exactly been easy on her."

Chifuyu was, in fact, still lying prone on the beach. Hatoko was doing her best to rouse her, but as of yet, she'd shown no signs of recovery. Losing *World Create*, it seemed, had been a more serious blow to cope with than we'd realized.

"You okay, Chifuyu?" I asked.

"Andou... I think I'm dying," Chifuyu rasped lifelessly. "I can't make any toys, or clothes, or a bed, or plushies... If I want to go somewhere, I can't just pop over right away... I can't remember how I used to live like this all the time. I can't do anything. I don't wanna do anything..."

*...Welp. This sure looks like a terminal case of sloth.* The instant I'd learned about *World Create*'s capabilities, my very first thought had been "Oh, wow, this is the sort of power that would *definitely* ruin its user's ability to function in society." Chifuyu, meanwhile, had started out with societal-dropout energy even before she'd obtained her power, so she'd succumbed to its almighty allure the instant she'd gotten hold of it. I could only imagine the life of pure indolence she enjoyed when she was alone at home, and having the power that enabled it abruptly stripped from her had turned her into what I could only describe as an unusually hefty beachbound sea cucumber.

"Umm... Chifuyu? If this is that difficult for you, I can always just give you your power back," said Kudou, who apparently couldn't stand to watch said sea-cucumberification any longer.

Chifuyu, however, shook her head. "I'm...okay. I said I'd give it to you today...and I meant it," she groaned as she made an honest effort to force herself to her feet. "I'm a good kid...so I can get by...without my power..."

Chifuyu gritted her teeth, arms and legs trembling, and finally managed to stand herself upright. She'd broken the chains of her own laziness and lethargy,

overcoming their temptation by planting her own two feet upon the ground once more. The mind boggled to imagine how great a feat of willpower and endurance that must have been for her.

“Kudou,” Chifuyu said between gasps and wheezes, “thanks for being the student council president. Good work.”

Kudou let out a quiet gasp. “Th-Thank you, Chifuyu,” she said, taking the little girl’s hand and shaking it vigorously as emotion overwhelmed her...and, for that matter, me. I was barely holding back my tears as I watched off to the side.

*Oh my god, Chifuyu, how are you this precious?! You’re a literal angel, I swear!* I thought...but, I mean, when I thought about it just a *little* harder, it did sorta strike me that she’d barely done anything at all. Still, judging using the Chifuyu scale, even the slightest bit of effort came across as a truly staggering undertaking, so I had to give her credit.

“Oh, huh— I guess we’re all here,” I noted.

Tomoyo, it seemed, had returned to the group at some point in between me getting untied and now. That meant that all of the event’s attendees were present: the five members of the literary club, plus Kudou acting as our silver or gold ranger, to put it in Sentai terms. For the first time in ages, the whole group was back together.

“Mwa ha ha... So, we’ve finally come together once more. The Chosen Sextet have gathered anew to resound our divine melody! The time has come! Let us inscribe a hexagram upon this beach, each of us standing upon one of its points, and then—”

“Hold on, Andou. Could I have a moment first?” said Kudou, brushing me aside right as I was getting to the good part and stepping forward. “There’s one matter that I have to settle before anything else...with you, Kanzaki.”

Kudou stopped directly in front of Tomoyo, who gaped at her.

“Huh? M-Me?” said Tomoyo.

“I owe you an apology, Kanzaki.”

“An apology? Um... Wait, *do* you? I don’t remember anything offhand.”



“I do. I said something to you that was completely indefensible, and I want to take this chance to formally apologize for that mistake.”

“Huuuh,” Tomoyo grunted. She still seemed confused by this development, but Kudou carried on with a look of total earnestness anyway.

“Several months ago...specifically, during the period when I’d misunderstood the intentions of Andou’s letter, I barged into the literary club’s room,” Kudou began.

An intense awkwardness suddenly blanketed the beach. The event that she was referring to was, well...honestly, it was something I would’ve preferred to not remember at all. I’d never be able to forget it, but boy, did I ever wish that I could. That applied to all of us, and I would’ve thought that it would’ve been an especially painful memory for Kudou in particular, so I was more than a little surprised to hear her bring it up herself.

“Kanzaki...I’m truly sorry for making light of your bust size in front of your friends!”

Kudou bowed as deeply as she could. It was an apology among apologies—as full of sincerity as it could have possibly been.

“Huh...? Wh-Wh-*Whaaaaaa*?!” Tomoyo shrieked. She didn’t just blush—her whole *body* turned beet red in an instant.

“I’ve regretted it ever since. I have no idea what possessed me to say something that horrible,” said Kudou. “Back then, I was, um...I was just a little worked up, really. I let my emotions get the better of me, and they drove me to say something incredibly thoughtless. I can’t apologize enough, but I hope you’ll forgive me for my indiscretion.”

“H-Huh?! N-No, wait, wait, wait... *What*?!” Tomoyo babbled.

“I’m ashamed to think that I belittled a peer’s body type. That’s not something that anyone should do for any reason, and I profoundly regret it. I expect better of myself.”

“O-Okay, no, just stop! You don’t have to apologize for this! Actually, you

didn't have to drag it back up again to begin with!"

"I *do* have to apologize, though. These things have to be settled, clearly and plainly. And so, Kanzaki...I'm truly sorry for saying such a terrible thing about the size of your brea—"

"Oh my god, you do *not* have to get this specific about it! I can barely even bring myself to listen to this... Anyway, it's *fine*, okay? I'd totally forgotten you even said all that stuff!"

"That's no good reason—"

"Would you just *listen*—"

What we had here was a spectacle of a perpetrator attempting to make an entirely sincere apology, and a victim suffering intense psychological damage on account of said apology. Kudou was just...just so friggin' *serious* about *everything*! She was the sort of person who didn't even know the meaning of flexibility! The sort of person who would never, *ever* tell a lie!

She wasn't wrong, in a sense. If you slip up and carelessly say something hurtful, it's only right to apologize...but what she'd failed to consider was that everything is circumstantial, and in this particular circumstance, the harder she pressed her apology, the sorrier I felt for poor Tomoyo. It was like... Okay, if goodwill was a knife, then every word Kudou said was gouging that knife deeper into Tomoyo's soul. *Closed Clock* was unbeatable in a fight, but it was completely incapable of thwarting Kudou's verbal violence.

"Agh, *seriously*, it's *fine*! I honestly didn't even care at *all*!" Tomoyo shouted, her indignant frustration finally erupting with the force of a volcano. "A-And why are you bringing this up *now*, anyway?! It's been *ages* since that whole thing happened!"

"That would be because I for—" Kudou began, then coughed. "I, um, was very busy with a variety of—"

"‘For—’ what?! You totally almost said that you forgot, didn't you?! Wait, does that mean that you were lying about having regretted it this whole time too?!"

"N-No, it doesn't! I wasn't lying. I really did know that I needed to apologize

to you eventually. I just kept trying to find the perfect time to do it, and I ended up putting it off over and over again...”

“And *this* is supposed to be the perfect timing?! Why today?!”

“That,” said Kudou, her gaze fixed firmly upon Tomoyo’s chest, “would be because the moment I saw you wearing a swimsuit, I thought, ‘Oh, that’s right. I still need to apologize to her.’”

The light drained from Tomoyo’s eyes. There was nothing *malicious* about how Kudou had said it, per se. She’d just taken so little care to mince words, you could easily imagine her saying something along the lines of “‘Subtlety’? That’s when they put words on the screen so you can understand what people are saying in foreign movies, right?” without a trace of irony. In any case, it wasn’t long before Tomoyo’s hollow, vacant expression slowly began to twist into a distorted grin.

“...Kye ki ki!”

*O-Oh god—she’s busting out the kye-ki-ki laugh again?!*

This was *not* a good sign. Tomoyo’s mind had shorted out under the pressure of multiple cheap shots to her flat chest! That last jab had been such a shock, it’d made her regress to her eighth-grade self! She’d returned to chuuni-era Tomoyo—the version that I’d first met way back in the day!

*Actually...wait a second. Is it just me, or is this basically the same thing that’d happened back when—*

“You whelp... Did you truly believe that you could make a fool of me, she who is called the Witch of Antinomy Who Smirks in the Face of Twilight: Endless Paradox, and live to tell the tale?! Superterminal Climax...Winged Blades of—”

“Hmph. Too easy.”

“—Briaugh?!”

Tomoyo was all ready to unleash her power to the fullest of its lethal potency, but the instant she snapped her fingers—the trigger she’d picked to show she was about to use it—Kudou snatched *Closed Clock* away from her, leaving her to collapse to the sandy ground in a stupor. The battle had lasted all of half a

second, and it'd ended in Kudou's unambiguous victory. All I could say was déjà vu.

"Ugh..."

"Ah! Sorry, Kanzaki! That was a reflex," Kudou said with an awkward half grimace. Tomoyo, meanwhile, was trembling in shame at the sheer speed and efficiency of her own spectacular self-destruction.

"But you know, Kanzaki, this reminds me that I've been meaning to ask you something," Kudou continued. "Why do you go out of your way to tell everyone when you're about to stop time?"

"Eep?!" Tomoyo squeaked, her eyes widening.

"As you know, I can't use my power to steal someone else's unless I see them using it first. In other words, if you used your power *without* announcing it, then there would be nothing I could do about it."

She'd hit the nail on the head. Kudou was right: *Closed Clock* was, per popular consensus, the ultimate trump card against *Grateful Robber*. There was no way to perceive someone using their power while time was stopped. Clearly Kudou could still steal *Closed Clock* if she could pick out the precise moment that Tomoyo intended to stop time, but that moment really was the smallest of split seconds. The timing requirements would be *seriously* severe...and yet as of just now, Kudou had managed it twice in a row.

How? Simple: both times, Tomoyo had taken the time to drop a catchphrase before she used her power. She'd even done the finger snap, which, it must be said, was *completely* superfluous. She'd basically gone out of her way to shout "Okay, I'm gonna stop time now! What're you gonna do about it?!"

*I mean, I get it, Tomoyo. I understand exactly how you feel, trust me. The fact that keeping quiet would win you the fight is absolutely not a good enough reason to go out of your way to fight in silence!*

"I have a few other questions as well, while I'm at it. Like that noise you made a moment ago—'Kye ki ki'? What *was* that? Were you *laughing*? Why would you suddenly start laughing in such a bizarre way?"

"..."



“And you said that people call you Endless Paradox...? Do they really? What sort of outlandish nickname is that? Are you being bullied? For the record, if you ever need someone to talk to about that sort of social trauma, I’m available anytime.”

“...”

“Also, did you say ‘whelp’...? *Huh?* Why ‘whelp,’ of all the words?”

“...”

*Stop... Just stop, Kudou, please! Tomoyo can’t survive much more of this! She’s clenching her teeth so hard, I can practically hear them creak under the pressure! The wound’s already well seasoned, so you don’t need to keep salting it!*

I could understand Tomoyo’s shame and frustration painfully, *excruciatingly* well—far more so than the vast majority of people probably could, in fact. Having your behavior picked apart by pointed questions asked by an overly serious stick-in-the-mud *sucked*, and boy, did I ever know it from experience! I’d been through a very similar bout of psychological torment thanks to Chifuyu’s friend, Kuki, back when she’d come to visit the literary club. She’d picked apart each and every thing I’d said and done by the seams... It was torturous, honestly.

Kuki and Kudou formed an odd sort of pair. They’d never met, but their mutual dedication to excessive seriousness and tendency toward terrible misunderstandings made them oddly reminiscent of each other. I had a feeling that they might hit it off if they ever met—they could probably sing a mean duet together.

“U-U-U-Ugaaahhhhhhhhh!”

In all likelihood, Tomoyo had long since passed her limit. She let out a half scream, half wail, activated *Closed Clock*, and curled up in fetal position, just like — Ah, wait, no, scratch that. Tomoyo’s go-to move when her shame meter had maxed out as of late was *usually* to stop time, curl up in a corner, and sulk...but at the moment, *Closed Clock* was in Kudou’s possession. In other words, Tomoyo would just have to sulk like a normal person.

Just as I was thinking *Sheesh, fine, I guess I'll go bail her out of this somehow*, though, I—or rather, *we*—witnessed something unbelievable: Tomoyo, who we'd all *just* witnessed go through a hyperdramatic emotional outburst, just sort of...casually stood up again. Her face was still pretty red, but her expression was relatively calm, all things considered.

Tomoyo let out a heavy sigh. “Ugggh, this blows. Why does it always turn out like this?” she grumbled as she turned on her heel and started walking away from us. “This is all Kudou’s fault, seriously. Why’d she have to go after my boobs *again*...? They’re not even *that* small, for crying out loud! I-I mean, sure, they are compared to hers, or Sayumi’s, or Hatoko’s...b-but they’ve grown a little lately! A whole centimeter!”

She was just...grumbling to herself. It was almost as if she didn’t know we were there, or—

*No. No, it couldn't be...but what if...? D-Does... Does Tomoyo think that she actually stopped time just now?! Was the shock of it all so intense that she actually forgot that Kudou stole Closed Clock from her?! Did she just jump straight into her usual routine?! Surely not, right? But, I mean, I just can't think of any other reason she'd—*

“...WRYYYYYYYYYY! Ahhh, okay! I feel a little better now.”

*Oh god, no doubt about it—that's exactly what's happening here! She's one hundred percent convinced that she stopped time! No way would she ever bust out a pose like that in front of us otherwise! Agggh, god... Wh-What the hell are we supposed to do now?!*

“Oh, crap! Gotta get moving before time starts again—I need to pick a good sulking spot.”

*A what now?!*

“Not being in the club room makes this such a pain. Where should I even go? I can't go too far away or they won't even find me.”

*I...guess that was all calculated, huh? She was always planning out her whole fetal-position-in-the-corner shticks from the very beginning? Seriously, Tomoyo, just how starved for attention are you?*

Of course, when I really stopped to think about it, curling up in a ball in the corner to sulk was about as conspicuous of a “Look at me, I’m depressed” signal as you could possibly send. I mean, don’t get me wrong—I *got* it, okay? I totally understood that sometimes when you’re depressed, you can’t help but choose a place where people are sure to see you being sad. It’s like how you sometimes find yourself heaving really big, exaggerated sighs in the hope that somebody will notice and be all “Hey, are you okay?” or “Did something happen?” or whatever.

The problem, of course, was that Tomoyo was doing all of that completely transparently, and it was just...*really* hard to watch. In her misapprehension that time had stopped, Tomoyo had shown us her *whole* ass, metaphorically speaking. The urge to look away was overwhelming. The secondhand shame: indescribable. I *actually* felt sort of nauseous. It was just...just...agggh. *Aaaaaaaggghhhhhhhh...*

Very, very quietly, taking great care to make sure that Tomoyo wouldn’t notice, I turned just my head, just enough to make eye contact with Hatoko and Sayumi. The two of them looked back at me and instantly nodded in understanding. The look in their eyes was intensely serious. It seemed we were all of one mind: there was no choice but to see this through.

All of us would have to keep standing there, perfectly still, and act as if time was, in fact, actually stopped. It was our only option. After all, if Tomoyo learned the truth, there was a very real chance that she might actually, literally end herself. The flat chest jokes had already put her mental state into a precarious position, and if we beat the dead horse that was her psyche any longer, her heart would shatter to pieces. And so, our only option was to back her up to the bitter end. For the sake of her psyche, every one of us would come together and play along with her ridiculous misunderstanding. We’d ride out this game of red light, green light to hell and back again!

The success or failure of our mission would hinge entirely on our ability to work as a team. If even one of us wasn’t with the program, then Tomoyo would figure out what was going on before we knew it. There were two things that I could imagine screwing us over—or, more precisely, two people. First up was Kudou. I couldn’t blame her for this, of course, but the simple fact of the matter

was that she just hadn't spent as much time with the crew as the rest of us had. Would we be able to communicate the plan to her without saying so much as a word?

I anxiously made eye contact with Kudou, and she gave me a nod. Her signal was clear: "No need to worry." That's when it suddenly hit me—all sound had just...stopped. The sound of the wind and the sound of the waves had vanished, almost as if the world itself had come to a standstill...

*Oh! Of course! Kudou had used a supernatural power to create this whole space, meaning that everything about it, climate and weather conditions included, is under her control! Making the space behave as if time's been stopped wouldn't be impossible for her at all!*

*Phew—looks like I've been underestimating her. Not only is she totally on the same page as the rest of us, she's backing us up in the biggest way possible! You're one of us, Kudou. There's no doubting that anymore!*

I gave Kudou a spirited thumbs-up, and she responded with a modest "Nah, it wasn't that big of a deal" sort of bashful grin. And, I mean...she *was* sorta the root cause of this whole problem to begin with, but I decided to not let that bother me for the time being. The point was that Kudou was clearly not going to be a problem, so I could turn my attention to the other source of potential disaster, Chifuyu.

To be completely honest...Chifuyu was so much more of a cause for concern than Kudou, I almost felt bad comparing the two of them. At times like these, her behavior was completely impossible to predict. If there was one thing that we *could* count on being consistent, it was her total inability to take a hint.

I fearfully turned to check on her, and sure enough, the bug-eyed look on Chifuyu's face as she gawked at the rest of us told me that she had no clue what was happening. It was an expression that said she could pipe up to ask why none of us were moving at literally any second. I *had* to intervene.

I reached out and very gently tapped Chifuyu's shoulder. She turned toward me, and I gave her a look. And I mean, like, a *look*. I looked like I'd never looked before. I looked so hard, I could practically feel the veins bulging on my forehead. If I wanted to make Chifuyu the Clueless actually take a hint for once,

I could spare no effort in the eye contact department. This was one of those times where a little too much was just enough.

*Come on, pick up on it! Let my feelings flow through you, Chifuyu! This is the perfect time for us to miraculously read each other's minds!*

Chifuyu's eyes widened. My no-holds-barred stare, it seemed, had gotten through to her after all, and I heaved a very quiet sigh of relief...and then, for some reason, Chifuyu gave me a *weirdly* bashful smile.

*Uh. So, umm...what does that expression mean? She looks, like, half embarrassed and half weirdly in control? That really feels like an "Oh, you" smile, if you ask me!*

It was the sort of look that you'd give to your rambunctious little brother, or to your slightly younger boyfriend, and Chifuyu was giving it to *me*, for god knows what reason. Then, a moment later, she closed her eyes and very slightly pursed her lips. That one, at least, was easy to interpret: it was the face of a girl who was waiting for a boy to kiss her.





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“But *why*, though?!” I bellowed with all my might. I could *not* let that pass by without comment. I just didn’t have it in me.

“Huh?” grunted Chifuyu. “You don’t want to kiss, Andou?”

“No! *Hell* no! And, like, *why*?! Why would you *ever* assume that was what was happening there?!”

“You were giving me a really intense look.”

“And that leads to the kiss conclusion how, exactly?!”

“I thought it meant you wanted to kiss again.”

“Hgghkh!”

“I thought the first kiss was so unforgettable, you wanted to do it again.”

“R-Right, point made... I get it, Chifuyu, so please just stop talking about that. I’m seriously dying of embarrassment over here...”

“A-Andou? Wh-What is she talking about? You *k-kissed* Chifuyu...?”

“Huh? Kudou...? Oh, right! You weren’t there for that!”

“You *didn’t*—”

“No, I didn’t! I mean, I can’t say it didn’t *happen*, but... H-Hatoko! Sayumi! Tag in! Help me explain how all that—”

“...!”

“Why are *you two* blushing?!”

“Wh-What did you expect, Juu? I mean... I *mean*...”

“I-I’m afraid you’re going to have to look elsewhere for assistance, Andou. This is beyond us.”

“Come ooon, guys!”

“Andou? I hope you’ve got a *very* good explanation for this.”

“Yeah, Andou. You’d better explain this.”

“Why are *you* on Kudou’s side, Chifuyu?! You’re taking bandwagon jumping a step too far this time! And anyway, this is no time for us to be arguing! We can’t

afford to fall apart here! We're supposed to be covering for Tomoyo's excruciatingly embarrassing mistake right now, so we have to get on the same page and stay *totally silent* until— Oh."

My shouted rant came to an abrupt conclusion as, with a synchronized "Oh," all of us came to the same realization, all at once. We turned in unison...and found that Tomoyo was gone. There wasn't the slightest sign she'd ever been here in the first place. Only the quiet lapping of the waves remained in her wake.

And so, on that day, Kanzaki Tomoyo vanished without a trace, never to be seen or heard from again.

...So, obviously, that was just a joke.

The rest of us talked it through, and we decided that the best thing we could possibly do for Tomoyo was just leave her alone for the time being. The psychological wounds she'd surely suffered this time were just...unfathomable, honestly. Her human dignity had been unceremoniously dumped into one of the deepest pits I'd ever witnessed, and there was nothing our words could do to lift her out of there, so we chose to refrain from searching for her and elected to enjoy ourselves instead. Tomoyo would probably sort of just show up out of nowhere before long, and we would all act as if nothing had happened whatsoever. Sometimes feigned ignorance is the greatest kindness you can offer.

In the meantime, we moved right along to our first activity: beach volleyball! A quick game of rock-paper-scissors put Hatoko on my team, while Sayumi and Kudou were our opponents. Chifuyu would be our "referee," which was her way of saying that she'd be sitting this one out.

"Over here, Hatoko!" I shouted.

"Okaay! Here goes, Juu!" Hatoko called back as she bumped the ball into the air.

Hatoko had always been surprisingly athletic, and the ball sailed right into the perfect position for me to kick off the sandy ground, leap as high as I could into the air, and smack it down into the other side of the court. I'd seriously

considered trying to pull off the Freak Quick Attack for a moment, but I'd ended up scuttling that idea after I realized how scary it would be to jump for a spike with my eyes closed in real life.

Our opponents were both standing in the back half of their side of the court. Nobody was around to block me or obstruct my vision.

*I get it now! This is what people mean when they talk about the view from the summit!*

I focused on the ball, and swung my arm with everything I had, and...

...Whoosh!

"H-Huh?!"

Tragically, my attack ended up being more of a misfire. My fingertips had just barely skimmed the ball. Apparently, trying to pull off a jumping spike was a little overambitious for an amateur like me. The ball bounced upward in a slow, gentle curve that I *definitely* hadn't planned for, but by a stroke of sheer luck, it'd just barely managed to clear the net.

"Oh, nice! Talk about a lucky... Ah, uh, d-did you see that? Witness my secret technique, the...uh, the...the secret one!" I blathered. I'd been so surprised by my own success, I couldn't come up with a technique name in time.

*Damnations, I expect better from me!*

The ball dropped straight down, just on the other side of the net, and since I'd put everything I had into that all-out whiff, it had inadvertently turned into the perfect feint. Both of our opponents had read my form and prepared themselves for a spike toward the back of the court, and no human could possibly make it all the way up to the net from back there in time, especially considering we were playing on sand. The point was mine—

"In your dreams!"

I couldn't believe my eyes. The instant before the ball touched down, one of our opponents had appeared out of thin air in a perfect receiver's stance. It was like she'd been standing there from the very beginning—she'd just jumped from one position to the other, cutting out all the movement in between. It could only have been *Closed Clock*, Kanzaki Tomoyo's signature power of temporal

dominance...but of course, Tomoyo wasn't the one currently in possession of said power.

"Takanashi!" Kudou called out as she flawlessly received the ball. She'd put herself exactly where she needed to be to intercept it with ease, passing it to Sayumi, who then passed it back overhand.

The very instant the ball cleared Sayumi's fingertips, Kudou, who just moments before had been crouched down right by the net, was suddenly in midair. She swung without hesitation and spiked the ball directly into the sandy beach below.

All told, I gave Kudou's attack an A for Abnormal. She'd disregarded the rules of spacetime so freely that words didn't do it justice, and Hatoko and I had been completely incapable of even *trying* to stop her.

"H-Hooly crap, she's good," I muttered.

"Y-Yeah," Hatoko agreed. "The power to stop time sure is incredible, huh, Juu?"

"Tell me about it."

"I never realized from any of the times Tomoyo's used it!"

"...Tell me about it," I agreed once more, a little less eagerly. She'd said it so casually, I almost hadn't realized what a brutal diss it had actually been.

The power to control time freely, one would think, would give you the capability to play any sport under the sun at a world-class level. With it, you could theoretically take down the best players on Earth with ease. Tomoyo, however, was a total klutz with disaster-tier athletic capabilities, and she had never figured out how to make the most of her power in a sporting environment.

We'd used our club time to engage in all sorts of recreational activities in the past, and her results in pretty much all of them had been...lacking. When we'd played tennis, she'd stop time, rush over to the ball, then hit it straight into the net. When we'd played volleyball, she'd stop time, run into a receiving position, then bump the ball directly out of bounds. Basketball was somehow the most painful of them all—she'd been completely untouchable on defense, but she'd



just never been able to shoot to save her life. She'd stop time to steal the ball, then stop time again to go on a one-woman offensive, only to miss the hoop by a mile despite throwing from right next to it. Like, what can you even say to that? It'd been the sort of performance that demoralized the whole court, teammates and opponents alike.

"Man, you really got us there, Kudou," I said. "You've mastered *Closed Clock* already, huh?"

At the moment, Kudou had both *World Create* and *Closed Clock* in stock. As far as I knew, this was probably the first time she'd ever been in possession of two stolen powers at the same time. I'd half expected her power to reveal some sort of weakness when she stole the second one, but she'd proved perfectly capable of using them both at once without issue.

"Sorry about that," replied Kudou. "I was just so curious, I couldn't help but give *Closed Clock* a try. That was definitely cheating, though—I won't use it from now on."

"What? No, no, it's fine! Feel free to use it as you please! After all, this isn't beach volleyball...it's *superpowered* beach volleyball!" I said with a bold and confident grin.

We got back into position and resumed the match. Sayumi served the ball, and a rally began.

"Hmm. If you're sure about that, then I guess I'll take you up on it!" Kudou said, then she suddenly appeared directly in front of the net, hands raised in the air to intercept the ball.

She was blocking aggressively, reaching over the net in an effort to swat the ball to the ground before it even left her opponent's side of the court. A move like that wasn't easy to pull off—it took serious technique, not to mention foresight and precision. With *Closed Clock* on your side, however, it would be like taking candy from a baby...assuming you had, like, at least average-level athletic ability and stuff, I mean. Anyway, there was no chance in hell that a rank-and-file volleyball amateur like me could cope with hyperdimensional volleyball tactics like that...or at least, not on my own, I couldn't have!

"Let's do this, Hatoko! Just like we planned!" I shouted.

“You got it, Juu!” Hatoko called back. With that, the two of us sprang into motion!

*Oooh, nice! We nailed that!* We were moving with incredible coordination, and you could just *tell* that we were about to pull out some sort of combo attack. If this were one of the more recent *Tales* games, this would be the bit where we got a super cool cut-in animation!

“Seethe, O thrice-damned flames of hell! *Dark and Dark!*” I chanted, swapping in a short-form Malediction substitute as I activated my power—full-length incantations just aren’t suited to sports, unfortunately. In any case, the words that I, the conqueror of chaos, spoke served as the trigger to open the gates of hell, sending a burst of jet-black flame surging across my right arm!

Meanwhile, off to the side, Hatoko was busy making her own preparations. “Heeere goes!” she shouted as she waved her hands in the air, forming a raging gale in the process. She’d used one of *Over Element*’s five domains: the power of wind!

The tropical wind was soon blowing so fiercely it resembled a tornado, with Hatoko and I standing in the eye of the storm, and the ball that Kudou had very nearly managed to slam back into our side was caught up in the breeze, wafting its way to a touchdown all the way outside of the court. It was out—in other words, the point was ours.

“Mwa ha ha!” I cackled. “Bear witness to the Unison Skill of *Dark and Dark* and *Over Element*: Crimson Dread: Gale Lord Mode!”

The true latent power of Hatoko’s ability could only be unlocked when it was supplemented by my stygian flames. Through them, each of her five elements could be elevated to a higher domain, resulting in a dramatic class change! Among the five modes of Crimson Dread, the Gale Lord mode was all but unparalleled in games like volleyball or ping-pong, where ambient winds could easily alter the course of the ball. In short, she could hit a Tezuka Phantom no matter *what* sport she was playing, as long as there was a ball involved!



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“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Did you see that?! This is the true might of our powers combined!” I shouted.

“That’s right!” Hatoko chimed in. “This is *our* power!”

“Ugh,” Kudou grunted, gritting her teeth with frustration. She’d thought that her time stop-enabled block had the point in the bag, but we’d gotten the better of her this time.

“I-I don’t understand,” said Kudou. “What did Andou’s power even contribute to that?”

I froze. She’d cut right to the crux of the matter in a single, extremely earnest question. I couldn’t exactly blame her for wondering about it, in all fairness—I’d more or less just turned my power on and stood to the side as Hatoko conjured up the actual tornado. But, like, just for the record, that’d actually been pretty hard to do! If I’d slipped up even a little, her wind would’ve blown my flames right out! I’d had to be *really* careful about how I’d manifested them! Imagine trying to keep a lighter lit in the middle of a typhoon—that’s about the difficulty level I’m talking here!

“Ha... Ha, ha, ha, ha!” I laughed, a little more stiffly than before. “It seems I’ve been overestimating you, Kudou!”

“Huh?” Kudou grunted.

“Perhaps it seemed, at a glance, that my *Dark and Dark* was accomplishing nothing...*however*! That’s only because the true glorious yet terrible intentions behind its use were far too cleverly hidden for the masses—that means you—to ever comprehend!”

“Wh-What...?! But...that’s impossible! Your power’s completely worthless! What sort of secret scheme could you have ever been using it for?!”

Sooo...on the one hand, I was glad that she’d bought my story, but on the other hand, the part where she’d called my power “completely worthless” had been a pretty heavy emotional blow. That’s why I decided to take the opportunity to mess with her a little.

“Oooh? Wait, so you really *didn’t* get it, Kudou?” I said.

That's right—I'd resorted to a secret art commonly bound to the select button in console fighting games: the taunt! It was a skill that allowed me to use what both I and those around me acknowledged as one of my most potent traits—my obnoxiousness—to its fullest potential.

...Yup. Acknowledged by everyone, including me. Even I have to admit that's a little sad.

"You've got the best grades in your year, so I just *assumed* you'd be able to figure out something this simple with ease," I said.

"Wh-What...?" muttered Kudou.

"Wow, for real, huh? I guess you just don't get it! Guess this plan was just a little too high-level for you to keep up with! You're working a step below our pay grade! You're in a class of your own, that happens to be below ours! You're just not ready to step up to our stage!"

"U-Ugh..."

"But honestly, that's nothing to be embarrassed about! It's totally reasonable. Stuff like this is just *hard* for ordinary people to figure out! I should apologize, honestly—I totally forgot that I was one of the chosen ones for a second there. Should've tried harder to stay on your level!"

"D-Don't you dare make light of me! I-I get it now! That's right, I figured it out! I've seen through your pathetic little scheme, and—"

"Please don't fall for his cheap provocations, Kudou. You're making light of *yourself* by taking his nonsense at face value," said Sayumi. She'd jumped in to save the day just as Kudou was starting to get dangerously worked up. "And as for you, Andou, I'd appreciate it if you'd restrain yourself. Provoking people may be your strong suit, but I have to say that it's rather cowardly of you to lean on that skill because you couldn't win with your power itself."

"Please...at least say that *fast-talking* people is my strong suit," I groaned. *What sort of skill is "provoking" people supposed to be? That sounds like the most bit-villain-coded talent imaginable!*

"Mwa ha ha—very well. And yet, details aside, our Unison Skill remains unbeatable! Our defense is impregnable—our power, superlative! That's right:

*our* power!” I said, putting as much emphasis on the “our” as I possibly could while I wreathed my arm in black flame once more. Hatoko took that as her signal to conjure the whirlwind up again, forming a barricade of wind around our side of the court. “From now on, this will be the game’s default state!”

The wall of wind formed a completely impenetrable defense, but that wasn’t all—Hatoko had also covered the ground on our side of the court in a barrier of compressed air! Between those two factors, I knew I’d come up with a battle plan that *Closed Clock* would be completely incapable of coping with (as long as we were playing beach volleyball).

The big, flashy tornado was, in truth, a trap—as in, a decoy to draw our enemies’ attention, not a means to physically ensnare them! There are just so many types of traps out there, it’s hard to pick just one sometimes.

Anyway, back on topic—thanks to the layer of compressed air covering the ground, even if Kudou stopped time to get the ball through the tornado, it would just end up floating in the air on our side of the court, and if it didn’t touch the sand, then our opponents wouldn’t score a point. It was a flawless plan, if I may say so myself!

*The power to stop time: vanquished! Let’s see how you cope with our perfect defense, Team Third-Years!*

“If you would, Kudou,” said Sayumi.

“On it,” Kudou replied.

“Bwehhh,” Hatoko moaned as she crumpled to the beach. Kudou had brought out *Grateful Robber* once more and stolen *Over Element*, just like that.

“What in the— Oh, come *on*! Just a friggin’ second! That is *not* fair, Kudou!” I shouted.

“How do you figure?” asked Kudou. “You’re the one who said we’re playing superpowered beach volleyball, aren’t you?”

“I mean, I did, yeah...but that doesn’t mean there aren’t *any* lines that shouldn’t be crossed!”

*Grateful Robber* was a power that just couldn’t be beaten in a straight-up



fight. In other words, if Kudou decided to use it on you mid battle, there was simply no way for you to resist her.

“Listen up, Kudou,” I said. “The single most important skill for a superpowered beach volleyball player to have is the ability to read the room! I mean, yes, I get it—there’s always that small part of you that wonders, ‘Why doesn’t he *open* with the Spacium Beam?’ or ‘Why doesn’t he just use the Spirit Bomb at the *start* of the fight?’ but you have to accept the fact that pulling out your finishing move first thing is fundamentally *wrong*! It screws up the power scale, you know? That’s really the essence of what I’m trying to say here.”

“Andou,” Kudou said with a troubled frown, “have I ever told you that almost nothing you say ever makes sense to me?”

Meanwhile, off to my side, Hatoko seemed downright devastated to find herself stripped of her power. “Aww... I’m sorry, Juu! She took *Oven Element* away from me...”

“Are you...*sad*, Hatoko? I see... So, you’ve finally begun to develop an attachment to your power. How terribly ironic, to learn of your love for your power at the exact moment it’s stripped away from you... Though, heh, I guess that’s just what it means to be human. We’re foolish beings, never able to perceive the blessings we’ve already been granted, always reaching in vain for illusory fortune that we believe must surely— *Hey!* I’ve told you a thousand times, it’s *Over Element*, not *Oven Element*!”

“Oooh, wow! You really dragged out the buildup to that punch line, Juu!”

“Hey...Hatoko?”

“Yeah?”

“Be honest. You remember your power’s real name, don’t you?”

“...”

“I can accept that the names I come up with are a little hard to remember, but surely you know it by now, right? We’ve all been saying it over and over for a *year*!”

Hatoko awkwardly broke eye contact. A moment later, she let out a snicker.

“Hee hee hee! Guess you caught me!” she admitted.

“I *knew* you were doing it on purpose,” I sighed. “But why, though? What’s the point of pretending you forgot?”

“Oh, that’s because... Well, I mean... The banter’s been fun, you know? I think it’s funny to have a little gag you can shove in my face every once in a while,” Hatoko explained.

I couldn’t really argue against that—I’d been enjoying the banter just as much as she had, after all. “Well, that’s fine, I guess,” I said. “But look, Hatoko...could you at least be a little more careful about, y’know, your word choice?”

“Huh? What about my word choice?”

“I mean, like...the bit about me shoving it in your face, y’know...? Maybe don’t, like, *shout* that sort of thing?”

“Why not? I don’t mind if people know you shove things in my face,” said Hatoko with a look of complete bafflement.

Maybe this was on me. Maybe the fact that I couldn’t hear it as anything other than a euphemism was a sign that my heart had been corrupted. Alternately, maybe—*probably*—it was Sagami’s fault. Actually, yeah, I’m just gonna blame Sagami for this. *Definitely* all his fault.

In any case, Hatoko’s innocent gaze was starting to grow too painful for me to look at, so I glanced over at Kudou—that is to say, at the mighty plunderer who now held *three* superpowers in her possession—instead.

“So, she finally claimed Hatoko’s too, huh?” I muttered.

Not “took,” not “stole,” and definitely not “grabbed”—she’d *claimed* it. It might not’ve been quite as technically apt as some of the other options on the table, but in a situation like this, “claimed” was just the only word that felt *right* in an expressive sense. *Claiming things that aren’t yours: hella cool.*

“So, how’s it feel, Kudou? I know you said that there’s no limit to how many powers you can steal back when we first met, but does having three of them at once feel different from when you only have one, or anything?” I asked.

“Hmm... This isn’t exactly an answer to your question,” said Kudou, “but I just

learned that apparently, I can't use my power to steal two different powers at the same time."

"At the same time?" I repeated. I didn't quite understand what she was getting at.

"Right. You and Kushikawa both used your powers at the same time just now, right? Well, I tried to steal both of them, but I only ended up actually getting Kushikawa's."

In other words, she could *stock* as many powers at the same time as she pleased, but could only *steal* them one by one. It seemed that *Grateful Robber*, a power I'd thought was *all* powerful, had a single surprising drawback...if you could even call it that, considering how minor of a failing it was. Being able to steal your enemies' powers without any risk on your part was still stupidly busted, regardless.

"Then again, it could be a psychological thing," Kudou continued. "I *did* think, 'Honestly, I don't really need Andou's power' while I tried to steal them, after all."

"You thought *what*?! Why not?!" I barked.

"What...? I mean, I just *don't*."

"Well, you could at least try not to look so repulsed by the thought of having it!"

"I've stolen your power a few times already, and to be honest, I'm just bored with it."

"You're *bored*?! But *how*?! Stealing it over and over should've made you *more* attached to it! You're supposed to take care of the powers you steal! You're basically *Dark and Dark's* godmother, at this point!"

"I'm extremely uncomfortable with you calling me that."

"You're not even willing to admit it?! You're just going to keep insisting it's not your child to the bitter end?!"

"I'm also extremely uncomfortable with you treating me like a deadbeat dad!"

*Damnations! Damnations, I say! Why must my dear, sweet Dark and Dark go through this terrible treatment?! Why does everyone always act like it's such a black sheep of the superpower family?!*

*It's okay, Dark and Dark. Don't feel sad. I'll always be on your side! I know all sorts of incredible things about you, like how your color's hella cool, and how being all black makes you hella cool, and how your color... Yeah, wow, your color sure is hella cool... A-And how you're gonna keep me nice and warm as the weather gets chillier too!*

While I frantically consoled *Dark and Dark*, Kudou was off to the side being *incredibly* inconsiderate with *Over Element*. "Oh, wow! Talk about a strong flame," she muttered as she tested out its capacity for firepower...which was really, *really* high, judging by looks alone. *Oh, it is on, I swear!*

"This brings back memories of the first time you came to the literary club's room, doesn't it?" said Sayumi as she walked over to our side of the court. Hatoko having her power stolen had more or less naturally brought our game of superpowered beach volleyball to a close. "I recall you declaring that you'd come to steal all of our powers, at the time."

That'd actually slipped my mind until the moment Sayumi had brought it up. *Oh yeah*, I thought, *Kudou really did say something like that, with a big evil grin and everything*. I knew now that her whole persona back then had all been a bluff, but it struck me that, as of now, she had finally made good on her threat. She'd brought multiple god-tier superpowers under her sole and exclusive control.

"Hm? What? Why are you looking at me like that?" Kudou said as she noticed my stare and walked over to our side of the court as well.

"I was just thinking that, man, you're pretty ridiculously powerful right now," I admitted.

Out of the five powers in the literary club's arsenal, *Closed Clock*, *World Create*, and *Over Element* were all especially suitable for combat, and at that moment, Kudou was in possession of all three of them. Not only could she use them all freely, she *also* still had *Grateful Robber* up her sleeve, just in case. Nothing could stop her now. This probably isn't something I should say about a

girl, but she was a genuine monster.

“You’re totally unbeatable at this point, huh? We managed to deal with you last time because you were only able to steal one power before the battle started, but that’s definitely not how it’d go here,” I casually admitted.

“I...see. When you put it that way...I *am* unbeatable right now, aren’t I...?” Kudou quietly muttered. A look of surprise came across her face, and she sank into thought. I watched, confused, until her mouth finally twisted into an ecstatic grin. “Yes. Yes, I am. Right now, I *am* unbeatable!” Kudou shouted, her voice quivering with delight. The look in her eyes was one truly worthy of the title *Grateful Robber*: a look of pure, uncontrollable avarice.

“H-Hey...Kudou...?” I stammered.

“The girls of the literary club’s powers are each a force to be reckoned with, and *three* of them are within my grasp...? Is this... Is this my moment? Is this the perfect chance for me to take revenge on the literary club?!”

“Revenge?!” *Don’t tell me Kudou’s been holding a grudge this whole time?! She still hasn’t gotten over how we turned the tables on her after she’d shown up to pick a fight?!* “W-Wait a second— When you say revenge, does that mean you want to *fight* us?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Kudou. “I’m not saying I want a fight to the death...though I suppose you should prepare yourselves to break a bone or two, just in case.”

*Oh, jeez! We’ve gone back to early-era Kudou, all right! She’s doing the thing where she tries to act like a big confident tough guy so we don’t take her lightly but ends up going just a little too far with it!* This was, I had to admit, something I hadn’t anticipated. Who would’ve thought that Kudou would double-cross us now, of all times?

“Crap!” I grunted. I went into emergency mode in an instant and jumped in front of Hatoko and Chifuyu, who couldn’t protect themselves in their powerless states. This was bad—*really* bad. We’d beaten Kudou once before, sure, but the circumstances then and the circumstances now could hardly have been more different.

At the moment, Kudou had three of our powers under her control. It was too

late to use Tomoyo's "Just don't let her see our powers" tactic—that could only work if she hadn't already stolen one of them. If she had a combat-ready power in stock, *Grateful Robber* had no real weaknesses to speak of.

"I think now would be the perfect opportunity for me to get payback for all the humiliation I've been put through," said Kudou. "We've been through a lot, after all. Haven't we, Andou? Like the time with my email address. Or the time with my email address. Or *the time with my email address.*"

*Oh god! She's really, really holding a grudge!*

A few months beforehand, I'd...well...let's just leave it at "I did something you couldn't make up for with an apology." An ambiguously phrased letter had wounded Kudou's heart in a way that would probably never fully heal. That being said, I did have one thing that I had to say—or rather, shout—while we were on the subject.

"Okay, the letter was my bad, but the email address was *totally* on you!"

"Shut up! Shut! Uuup!" Kudou screamed with a mixture of shame and fury. At the same moment, a violent gale began to blow, and a massive number of sandy barricades rose from the beach, boxing us in.

"Heh... Heh heh heh! This power really is incredible. With it on my side, I might even manage to beat Takanashi!" said Kudou. She had the eyes of a woman who'd been completely consumed by her own power—the eyes of a girl who was, at most, a single step away from succumbing to the Dark Side. "I could beat Takanashi...or, well, I could fight on even footing with her... I mean, I could probably get in at *least* one solid hit, if I can just find an opening..."

*Just how much respect does this girl have for Sayumi?! She has Closed Clock, Over Element, and World Create on her side, and only now does she think she could land a single hit?!*

"The odds are against me, but this is the only time I'll ever have any shot at winning... Just gotta go for it!" Kudou said to herself before turning to face us. "All right—it's time for the two of us to have a rematch, Takanashi! I'll finally be paying you back for that arm bar, with intere—"

"I'm afraid you've gotten ahead of yourself, Kudou."



With a resounding *pat*, before Kudou had even finished giving her declaration of war, Sayumi had laid a hand on Kudou's head. I had *no* idea when she'd gotten so close to Kudou, or even when she'd circled around behind her, but all of a sudden, there she was.

"T-Takanashi— Ugh!" Kudou grunted. A moment later, I heard Hatoko and Chifuyu grunt from behind me as well, this time with shock.

"H-Huh? What?"

"Mnh? Hmm..."

I turned around to find both of them inspecting their hands, then glancing down at their bodies for good measure.

"Huh? Hatoko, Chifuyu, what's going on?" I asked.

"Juu..." said Hatoko. "Well, umm... It looks like my power came back!"

*Her power...came back?* I was stunned, but Hatoko quickly dispelled all of our doubts by expelling a tentative burst of flame from her hand. I'd seen her use *Over Element* enough times to recognize its effects in an instant.

"Yeah, sure looks like it's back, all right!" I agreed with a nod. "What about yours, Chifuyu?"

"Yeah. It's back. I can sort of just feel it," said Chifuyu.

The powers that Kudou had stolen from them had gone back to their original owners. Or, to put it in slightly different words, *Over Element* and *World Create* had returned to where they were meant to be.

"W-Wait," I said. "Sayumi, did you—"

"I can't imagine why this would surprise you, Andou," Sayumi said, her tone as composed as ever. "After all—you yourself proved that I cannot perceive us lacking our powers as the way we are meant to be, didn't you?"

About one year earlier, when we were still grappling with the question of what to do about our powers, Sayumi and I had gotten into a bit of a dispute. The result of that conflict had proved one simple truth: *Route of Origin* was incapable of erasing our powers. The presence of our powers in our lives had altered Sayumi's perspective to such an extent that she was no longer capable

of considering a *lack* of powers to be, by default, the way we were meant to be. By logical extrapolation, that meant that she thought of us *having* our powers as the way we were meant to be—and when I say “us,” I mean “us, the members of the literary club, having specifically our own individual powers.”

“So then, that means...*Route of Origin* just nullified the effect of *Grateful Robber*?!”

Sayumi’s power hadn’t been able to cancel out our powers, but *Grateful Robber*’s ability to usurp our powers, it seemed, was an exception to that rule.

*Wait, whoa, hold up a second! Do you have any idea how messy this is gonna make our power potency tier list?! Grateful Robber was the undisputed champion for ages—who would have thought that Route of Origin would hard-counter it, even if Sayumi does have to touch Kudou to pull it off? That shuts it down even more thoroughly than Closed Clock does! I guess power levels really are all a matter of matchups, when all’s said and done.*

“Ugh... But how...? All the powers I stole,” Kudou gasped, her eyes wide and her voice tinged with hopeless devastation. Karmic justice, it seemed, had come home to rest. She’d stolen countless powers—well, okay, a perfectly countable number of powers—and now, for the first time, she’d learned the horror of having powers stolen from her.

“He he he he he.”

An ominous, almost devilish laugh rang out as Kudou came to grips with her sudden depowering.

“T-Takanashi,” Kudou stammered.

“Now then, Kudou—what was it you said a moment ago? I believe you wanted a rematch?” said Sayumi.

Kudou didn’t say a word.

“He he he—that’s quite all right with me. I would be *delighted* to spar with you.”

“Ugh... I-I’ll get you next time!”

“I think not!”

Kudou set off with all the speed and dignity of a startled hare, with Sayumi in hot pursuit. As we watched the two of them sprint along the shoreline, Hatoko let out a chuckle.

“You know,” she said, “I think those two are actually pretty good friends!”

“I mean, that’s one way to look at it,” I replied. “I guess you’ve got a point, though. They have the sort of relationship where they don’t have to hold anything back from each other... Oh, looks like Kudou’s down.”

Sayumi and Kudou were matched academically, but athletically, Sayumi was the clear victor. Before I knew it, the arm-bar tragedy from our first meeting was playing out all over again. Kudou was on the ground and reduced to shouting “Nooooooo! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it, I’m sorry!” once more. On the one hand, it looked less like a punishment and more like the two of them were just messing around, but on the other hand, Kudou’s screams seemed maybe just a little too genuine for comfort.

“Yeesh. I kinda feel sorry for Kudou,” I said.

“Hmph. I’d say you should save your pity. She’s the one who picked this fight in the first place.”

“I mean, yeah, but— Wait, Tomoyo?!” I yelped as I did a double take. All of a sudden Tomoyo was standing right beside me, as if it was perfectly natural for her to be there. “When the heck did you get back...?”

“What?” said Tomoyo.

“What do you mean, what...?”

“What?” Tomoyo repeated. “What, as in, what do you mean, when did I get back? I’ve been here this whole time.”

I stared at Tomoyo. Tomoyo stared back.

“I’ve been here this whole time, *right?*” Tomoyo said with a perfectly amiable smile that was *completely* divorced from the glare she was giving me. The look in her eyes, in fact, was devoid of life—a bottomless darkness in which no light could ever hope to dwell. Those were the eyes of a girl who had seen hell and lived to tell the tale—the eyes of a girl who understood true despair not just

intellectually, but *instinctually*. They were the eyes of a girl who had looked into the void and perceived the unknowable, and they were screaming out one very simple phrase: *If you don't let this go, I will kill you, then myself.*

"R-Right," I said. "Yeah, of course. My bad. No clue what I was talking about."

Clearly, Tomoyo's little time-stop misapprehension had inflicted a far greater blow on her spirit than I'd given it credit for. Her psyche was teetering on the brink of total collapse, and it seemed the route she'd chosen to escape that fate was to bury the whole incident and act as if it had never happened. Could any among us blame her for that decision? Not me, that's for darn sure.

Hatoko and Chifuyu, who were standing nearby, both picked up on what was happening in an instant and refrained from acknowledging Tomoyo's return in the slightest. We all just acted as if she'd been there from the start. The fact that even Chifuyu the Clueless had worked things out right away proved above all else just how obviously precarious Tomoyo's mental state was. In any case, when all was said and done, I was just glad to have her back.

"So, umm... What should we do next? I'm not really feeling beach volleyball anymore," I said. "Anything you wanted to do, Tomoyo?"

"You should ask the third-years, not me," Tomoyo replied.

"Oh, right, fair enough. This *is* supposed to be Kudou's event, and all."

"Right. Well, Kudou's and Sayumi's," said Tomoyo. There was a certain sadness to her tone, but a resigned sort of sadness, as if this was all something she'd already come to terms with. "She's not gonna be in the literary club for very much longer, after all."

"...Huh?" I grunted. For a second, I couldn't even understand what she'd just said. "Wh-What's that supposed to mean, Tomoyo...?"

"Huh? Wait, you haven't heard?"

"No, I haven't... Wait, heard *what*? Why can't Sayumi be in the club for much longer? Don't tell me she's transferring out?!"

"Of course she's not, doofus! As if anyone would transfer in the middle of their last year of high school!"

“Yeah, but mysterious transfer students showing up at weird times of year is a whole trope in school-life manga and anime!”

“So what if it is?!”

“*However*, if transfer students showing up at totally unreasonable times of the year is a trope, then so too is a main character’s parents deciding to force them to transfer schools unilaterally, thus compelling their friends to band together to save them! Don’t worry, Sayumi—we won’t let your transfer go through, no matter what we have to do to stop it!”

“Why the hell are you so worked up about this?!”

“And with that decided, our first course of action is to talk things through with her parents! We’ve gotta find Sayumi’s dad! Let’s get a move...on... A-Actually... Y’know, thinking this through again... Yeah, we really should respect her parents’ judgment about this sort of thing, don’t you think? Like, they wouldn’t make this sort of decision if they didn’t think it was in their kid’s best interests.”

“Way to give up at the drop of a hat! Just how terrified of Sayumi’s dad are you?!”

*Well, I mean...come on, he’s Sayumi’s dad! You just know he’s scary! I mean, like, scary-scary! I bet the sheer force of his bloodlust is powerful enough to vaporize falling tree leaves midair! He’s definitely the sort of guy who’d tell you that he’ll only allow you to marry his daughter if you can score a clean blow on him in a sparring match first! I’ve never met the guy, so this is all pure imagination on my part, of course.*

“Anyway, she’s not transferring schools. That’d be obvious if you, y’know, *thought* about it for half a second,” said Tomoyo with a roll of her eyes. “It’s just time for her to pick the next club president and retire, that’s all. We were just talking about it a minute ago while we were changing into our swimsuits.”

“Oh...right,” I said. It made total sense, but it hadn’t occurred to me at all until she’d pointed it out. The truth had completely slipped my mind until now—or rather, I’d been keeping myself from thinking about it—and now it felt like I’d been forced to reckon with it out of nowhere.

Just the other day, Kudou’s term of office had come to a close, and she’d

retired from the position of student council president. Sayumi was a third-year as well, so she too would have to step down from her position as club president in short order. She would have to depart from the literary club before the rest of us. I had always known that that's how it would happen, and I knew there was nothing we could do about it. It was an inevitability that our godlike powers could do nothing to stop—and even if that weren't the case, it was something we couldn't *let* ourselves stop, one way or another.

## Chapter 2: Inherit the Presidency

“Hey, Jurai—are you on Team Chocolate Mushroom or Team Chocolate Bamboo Shoot?”

It’d all started with an almost unbelievably banal conversational prompt courtesy of Sagami. Normally, when I recalled mundane exchanges like that one, the details of when exactly the conversation had occurred would escape me, even if I could remember who I’d been talking to or what we’d been talking about. I think that’s pretty normal for most people, but in my case, there was one major exception to the rule: when I happened to remember a conversation with Sagami in particular, the content and time period of the exchange would both emerge from the depths of my memory in tandem.

The logic was simple: I would know in an instant when the conversation had taken place based on how we’d referred to each other. If he’d called me by my first name, Jurai, and if I’d called him by the nickname Sagamin, then it was certain beyond a doubt that the exchange had taken place during my second year of middle school.

“Neither,” I replied. “I really can’t stand that sorta stuff.”

“Oh, really? But they’re both so tasty,” said Sagami.

“No, that’s not—I mean, I like the chocolates! Both types are awesome!”

“Hmm? Well, now I’m confused. What exactly is it that you can’t stand?”

“It’s the whole premise that you *have* to be on either Team Mushroom or Team Bamboo Shoot,” I explained. “Like, how people act like there’s no choice but to line up behind one of two big factions and march off into a never-ending chocolate war. There’s this pressure to pick one or the other that just... I dunno, it feels *wrong* to me. They’re both good, so why not just pick whichever one you feel like on any given day, y’know?”

Back during that period—the period where I’d been in the eighth grade and out of the eighth-grade sickness sufferer’s club—I would take any excuse I could



get to be as stuck up, cynical, offhanded, and apathetic as possible, not to mention act like a total know-it-all. I'd fallen into despair after reaching the realization that all the fictional worlds I'd admired so deeply were nothing more than calculated works of crass commercialism made up by adults looking to further their business, and as a result, I'd come to hold those works, the diligent effort that the adults had put in to produce them, and everything else that fell in a broadly related category with disdain.

That included Christmas, a holiday that had been turned into a family or romance-centric event for the sake of commercial interests. It included Valentine's Day, a holiday that had wound up dedicated to expressions of love for the sake of commercial interests. It included Halloween, a holiday that had been twisted to center around candy and costume parties for the sake of commercial interests. I'd come to see the creeping hands of commercialism in anything and everything, and the moment I'd realize that something was the product of a store or manufacturer's sales scheme, the fun would be sucked right out of it.

Looking back on it nowadays, the whole thing seems so stupid. I'd been downright fastidious back then. No, not fastidious—I'd just been petty, plain and simple. I'd been no better than those nitpicky little kids who think that asking why amusement parks would charge entry fees if they were *really* fantasy dreamlands is some sort of ultimate gotcha. All I'd proved was my own narrow-mindedness.

"And besides," I continued, "there's all sorts of sweets and snacks out there, so why would you narrow it down to a contest between just two of them to begin with? I'd get it if this were, like, an election or something, but I have no idea why you'd throw me into the final round of a popularity contest out of nowhere."

"Hmm. Well, I more or less get where you're coming from. In short: you take issue with the fact that you're being forced into a choice. You can't bring yourself to go along with it when you're given a binary option and compelled to pick just one side," said Sagami, summing up my opinion in that very particular know-it-all sort of way he'd been so prone to. I'd tended to act like a pretty big know-it-all when I'd been in the eighth grade, but being one had been a core

component of Sagami's very nature—and for better or worse, the way it'd manifest had been in a completely different dimension compared to my behavior.

"I get where you're coming from, yes...but isn't that just how society works?" Sagami continued. "Even bigger than that, actually—that's just how the *world* works. People love to talk about how you can choose the things you like by your own free will, but the truth is that you were choosing from a limited set of options from the outset. That's how it always goes."

*Your choices are limited from the outset.* His claim felt like it held true, in a sense. Take how people always say that kids have the potential to be anything when they grow up. It *sounds* nice and all, but the truth is that the paths a child can take in the future will inevitably be limited by their talents, their parents' resources, and all sorts of other factors. I'd thought that was what Sagami had been getting at, anyway...until he shook his head.

"No, no, that's not it at all. I wasn't talking about picking holes in the logic of choices that people are actually aware of. I'm talking about unconscious choices," he'd said with a shrug.

"Unconscious, meaning...?"

"Let me think of an example... Okay, you know how J-pop lyrics always seem to have verses about what a miracle it was that the singer found their one true love in the big, wide world they live in? They're trying to make a whole thing out of how incredible it is that they found their one true love out of the seven billion people on the planet Earth. But, you know," Sagami continued, a sly grin creeping across his face, "the truth is that no one will ever *actually* meet all seven billion of those people."

"I mean, no crap they won't," I said with a shrug.

If you could meet one new person each and every second, you'd need seven billion seconds to meet the whole world. Assuming a human lifetime lasts about eighty years, that gives us roughly two and a half billion seconds to work with. In other words, if you were to spend your entire lifetime meeting one person a second, from the moment of your birth to the moment of your death, without ever stopping for so much as a wink of sleep, you wouldn't have met even *half*

of the global population by the time you kicked the bucket. That whole hypothetical is also flawed from the get-go, seeing as a second's worth of interaction isn't so much a meeting as it is a passing glance.

All of this, of course, had raised a question: just how many people *do* we meet over the course of our lifetimes?

"I'm sure it varies a fair bit from person to person, but on average, I imagine that in terms of people you know well enough to count as acquaintances, those on the high end of the spectrum would have met a few thousand people, while those on the lower end might have met fewer than a hundred," said Sagami.

"That's a pretty big range, isn't it?"

"It's barely a blip compared to seven billion. And if you narrow the range further from 'acquaintances' to 'potential romantic partners,' that blip gets even smaller. I figure most people would be lucky to have ten or so. In other words," said Sagami, finally moving toward his conclusion, "we choose our partners for romance and marriage out of a tiny handful of potential candidates. When all's said and done, life's no different from a dating sim! We start our lives out with a small set of routes to choose from, and pursuing a side-heroine who doesn't have a route's out of the question."

I'd really wanted to call him out for steering the conversation toward dating sims, of all things, but I'd unfortunately had to admit that it actually *had* been a pretty apt metaphor in this one particular instance and resisted the urge. It was just another forced decision, compelling us to choose from a predetermined set of options. You couldn't romance a heroine without a route, and you couldn't fall in love with a girl who you didn't even know existed.

"It's kind of hilarious, when you really think about it," said Sagami. "When all's said and done, all that we do is pick someone we happen to share a school or workplace with, or who we happen to meet at a group date or marriage interview, or who we happen to hit it off with in a game or on social media. We just fall in love with people who happen to share some convenient trait with us—or, to put it in less flattering terms, we make do with whoever happens to be within arm's reach—yet we then go on to kick up a fuss about 'soulmates' or 'my one-in-seven-billion' anyway."

His perspective on all this had struck me as pretty unconventional, to put it nicely, but at the same time, I hadn't been able to bring myself to disagree. You just can't fall in love with someone you've never met or interacted with. What some people frame as miraculously finding their soulmate in a seven-billion-to-one gamble could just as easily be seen as them picking a partner from the eligible candidates who'd just happened to be close at hand. I have to imagine we're driven to do so on an instinctual, even genetic level—driven to find a mate, breed, and multiply. It's been a biological impulse present in all organisms since time immemorial.

"Sagamin," I said after a moment's hesitation. "Promise me that you'll never, ever tell Tamaki about this whole theory of yours."

"Oh, I wouldn't. She loves all that destiny stuff—a real romanticist, you know? Come to think of it, was listening to this whole dreary, cynical, brutally honest spiel hard for you too, Jurai?"

"Why would it be?"

"Because for all your talk about being a cynic, you're actually still purehearted deep down. You're an idealist, so it just occurred to me that listening to a theory grounded in brutal realism might've been hard for you to stomach."

"Wait a second, what? What the heck would make you think I'm an idealist?!"

"The fact that you are one, obviously. It's obvious from an outside perspective—anyone who watches you for long enough would know. You're far from disillusioned when it comes to romance. Here's an example—has it ever bothered you when you hear the other boys in your class talk about how they want to get girlfriends?"

I'd paused and fallen silent. That *had* bothered me, in the past—or, rather, I'd thought it was weird. *They want girlfriends? Why? Surely "a girlfriend" isn't something anyone would want in and of itself? I can understand wanting to date the person you have a crush on or wanting to better yourself so your crush will take an interest in you, but why would anyone just want a girlfriend?*

The concept of saying you wanted a girlfriend when you didn't even have someone you were interested in had felt somehow self-contradictory to me. Well, maybe it hadn't seemed like an outright contradiction, but at the very

least, it'd felt like they were getting the order of operations all wrong. It'd felt backward, in the literal sense rather than the figurative one.

"See? What'd I tell you? You're so purehearted, it's adorable," said Sagami, who was clearly incredibly entertained by all this. "I'll admit, developing feelings for someone, learning that they have a thing for you too, and starting a relationship as a result paints a nice, pretty picture. If it actually worked out that well for everyone, however, then group dates and marriage interviews would be a thing of the past. The truth is that, rather than falling in love and starting a relationship, plenty of people start relationships to find someone to fall in love with. It sounds misordered, but it's really quite common."

"Misordered, huh?"

"I'll admit...there are times when even I get turned around. Do I jack off because I'm horny, or do I go looking for porn to make myself horny so I can jack off?"

"Next time you decide to smash-cut from philosophizing to stupid sex jokes, do you think you could at least warn me first?!" *You could've just gone with the chicken and egg metaphor, for crying out loud!*

In any case, the word "misordered" had stood out to me. It'd hinted at the core question of this whole matter: whether you should go out with someone because you love them, or whether you should love someone because you want to go out with them.

"The way I see it, this is just what human romance boils down to," said Sagami with a somewhat patronizing shake of his head. "I said that you weren't disillusioned about romance a moment ago, but really, romance might be nothing more than one big illusion in and of itself."

"You think romance is an illusion?"

"Imagine wanting a girlfriend so badly that you'd take anyone so long as she was vaguely your type. You put yourself out there, find a girl to date, then declare that she's your soulmate. All you'd have done was pick a girl out of all the ones you'd met—or rather, all the ones in the tiny selection who'd fit your criteria—yet, when all's said and done, you'd still end up going on about how you chose your partner out of all the people on planet Earth. People have taken

a vague, deceptive illusion, propped it up on a pedestal, declared it the most beautiful and sublime concept to ever exist...and chosen to call it ‘romance.’”

Society—or rather, the human race...no, the world at large—has celebrated and extolled romance for as long as the concept has existed. To fall in love is treated like the most wonderful thing in the world...and yet, in truth, all that it really entails is picking someone who happened to be close at hand and pairing up with them.

I’d paused once more, mulling over the theory...then paused again to mull over something completely different. *Wait. Why are we even talking about this? How and when did this conversation go this far off the rails?*

“Weren’t we talking about chocolate mushrooms and bamboo shoots a minute ago? How the *hell* did we end up *here*?” I asked.

“I’ll admit that the topic got a bit blown out of proportion—not to mention logically dubious—but the core of the matter’s still the same,” said Sagami. “You, Jurai, were upset by the ongoing feud between two types of chocolate. It wasn’t that you didn’t like the chocolates themselves, but rather, that you didn’t like being forced to choose from a limited set of options. What I’m trying to say is that if that question struck you as being arbitrary and in bad faith...then don’t you think the same argument applies to this country’s perception of romance at large? If you disavow one, you’re disavowing the other.”

“I’m...disavowing romance?”

“Not in the sense that you dislike the basic concept of romance—that would actually be a less extreme stance to take. No, you *have* a distinct set of ideals when it comes to romance, which is why romance that doesn’t live up to your standards is anathema to you. You have yet to be disillusioned regarding romance, which is why you have yet to accept the fact that romance is, on a fundamental level, nothing more than an illusion.”

“I never said—”

“You know, if you ever feel like some light reading, you should give *Lolita* a try. It’s the book responsible for the coining of the term lolicon—you know, ‘Lolita complex’? I think you’ll find it quite thought-provoking, and I think I know

what you'll say when you're done," Sagami said with a look that told me he could see right through me. It'd felt like he could see through everything about me, even, from that moment until far off into my future. "You'll say 'love that comes and goes depending on your partner's age isn't worthy of being called love.'"

I'd stared at him in stony-faced silence.

"I, however, feel differently. In my mind, choosing a partner based on their age is a perfectly natural thing to do. Whether your feelings for your partner change as they grow older, whether you determine if you could love someone based on if they are or aren't they're a virgin, whether you fall for someone you agreed to go out with on a whim, whether you lose all interest in a partner you swore to love forever after they cheat on you a single time, whether you fall for someone solely because they're in the same club as you, whether you break up with someone the second the two of you end up going long-distance, whether you get super into a character exclusively because you like their voice actor, whether you ignore a song because it's sung by a Vocaloid until an anime popularizes it and you decide you like it after all, whether you take interest in an anime's source material only after watching the show, whether you lose interest in that source material the moment the anime ends, or whether you drop a light novel series exclusively because it swapped artists partway through its run—I don't think there's anything strange or insincere about love like that whatsoever. To me, all of those things are totally natural."

Sagami smiled. "Falling in love with someone or something isn't a grand, earth-shattering act at all. It's a lot more vague and arbitrary than you think it is, Jurai," he concluded, summing up his ramble in a neat and simple thesis statement.

Simple though it'd been, when all was said and done, I hadn't really understood what he was trying to say at all. I hadn't been able to accept the idea that I'd harbored illusions about romance, or that romance itself was an illusion, and the way Sagami had talked circles around me to try to impose that label had accomplished nothing beyond letting him play silly word games, as far as I'd been concerned.

In the fall of that same year, however, everything had changed. I'd witnessed



the catastrophic collapse of Sagami Shizumu and Futaba Tamaki's relationship, and I'd suffered an astonishing, even off-putting degree of shock as a result. That, above all else, had proved that I really had harbored illusions with regard to romance. I had harbored illusions, and I'd thus feared the possibility of disillusionment. Sagami had acted like he'd seen through to the core of what'd driven me as a character...and his assessment had proved terrifyingly accurate.

And yet...

"Okay, but you know," I had said at the time, preparing to offer a counterpoint before I knew it. Not even I had understood why I'd felt the need to do so—I'd just felt, for some reason, that I'd needed to push back against his ideas. Maybe it'd just been that the pompous, pretentious way he'd presented his thoughts had gotten on my nerves...or maybe it was something else entirely.

"You might be right that romance is something pretty close to an illusion, and it's true that not everyone ends up living out their perfect, ideal romance. Maybe schoolkids really do love to say that their relationships were the work of destiny or a miracle, even though the truth is that they just got together because they happened to be in the same class or club or whatever. But the way I see it..."

I'd told Sagami how I'd felt, and he'd grinned.

"See? You really are fastidious, Jurai."

*Fastidious.* All throughout the eighth grade, whenever Sagami had offered an opinion of me, it had always boiled down to that one single word.



"Oh! Hey, Andou."

"Ah, hey! Afternoon, Kudou."

It was a few days after our fun-filled tropical resort event, and school had just let out for the day. I'd decided to stop by one of the vending machines set up outside our school before heading to the club room, and I'd happened to run into Kudou, who was getting a drink for herself.

"Thanks again for the other day," said Kudou. "It was really nice to get a

chance to go all out messing around at the beach like that.”

“Oh, it’s cool! No need to thank me—we had a ton of fun too, so it’s all good. Tomoyo and Sayumi were both talking about how happy they were to get to wear their swimsuits since they’d missed their chance for it over summer break,” I replied.

“Right. Their swimsuits,” Kudou muttered. She seemed a little troubled by the thought as she pushed one of the machine’s buttons and collected the café au lait that dropped out of it.

“Something on your mind about them?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” said Kudou. “It’s just... I was remembering how everyone’s swimsuits were pretty flashy, that’s all.”

*Flashy? Were they? Hmm... I mean, I guess they sorta were, if I had to call it one way or the other.* Chifuyu had worn a standard-issue school swimsuit, but the literary club’s other three girls had all worn relatively revealing outfits. “Relatively” was the key word, though—none of them had been beyond the bounds of decency by any means. The way I saw it, it wasn’t so much that everyone else had been wearing flashy swimsuits, but rather...

“Come to think of it, your swimsuit was pretty normal, huh? Or, like, simple, I guess?” I commented.

“W-Well, what was I supposed to do?! My mom—”

“Your mom?”

“Ah!” Kudou yelped, then clammed up. That had clearly been an embarrassing slip of the tongue on her part, but eventually, she started reluctantly explaining herself. “My mother, umm...says that I’m still too young to wear bikinis and stuff.”

“...”

“Wh-Why’re you looking at me like that?! If you have something to say, then say it! Go ahead! Laugh it up!”

“Oh, nah, that’s not it! This isn’t really laugh-worthy, in my book,” I explained. I’d been thinking that it was kind of cute how Kudou was so conscientious about

following her mom's orders, and that wasn't something I felt like laughing about at all. I also didn't have any right to laugh about it, considering that my sister had long since reserved the right to do all my clothes shopping for me.

*Man, though... I guess this means that Kudou really does have a mom, huh? Wonder if it's the same one her curry had her buy ingredients to make that one time.*

"Hmph... Is dressing like that normal for high schoolers? Does everyone wear sorta extreme swimsuits...? But I can't just jump straight into wearing something like *that* right away, can I...? Hmm," Kudou muttered, her expression completely serious despite how adorably petty the subject at hand was.

There was something heartwarming about the sight, and I watched with amusement as I stepped up to the vending machine. Needless to say, I ordered my usual stygian solution: a drink suitable indeed for a mature, hardboiled, and stylish man such as I.

"Oh? Black coffee, huh?" Kudou commented as I crouched down to scoop up my drink. "I didn't know you drank yours black. You're pretty mature, huh, Andou?"

"Hgkgh?!" I gasped. She'd said it so quietly—so perfectly casually—yet her words had impacted my heart with all the force of a literal supernova.

"I can't stand black coffee, personally. It's just so bitter! Café au lait and caramel macchiatos are pretty good, but— Whoa, Andou?!"

I just... I just...*couldn't*. My legs gave way beneath me, and I fell to my hands and knees, essentially kneeling down before her. The can of coffee I'd only just bought clattered to the ground and rolled away, but I didn't have it in me to chase after it.

"I... Ugh... I-I... B-Bwaaaaaah..."

"Oh god, you're *crying*?! *Why*?! What on earth are you bawling about, Andou?! Huh?! Whaaa?! W-Was it me?! Did I say something wrong?!"

"N-No... I'm just... So, so happy... W-Waaaaaah..."

This was the first time. The very first time in my whole life that anyone had

said that drinking black coffee made me look mature. She'd *complimented* me. I'd been forcing myself to swill that bitter black sludge in front of people for years on end, and finally, *finally* those efforts had all been rewarded.

The truth is that deep down...part of me had always been scared. I'd been going so far out of my way to show off how I drank the stuff for so long, but no one had *ever* complimented me for it, and my anxiety had been reaching critical mass. Time and time again, I'd thought about just giving up on the whole thing, but I couldn't stop after having come so far, and I'd just kept at it instead...

*...And thank goodness for that. I wasn't wrong! Drinking black coffee really does make you look super cool and mature!*

"Kudou... Kudooou... Thank you so, so much... I'm... I'm so happy right noooow!"

"C-Cut it out! Stop clinging to me! And stop crying already, please! You're making it look like I'm the one making you have a breakdown!"



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*Whoops! That was almost bad—I wouldn't want to put my newly found goddess and savior Kudou in an uncomfortable position!*

I stood back up, brushed myself off, and dried my tears. No longer would I hesitate. I'd be drinking black coffee from now until the day I died!

"Sorry! I was just so overcome with emotion, I ended up making a scene," I said.

"No kidding," Kudou grumbled.

"By the way, are you heading out after this?"

"That's the plan. I'm guessing you're going to your club?"

"Yeah. The conversation might end up dragging on for a pretty long time today, so I figured I'd stop for a black coffee on the way to hype myself up for it."

"Oh, right. I remember hearing that today's the day, huh...?"

"Yup. We'll be having a meeting to choose the literary club's next president."

We'd chosen the date of our discussion shortly after our tropical resort excursion. We'd dragged the choice out for as long as we possibly could, but it was now finally time for the next president to be picked.

"So, we'll finally know who Takanashi's successor will be..." said Kudou.

"Come to think of it, how are you going to pick the next president? Your club doesn't even have a vice president right now, does it?"

"Not sure—that's actually one of the things we're going to be talking about. We have to pick a method for picking the president before we can, y'know, pick the president."

"Ah. I see what you meant about the conversation being likely to drag."

"Do you want to come along, Kudou?" I offered.

"Me?" said Kudou. "I'm not even a member of your club! It'd be weird for an outsider to stick her nose into your business, wouldn't it?"

"What're you talking about? You're totally an honorary literary club member at this point!" I countered.

Kudou looked a little taken aback about that, but she bashfully shook her head. “I appreciate it, really, but I’ll have to pass. I actually already have plans this afternoon. I’m heading out to meet up with someone I got to know online.”

“Ah, gotcha. No problem... But, wait—you’re meeting someone you met online?”

“Yeah. She’s my age, and she’ll be going to the same college as me next year, apparently. We met on social media and ended up chatting a few times before we decided to meet up in person,” Kudou explained.

“Huh! That sounds kinda nerve-racking, huh?” I commented.

I’d never met up with a friend I’d made online before, and honestly, I couldn’t even imagine how it would feel. I figured it’d probably be pretty freaky...but on the other hand, it seemed like that sort of thing had been getting more and more normal lately. I’d heard that making friends online with people who’d be going to the same college as you like Kudou had was actually quite common in this day and age.

Oh, and speaking of which, Kudou had apparently already been accepted into a college by recommendation. Sayumi had received a recommendation as well, and to make it even more impressive, both of them had been accepted into their first-choice schools. I’d befriended a pair of truly exceptional upperclassmen, no doubt about it.

“Oh, sorry! Speak of the devil,” said Kudou as she pulled out her cell phone, which had started vibrating. It looked like she had a call coming in from the girl she was meeting up with. We said a quick goodbye and split up, me heading toward the literary club’s room, and Kudou toward the school’s back gate.

“Hello? Yes, this is Kudou. I’m actually still at school right now... Yeah, I’ll call you back when I’m there. Sorry about that,” Kudou said as we walked away from each other.

The use of cell phones and smartphones on school grounds was technically banned, but basically none of the students bothered following that rule, and the teachers turned a blind eye to it as long as you weren’t pulling your phone out during class or anything. Kudou had always been so zealously dedicated to her student council work that it was sort of surprising to see her break the rule

as well—apparently, she could be pretty flexible about that sort of thing after all. *Though I guess we did exchange email addresses in school ages ago, come to think of it.*

“Yeah. Okay, see you soon...” Kudou said just before she dropped out of earshot. I caught just one additional word of her conversation—the name of the girl she was talking to.

“...Hinoemata.”

*Hinoemata.* Needless to say, it was a name that meant absolutely nothing to me.

“Now that all of us have arrived, I hereby call our meeting to determine the next president of the literary club to order,” Sayumi said as she looked out across our assembled members. Tomoyo, Hatoko, Chifuyu, and I were present, meaning that all current members of the literary club, formal and informal alike, were in attendance. “Being the current club president, I will serve as this discussion’s moderator, as per usual. That said, I do not intend to contribute to the conversation in a personal capacity. I hope you will all give this matter careful consideration and discuss your options thoroughly.”

With that, Sayumi turned to look each of the second-year members—me, Tomoyo, and Hatoko—in the eye. In all likelihood, one of us would become the next president.

“I guess Chifuyu’s probably not gonna get much out of this whole— Ah?!” I muttered as I looked over at the one member of our crew who wasn’t in the running, only to cut myself off as I realized what I was saying partway through.

*Oh, come on, you know that’s not right! What are you even saying? Do you want to make the cultural festival disaster play out all over again?*

Back when we were deciding who would get the role of Juliet in our play for the cultural festival, my thoughtless choices had deeply hurt Chifuyu’s feelings. I’d drawn a line between her and the rest of us, rationalizing my actions with the excuse that she was a grade schooler. I’d supposedly learned my lesson, and



yet there I was, once again assuming she'd be excluded from the running for president—and for the exact same reason, at that! I was more or less treating her like an outsider!

*Dammit, what is wrong with me? Am I completely incapable of learning from my mistakes, or what?!*

“...not gonna get much from this whole explanation, since I'm sure she already figured all that out for herself! After all, Chifuyu's a full-blown member of the literary club, just like the rest of us! Maybe she'll be the next president! That'd be perfectly fine and normal!” I said. Well, more like shouted, really, in an effort to break myself out of the brainless rut I'd apparently gotten stuck in.

“No, it wouldn't. That would be weird,” said Chifuyu, providing a counterpoint so normal and reasonable, it was actually stunning. “I'm still an elementary schooler.”

“...”

“It would be weird for me to be president of a club at a school I don't go to.”

“...”

“Anyone with common sense could see it's not okay.”

“...Yup. True enough.”

*How strange. Why is it that hearing Chifuyu say “Anyone with common sense could see it” makes me feel so very begrieved? Maybe it's because she is, very literally, the single last person on earth who could possibly have the right to say that to someone?*

My little overreaction on account of semirecent events had turned out to be mismatched with Chifuyu's own perspective. Clearly, being counted out of the running for club president didn't make her feel any sense of estrangement whatsoever.

“I can't be the president, so instead, I'll be a witness,” Chifuyu said in a tone that somehow made it sound like she was doing us all a favor. “Andou, Tomoyo, Hatoko... Which one of you will be my leader from now on, I wonder?”

*H-Huuuh. Okay, then. It's sort of weird how much it feels like she's looking*

*down on me right now. Seriously, where's this condescension coming from? It's like she's our club's biggest shareholder and she's decided to sit in on our meeting for a lark!*

It was becoming increasingly clear that in Chifuyu's world, who exactly happened to be the club's president was a petty technicality, at most. I had a feeling she was in a "Whoever the president is, I'm the real power behind the throne" sort of mindset. Everyone treated her as the literary club's beloved mascot, but in truth, she ruled from the shadows (in her mind, anyway).

"Well, if Chifuyu's out of the running, I guess it's gonna be one of us second-years after all," I said. "Oh, but wait a second, Sayumi. Don't club presidents usually nominate someone to be their successor? Aren't you gonna do that?"

"I considered it...but ultimately, I came to the conclusion that it would be for the best for all of you to discuss the matter among yourselves," said Sayumi. "After all, this club won't be mine from now on—it will be all of yours."

*Okay, I get where she's coming from. She's decided that it'd be better to step down gracefully and keep her hands off what happens next.*

I looked over at the other two second-years once more. "So, we have to pick one of us to be the next president...?" I muttered.

"Looks like it," said Tomoyo.

"I guess so!" Hatoko agreed.

The three of us exchanged glances. Nobody seemed especially inclined to kick off our deliberations. Eventually, the silence became so awkward that I decided to give it a go myself.

"Okay, umm... Raise your hand if you wanna be the president!" I said, testing the waters for aspiring candidates. Neither Tomoyo nor Hatoko raised their hands.

"I mean, not really...? If anyone else wants to do it, I'm cool with that," said Tomoyo.

"I don't really think I'm a president sort of person," Hatoko added.

"Hmm. Okay, so no one's invested in the job," I said. "All right, let's go at this

from the opposite direction: anyone who absolutely does *not* want to be president, raise your hand.”

Once again, not a single hand was raised.

“I’m not gonna say I *absolutely* won’t do it,” said Tomoyo. “Like, if you and Hatoko have other stuff going on and I’m the only one left who could, I’d give it some serious thought...”

“I guess I could do it if you and Tomoyo don’t want to,” said Hatoko. “I don’t want to force someone into taking the job if they’d prefer not to!”

“Hmm. Gotcha, gotcha. So neither of you is completely opposed to taking the job. Makes sense...*not*! What are you two, a couple Japanese people or something?!” I shouted. It definitely felt like the situation needed to be called out *somehow*, and while “Are you Japanese?” might not have been the *most* apt choice imaginable, it was the first that came to mind.

That exact sort of vague ambivalence—the unwillingness to just make your opinion clear—was just one of those *things* that Japanese people seemed to share. Our inability to just say “no” was a byproduct of a society that treated modesty and reservation as virtues. Ours was a culture in which even in the most egregious of circumstances, when we *had* to say “no” no matter what, we would muddy the rejection by saying “I’m fine, thank you” instead. When asked to score something on a scale of one through five, we would feel driven on a psychological level to never give anything a flat one *or* a perfect five for fear of seeming too extreme.

“Tomoyo, Hatoko, why’re you both being so noncommittal all of a sudden?” I asked. “We’re picking our president for the whole next year, for crying out loud! Put some spirit into it!”

“And what about *you*, Andou?” asked Sayumi.

“Huh...? Me?” I grunted. “You mean, like, me as president? I mean... It’s not like I wanna be president no matter what, or anything, but if those two *don’t* want the job, I guess I could do it.”

Sayumi heaved a sigh. “So you’re in the same boat as they are, then.”

The three of us second-years exchanged glances once again, this time adding

rather strained smiles to go with them. We were officially in a bit of a pickle. It wasn't terribly surprising in retrospect, but I don't think that any of us had really predicted that neither Tomoyo, Hatoko, nor I would actively *want* to be the president of the literary club. Worse still, none of us were opposed enough to the idea to take ourselves out of the running entirely, leaving us with zero nominations and zero withdrawals. None of us thought we were the *right* choice for the job, but we also didn't want to shove it off on someone who didn't want it, leaving us in a state of deadlock.

"Well...rats," I said. The combination of our mutual lack of assertiveness, tendency toward being considerate and reserved, and sense of responsibility toward the literary club had all come together to put us in a downright obnoxious situation.

No amount of discussion seemed likely to move us forward, but none of us seemed interested in putting our foot down either. If I were putting it nicely, I'd say that we were just a little too cooperative, and if I decided not to mince words, I'd say that none of us had squat for initiative. I could see this turning into a terrible battle, only rather than fighting to claim or reject the position, we'd be fighting to *not* fight in the first place.

*Yup. This is gonna drag, all right. Grabbing that can of coffee was the right call.*

—"Okay, what're we gonna do about this, Tomoyo?" "Hey, don't ask *me*!" "Juu, Tomoyo, I'm getting the feeling you don't want to do it. I could take the job, if you want?" "Nah, it's not like I'm *opposed* to it!" "What he said. Plus, I don't want to push all our busywork off on you." "Tomoyo...you really shouldn't call being the president busywork." "Th-That's not what I meant, and you know it! Stop reading into everything I say in the worst possible way!" "Hmm. Being the president *would* probably be pretty hard, right? I don't know if I could handle it." "You totally could, Hatoko! You're really responsible, and you always do a good job on all the work you're given. Plus, there's no telling how good you'd be at this sorta work if you've never tried, right?" "Okay, but 'There's no telling how good you'd be' isn't gonna get us anywhere, Andou." "I know, I know!" "But what about you, Tomoyo? You and Juu both read tons of books. Wouldn't that make you two good presidents?" "I dunno about Tomoyo, but I

don't actually read many *book*-books at all. I'm basically all about manga and light novels." "I'm not as huge of a reader as you might think either. As far as actual literature goes, I've just read Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Miyazawa Kenji's stuff since I thought it'd help me write better." "Well, when you put it that way, I guess I've read Shakespeare and Goethe's stuff!" "This isn't a contest, Andou, god! And quit lying about your reading record—you're gonna make me look like as much of a cringey poser as you are!" "Setting Juu aside, wow, Tomoyo! You read *all* of Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Miyazawa Kenji's books? That's amazing!" "Huh...? Uh, I mean... Not *all* of them so much as just *Rashomon*, *The Spider's Thread*, and *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, really." "Three total? Seriously?! And they're all the really famous ones too! 'I've read their stuff' my rear, Tomoyo! Talk about talking yourself up!" "Sh-Shut your trap! I don't wanna hear that from *you*!" —

Fruitless. Our discussion was utterly, excruciatingly fruitless. We, the literary club's second-years, had proved ourselves completely incapable of reaching a consensus. The vague unassertiveness and equally vague sense of responsibility we all shared was working against us in the worst way possible.

Sayumi, meanwhile, sighed deeply as she watched our non-debate ouroboros its way to nowhere in particular. "I can't say I'm impressed by this club's next generation at this particular moment. In fact, I'm starting to think we should have handed the presidential reins to Chifuyu after all," she remarked sarcastically.

"Yeah. Maybe I'll do it," said Chifuyu, jumping right aboard the criticism train.

We second-years were, collectively, ashamed of ourselves. If I could take a moment to defend us, though, I couldn't help but feel that Sayumi, our current president, shared at least some small portion of the blame for our obnoxious deadlock. Sayumi had been as good of a president as you could possibly ask for, and her act would be so hard to follow up that it was only natural we'd balk a little. Maybe it was silly for us to feel so pressured about taking over a five-person club, but still, the point remained.

In any case, Sayumi and Chifuyu watched on as we second-years continued to fail to make progress. We were at a standstill, and one that I couldn't see us breaking out of without some kind of outside intervention. Just as I was

wondering what we could possibly do to solve the matter, however...

“Okay, sorry I’m late!”

...outside intervention arrived. The literary club room’s door opened with a clack, and a woman stepped inside. She looked as sleepy as a person could possibly seem while still being conscious, and she had an eye mask with “Rest In Peace” written on it in English.

*Wh-Whoa, that actually looks hella cool when you write it in another language! Who knew?*

The woman strolled into the club room like she owned the place. It was like she was walking into her own living room—or, rather, her own bedroom. Her name was Satomi Shiharu, and she was my homeroom teacher, Chifuyu’s aunt, and, most relevantly, the literary club’s faculty advisor.

“Oh, Miss Satomi! Sure has been a while,” I said.

“Huh? Since what? I see you basically every day,” Miss Satomi replied.

“Right, but I meant it’s been a while since I’ve seen you *here*.”

On the whole, Miss Satomi was something of an absentee advisor. She barely ever showed her face in the club room, even during the cultural festival. She’d stop in on the very rare occasion when she happened to be walking around the school, but that was about the extent of her involvement with our organization. If I wanted to frame it nicely, I’d say that she had a lot of respect for her students’ autonomy, but considering she was related to Chifuyu, I couldn’t see it as anything other than her having decided that nap time was a higher priority than her responsibilities as a club advisor. She’d be out like a light nine times out of ten when I went to see her in the faculty office, after all.

“You’re picking your next president today, right? That means that I should at least make an appearance, according to Takanashi,” Miss Satomi explained.

*“According to Takanashi,” huh? Figures.*

“So, how’s it going, Andou? Picked the next prez yet?”

“About that,” I awkwardly muttered. Not only had we not picked a president, our deliberations were going nowhere fast. It wasn’t anyone’s fault in particular

—just a disastrous combination of reservation and consideration that had put us at an impasse. I explained that in broad strokes to Miss Satomi, who gave me a nod of understanding and sank into thought for a few seconds.

“Okay, then—you do it, Kanzaki,” she eventually said with a casual ease as she turned to face Tomoyo.

“M-Me?!” Tomoyo replied.

“Yeah. You’re not against it, right?”

“Right, but...”

“Then do it. Okay, that’s settled!”

Just like that, the deadlock was shattered. Miss Satomi had cut our dilemma down in a single stroke. Her unilateral decision had made all the time *we’d* spent blabbing on and on about nothing look like a downright idiotic waste.

“W-Wait a minute, Miss Satomi,” I said. I just couldn’t let this pass without *some* sort of comment. “Why Tomoyo?”

“Why not? Do you have something against her being president?”

“I mean, no, not really...”

“Then it’s settled. You’ve got the job, Kanzaki. Advisor’s orders,” Miss Satomi said in a tone that brooked no argument.

She had a lot of gall to go giving us “advisor’s orders” considering she’d barely done anything advisor-like at all up until that very moment, but she seemed set on making Tomoyo president one way or another. I didn’t actually have a problem with that, to be clear, and judging by how the conversation had gone up to that point, none of the other members would either. Tomoyo herself didn’t seem opposed at all. The only problem, then, was the fact that I just couldn’t accept having the decision imposed on us unilaterally.

“I’m totally okay with Tomoyo being the president, Miss Satomi, but it’d be nice if you’d at least tell us why you picked her,” I said.

“Why I picked her, huh...? Well, if I’m being totally honest, I don’t even think it matters that much who ends up being the president of a club that might not even exist when next year rolls around,” she said. That was brutally direct

enough on its own, but she wasn't quite finished. "Really, though, I picked her because her older brother was the president of this club too," she added with a look that seemed somewhat pensive...or actually, like she'd just remembered something *deeply* irritating from her past.

*Tomoyo's brother? Does she mean...?* "You mean Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First?!"

*"Huh? Who's that supposed to be?"*

*Ugh! Guess his true name hasn't made the rounds in these parts. Fine, then—I'll just have to use the moniker he goes by in this realm!* "I mean Kiryuu, you know? Like, are you talking about Kiryuu Hajime?"

"Ooh, yeah, that's the guy! Didn't know you knew him, Andou. He was a student of mine."

Now that was a shocking coincidence if I'd ever seen one. I'd learned that Kiryuu was a former literary club member the very first time we'd met, but I hadn't realized that he'd been the president nor that he'd been one of Miss Satomi's students.

"Boy, talk about a crazy coincidence...*nay*, not a coincidence, but rather the strings of fate pulling us together once more!" I said. "Could this mean that our destinies are even more closely intertwined than I realized?!"

"Why the hell are you freaking out about this, Andou?" Tomoyo sighed.

"If this isn't the right moment to freak out, then when would be?! This is *Kiryuu* we're talking about! I have a slight but concrete connection to him! Of *course* I'm happy about that!"

"Just how big of a man-crush do you have on my brother?! You've met him, like, *once*!"

That was true...but sometimes, one meeting was enough. Over the course of that single fleeting encounter, we'd hit it off so shockingly well, you'd think we'd been a married couple in our past lives. He'd spoken to something deep within me—something that I could only possibly express as my inner wellspring of chuuni power. We'd met by chance, but the way I saw it, that chance meeting had been the work of destiny.



“Andou *does* always seem to have a certain look come across his face when he thinks of your brother,” said Sayumi. “The look of a lustful maiden, that is.”

“I’m sorry, Sayumi—*what?* A lustful maiden? What sort of look is that?!”

“Tomoyo’s brother, though? I see,” she continued, her gaze drifting downward as she muttered thoughtfully to herself.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“No... Pardon me. It’s nothing,” Sayumi said. I could tell from her tone that there was something more to it, but before I had the chance to probe further, Miss Satomi hustled the conversation along.

“Kiryuu was the first student to join the literary club after the school forced me to be its advisor. There was another kid who joined too—a girl named Saitou Hitomi—and the two of them got up to all sorts of stupid shenanigans together. Well, I guess it was more like Kiryuu dragging Saitou into his stupid shenanigans, but same difference really,” Miss Satomi said with an air of flat indifference. She didn’t seem to think much of recounting Kiryuu’s student days at all. “Come to think of it, I actually saw him...must’ve been a couple months ago, before summer break? He just showed up at school one day—no warning, nothing.”

That, in all likelihood, would have been the same day that I’d met him. The day that we’d fulfilled our long-destined chance meeting, that is! *Oh...I get it. So Kiryuu actually did have permission to be walking around in the school. He wasn’t trespassing after all, I guess.*

“He said that he’d dropped out of school and gotten fired from his job, and I was *going* to give him the lecture of a lifetime, but he just wouldn’t listen. Then he said this to me,” Miss Satomi said before dropping into a half-hearted imitation of Kiryuu’s voice. ““I consider you my benefactor, Miss Satomi, so I’ll give you a warning: this town will soon be swept up in a maelstrom of battle, ravaged and razed by forces beyond your comprehension. I won’t mince words: you should flee now, before it’s too late.””

*H-Hoooly crap, that’s so friggin’ cool! A harsh, brooding tone, but with the baseline decency to want to keep his old teacher safe! Talk about nailing the low-key tsundere antihero vibe! So! Cool!*

“Why...? Why is that jackass *always* like this?” Tomoyo groaned, clutching at her head in shame while I literally shivered with profound respect for her brother.

That’s when Hatoko spoke up. “Hey, Juu?” she said, tugging at my sleeve and giving me a rather anxious look. “Tomoyo’s brother’s surname is Kiryuu? Not Kanzaki?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “His name’s Kiryuu, for sure. It’s... Well, apparently it’s sorta complicated.”

“Oh...”

Hatoko looked a little downcast. Oddly, it felt less like she was surprised that Tomoyo and her brother had different last names, and more like something about the name “Kiryuu” in and of itself had set her off somehow.

“Hey, Hatoko—do you know something about Kiryuu?” I asked.

“N-No, I don’t... I mean, I *shouldn’t*,” said Hatoko. “Hmm... It’s the strangest thing. I have this feeling that I’ve heard that name before somewhere, but I just can’t put my finger on it...”

Apparently, both Sayumi *and* Hatoko had some sort of baggage regarding Kiryuu, which was weird since, as far as I knew, the two of them had never even met him. A strange sensation that I couldn’t identify was beginning to build up within me. It was like there was something stuck in my throat that I just couldn’t quite seem to swallow down—like a fistful of sand had been dropped into the gears of my mind, causing them to grind and stick.

It was as if, before I knew it, someone had intervened in our lives. As if, before I knew it, a great change had come about us. As if, before I knew it, the curtain had raised on a production we hadn’t known we were part of. *His* presence was working its way into my relationships, manifesting in my life like an evening fog, its moisture beginning to quietly bead up on my skin.

“Okay, I think that’s enough getting sidetracked on Kiryuu’s account. Sheesh—this happens every time he comes up, I swear. There’s no lack of out-there anecdotes about him, that’s for sure. Seriously, I’ve got an endless stock of great stories thanks to that little troublemaker,” said Miss Satomi. She was

treating Kiryuu's surely heroic exploits like they were material for a stand-up comedy act. "Where to even start...? If I had to pick a single classic example, I'd probably have to go with the *Crisis Clown* incident. That one's never failed to impress at parties."

"The *what* incident?! That's such a cool name, what the heck!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah, he named it himself."

"Kiryuu did?! The culprit named his own crime?!"

"Yup. He kept muttering, 'This will go down in history as the *Crisis Clown* incident, surely!' while he was at it, and it ended up sticking."

"He was talking about how the incident would go down in history before he was even finished causing it?! Talk about stealth marketing, only without the stealth!"

"Right... But anyway, the point is that Kiryuu was this club's president in his time, and Kanzaki's his little sister, so I figured she might as well be the next one."

"Way to pivot away from the story you were telling on a dime! Is it just me, or did you get bored with it halfway through and decide not to bother telling the rest?!" *Seriously, what the heck was the Crisis Clown incident?! I'm so friggin' curious now! It's supposed to be your surefire story to tell at parties, isn't it?! Why set it up and not follow through?!*

I was completely invested in hearing the rest of the tale, but Miss Satomi ignored me entirely and turned to face Tomoyo instead. "I sorta alluded to this a minute ago, but back when I had this club shoved off on me, it had lost its last members and was due to be suspended. It would've gone through too, if your brother hadn't jumped in to keep it alive. So, I sorta figured...well, you know! It'd just make sense for you to carry on his responsibility and keep it going...or something along those lines, I guess. Should work out just fine. And hey, it'll look good on your record and stuff."

*Wow, talk about a muddled disaster of an argument! Just look at Tomoyo's face—could an expression get any more skeptical than that?*

"All right! Looks like the next president's all sorted, so I think we're done

here. Don't forget to lock the door on your way out!" said Miss Satomi, stretching as she shut the conversation down and departed from the room before any of us could get a word in edgewise.

I did *try* to get a word in, for the record—it would've been "wait" or "stop," most likely—but by the time I'd opened the door again and stepped out into the hall, she was already long gone. She'd actually headed home, just like that. It felt like a localized rainstorm had swept into our club room and had departed just as quickly. She'd just stepped in, made a super important decision on our behalf, and then vanished again before we even knew what had happened.

"Your aunt sure is something, huh, Chifuyu?" I commented.

"Yeah. Shiharu's super amazing," Chifuyu proudly agreed. Apparently, she hadn't picked up on my sarcasm.

*Super amazing, huh?* I had to admit that she *had* solved the problem that we'd been waffling over in a snap, even if she'd done it in the most arbitrary way possible. I could see her being amazing in a certain sense of the word, at least.

"So, what's it gonna be, Tomoyo?" I asked.

"What's *what* gonna be?" Tomoyo replied.

"If you want to turn the job down, you should probably chase her now while you still can. When Miss Satomi has actual work to do, she gets it done as quickly as possible so she can have more slacking-off time later on. I'd bet that she's heading to the staff room and filing the paperwork to make you the next president right about now."

"Oh... Jeez, what *should* I do?"

"Why not accept the position? I don't see any particular reason why you shouldn't," Sayumi chimed in, her gentle words cutting Tomoyo's bewildered skittishness off before it could escalate. "I hadn't imagined the choice would be made in this manner, but that being said, I have no objections whatsoever to you serving as our club's next president. For that matter, if you had requested that I nominate my successor, I suspect I would have settled on you."

"Oh. Really?" I asked.

Sayumi gave me a nod. “Yes, on account of the fact that out of all our second-year students...no, out of *all* of us, myself and Chifuyu included, Tomoyo has applied herself to her writing more earnestly and consistently than anyone.”

*Oooh. Yeah, that’s true, actually.*

Literary clubs were far from a rarity. It would be hard to find a person who wasn’t aware of them, at least on a conceptual level, but for people who had never actually been *in* a literary club, their actual activities were probably something of a mystery. It wasn’t rare for people to be under the misapprehension that everyone who belonged to a literary club was hoping to be an author in the future as a result.

The truth, however, was that the actual nature of a literary club’s activities varied wildly from club to club and school to school, making it very hard to sum up the whole concept in simple terms. Plenty of the people who joined them had no aspirations of future authorship as well...but at the same time, some literary club members really *did* hope to go pro in the long term. Some members, in other words, actually took their writing activities seriously—even in our own little club.

“Yeah, when you put it that way, you’re right. Tomoyo really *does* work the hardest when it comes to our actual literary club stuff,” I admitted.

I’d had an up close and personal perspective on her activities, so I knew that very well. I knew exactly how hard she’d been applying herself, not just to her own personal writing, but also to writing and editing stories for our literary magazines, penning the story for the game everyone had made as a birthday present for me, and putting together the script for the play we’d staged just recently as well. She’d thrown herself headfirst into all sorts of activities.

“That’s a good point. I think Tomoyo would do a great job too!” Hatoko said with a smile.

“Me too. Tomoyo would be a good president,” Chifuyu agreed.

Sayumi stood up and stepped in front of Tomoyo. “Well, Tomoyo? Are you willing to take on the position?”

“I...don’t know if I’ll be able to be as good of a president as you were,”

Tomoyo hesitantly replied.

“There’s no need for you to try to emulate my methods. After all...I don’t believe that I was an exemplary enough president to serve as a model for my underclassmen,” said Sayumi.

I’m pretty sure that everyone else in the room thought something to the tune of “How modest can you possibly get?!” in unison. Sayumi, however, spoke on with a somewhat bitter smile on her face.

“I’ve spoken about this with Andou before...but initially, I had hoped to be the president of the student council. Frankly, I’d viewed participating in this club’s activities, and even becoming its president, as a temporary affair. I’d fully intended to resign once I’d won the election and assumed the student council president’s office.”

I’d already heard this story from Sayumi’s sister, Maiya; from Kudou; and from Sayumi herself. Her aspiration to lead the student council had started before she’d even enrolled in our school. She’d intended to put her name forward when the election arrived, square off in a fair fight with her rival Kudou, and emerge victorious when all was said and done...until I’d come along and ruined her whole plan.

“Last year, I’d seen this club as nothing more than a temporary occupation. I was given the position of president for lack of other members, and I’d fully intended to retire from it to focus upon my student council campaign when election season rolled around. However,” Sayumi said, pausing to look out across our faces, “Andou, Tomoyo, and Hatoko joined, and soon after, Chifuyu started attending on Miss Satomi’s recommendation...and before I knew it, the literary club had become something irreplaceable to me. I began to take pride in my position as its president, and I came to the realization that I would prefer to continue serving that role than strive to join the student council after all. That is a decision that I have never regretted in the least.”

She looked me in the eye as she said those final words. I’d probably failed to hide the fact that I was feeling guilty again, and she’d chosen to make it clear that she didn’t hold what had happened against me.

“I believe I’ve made it clear by now, Tomoyo, that when I became this club’s

president, I'd had no attachment to it or its activities. I believe, however, that the same cannot be said for you," Sayumi continued with an ever so slight grin. "I still remember very well the time when, before you'd even formally joined the club, you told me everything there was to know about the novel that you were writing."

"D-Do you really have to drag that back up now? That was ages ago," Tomoyo muttered, dropping her gaze to the ground as a blush crept across her face.

The story that she'd told Sayumi about, I knew, was one that she'd written just for the fun of it: a flagrant self-insert power fantasy that she'd penned during the thick of her chuuni era. That story had been the trigger that'd finally let me put the pieces together and realize that Tomoyo had been the girl I'd met on a particularly impactful day in my own past.

"You appreciate the joy and pain inherent to writing better than anyone else in this club, so I believe you are worthy to assume the mantle of its president," Sayumi concluded. The look in her eyes and the tone of her voice, both laden with sincerity, made it abundantly clear that she wasn't just being considerate or paying lip service to Tomoyo—she'd meant every word of it.

For a moment, Tomoyo thought to herself in silence. "Okay, then," she finally said with a powerful nod. "I'll... I'll do it. I'll be Sayumi's successor and take over as this club's president."

That was the moment when our next leader was well and truly decided upon. She would carry on what had become a strange sort of family tradition through Kiryuu, and she would carry on Sayumi's will to keep the club going as well. From tomorrow onward, Kanzaki Tomoyo would be our new president.

Our meeting to determine Sayumi's successor had more or less turned into an impromptu retirement ceremony for her as well, but that being said, she wasn't going to be pulling out of the club entirely just yet. She'd still be stopping by to hang out on occasion until she graduated, it seemed.

"Though considering how well the passing of the torch went over in the end, I'm afraid it would rather spoil the mood if I were to show up tomorrow as if nothing had changed whatsoever," Sayumi had said with a somewhat self-

deprecating air, but the rest of us quickly jumped in to tell her that she could—and *should*—show up anyway, which she'd agreed to with an exasperated chuckle.

After that, we set about discussing a proper farewell party for Sayumi, and we also talked about picking a vice president as well. That prompted Chifuyu to ask for an official position in the club's leadership structure, which spiraled off into a whole different conversation. Before long, the time had arrived for the school to close for the evening, and we prepared to leave. Chifuyu used her power to warp right home, and I was just about to follow Tomoyo and Hatoko out the door when Sayumi called out to me.

"A-Andou," she said in an unusually restless tone.

"Yeah? Need something?" I asked.

"I, well... That is..."

Up until just moments before, Sayumi had been giving off the aura of an ideal club president, gentle and dignified in equal measure, but now she was acting more like a nervous trespasser. Her gaze drifted from one side of the room to the other, and her hands fidgeted restlessly.

"So, uh... Something wrong?" I asked once more.

"N-No, I'm perfectly fine. Pay me no mind," Sayumi replied before taking a long, deep breath, then she looked me straight in the eye. "Andou. Do you have anything planned tomorrow after school?"

"Tomorrow? Nah, nothing in particular."

"Is that so...?"

"Yup."

"Nor do I, as it so happens."

"Huh. That so?"

"Quite..."

"..."

"..."



“...Wait, is that *it*?! You’re just gonna confirm that both of us don’t have anything planned and drop the conversation there?! What are you getting at here, Sayumi?! Is this some sort of psychological test, or what?!”

“N-Not at all! My mistake—let me start over. What I meant was...if you don’t have anything planned after school tomorrow, would you mind meeting up with me behind the gymnasium?” Sayumi said, her voice trembling with every word. It seemed it had taken all of her courage to force the question out.



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*Behind the gymnasium?* “I mean, sure, but why— Ah?!” I gasped. An instant before I asked what her goal was, the truth had hit me like a bolt from the blue. “Don’t tell me... Sayumi, is this what I think it is?”

“Huh?”

“You want to meet behind the gymnasium? That could only mean one thing, right?”

“Huh...? Huuuuh?!” Sayumi all but shrieked. “Y-You mean...y-you figured it out...?”

“Well, I mean, duh. I think pretty much anyone would jump to the right conclusion if you asked to meet them *there*.”

Sayumi was blushing vividly. My best guess was that she was embarrassed I’d seen through her intentions that easily. “B-But... How? Why? Why would you see through me *now*, of all times...?” she asked.

“It just makes sense. You’ve stepped down from your position as president, so you’ve also stepped away from all the responsibilities it carried. There’s only one thing a girl in that sort of situation could be looking for when she asks someone like me to talk with her in private.”

Sayumi took in a sharp breath. “Wh-Why is today the *one* day you have to be so quick on the uptake?!”

“I’m right, aren’t I? Sayumi, you want—”

“No! W-Wait a moment, please! Th-This isn’t what you think! I mean, well...maybe it is, after all...but I’m not emotionally ready, and I haven’t finished planning at all yet...”

I ignored Sayumi’s teary-eyed pleas and pressed onward.

“Long story short—you’re saying you want a rematch with me, aren’t you?!”

“...Pardon?”

“How could I ever forget the history we share behind that gym? That’s where

the two of us fought with our lives on the line, isn't it?!"

Sayumi gaped at me.

"Yes, and our desperate struggle ended in my decisive victory! Clearly, you've borne a grudge this whole time and have been waiting for the perfect moment to challenge me to a rematch for the ages, haven't you?!"

"I, umm—"

"Worry not—I understand. Perhaps the others would be mystified, but I know *exactly* how you feel. You've always been responsible to a fault, Sayumi, and given your position as the club's president, you could never allow yourself to challenge me to single combat before now. Isn't that right?"

As of today, however, we'd elected a new president. Starting tomorrow, Sayumi would no longer hold her old office. She would be free to do as she pleased, up to and including seeking out a rematch to make up for the humiliation of her past defeat! *Yup! Everything fits together perfectly when I look at it in this context! For sure!*

"Mwa ha ha! Very well—I accept! It is, after all, a sovereign's duty to rise to meet any and all challenges from those who would seek to claim his throne!"

Sayumi just...gave me a look.

"Ah—b-but just to set expectations where they should be, it won't be a full-on battle this time, okay? I mean, it's not like I'm *scared* of fighting you again or anything! It's just like, y'know, doing the same thing twice in a row would be super stale, right? So instead of a supernatural battle, we can have a supernatural pose-off, or a supernatural naming contest, or something along those lines..."

"...Right. Of course," Sayumi listlessly agreed. For some reason, she seemed really, really tired all of a sudden. "I-In any case, Andou, meet me behind the gymnasium tomorrow after school—our rematch, or whatever it turns out to be, can happen then. And come alone, please, without telling anyone."

"Wha—?! You mean you're looking for a no-holds-barred deathmatch?! No rules, and no referee?!"

“I’ve lost the will to argue about this. Just be there,” Sayumi said, pressing a hand to her temple before leaving the club room behind her—though just before she stepped out the door, she turned around for one final comment.

“Please, Andou.”

The way she said those last words made her seem equal parts earnest and at her wits’ end.

To be completely honest: at that point, I’d had yet to figure out what was going through Sayumi’s mind at all. I’d had no clue why she’d *really* called me behind the gymnasium, and I hadn’t the foggiest idea how much courage and resolve it had taken for her to make that request.

I had, however, had a feeling. Somehow, I’d known that tomorrow, something would happen—tomorrow, something would change, and the daily lives that we’d been carrying on with as if they’d last forever were about to come crumbling down around us. I hadn’t been able to explain where that premonition was coming from, but it’d lurked within me, silently building in the depths of my heart.

To make a long story short: that premonition would turn out to be right on the money. The incident that followed would blow my—and, for that matter, Sayumi’s—expectations right out of the water, leaving us to stand with jaws dropped as the consequences poured down around us. I could hardly blame us, though. I don’t think *anyone* could have ever predicted what would become of our school lives—of our world—the very next day.

## Chapter 3: Does Andou Jurai Dream of Branching Paths?

In the mornings, my sister, Andou Machi, and I had an unspoken agreement: whoever got up first would make a point of waking up the other. Whenever I'd sleep in, my sister would come to haul me out of bed, and whenever she'd sleep in, I'd return the favor. That meant that I'd end up waking her up more often than not, though she would always swear that *she* wakes *me* up most of the time, actually. The truth would remain an eternal mystery.

Well, it would in a big-picture sense, anyway. On that day in particular, the truth was very evident—and, regrettably, the truth was that *I'd* been the one to sleep in.

"Awright! Up and at 'em, you little turd-brain!" my sister roared as she barged into my room, pulled the sheets off my bed, then used the momentum of that motion to sweep a kick in my direction, knocking me straight to the ground.

"Bwaugh!"

"Sheesh—how long were you planning on sleeping in for, huh?!" Machi fumed.

"That...*really* hurt, you know?" I grumbled from the ground. "Couldn't you have picked a nicer way to wake me up?"

"Tried it. Didn't work. Your fault for not getting up the first time."

"No, you didn't! Don't you dare lie to my face! That was a *hundred* percent your first try, wasn't it? I was actually half awake already, so I know for a *fact* that you didn't try anything gentler!"

"Sure I did. In my mind's eye."

"And you expected that to *work*?!"

"Maybe I thought that my beloved little brother would manage to pick up on the telepathic signals I'd been sending his way."

“Maybe if your little brother’s really so beloved, you could consider picking a less brutal wake-up call next time...”

“Anyway, getcher ass outta bed, Jurai. You’ve got an escort today, I guess—there’s a girl waiting outside for you.”

“A girl? You mean Hatoko?” I asked, and I was surprised to see my sister shake her head.

*Oh, huh.* It made sense on reflection—if it had been Hatoko, she would’ve come in to say hi to everyone. Even if she hadn’t come in on her own initiative, my mom or sister would’ve almost certainly dragged her in by force. In the first place, even though Hatoko and I walked to school together pretty often, we’d always meet up partway there. We almost never went all the way to each other’s houses.

*Okay, but if it’s not Hatoko, who is waiting for me outside?*

First things first, I had to get ready. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and quickly got dressed.

“Ahh, crap! It’s getting late—I really did oversleep,” I muttered to myself as I glanced at the clock.

I knew exactly why I’d slept in: it was because I’d stayed up late the night before ironing out the details of Operation Take Takanashi Sayumi Down in Single Combat. Our rematch was scheduled for today after school, and if I went in without a solid plan, my defeat was assured. I’d learned very well just how tough she was during our battle last year, and I knew that I’d have to use every trick in the book to steer our confrontation away from hand-to-hand combat and toward a battle of wits...

*But no, wait, that won’t work either! Sayumi has wits and intellect to spare—she makes me look like a rank-and-file chump in that field too!*

Sayumi was so skilled in the martial and intellectual arts, you could very well say that I’d lost the second I’d agreed to square off with her. I couldn’t afford to give up, though! Maybe some people would take this as an opportunity to give their upperclassman a win and let her graduate on a positive note, but I wasn’t about all that. If I was going to fight her, I’d be giving it my best. I’d be fighting

to win! I would come up with a plan to engage her, fair and square, to the best of my ability! That, after all, is exactly what Sayumi would be expecting from me...

“...”

...or so I thought, but some part of me had the strangest inkling that I *might* have had the wrong impression about all this.

*Hmm. Maybe she didn't want a rematch after all...? When I really think about it, I have no idea what the point of that would even be. But if it's not a rematch—if she isn't trying to reassert her superiority in battle—then what is going on here? Why would Sayumi want to meet with me behind the gym?*

“...Oh, crap! I've gotta get going!”

I'd finished changing at that point, and I dashed out of my room at top speed. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I had time to scarf down breakfast, but decided to give it a pass and headed straight for the front door. Not only would eating risk making me late, I also didn't want to make the mystery girl who was apparently outside wait for me any longer than she already had. And, speaking of that mystery girl...

“Huuuh?”

The moment I stepped outside and saw who was there, my eyes widened with shock. I seriously doubt it was possible for me to look more perplexed than I did in that moment.

“Kudou...? What are *you* doing at my house?”

It was, indeed, Kudou. She was wearing a red coat with a checkered scarf, and she had black tights on for good measure. It was a very *fall* outfit, well suited to the chilly autumn morning, but it did nothing to answer the fundamental question in my mind: *Why?* Why was *Kudou* waiting by my front door?

I stood there in a confused daze until Kudou noticed my presence and turned to face me. The instant she laid eyes on me, her face lit up in a smile. And what a smile it was—a real full-faced grin like I'd never seen on her before. Then she clasped her hands together behind her back, tilted her head, and said, “Tee hee! Here I am!” in the most stunningly cutesy voice I'd ever heard come out of



her mouth, with an expression to match. “Hee hee! Did I surprise you? I’ve been waiting around this whole time to see if I could!”

My jaw was on the ground. My thought process: *ceased*. I’m pretty sure my soul actually departed from my body for a split second.

*U-Umm. Huh? What even...? Since when was Kudou the sort of person who’d say stuff like that? Or do stuff like this, for that matter? Is she going through some sort of personality breakdown, or— No. No, wait. I know this Kudou.*

A powerful sense of déjà vu came over me. A day that I would’ve preferred to have left locked away in the annals of history was being dredged up from the depths of my memory. I’d seen this Kudou—a version of Kudou that was downright excruciating to watch—once before.

“Okay! Let’s head to school, all right...*darling?* ♥”

“Hgkgh?!”

The inflection when she said “darling,” so cloyingly sweet I could practically *hear* the little heart behind the question mark, sent me into a full-body shiver. Not on account of fear or cold, though—this was a shiver of pure, unspeakable shame. It was an awkward sort of secondhand embarrassment so powerful it literally gave me goose bumps and sent chills racing down my spine. To think that, in this day and age, she would call me *darling* again...

*I remember this. I remember this unbearably powerful level of cringe very, very well!*

“K-K-K... Kudou...?” I stammered fearfully.

“Oh, come *on*, darling! Why are you still acting like I’m a stranger? Honestly,” Kudou said with a bashful squirm as she shot me an uncomfortably affectionate glance. Her eyes were limpid, and her cheeks faintly flushed. The look on her face was, to be brutally frank, the look of a lustful maiden. “You can call me Mirei from now on, okay? ♥”

That statement on its own would’ve been enough to rob me of my words even *without* the cutesy smile, but it certainly didn’t lessen the impact. I didn’t know how this had happened, and I certainly didn’t know why, but when it came to the *what* of the matter, I had no doubts. Before me stood the version

of Kudou who had fallen head over heels for me after a terrible misunderstanding.

A quick recap, for everyone who might have forgotten: Kudou's character, like a certain alien overlord whose name starts with the letter F, had progressed through four distinct forms up to this point.

Her first form: Ordinary Kudou. The passionate and strict president of our school's student council. This was the version of Kudou who, half a year beforehand, had arrived at the literary club and stated her intention to have it shut down.

Her second form: Cocky Kudou, aka Battle-Mode Kudou. A form in which she gets a little *too* confident in her power and decides to talk way more smack than she could ever live up to. Bearer of a "Look down on me, and it'll be the last thing you ever do" sort of attitude, but in spite of her big mouth, still a timid and delicate girl on the inside. Also kind of a ditz, as evidenced by the fact that this was the form that had screwed up and revealed her true identity to us. A form that had seen a revival just the other day.

Her third form: Infatuated Kudou, aka Love-Drunk Kudou. A form in which Kudou lives for love and love alone, sparing not even a sidelong glance for anything else, which naturally results in a *complete* disregard for her surroundings. This version of Kudou has no scruples when it comes to PDA—in fact, I'd gotten the impression she *enjoyed* making a show of her affection. If an action would make the people around you roll their eyes at how sappy of a girlfriend you were being, this Kudou had probably done it.

And, her final form: Recent Kudou. The passionate and capable president of our school's student council. An individual with an ample supply of common sense, whose words and deeds made her intelligence clear for all to see. A truly remarkable leader who'd led the year's cultural festival to a stunning success before stepping down from her position at the height of her career. Similar in many ways to her first form.

That concludes the list of Kudou's forms to date. It's probably pretty clear by now that she was a girl who had been through a number of vast and sudden

personality shifts, and each time she'd changed forms, a boatload of drama and hardship always seemed to follow. She'd more or less settled down into her final form recently, to be fair, to the extent that, in my mind, Final Form Kudou was as close to a True Kudou as there could ever be. I'd more or less assumed that the other forms had been consigned to the history books...until I found myself walking arm in arm with her, listening to her happily hum away as we strolled to school. There was simply no denying it: this was her second form, Infatuated Kudou, back with a vengeance.

It was the early morning, in a quiet residential area. There weren't many other people around, but that didn't mean that *nobody* was there to see us. Kudou, however, had linked arms with me with an air of complete shamelessness, almost as if she was *trying* to show it off to the whole world. The skip in her step was making it weirdly uncomfortable to match her pace too.

"H-Hey, Kudou?" I said.

"Harrumph!" Kudou said with a sulky pout. To be clear, that was the *word* "harrumph," not an actual harrumphing noise. I'd never seen a more obviously performative expression of displeasure.

"Ah, uh... M-Mirei?" I hopefully corrected myself.

"That's me! What is it, darling?" said Kudou, her pout shifting in an instant into a full-blown smile. And, like...it was cute, okay? Like, honestly, it really was, but my mind just couldn't keep pace with the situation I'd landed in, cute smile or not.

"So, sorry to drag this up all over again...but just to be extra sure, this isn't, like, a prank, or some sort of weird dare you're being subjected to, right?"

"How many times do I have to answer that question? A prank? A *dare*? What are you talking about?" said Kudou. "Well, then again, I guess you could sort of call it a prank! I *did* keep it secret that I'd be waiting for you, since I thought you'd be happy to see me when you were least expecting it! I'd call it more of a surprise than a prank."

"Okaaay..."

“Oh! But I guess that probably makes it seem like I’m saying it’s your fault I had to wait around outside, doesn’t it? For the record, I only did it because I wanted to! And besides, stuff like this doesn’t bother me at all when I know I’m doing it for you!”

“Riiight,” I droned.

At first, I’d thought that there must have been a hidden camera somewhere filming my consternation at Kudou’s sudden and complete change in personality, but upon further reflection, there was no way Kudou would play along with something that mean-spirited. That said, there *was* still a part of me that desperately *wished* this was all just a prank.

“Okay then, Kudou—if this isn’t a prank, then what *are* you trying to accomplish here?” I asked.

“Huh? Whatever do you mean?” replied Kudou with a cock of her head. She seemed to honestly not understand what I was getting at.

“I mean, like... You know, the waiting outside my house thing, and the linking arms, and calling me ‘darling’...”

“Oh, is *that* what you meant? Honestly, darling, you’re such a bully with these questions sometimes,” said Kudou with a satisfied nod and a slight blush. “I’m doing it because I love you, obviously!”

“...”

“*Eek!* Oh jeez, I actually said it! C-Come on, darling, do you have to put me on the spot like this? You’re impossible, sometimes!”

“Umm... Huh? Wait, then, Ku—I mean, Mirei...are we, like, *dating?*”

Had I awakened to an alternate personality that had asked Kudou out behind my back? Had we been dating without my knowledge? Or maybe a warp in reality had led to third-form Kudou time-slipping her way from right after I’d given her power its name to now?

That possibility meant that I *had* to just come out and ask whether or not the two of us were an item. “Are we, like, dating?” is maybe one of the single scummiest questions a guy could ever ask, and I knew it, but circumstances

being what they were, I think I get a pass for playing that particular card. I figured that if she said something along the lines of “What, are you that desperate to hear me say it out loud?” I would have to start seriously considering the alternate personality or time slip theories...

“No, we aren’t dating.”

...but Kudou confirmed what I already knew without a second thought. She laid it out very clearly, though I did have to note a certain hint of sadness to how she’d said it.

“You turned me down, after all—and not very nicely.”

I...didn’t know what to say to that.

“Or, actually, I guess you didn’t *exactly* turn me down, did you, darling? All you did was correct *my* huge misunderstanding. I’d jumped to a totally wrong conclusion and gotten all worked up after reading the letter you’d left in my shoe cubby, and you did everything you could to cope with me nicely,” Kudou continued.

Hearing her say that I’d “coped with her nicely” actually made me feel a little ashamed of myself, to be honest. The way I saw it, nothing I’d done over the course of that incident had been commendable in the slightest. But that wasn’t what was really important here—what mattered was that the time slip theory had just been ruled out entirely. She remembered the love letter misunderstanding perfectly well...which raised just as many questions as it answered.

“So then, *why*...?”

“Why? Why do you even have to ask? You being in love with me was a misunderstanding, yeah...but *me* being in love with *you* is an undeniable fact!” said Kudou. She’d made so little effort to mince words—gone to such truly negligible lengths to soften the statement—that just listening to her was making me feel intense secondhand embarrassment all over again. “That’s why I make sure to let you know that you’re my darling whenever I can, and why I try to show how much I love you every time there’s a chance! Hee hee hee!”

While I was stricken with a blank-minded state of befuddlement, Kudou

tugged me even closer to her. We were both dressed for the chilly weather, which made it a little hard to tell, but I was still *pretty* sure she'd pulled my arm right into her chest.

"H-Hey, hold on, Mirei—let's give the arm-in-arm thing a rest, okay?! We're out in public!" I yelped.

"Honestly, darling, you can be so shy sometimes!" Kudou said with a pouty frown. She did let my arm go, thankfully, though she definitely wasn't happy about it. That was one of Love-Drunk Kudou's distinctive characteristics: her romantic inclinations were more or less out of control, but she was also docile enough to actually listen to her darling's requests. "Okay, darling—if linking arms is too much for you, how about we hold hands in one of our pockets instead?"

"I-In a pocket?"

"Yeah! Like, your coat pocket."

*Holding hands in a coat pocket? Isn't that, like, one of those things that couples do all the time in the winter?* It sounded incredibly embarrassing, and I really didn't *want* to do it...but on the other hand, it was also really hard to say no right after shutting down her dream of walking arm in arm.

"All right," I said after a moment of hesitation. "I'll do it."

"Yaaay! Thanks, darling!" squealed Kudou.

I'd more or less resigned myself at that point. It was embarrassing, yeah, but compared to linking arms, I'd gotten off lightly. I put my hands in my pockets, and waited for her to slip one of hers in as well. I was not, needless to say, brave or experienced enough when it came to romance to be the one proactively holding *her* hand.

Kudou let out an oddly mischievous chuckle, then—for *some* reason—she circled around behind me. Before I had a chance to react, she reached out with *both* hands, almost like she was about to hug me, and slid them into my pockets on either side, her left hand into my left pocket and vice versa. The next thing I knew, both of my hands were being firmly squeezed at once.

"Nooope, nope nope nope! This is *definitely* wrong!" I shouted.

“What about it?” Kudou asked.

“The whole thing! Why *both* hands?! This is definitely supposed to be a one-handed thing!”

“How other people do it isn’t my problem! This is the standard method, as far as I’m concerned.”



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“L-Look, just back off, please!”

“Nuh-uh, I don’t think so! You said I could, darling—no take-backs!” Kudou practically cooed from behind me, strengthening her grip at the same time. Anyone watching us would definitely have thought she was just plain hugging me.

*I-I underestimated her... I should’ve realized that when Kudou’s in this form, she has literally nothing but happy-go-lucky rom-com schlock on her mind! Her common sense and decency have been overridden by pure affection!*

In the end, there was no dissuading her. I gave up and resigned myself to carrying on toward school with her clinging to my back.

“K-Kinda feels like we’ve got a two-person conga line going, huh?”

“It kind of does! Our love for each other’s going to dance the night away, darling!”

That was my limit. I just couldn’t take another exchange like that, and plodded along in an exhausted silence until a familiar figure came into view.

“Ah. Hatoko!”

My childhood friend was waiting for me up ahead of us, at the same crossroad as usual. Meeting there and heading to school together was basically our morning routine.

“Ah, Juu! Good...morning?” Hatoko said as she turned to face me, her expression stiffening up the moment she actually *saw* me. That, frankly, was fair. Anyone would be weirded out by a guy and a girl our age walking along in a musicless conga line first thing in the morning.

“W-Wait a second, Hatoko! It’s not what you think! Just listen to me—I swear there’s a perfectly good explanation for this,” I frantically babbled.

I grappled for a decent excuse for a moment, but then it struck me that, really, I didn’t actually need to excuse myself at all. If anything, this was the perfect opportunity for me to explain the situation to Hatoko and have her *help* me come up with a solution. Anyone could see that Kudou wasn’t in her right mind, and I knew for a fact that as long as I explained myself clearly, Hatoko

would understand.

Just as I was thinking that I'd have to slip free of Kudou's grasp and talk with Hatoko one-on-one, however, a chill shot down my spine. The chill that I'd felt from Kudou earlier, to be clear, was one of awkward secondhand shame. This, on the other hand, was the sort of chill that meant I was in *trouble*. In fact, my survival instincts were screaming that my life was in imminent danger.

I looked over reflexively...and my gaze met Hatoko's. There was something new in her eyes—a darkness so deep and vast, it was downright terrifying. It was an abyss so dark, it felt like it could draw my soul in and consume it whole if I made the mistake of peering in too deeply.

“H-Hatoko...?”

“Juu... Huh? What's wrong? Hey. Why are you acting like you're scared of me? Why? Hey, Juu? Why? That's so weird. Why would seeing me scare you? It's weird. You know it's weird, right? Are you scared because you think I'm going to get mad at you? Does that mean you think you've done something wrong? It does, right? Right? By the way, weren't you trying to say something a second ago? You said, 'It's not what you think,' didn't you? What did that mean? What were you talking about? I won't understand if you don't explain yourself, you know? It's not what I think? What's not what I think? Oh, you know, I just noticed that there's someone behind you. That's right. I only just noticed. I didn't see them at all until just a second ago. Didn't notice even a little bit. I only saw you, and had no idea anyone was there. Hey, what are you doing? What is this? What's going on? Juu, why's a girl hugging you from behind? Hey, Juu, why? Why? Why? Is she what I have the wrong idea about? What about her? It sounded like you were making an excuse—that means you feel guilty toward me about something you're doing, doesn't it? Are you doing something you can't bring yourself to tell me about? Would you be in trouble if I found out about it? Hey, Juu, tell me. If you have something to say, then say it. Explain it in a way that I can understand. Or, actually... Sorry. You don't have to tell me after all. You don't have to tell me anything anymore. I get it. I'm being weird, right? It's annoying to have your childhood friend pry into your private life like this. We're just childhood friends, after all. It's not like we're dating or married—we just happen to hang out because we live near each other and get along well.

Sure, we've been together since elementary school, but that doesn't mean we can meddle in each other's lives all the time, right? Who even knows if we'll still be together a few years from now? Maybe we'll end up going to different colleges, drift farther and farther away from each other, get jobs at totally different companies in totally different industries, and end up so distant from each other that I'll only learn that you're getting married when I get an invitation to your wedding ceremony. I'm sorry, Juu. I've probably said too much, haven't I? But please understand, okay? I want you to understand how I feel. I don't care if anyone else understands me, but I at least want you to, Juu. I'm only saying all these things because you're special. You're important to me, Juu. That's why I can't help but run my mouth to you. I know that I'm doing it, but I just can't help myself. This is all about you, so how could I? I just can't help myself when I end up thinking about you. Hey, Juu. Let me ask again—what are you doing? Why's that girl hugging you from behind? Why does it look like the two of you are so close? Oh. Don't misunderstand me, okay? I'm not jealous, or anything. I wasn't thinking that I wanted to hug you like that at all. That wouldn't be nearly enough to satisfy me, after all. I wouldn't want a half-hearted hug like the ones that normal couples give. I'd want to give you a real, full-body hug from behind, so close that I could feel your clavicle, and your hips, and your shoulders... Ah, no, that's not what I meant to say. I'm sorry, that was a really weird tangent. Forget about it. Forget about it, okay? Please. Hee hee hee hee hee hee hee. Hey, Juu? You don't have to worry—I understand, okay? You don't actually like this, do you? She hugged you from behind out of nowhere and you're upset about it, right? You must be. I understand. Of course I understand—it's you, after all. I'm your childhood friend, so it'd be weird if I didn't understand. You wouldn't be happy about a girl pressing herself up against you like that, would you, Juu? You'd just be confused and uncomfortable, right? You would, right? There's no way you'd enjoy it, would you? You're not just acting uncomfortable but secretly celebrating inside, right? You're not, right? That's definitely not what the Juu I know would do. If you were, though...what would I even do? If you really were turning into the sort of perv who would enjoy something like this, then as your childhood friend, I'd have to stage an intervention. I'd have to do something to help you, for sure. That's right—I'd have to turn you back to normal. Ah... I'm

[illegible]

*Holy crap, did she seriously just do that?! She must've been talking for at least three print pages there! That was the sort of ultra-length line that actually kills voice actors—the sort of line that gets a standing ovation from the whole studio if the actor manages the whole thing in one take! Her dialogue was so word-heavy that you have to imagine her voice actor would end up thinking “I can’t believe I’m getting paid the same rate as everyone else even after all that effort...” once they’re finished recording it! It definitely feels like we’ve been here before! And...actually, wait. Huh?*

“H-Hatoko...? That *is* you, right?” I asked, my voice beginning to tremble. Not just my voice, actually—my whole body was starting to shiver. It was like a deep and penetrating chill had been cast over my soul, setting my teeth chattering. A clattering percussion of shivers was playing throughout my whole body, from my head to my toes.

“Huh? What are you talking about, Juu? Of course it’s me! Who else would I be?” Hatoko asked with a beaming smile. “I’m the same Hatoko who’s been by your side allll the way since kindergarten, and the same Hatoko who’ll be with you allll the way from now on till forever!”

Her smile really was as bright, tender, and cheerful as could be...but her eyes were another story. Nothing about how they looked said “smile” to me at all. No, her eyes were host to a crazed, maddening darkness. Just looking into them felt like it had shaved a solid three years or so off my life span. No evil eye, magic eye, or any other sort of eye-based power I’d heard of had ever scared me quite the way her eyes did in that moment.

*Oh. Oh, god. Kudou's not the only one who's gone crazy.*

If I had to describe the rest of the trip to school in a word, the only one that could really do it justice is “chaos.” Love-Drunk Kudou and Darkside Hatoko entered a war to end all wars, and my pockets were the territory they were feuding over. I’d...rather not get into the details, honestly. Like, I *really* don’t want to talk about it.

When all was settled and done, the two of them agreed to an even split—in other words, Kudou and Hatoko were each allowed to occupy one of my pockets. Hatoko wound up on my right side, and Kudou on my left. That left me walking to school holding hands with two girls at once, which was the sort of situation a *lot* of people would find enviable as could be, but I felt more like I was walking on coals than anything else. In fact, I felt like a dead man walking. Sure, their territorial dispute seemed settled for the time being, but only because they’d moved from direct hostilities to a brutal and extended cold war.

“Excuse me, Kushikawa—I know you’re jealous of me, but isn’t copying my hand-holding crossing a line? Shouldn’t this sort of thing be first come, first served?”

“Juu, Juu, Juu! Hee hee hee! Your hands really are warm, you know?”

“Hey! Are you listening to me, Kushikawa?”

“Hey, Juu—did you just hear a girl’s voice, or was it just me? That’s weird, though. We’re the only ones around, so I must have been hearing things! Yup. We’re the only people here, for sure! We walk to school like this every morning, after all. Just the two of us!”

“Oh? So you’re ignoring me? If that’s how you’re going to play, then I’ll just have to fight dirty too...”

“Hey, Juu—don’t you think walking with both hands in your pockets is kind of dangerous? You should probably take your other hand out, just to be safe! And I mean really whip it out—hard and fast enough that you’d knock someone right over, if they were standing next to you!”

“*Hey, ow! I said ow! Would you please stop squeezing my hands so hard, you*

two?!” I wailed. The strength of their grasps had been increasing in direct proportion to the strength of the hostility they were projecting toward each other. Thankfully, my screaming did convince them both to loosen their grips right away. They were both nice people at heart, after all. They were nice, and I knew it...but, still...

“Ah, I’m so sorry, darling! How could I possibly make this dire of a mistake?! Don’t worry—I’ll rub it better right away! A nice massage should help! Here, see? Pain, pain, fly away!”

“I-I’m sorry, Juu! I’m so sorry, honestly... If it leaves any lasting pain, I promise I’ll stand in for your right arm for as long as I have to! I’ll do it for the rest of my life, even! Anything you need, just say the word!”

On one hand, I had a girl treating me like I was a little kid, and on the other, I had a girl who’d jumped *directly* to the most uncomfortably heavy place imaginable. They were both running completely out of control.

“Hey, umm...we’re nearly at school, so maybe the two of you should, y’know, let go...? Ahh, y’know what? Forget about it. Full steam ahead!” I said, abandoning my attempt to make them give me some space before it had really even started. I’d caved in an instant under the physical and psychological pressure coming at me from both sides.

Nothing I could possibly say was going to extract me from this situation, apparently, so I gave up on talking my way out entirely and resigned myself to walking up to school with a girl on either side of me. As we approached the school gates, however, my attention was seized by something else.

A single individual stood out from the crowd. He was the one outlier—the one solitary figure who cut a sharp contrast with the students around them. He stood with his back to the school’s gate, leaning up against it with his arms crossed. His silver hair glimmered brightly in the early morning sunlight, his eyes were concealed by a pair of round sunglasses, and his jet-black coat seemed to symbolize the profound weight of his sins. He was practically the physical embodiment of blasphemous corruption, and the moment I saw him, a single name sprang instantly to mind.

“K-Kiryuu Hel—” ...*dkaiser Luci-First* would have been the next words out of

my mouth, if it weren't for me noticing something that made me cut myself off mid name and cock my head in confusion.

For a single wonderful instant, I'd thought that the fated moment had finally arrived. I'd thought that the reunion I'd been waiting for was here, and that his and my paths had finally come together as one. For just a split second, my head had filled with glorious fantasies about what would become of the world now that we had been brought together...

"H-Huh?"

...but when I looked a little harder at the figure before the school gate, a sense that something was just *off* about him smacked all those fantasies into the dirt. He was...*small*. Just overall much too small, in every sense. Kiryuu was a strikingly tall, slim, and handsome man, whereas the silver-haired, black-coated figure by the gate was actually a little shorter than me. He looked more dainty than slim, and although the bulky scarf wrapped around his neck made it a little hard to tell, I was starting to think *he* might actually be a *she*...

"Oh!" I exclaimed as a realization struck me.

*That's right!* I had completely forgotten—or, rather, it hadn't been on my mind to begin with. It'd happened a few months back, on the day I'd gone to the summer festival. As fireworks had bloomed in the sky above, I'd reunited with a girl who'd loomed large in my memories for many a year. I'd first met her when I was in the eighth grade, and upon encountering her for the second time, I'd learned that the version of her I'd first come into contact with had been lost for all eternity. Never again would the girl I'd met that day set forth into town clad in the same garments she'd been wearing when I'd first laid eyes on her...or so I'd thought.

"Kye ki ki!"

The silver-haired, black-coated girl let out a forced, unnatural laugh, carefully pronouncing its every oddly specific syllable. In many ways, it was quite similar to my own signature "mwa ha ha." She stepped forward, arms still crossed, and walked right in front of me before looking me in the eye. "I shall confess, I did not imagine I would cross paths with *you* in this time and place. It seems the two of us are bonded by the fates themselves, Guiltia Sin Jurai!"

There it was—the classic “shall,” a staple of her chuuni-era vocabulary. It was, however, paired with something she hadn’t even known back during those days: my true name. In other words, we weren’t dealing with an irregularity in spacetime or with three years’ worth of her memories having been erased. She remembered everything—it was just her personality that had regressed to her chuuni phase.

“T-Tomo—”

“Cease! You’d do well to not speak *that* name aloud...assuming, that is, you value your life,” she spat with a glare that probably *would’ve* been intimidating if it weren’t for the fact that, between her sunglasses being kinda big and her face being on the smaller side of things, she looked more like one of those stock caricatures of shady Chinese salesmen you see in manga sometimes than anything else. “Kye ki ki! I’m most unamused when the children of man deign to flaunt taboo and speak my name...but I suppose lacking a name of any sort is inconvenient in its own right. Very well! Henceforth, you shall call me by a new name—a name, it seems, the denizens of this realm have seen fit to grant me by their own initiative,” she said.

*Now that was an outrageous preamble for a self-introduction if I’ve ever heard one! And wait, why’s she making it sound like she’s only vaguely aware of her own title?*

“You may call me the Witch of Antinomy Who Smirks in the Face of Twilight: Endless Paradox!”

It was a title that I’d grown quite familiar with, and quite fond of to boot...but this was the first time that I’d ever seen her stand tall and proud and declare it to the world, as if it really *was* a title that she’d laid claim to herself.

I was struck dumb by what I’d just witnessed, and I froze on the spot. The girl before me was nothing less than the second coming of the God of Chuunibyou—or rather, nothing less than Kanzaki Tomoyo, whose chuunibyou had *somehow* begun a catastrophic relapse.

There’s a saying in Japanese that goes “What happens twice will happen thrice.” Meanwhile, people also say that “the third time’s the charm.” I bring



this up because, like... Okay, so this is probably a *really* awkward turn of phrase to use in the immediate aftermath of a certain someone's loud and proud declaration of a certain title she'd thought up for herself, but I have to say it anyway: those two sayings were, in my mind, yet another example of an endless paradox.

Does something that happens twice inevitably happen a third time? Or is the third time the charm—the time that's sure to break the established trend? It was an eternal debate, fought upon a battlefield in a far higher realm of reality than the one the mushroom-versus-bamboo-shoot feud occupied. Countless individuals throughout the ages had surely made heated arguments in favor of both sides.

Personally? I was a firm member of team “What happens twice will happen thrice.” After all, it just makes sense, doesn't it? I think that anyone who's watched a phenomenon occur two times in a row would jump to the immediate and logical conclusion that it would *probably* happen a third time as well. The fields of probability and statistics, I was certain, would both back me up on that.

Saying “the third time's the charm,” on the other hand, was, well...just pure wishful thinking, honestly. That, and a sure sign of a poor loser. After all, people who say “third time's the charm” are almost universally people who'd just failed to do something twice in a row. It usually comes across as them making excuses for their screwups. I've heard people claim that the *actual* intended meaning of the phrase is that the results you get on your first or second attempt could just be flukes, and it takes three attempts to know that you're *really* seeing the truth of the matter. It definitely feels like the “you'll get the results you want on attempt number three” interpretation is dominant in this day and age, but if that theory's true, then “the charm” would have originally referred to “the accurate results” rather than “the results you want,” I guess.

*Anyway*, this is just one of those things that I tended to end up pondering when I was bored in class. All I'm really trying to say here is that I had never been fond of the baselessly optimistic “third time's the charm” mentality...but now, all of a sudden, I found myself mortified by how proud I'd been of all the justifications I'd come up with over the years to justify my viewpoint. I was doing some *serious* soul-searching. I now understood *very* well how all those

people throughout history had felt when, having faced thoroughly undesirable results twice in a row, they'd muttered the phrase "third time's the charm" with the air of a devotee saying a prayer to their chosen deity.

I now saw the appeal of the phrase's modern interpretation. When faced with two failures, some part of you ends up thinking "next time for sure" whether you like it or not. You find yourself desperately praying that the third attempt won't produce the same results.

Boiling all of this down to the point that I'm really trying to make here, meeting three acquaintances who had apparently lost their minds in the time between now and yesterday in a row was *seriously* straining my psyche. Kudou had shifted into Love-Drunk Mode, Hatoko had gone full yandere, and now Tomoyo had regressed to her chuuni days. The moment I'd seen her getup and realized that something might be wrong with her too, I'd started mentally grasping at the "third time's the charm" straw, only to find myself in a "what happens twice" scenario instead, as you can see.

Three of my friends had gone nuts in sequence. I'd been caught in a Triangle Attack—I'd been struck by a Jet Stream Attack. Difficult though it was to swallow, I had no choice but to accept that this madness was, in fact, actually happening to me. Two of them could've maybe been explained away, but once we'd reached the three mark, I just had to take it for what it was. *Something* was happening—something that I couldn't even begin to identify, but that was having a clear and pronounced effect upon the world around me.

"So, uhh—hey, Kudou, Hatoko, Tomoyo? Can you guys hear me out for just a minute?" I said the moment the four of us had passed through the school's front gate, taking great care to address my bizarro-mode friends as neutrally as possible. "This might seem like it's coming out of nowhere, but I'd like to ask you all some questions."

My mind was playing a symphony of chaos and confusion, but I somehow managed to muster up the brainpower to make an effort to confirm their identities, for a start. I had to consider the possibility that they were experiencing some weird form of amnesia, or they were actually imposters disguised as my friends, or they'd had their minds controlled or personalities replaced by someone with a power that let them do that sort of thing. I knew

those were absurd scenarios to take into serious consideration, but I had a feeling that if I ever wanted to make sense of this situation, I'd have to take it slowly and run through each and every possible explanation, no matter how unlikely they seemed.

I decided to start with Kudou. "So, M-Mirei... Can I ask you something first?"

"Sure! Go right ahead, darling. I'll tell you anything you want to know!"

"Would you tell me something you like, to start?"

"My darling! ♥"

"...My bad," I said. I just felt the need to apologize, though I couldn't explain why. I had absolutely *no* clue what to call whatever the emotion I was feeling was. "O-Okay, then...what's your favorite food?"

"Apple pie."

"Oh, yeah, those are great. How about the opposite, then? Least favorite food?"

"Pickled plums. I've never been able to stand how sour they are."

I nodded with understanding as, gradually, the fact that I'd already screwed up sank in. I, uh...didn't actually know what foods Kudou liked or disliked to begin with. In fact, I didn't know her well enough on a personal level to quickly determine whether or not I was talking with the real her, period. I briefly considered pulling a *YuYu Hakusho* and asking about her measurements, but I had a feeling that I couldn't pull off the whole pervy-but-still-cool shtick that Urameshi Yusuke had going, so I decided against it.

"Okay...how about drinks you don't like?" I asked, going with the single line of questioning where I *did* actually have something to work with.

"Black coffee. I told you that yesterday," said Kudou, as expected.

Clearly, she hadn't been kidding about not liking her coffee black—but, more so than that, the word "yesterday" struck me as noteworthy. That meant that she did, in fact, remember everything that had happened the day before, and by extension, she *was* the same girl I'd spoken with then. She hadn't been replaced by an impersonator, and she hadn't swapped bodies with someone

like you see in anime sometimes. This was definitely the real, genuine Kudou, with the sole exception of her altered personality.

“Okay,” I said. “You’re next, Hatoko.”

“Okay! Go ahead! You can ask me anything! There’s nothing I wouldn’t tell you, Juu!” Hatoko happily replied.

“Here goes, then: what are you into? And I mean, like, hobbies and stuff, not people.”

“I think you already know this, but I like comedy, for one thing!”

“Yup, figures. I knew that for sure. Okay, then—what sort of comedy are you into?”

“Acts that stick to the classics and don’t rock the boat.”

“And what sort of comedy do you *not* like?”

“Acts that try to get away with not having any real punch lines by calling themselves ‘surreal humor.’ You see that a lot these days in sketches and comedy groups that are trying to make themselves seem more modern.”

*Yup! That’s Hatoko, all right! Literally no doubt about it! No one else would be that weirdly judgmental about comedy exclusively!*

You’d think she was a leading figure in the industry listening to how she talked about it. On the one hand, she’d moan and groan about how there were way fewer comedy shows on TV recently, but on the other hand, she’d say stuff like “It feels like all it takes is an amateur being even just a *little* funny these days for everyone to start raving about them! I mean, so many models and actors—you know, *normal* people—have been showing up in variety shows lately. Maybe it’s because people lower the bar for what they consider funny when they know they’re not watching a professional perform? I like professional, polished comedy, myself, so I’m not really a fan of people who don’t put in that sort of time and effort getting all the screen time on those programs... But I guess that’s just a sign of the times, isn’t it?” She’d get so *weirdly* big-picture about it all that I always had to restrain myself from asking her just who the heck she thought she was vis-à-vis the world of comedy.

In any case, there was no longer any doubt in my mind that the obnoxiously nitpicky comedy fan before me was my childhood friend. And, with Hatoko's identity confirmed, I only had one person left to verify.

"Kye ki ki! Fortune favors you, child of man. I find myself in the highest of spirits today, so I will allow you to ask me a single question—but no more!"

I had to pause for a moment to collect myself.

*Hmm. How to describe what I'm feeling right now?* Considering the sort of person I was, you'd think I would've been super hyped up about Tomoyo returning to her chuuni era...but for some reason, I just wasn't really into it. Most likely, our first contact—the time we'd met while I was in the eighth grade—had left *too* strong of an impression on me. Seeing her in her silver wig, round sunglasses, and black coat felt like it was drawing me right back to that moment in time—that being a moment in time where I'd abandoned my own chuuni ways. Ironically, it seemed that the presence of the God of Chuunibyou rendered me into nothing more than your everyday mortal.

"Okay, here's my question... Or, actually I guess it's more of a comment? Now that I look at you...man, your whole getup's just a blatant rip-off of Kiryuu's style, isn't it?"

"I-It's not a rip-off! It's totally original! My own design! Hajime basically ripped *me* off, actually!" Tomoyo spluttered, displaying one of the God of Chuunibyou's distinctive characteristics: a tendency to revert to her normal self whenever she was thrown off-balance. "It's not a rip-off, honestly... It's... Ah, right! Kye ki ki—this holy garb has been passed down in my line for generations! I inherited it from my kinsman!"

"Hmm. Okay, so you borrowed it from him. On that note...didn't you end up getting your whole outfit pretty dirty back then? I remember you falling over, like, a bunch of times. How'd that work out?" I asked. My mind drifted back to the winter's day I'd met her in the park.

A dark shadow suddenly descended over Tomoyo's face. "He got really mad," she said in a sulky, spiteful tone that made it seem like she was on the verge of tears. "I mean, *super* pissed. Not even in a chuuni way—he just got, like, *normal* mad."

“N-Normal mad, huh?”

“And when Hajime gets normal mad...it’s *really* scary...”

I tried to envision Kiryuu just plain flipping his lid. *Oof, yikes. Yeah, I bet that would be freaky.*

“Just remembering it is a serious drag,” said Tomoyo with a scowl. “Hmph! Why does he have to be so *petty*, anyway? All I did was borrow a few of his things without asking! He didn’t have to get *that* mad about it!”

“So you didn’t even have permission...?” *She borrowed his clothes without asking, then rolled around in the dirt with them on? No wonder he flipped out!*

That, at least, had brought my identity check to a close. My conclusion: it was extremely likely that all three of them were, in fact, the genuine articles. Their personalities had shifted dramatically on a surface level, but their memories and core traits were all the same as ever. I believed, from the bottom of my heart, that they were still fundamentally *themselves*. They seemed to have changed at a glance, but their essences remained as they’d always been.

Ideally, I would’ve spent way more time talking with them, but our first period was rapidly approaching. We had to cut our conversation off there and make our way to our classrooms. Love-Drunk Kudou seemed *really* reluctant to say goodbye, but even in her addled state, her usual dedication to her responsibilities remained as firm as ever, and she plodded her way toward the third-years’ classrooms. Tomoyo and Hatoko headed to year two, class three’s room, while I headed to my own homeroom—class one.

I let out a heavy, *heavy* sigh as I sat down at my desk. I’d been through one shocking revelation after another starting from the moment I’d left my house, leaving me in a state of mental exhaustion. I was still so confused and bewildered I couldn’t even begin to coax my train of thought back onto its rails, and even if I *had* been able to manage that, I wouldn’t have known *what* to think about in the first place. I was still struggling to comprehend the situation on a basic level, which was a pretty nasty roadblock in the way of figuring out how to cope with it. Just what the *hell* was happening to the people around me...?

“What’s wrong, Andou?”

As I sank into thought, a voice rang out from the seat beside me. It was a familiar voice—slightly garbled in a mumbly but nevertheless cute sort of way. It was a voice that soothed my troubled heart in an instant.

“You were frowning.”

“Ah... Yeah, I was just thinking about something, that’s all,” I replied.

“About today’s lunch?”

“I *definitely* wouldn’t brood this much over something like that, trust me.”

“Oh. Then, about how to inspire world peace?”

“Veering to some wild extremes, aren’t we?! It’s definitely not *my* job to brood about problems on *that* scale!”

“That’s no good, Andou.”

“Huh?”

“If everyone thinks that war and peace have nothing to do with them, then nothing will ever be resolved. The world will never get better. If everyone stops to really think about it, though, then maybe one day we’ll all make world peace happen.”

“Uh... Right,” I said. I had a feeling that she didn’t *really* have any right to be scolding me like that, but I agreed with her anyway for lack of any better options. She had a way of pulling out reasonable arguments at the weirdest of times, and I never knew how to cope with it. “Honestly, Chifuyu, sometimes I think I’m just no match for— Wait, *Chifuyu*?!”

I did a double take halfway through my sentence. The time was one minute before homeroom, and the place was class 2-1’s room at Senkou High. *Why would Chifuyu be here, especially now?*

“Huh? That’s me,” said the rather tired-looking girl in the seat beside me.

Her sleepy eyes and petite mouth bore distinct traces of how she’d looked in elementary school, but on the whole, her face looked distinctly adultlike. It was hard to tell how tall she was since she was sitting down, but I could estimate she was of average height for a high school girl. Speaking of high school girls, she was wearing one of our school’s standard-issue uniforms. Finally—

unavoidably—my eyes were drawn to her chest. The space that was normally occupied by a sheer cliffside—a mousepad’s worth of padding, at most—now hosted a pair of distinct hills that boldly strained the confines of her uniform’s jacket.

“Oh, that’s right. Show me your English homework later, okay, Andou? I didn’t do it since I was planning on copying yours,” Chifuyu said with a perfectly casual air, acting like I was and had always been her classmate. Apparently, being in the same class did basically nothing to change the attitude she usually took with me.

*Oh god. How could this be? Is this a miracle worthy of tears of joy, or a tragedy worthy of tears of blood?*





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Chifuyu...had become a high schooler. Her elementary school days, apparently, had been numbered.

*Something's wrong. Something's very, very, very, very wrong. Something is very, verifiably, veritably wrong!*

I could, under extreme duress, more or less accept everything that had happened up through my encounter with Tomoyo. She, Kudou, and Hatoko had all gone through dramatic personality alterations, but that was all there'd been to it. In the worst case, we could say something along the lines of "They all just ate something bad last night and went a little crazy" and have a workable explanation, albeit only *just*.

Chifuyu, however, was different. *Very* different. An elementary schooler had become a high schooler overnight. She wasn't here to shadow a high schooler, and she hadn't skipped several grades. She had actually grown and aged to fit the part of the high school girl she apparently now was, and she had become my classmate.

To make matters even stranger, nobody seemed to be questioning this bizarre development. The rest of my classmates didn't say a word, and not even Miss Satomi called out Chifuyu's presence once she'd arrived for homeroom. It was almost as if Chifuyu was *supposed* to be there. Looking back with that fact in mind, it struck me that Kudou, Hatoko, and Tomoyo hadn't acknowledged each other's transformations either. Tomoyo's outfit alone was an obvious enough change that you'd think it would've been worthy of note, but nobody had so much as mentioned it. They'd almost acted like Tomoyo went to school dressed like that *every* day.

Something was *wrong*, no two ways about it, and the level of the irregularity had just jumped massively from a personal scale to a global one. We weren't just dealing with altered personalities and memories—actual, physical reality had been changed. I had no choice but to accept that. It was the natural conclusion to draw. The world of today differed in a clear and distinct manner from the world of yesterday—the transformations of the people in my life served as decisive proof that my world had, in fact, gone totally nuts.

But then, another possibility struck me out of the blue: maybe I was the one who was off his rocker. Maybe they'd always been that way—Kudou had always been love-drunk, Hatoko had always been a yandere, Tomoyo had always had chuunibyou, and Chifuyu had always been my classmate. In other words, maybe *these* were their true forms, and my memories of them were, in fact, nothing more than delusions.

Take Chifuyu, for instance. Maybe she'd been my classmate from the start, but I'd fabricated memories of an elementary-school-aged version of her out of a desperate desire for her to have been that way, for whatever reason, then confused those delusions with reality in the long term. I...*really* didn't want to think that was the case, frankly.

Or another possibility: maybe I'd somehow found my way into a parallel world. My soul might have been spontaneously swapped with some other Andou Jurai who'd made different choices than I had over the course of his life. If that were true, then the parallel me would probably be saying "Wh-Why is Chifuyu an *elementary schooler*?!" with a look of bug-eyed horror on his face right about now.

All sorts of explanations for my situation crossed my mind, one after another, all sharing a single trait: they were laughably absurd. Unfortunately, however, I'd fallen into such an intense state of paranoia that I couldn't let myself dismiss even the most outlandish of theories. I couldn't trust my own perspective, and I was rapidly losing faith in the credibility of my own memories. Had the world gone mad, or had I gone mad?

Suddenly, I sat bolt upright. I'd spent the first two classes of the day spacing out in a trancelike stupor, but the instant second period ended and our between-class break began, I bolted out of the classroom like a bat out of hell. I knew exactly where I was going, and I made a beeline for that destination at full speed.

Things had been *off* ever since this morning. My friends were *different* now. It didn't just feel like their personalities and memories had been altered—it was more like...I don't know...like their whole character profiles had been rewritten. Their backgrounds, personalities, ages, and social standings were different from those I was used to, some in ways more subtle than others.

That said, it wasn't like *everyone* around me had gone crazy. My sister had seemed the same as ever when she'd woken me up earlier that morning, and Chifuyu aside, my classmates and homeroom teacher, Miss Satomi, had all seemed unaltered as well. There was, in short, one very simple and straightforward trait that connected everyone who had been impacted: they were all in possession of supernatural powers.

Kudou, Hatoko, Tomoyo, and Chifuyu—everyone who I'd currently confirmed to have been affected by this phenomenon—were girls with supernatural powers in my social circle. That understanding is what led me to sprint my way toward the third-years' floor. There was still one superpowered individual I knew who I'd had yet to see that day: Takanashi Sayumi. What was going on with *her* at the moment? How had *her* personality traits been altered? I had to check, as soon as possible.

"Ah!" I exclaimed as, halfway down the stairs to the third-years' floor, I very nearly ran straight into a student who was on her way up the very same staircase. It was Sayumi herself—we'd crossed paths on the landing.

"Andou... I'm glad I found you," said Sayumi. "I was just on my way to your classroom, in fact."

I didn't reply—not immediately, anyway. Clearly, each of us had been searching for the other. By all rights, it was a stroke of luck that we'd bumped into each other so easily, but for the time being, I kept my mouth shut and withdrew to a safe distance on reflex. I was on full alert, for one simple reason: I could tell in an instant that *something* was different about her. I'm not talking about her personality. There was a very visible, external sort of disparity with her usual self.

Glasses. Sayumi was wearing *glasses*. She'd become a *glasses* character! If that wasn't a massive shift in her traits, then I didn't know what would be! And...okay, maybe it *does* look like I was making a mountain out of an especially unimpressive molehill, but I'd lost faith in the people around me so thoroughly that even that petty of a change was enough to put me in a state of red alert.

"S-Sayumi...?" I cautiously, fearfully probed.

"Andou," Sayumi replied with a look of trepidation. "Just what on earth is

going on? When Kudou arrived at our classroom this morning, she was acting slightly...no, *extremely* strange. It was almost like she'd gone back to how she'd behaved when she thought the two of you were dating..."

Kudou was acting strangely—and Sayumi had realized it. She'd recognized the change in our surroundings for what it was. She was aware of the storm of abnormalities that had overtaken our world. That proved two things to me: she was in her right mind, and it was the world that had gone crazy, not me.

## Chapter 4: The Outcast Who Shouted Love at the Heart of the World

After a brief discussion, Sayumi and I had decided to ditch third period.

“Are you really sure about this?” I asked. “What if they revoke your college recommendation on account of delinquency or whatever...?”

“No school would declare a recommendation null and void over a single skipped lesson,” Sayumi replied. “And for that matter, I should be asking you the same question. I believe you’ve mentioned having a perfect attendance record?”

“Eh, it’s not like I’m going for a perfect attendance award or anything. I’m totally okay with skipping out early...especially considering this is an emergency.”

Sayumi nodded gravely.

The two of us were in the literary club’s room. Skipping class to hang out in your club room was probably pretty typical behavior for most high schoolers, but for me and Sayumi, it was a completely novel experience.

“I appreciate that this is less than appropriate considering the circumstances, but I must admit that cutting class like this is a little exciting,” said Sayumi. “I’ve never been a truant in any capacity before.”

“This’ll be my first time in high school too. Middle school, though... Well, I guess you could say I was sort of a slacker.”

We’d spent a few minutes more or less aimlessly chatting, but finally, Sayumi began to gently steer us toward our main order of business. “I have to say...this is dispiriting news. I knew about Kudou, of course, but I never imagined that Hatoko, Tomoyo, and Chifuyu would all be stricken by the same madness as well. What on earth is happening to our acquaintances?”

The atmosphere in the club room grew heavy. Sayumi had dispelled my

worries that I was the one who'd lost my mind, which was nice and all, but it did nothing to solve the actual problem we'd been confronted with. In a sense, we'd had yet to even *identify* the problem, much less start figuring out how to solve it.

"If I had to pick out one trait that everyone who's been impacted shares..." I began.

"It would be their powers, I presume?" said Sayumi.

I nodded. "That's right. Only the people in our social circle with supernatural powers have had their characters rewritten." *Tomoyo's turned into a chuuni, Kudou's gone into love-drunk mode, Hatoko's become a yandere, Chifuyu's grown into a high school girl, and...* "You've started wearing glasses too."

"I must admit that my transformation feels somewhat muted compared to the others," Sayumi muttered in a slightly bitter tone as she raised a hand to her glasses. The look on her face could hardly have been more severe. "Putting in my contact lenses is part of my morning routine. When I woke up today, however, without so much as a shred of doubt or hesitation, I found myself putting on my glasses instead. Indeed—I *put on my glasses instead!*"

"Not really sure what the point of the rhetorical repetition was there... But anyway, couldn't you have just taken your glasses off and put in your contacts after you noticed?"

"I could not," Sayumi replied with a weirdly blunt and definitive air. "It would seem that a potent sense of fear and revulsion toward contact lenses now rages within me."

"F-Fear and *revulsion*?"

"Picture the instinctual fear of placing a foreign object into your eye that you might feel the first time you try wearing contacts, then amplify it by a factor of several dozen."

"I mean, that *kind of* makes sense, but I also have no idea what you're talking about."

"I attempted to put my contacts in, the same as I always have, but I was forced to give up on account of my hands' uncontrollable trembling. No matter

how I tried to overcome my fear, I couldn't shake the intrusive thought that when I tried to remove the lenses, they might take my corneas along with them. It was like a phobia," Sayumi explained. It sounded like her fear still had a hold on her, and she was clearly being completely earnest, but considering the actual content of her story, I just couldn't quite bring myself to empathize. "Moreover, the dread and loathing I felt toward contacts was balanced by a sudden affection toward glasses to match," she added.

"You mean, like...?"

"I found myself wishing that people would associate me with my glasses so strongly, they would tease me by asking what happened to my cape and costume when I took them off."

"*That's* what affection means to you?!"

"Oh, and I've developed an intense distaste for ramen as well."

"Because it'd fog your glasses?! You know there are plenty of people who wear glasses *and* love ramen, right?!"

"I'm also hoping that at some point, I'll be so surprised that my eyeballs bulge out of my skull and crack through my glasses' lenses."

"There's something *seriously* messed up about your relationship with your glasses, I swear!"

Sweeping the details of that exchange under the rug for the moment, one thing was clear: Sayumi had turned into a glasses person. It was a trifling change, but a change nonetheless. This'll probably only make sense to a certain subset of people, but it was like she'd been hit by the Power to Change One's Opponent into a Lover of Glasses.

"I've harbored doubts about my transformation since this morning, but I didn't consider it too terribly grave of a matter...that is, until I learned about what had happened to Chifuyu. It seems clear that this is far more serious than the simple alteration of one's personal preferences."

I had to agree. Chifuyu's case was what had pushed the incident over the final line into something that couldn't be ignored. A grade schooler turning into a high schooler was so outlandish, it could only be called a supernatural



phenomenon—and that wasn't even the worst of it.

"The fact that everyone has changed overnight is a problem, of course...but it's just as concerning—if not more so—that *nobody has noticed* the changes that have occurred," said Sayumi.

The changes to our world had flown completely beneath the radar. Everyone was acting as if they'd *always* been this way. They were treating the abnormal as commonplace. Sayumi and I were the only exceptions—the two of us aside, everyone had simply adapted and moved along.

"I'm so glad that you realized what was happening, Sayumi," I said. "I was starting to really doubt myself before I ran into you. Like, I was seriously starting to worry that all my memories about how things *should* be were all just part of a really elaborate dream I had last night, or something."

"I'd like to say you were overthinking the matter...but circumstances being as they are, I suppose I can't dismiss the possibility out of hand," said Sayumi. "And, in fact, it's still entirely possible that the two of us have simply gone mad together."

She was certainly right about that. It was still very much on the table that *we*, rather than the world, had changed...but having two people in the same situation was still worlds apart from going it alone. The knowledge that I wasn't completely isolated in my disbelief was powerfully reassuring. It made a world of difference to have someone on your side who saw things the way you did.

"There's definitely something supernatural going on...so, do you think some sort of power caused this?" I asked.

"It's the only reasonable explanation that comes to mind," Sayumi agreed. Blaming everything weird that happened around us on a supernatural power felt just as lazy as explaining away everything you can't make sense of by saying "A wizard did it," but it really was the only rational conclusion.

"It's been about a year since we got our powers, right? Maybe... Nah, that probably has nothing to do with it. If this had happened *exactly* a year afterward, I'd figure some sort of anniversary event was going on, but we're just not close enough for that," I muttered to myself before a thought struck me. "Come to think of it, what *did* you do on our powers' one-year anniversary,

Sayumi?”

“Hm? Nothing in particular,” Sayumi replied with an air of casual indifference.

I very nearly passed out from sheer shock. “Y-You didn’t do *anything*?! You didn’t commemorate the one-year anniversary of your power’s awakening at *all*?!”

“Correct. Is something the matter, Andou? You sound agitated.”

“But... But it was the one-year anniversary! That basically means it was our powers’ birthday, for crying out loud! And you didn’t do *anything*?!”

Sayumi paused for a moment to give me a look. “Let me turn that question around on you, Andou. Did *you* do something to celebrate?”

“Yeah. I threw *Dark and Dark* a party.”

“You threw your *power* a *birthday party*?!” Sayumi repeated, her eyes wide with stupefied horror. They didn’t *actually* bulge out of her skull and shatter her glasses, but the expression was definitely on that general level of astonishment. She looked like she’d just glanced out a window and seen an alien walking around outside.

“Yup,” I replied. “It was *Dark and Dark*’s first birthday party, so I went pretty all out putting it together.”

I’d stopped by a few stores on my way home from school to pick up a cake and some party poppers, plus origami paper and balloons to decorate my room with, then threw my malevolent power, *Dark and Dark*, the party to end all parties. Maybe it was weird to throw a party for something I literally just described as malevolent, but come on—I loved my power to pieces, so of course I would!

So, yeah—*Dark and Dark* and I had had our own party, all by ourselves. I’d written out a message in chocolate on the cake, by the way. My initial plan had been to ask the bakery to do it, but when I explained what I’d wanted written, the cashier had just given me a *look*, so I’d ended up buying a kit and doing it myself. The end result: a bar of dark chocolate with “Happy Birthday, *Dark and Dark*” written on it in white chocolate. The elaborate cursive I’d written the “*Dark and Dark*” part in was *really* hard to get just right, and it’d taken me five

tries before I was satisfied, but it was totally worth it in the end.

“...Then I sang happy birthday to *Dark and Dark*, we played games together, I gave a speech about how grateful I was for everything it did for me—you know, just normal birthday stuff.”

“My understanding of the phrase ‘normal birthday stuff’ feels like it’s about to collapse catastrophically,” said Sayumi. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why she looked so repulsed. “Andou...at the absolute least, couldn’t you have invited the rest of us to participate? The image of you celebrating a birthday all on your own—well, on your own with the exception of your power—is unbelievably tragic, and it could’ve been avoided if you’d just called us.”

“Huh? No way. What are you even talking about? This was *Dark and Dark*’s very first birthday, so of course it’d be a private occasion for the two of us!”

“Andou...” Sayumi sighed. “Do you consider *Dark and Dark* to be your lover? Because you’re certainly treating it that way.”

“Hmph! And, wait a second... Judging by the way you’ve been reacting so far... D-Don’t tell me you didn’t acknowledge your power’s birthday at *all*?”

“I did not,” Sayumi stated, bluntly and somewhat indignantly.

I was flabbergasted. “H-How could you...? Just what do you take your power for?!”

“A power. What else?”

“D-Don’t tell me *Route of Origin* told you that it wouldn’t mind if you didn’t do anything for its birthday and you took it seriously? That’s the worst mistake you could make! When a girl says something like that, you always have to assume she’s *actually* hoping that you’re gonna surprise her, deep down!”

“I cannot for the life of me understand why I’m receiving the sort of advice that men get regarding their first girlfriends from *you*, of all people.”

“Oooh, I get it! It all makes sense now! All the weird stuff that’s happening today is because *Route of Origin*’s running out of control! You didn’t do anything for its birthday, and now it’s throwing a tantrum over it! Makes sense, right?”

Sayumi let out a deep, *deep* sigh. “I would appreciate it, Andou, if you would treat this situation with the gravity it deserves and discuss it seriously.”

“Can do,” I replied. “Yeah, you’re probably right—*Route of Origin* isn’t the sort of power that’d throw a tantrum over something as petty as a missed birthday party. It’s the most broad-minded, tolerant, and mature of all the powers in our group, after all.”

“Please...let’s move on. Let that be the last birthday-related comment for the time being,” said Sayumi, who was apparently well and truly tired of the subject.

“What else *could* be causing this? I guess it could be the work of someone else’s power? Like, someone not in our group?” I said, proposing the first idea that came to mind. “Like, someone somehow got a supernatural power of some sort and decided to use it on our school to do something for some reason?”

“There were far too many ‘somes’ in that hypothesis for me to make much of it in particular...but I suppose I can’t deny the possibility,” Sayumi admitted.

“If we assume that this mystery person has the ability to figure out who does and doesn’t have powers, then it would explain why only people with powers—meaning, literary club people and Kudou—were affected. Of course, that raises the question of why *I* wasn’t impacted at all,” I continued.

“If we’re to assume that this situation is the work of someone’s power, then what sort of objective would they be hoping to accomplish through it?” asked Sayumi. “We haven’t been attacked in any meaningful sense of the word—the alteration of our personalities strikes me as largely purposeless. What’s the point?”

“I dunno. I think it might still be too early to decide that all they’re doing is altering our personalities. For all we know, this is just the start, and the end result is going to be some totally different phenomenon we have yet to even fathom.”

“While we’re on the subject of hasty assumptions, I believe we might have been too quick to jump to the conclusion that only people with powers were altered. For all we know, other changes have transpired as well that we’re simply not aware of.”

“Ah... Right, true enough.”

I’d been totally prepared to move forward under the assumption that this was a problem for superpowered people exclusively, but it *was* possible that someone without powers had been impacted as well and I just hadn’t noticed. Maybe it wasn’t limited to this school, even—maybe someone on the other side of the world who I’d never met had had their personality scrambled as well.

*Hmm. Yeah, this isn’t getting us anywhere.* Our conversation so far had been full of ifs, maybes, and for-all-we-knows. We weren’t getting anywhere close to an actual theory. The scale of the incident was just too large compared to the quantity of information we had to work with. Of course we wouldn’t be able to come up with a concrete theory when we didn’t even have a satisfactory grasp of what was happening to us—all we could do was bring up one baseless piece of speculation after another. Theories needed a concrete basis to rest upon that we couldn’t provide. We were basically just piling up wild guesses like a house of cards.

“I believe we should narrow our focus to a single core point,” said Sayumi. “We don’t have the capability to view the phenomenon in its totality, so if we try to discuss the big picture, it’s inevitable that our theories will end up vague and superficial.”

*A single core point, huh?* “Okay, then—let’s approach this situation from another angle,” I said, making like George Joestar and changing my viewpoint. “Instead of thinking about why everyone’s changed, let’s think about why I *haven’t* changed. Figuring out the cause of the change might be tough, but the cause of the *lack* of change might be easier to boil down, right?”

“The cause of your lack of change...?” Sayumi repeated thoughtfully.

“That, or the reason we were able to perceive the changes. Why are the two of us the only ones who can tell that something’s up?” Nobody else, altered or not, seemed to perceive the alterations. Sayumi and I were the only exceptions.

“Why are we the only ones who don’t see the situation as normal? Well, to start, I believe the most natural hypothesis would be one we’ve already discussed: that the two of us, rather than the world at large, have lost our minds,” Sayumi declared with a sardonic smile. “Are you familiar with the five-

minute hypothesis, Andou?”

“Of course I am! You know I love that sorta stuff,” I replied.

The five-minute hypothesis was more or less exactly what it said on the tin: a thought experiment centered around the hypothesis that the whole of existence was created exactly five minutes ago. The theory itself is downright farcical...and yet, when all's said and done, it's surprisingly hard to definitively disprove. Sure, you can say “That's not true—I remember stuff that happened more than five minutes ago,” but when you factor in the possibility that all of your memories of the nonexistent past were created at the same moment the rest of the world was, it becomes a lot harder to argue against. Maybe, the argument goes, humanity was simply made to *believe* that the world had existed for more than five minutes. No person would be exempted from that rule, meaning that completely refuting the theory isn't technically possible from a human perspective.

“We have no means of directly perceiving the world of five minutes ago, but let's consider, for a moment, a scenario in which precisely one person in the world *was* aware that the world had come into being a mere five minutes beforehand. That person, I'm sure, would raise their voice and shout to the high heavens that everyone else was wrong—and yet, the world at large would surely not hesitate to tell them that, no, *they* were mistaken.”

“So the one person who knows the truth would end up getting cast out like an iconoclast?” I muttered. The implication didn't escape me: we had found ourselves in that very hypothetical scenario. The vast majority of humanity had let the changes made to the world pass them by—only we could call them out.

“The world was altered rather than created, in our case, but that's no different on a fundamental level,” said Sayumi. “Being part of what is, in all likelihood, an extreme minority that is aware that the world has gone wrong makes *us* the current iconoclasts. Society at large believes that this is the world we've always lived in, and a change that you can't perceive doesn't come across as any sort of change at all.”

“So change is in the eye of the beholder, basically? A change is only a change when you perceive it, and if no one ever perceives it, it'll never be regarded as a

change at all... Is it just me, or is this kinda getting into Schrödinger's cat territory?"

Schrödinger's cat was a thought experiment so famous and so frequently referenced by many sources—me included—that explaining it in detail would kinda feel like beating a dead horse. The important part for this purpose is that its essence revolves not around the question of whether or not the cat in the box is alive or dead, but rather around the idea that the nature of *all* things can only be determined through observation. Until the box is opened, the cat is neither alive nor dead—only after the box is open and the cat is observed is its nature set in stone. That's an *extremely* rough and simplified version of the implications of the thought experiment from a quantum theory perspective, anyway.

"We're the observers in this equation who establish that the world *has* changed," I began, "but on the flip side, if we couldn't be observers because we *hadn't* noticed the changes—if *nobody* had noticed them—then those changes wouldn't count as change to begin with. Whether the world was created five minutes ago or altered overnight, as long as nobody notices, then you may as well say that nothing's changed at all."

"The intersection between the five-minute hypothesis and Schrödinger's cat? That *is* an interesting line of thought. You may well be right, Andou. For all we know, this world has been altered countless times before without us having ever noticed," Sayumi said with a nod. She seemed intrigued, but a moment later, a somewhat remorseful look came over her face. "I'm sorry—I've led this conversation in a less than constructive direction. This has nothing to do with our actual circumstances anymore."

"Nah, it's fine!" I replied. "I mean, we can't say for sure whether it has anything to do with the situation or not, and it was fun to talk about regardless."

"It was?"

"I mean, like I said earlier, I love this sorta stuff."

Schrödinger's cat, Hempel's paradox, probatio diabolica, the Ship of Theseus, Zeno's paradoxes, Laplace's demon, the theory of fundamental goodness, the

theory of fundamental evil, cogito ergo sum, the plank of Carneades, the sword of Damocles—the list went on and on, but the point is that I absolutely adored all those philosophical anecdotes and thought experiments. Their names *and* nuances made my heart leap with joy. Of course, my understanding of said nuances was most likely surface level at most. I was ranting and raving about how amazing the tip of the philosophical iceberg was, and I knew it, but that didn't change the fact that I liked what I liked, and it didn't diminish my joy in learning about it.

“It's kinda shocking how rarely you get a chance to talk about this stuff, though,” I said. “Or rather, it's shocking how rarely anyone'll give you the time of day when you try talking about it. Most of the time when I bring stuff like this up, people's eyes glaze over before I know it.”

“I recall discussing this with you before, actually. You said that you'd explained the theories of fundamental goodness and evil to your sister, and her reaction was to ask you ‘So what?’”

*Oh, right. I guess I did tell Sayumi about that when she came over to my house during summer break.*

Normally, when I tried to bring up the philosophical matters that I enjoyed so much, people would ask “So what?” and that would be the end of it. More often than not, they wouldn't identify with my excitement at all.

“Really, I consider myself lucky when someone actually *listens* to what I'm trying to tell them before they bust out the so-whats,” I said. “Some people just ignore me entirely or shut the conversation down partway through. A lot of people have started going all, ‘LOL, here we go again’ the second I bring up Schrödinger's cat lately too.”

“I certainly understand your perspective,” said Sayumi, “but I'm afraid this is something you can do very little to fix. Everyone has subjects that they're simply not interested in, after all.”

“Yeah, nothing I can do about it. It's probably silly of me to think that anyone would take me seriously anyway, considering I barely know what I'm talking about and don't have the knack for describing stuff well either,” I said. “But, y'know...*you* always listen to me, Sayumi.”



Sayumi seemed to pause as my words sank in.

“Whenever I go off about weird philosophical problems and thought experiments, or when I start rambling about my own little theories, you don’t brush me off or make fun of me. You actually listen,” I continued.

If I’m being completely honest, I’d come up with wildly outlandish theories and posited completely mistaken facts in front of Sayumi more than just a handful of times. Every time I’d go off on one of those tangents, however, she’d play along and match me point for point. She’d never shut me down without letting me explain myself—instead, she’d listen carefully to the end, *then* contribute her own opinion. Sometimes, she’d correct my mistakes and misunderstandings; sometimes she’d bring up new topics that would instantly draw my attention; and sometimes, she’d even make it clear that she just plain identified with my opinion.

“I...feel like I’ve made fun of you on quite a fair number of occasions, actually,” said Sayumi.

“Ha ha ha! I mean, yeah, you *tease* me pretty often, but, like... I dunno, it just feels different. You’re always messing with me, not attacking me.”

“Hee hee! Yes, that’s true. Messing with you is most enjoyable, after all,” Sayumi said with a smile tinged with just a hint of sadistic glee. After everything that I’d discovered had changed over the course of that morning, seeing that familiar expression on her face was almost a relief. I found myself smiling as well before I knew it.

“Yeah, I enjoy it too,” I said. “Talking with you is always super fun.”

“...”

“I always learn a ton too, and I feel like it’s making me into a better speaker long term. And, I mean, it’s just so plain fun that I’d like it if we could— Uh, Sayumi? What’s going on? Why’re you hiding your face like that?”

“I-It’s nothing at all!” Sayumi shouted, her voice slightly cracking as she buried her face even deeper into her arms.

*Huh. Wonder if something’s wrong with her glasses, or what?*

We kept talking for quite some time after that, but in the end, we didn't manage to come up with any sort of viable plan and left the literary club's room just a little before third period ended. Neither of us felt great about the prospect of skipping two classes in a row, and we'd also come to the conclusion that no amount of discussion would help, considering how little information we had to go on.

For the time being, we'd return to our usual school lives and focus on learning as much as we possibly could. That meant carefully observing the people around me, doing my best to figure out whether any of them were acting differently than they usually do, and also checking in on the friends we knew had been altered to see how their conditions were progressing. I didn't know whether any of that would actually help, but for the time being, it was all we could do.

"Man, though—it really does feel weird to be wandering around the school while classes are in session. It's making me feel, like, nervous *and* hyped up at the same time," I muttered to myself as I made for my classroom...

"Huh? Oh, if it isn't Andou!"

...only to stop in my tracks as an amiable voice rang out from the direction of the school's entryway.

"Isn't there a class going on right now? What are you doing out here? Are you late? Or cutting class? Either way, that's not very like you, is it? We cut class together a lot in middle school, but you've been a real model student since we got into high school, haven't you?"

"..."

"Oh, me? I just got here. Overslept and ended up late—the usual story! I decided to start playing the demo for a new game from one of my favorite devs last night, and the download took an *eternity* to finish up, honestly. I'm talking over three hours, start to finish! I actually fell asleep partway through playing it, pants around my ankles and everything. It's a wonder I didn't catch a cold."

"..."

"Eroge demos tend to be pretty sizable these days, you know? A lot of them

don't just include the prologue or part of the main route—they actually let you go all the way up to the first sex scenes, most of the time! Sometimes they'll even put in one scene for each of the heroines and stuff like that.”

“ ... ”

“That's the sort of demo I was playing this time...but horror of horrors, it turned out that one of the heroines *wasn't* a virgin. They actually put that reveal in the demo! Normally I'd be able to tell in an instant when there's a nonvirgin heroine in a game and avoid her route like the plague, but all the other heroines were just *so good* in this one! Agh, honestly... I just don't know what to do anymore. I really think those companies need to start drawing a line in the sand about this. There should be all-virgin games and no-virgin games, and they should make which are which clear from the outset! I mean, give me a break, right? Why go with an awkward half-and-half cast when you could go all or nothing? I know there are people out there who get just as weirded out by virgin characters as virginity fetishists like me do by nonvirgins, so that'd make everyone happy! Mixing virgin and nonvirgin heroines in the same game is just...just shady, you know? It's like they're trying to rope in both audiences without really satisfying either of them. It really goes to show just how little integrity the devs have! I firmly believe that these things should be kept segregated!”

“ ... ”

I was at a complete loss for words. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that I did *not* want to hear about *anyone's* masturbation habits, or that it was super gross to hear him wax philosophical about his virginity fetish. I'd come to expect my conversations with him to devolve into vulgarity in the blink of an eye—and, in fact, they did so on a daily basis—but this time, I found myself frozen stiff and unable to fire off so much as a single snide comment. It had just been one thing after another since that morning, and I'd *thought* that the repeated curveballs reality had thrown at me had rendered me incapable of being surprised by anything anymore...but the shock I felt in that moment was so powerful, it blew through the resistances I'd built up in the blink of an eye.

“S-Sa... Sagami? I-Is that you? Sagami Shizumu?” I just barely managed to stammer, pushing through my agitation to squeeze out that single question.

“Hmm? Why do you have to ask? Is this a bit?” Sagami asked, his head cocked in confusion. “Who else would I be other than Shizumu of the Sagamis?”

Sagami flashed his usual flippant, superficial smile. Everything about him, from his facial features to his hair color, his expressions, his mannerisms, his tone, his idiosyncrasies, his interests—it all matched up perfectly with those of the outrageous degenerate known as Sagami Shizumu...except for one thing. There was just one detail—just one *massive* difference that distinguished the Sagami I knew from the one who stood before me. It was a difference so profound and blatant, part of me wanted to scream that it had turned him into a totally different character in an instant.

“Ha ha ha! What’s your deal today, Andou? You’re really staring a hole in my face—and my body, for that matter. I know I don’t *act* like a girl, but that doesn’t change the fact that *I am* one, and even I get embarrassed when I get *that* much attention! Or what, are you trying to stare at me so hard you’ll see through my skirt and catch a peek of my panties?” Sagami said, grasping the hem of his skirt and giving me a flirtatious look accompanied by a playful smile.



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It was a truly feminine gesture, which made sense, since he was plainly female. The Sagami who stood before me was, unmistakably, a high school girl, and the fact that I'd actually thought that he—or rather, *she*—was cute for a split second made me seriously contemplate hurling myself out the nearest open window.

This was *far* beyond the realm of “unexpected.” Not only had the hypothesis that just people with powers had transformed crumbled into dust, a vital, core component of my very being also felt like it had also collapsed into ruin.

Sagami...had been genderbent. He'd swapped sexes—he was a distinctly boyish girl, but he was a girl nonetheless.

*Okay. Yup. This is scream-worthy.*

“Who the *hell* asked for this?!”

## Chapter 5: Sin Is a Harsh Mistress

The instant our lunch break began, I went out to meet with Sayumi again. We'd ducked into a secluded corner on an unpopulated floor of our school.

"I see," she said after I wrapped up my report. "Sagami has turned into a young woman..."

Sayumi's reaction to my informing her of Sagami's genderbend was an expression of distaste so potent, I could only assume the news had left her physically ill. I knew *exactly* how that felt. I was *still* sick to my stomach.

Having a guy I was acquainted with suddenly become a girl out of the blue was enough to overload my brain on its own, but when that guy was *Sagami*, a truly phenomenal dose of disgust was added into the mix. It was *not* a pleasant thought to consider. I actually felt like I might throw up. He hadn't looked bad as a girl, to be fair—maybe on account of the fact that he'd had a pretty androgynous sort of look to begin with. In fact, I would've gone as far as to call him downright pretty...if it weren't for the fact that *internally*, he was still the same nauseatingly vulgar pervert as ever.

*"Ugh, I really am sleepy! Math-class-right-after-swimming levels of sleepy, even. I guess it's never a good idea to jerk it before school, no matter how horny you are when you wake up. It's weird, though—why does rubbing one out make you so tired? You know what I mean, don't you, Andou? Some nights when you just can't seem to get to sleep and you know that you have to be up early tomorrow, all you have to do is knock one out real quick, then you're out like a light, right? That's gotta be universal. I think every guy's done that at least once...but on the other hand, isn't it just wrong, somehow? It's, like...disrespectful to the essence of masturbation, don't you think?"*

Hearing the sort of casual vulgarity that would make even *guys* cringe coming out of the mouth of a girl had left me at a complete loss for a reaction. If this *was* a parallel world, I really had to wonder just what sort of relationship the parallel me and Sagami had had.

“But wait, Andou. Are we absolutely certain that Sagami’s transformed into a woman? It seems possible that he could simply be cross-dressing, for instance,” said Sayumi.

“Nah, I’m pretty sure he’s a girl through and through,” I replied. “His face and body both seemed more feminine, somehow, and his voice is super cutesy and high-pitched now.”

“Still—maybe we should check, just to be certain?”

“Check *how*?”

“By flipping his skirt, for instance.”

“...No.”

I did *not* want to do that. I was genuinely, earnestly *not* interested. I would’ve rather *died*. It didn’t matter whether he’d actually become a girl or he was a cross-dressing guy—either way, I could only see the deepest depths of hell lying in wait for me at the end of that path.

“That suggestion was a joke, of course,” Sayumi casually added.

“*Please* don’t make jokes like that, seriously” I groaned. “I actually ended up picturing it for a split second.”

“For the time being, let’s proceed under the assumption that Sagami is currently a woman,” said Sayumi. “Whether or not his physical sex has actually changed is hardly pertinent. What *is* worthy of our attention is the fact that he—an individual who is *not* in possession of a supernatural power—has changed at all.”

That really was the key point. We’d been under the impression that only people with powers had been altered, but Sagami getting thrown into the mix had torn that idea down by its foundations. It was one of the very few seemingly valuable conclusions we’d come to in this incomprehensibly out-there situation, and it had now been proved hopelessly wrong. The whole basis of our working theory had been uprooted, leaving us to start from a blank slate.

There *was* always the chance that Sagami secretly *did* have a power, I guess. I saw the odds of that as being really low, but knowing what sort of person



Sagami Shizumu was, I couldn't discount the possibility entirely. He had a particular sort of troublesome personality that made it pretty easy to imagine him casually dropping an "Oh, by the way, I have a superpower," into a conversation.

"I suppose that in the end, all we can do is devote ourselves to gathering information," Sayumi ultimately concluded.

*Gathering information, huh?* I wasn't opposed to that, per se...but something was bothering me: Sayumi's attitude. I didn't quite know how to put it—it was almost as if she wasn't taking the situation entirely seriously. Gathering information certainly wasn't a *bad* plan, but it didn't strike me as being the most effective course of action either. It was like we were just treading water, or pushing the problem down the road.

*Normally, when something goes wrong like this, Sayumi would be the one to take the reins and put together a calm and effective plan to... Actually, no, I shouldn't think like this. She's incredible, sure, but I'm expecting way too much from her right now.*

We'd been dropped headfirst into a confusing mess of a situation. It would throw anyone off their game—leave anyone in a state of befuddlement. Why would I be at all surprised that Sayumi wasn't able to step up and perform like she usually did? She was just so dependable that I'd developed an unfortunate habit of relying on her as a result...but, in the end, she was still just a kid, the same as I was. And moreover, she wasn't even our club president anymore. I couldn't let myself impose on her forever, and I knew it.

"Huh? Chifuyu?"

I'd decided to start out by probing everyone who I knew for a fact had been affected, only to run into a certain familiar little girl in the hallway before I'd even started looking. Though, really, calling her a little girl wasn't the best description at this particular moment—she was, after all, currently a high schooler whose appearance I wasn't used to at *all* yet.

"What're you doing out in the hall?" I asked as I walked up to Chifuyu. *Hmm. Yeah, it sure does feel pretty weird to not have to look down to make eye*

contact.

“Oh, Andou—good,” Chifuyu said with a look of relief in her eyes. “I got lost.”

“*Lost?*” I repeated.

“Yeah. I couldn’t figure out how to get around here at all.”

“Ahh, right—I guess you’ve mentioned getting lost at school sometimes, haven’t you?”

“Yeah...but it feels a little different today...I think?” Chifuyu said, her voice trembling slightly. “It feels like...I’ve never been to this school before. I’ve been coming here every day, but it just feels that way anyway...”

Chifuyu’s anxious words snapped me immediately to attention. *Oh, of course! This is nothing like how she usually gets lost in her elementary school. After all, she’s a high schooler now!*

Chifuyu had been to the literary club’s room time after time, but she’d only actually been to the part of the school where the classrooms and staff room were found on a handful of occasions, at most. It made total sense that she wouldn’t have a clear understanding of how to navigate the building, and it was no wonder she felt like she’d never been here before, in spite of the fact that she’d supposedly been going to school here on a daily basis.

You hear people talk about *déjà vu* a lot, but there’s a word for the opposite sensation as well: *jamais vu*, the inexplicable sense that you’re experiencing something for the first time when, in truth, you’ve done it many times before. I had a feeling that phrase summed up the sensation Chifuyu was feeling pretty nicely.

“I feel weird today, I think,” said Chifuyu as she pressed a hand to her breast. “My chest sort of hurts.”

“Y-Your chest? Are you, like, okay? What sort of pain are we talking?” I asked.

“It’s like...when I run, or move around a lot, it starts bouncing around and hurts.”

I froze. How was I supposed to react to *that*? I’d assumed that this was a psychological sort of distress—like, chest pain brought about by stress or

despair, or something—but no, it turned out it was actually purely physical.

“It’s weird,” said Chifuyu. “Have my boobs always been like this?”

“Um, Chifuyu...? Would you please try not to squeeze your chest like that? It’s making it really hard to, y’know, look at you,” I pleaded, but Chifuyu kept right at it, groping away with a sort of quizzical look on her face.

Not just groping, actually—she threw in some shaking, lifting, and pinching as well. It was like she wasn’t totally convinced her chest was part of her own body, and I could see her breasts—which were by no means small—squish and shift with each motion. And I mean, like, a *lot*. Like, way more than you’d think they would, considering she was wearing her uniform’s jacket. I was instantly struck by a terrible premonition.

“H-Hey, Chifuyu...? I’m about to ask you a *really* uncomfortable question, so I apologize in advance, okay? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, and if you feel the urge to punch me out or whatever, feel free,” I said. The preamble was out of the way—now, I just had to steel my resolve and ask away. “Are you...wearing a bra today?”

“Uh-uh,” Chifuyu grunted, seemingly indifferent to the fact that my question was teetering *right* on the brink of open sexual harassment. It was simultaneously the worst and best answer I could’ve expected. “I’ve never worn a bra.”

I choked on nothing. *Never?! Seriously?! A high school girl with a figure like that, going perpetually braless?! Surely that has to violate some sort of public decency standard!*

“Mom and Shiharu say it’s too early for me to wear one,” Chifuyu continued. “They say that they’ll buy me some when I start middle school and my boobs grow a little.”

“Right, but...you’re a high schooler, aren’t you?”

“Ah. Right,” Chifuyu said as a mystified look came across her face. “Why *am* I not wearing a bra?” she muttered anxiously, once again groping at her chest. It was a motion that could’ve surely gathered the gazes of men for miles around, but *my* mind was too occupied by a completely different matter for me to really

register it.

A crack was rapidly beginning to show. Chifuyu's cleavage—*ahem*, Chifuyu's character was beginning to strain, and the cracks were becoming more and more apparent by the moment, as the details of her backstory grew more and more warped. The elementary-school-aged Chifuyu who I knew so well was beginning to shine through the gaps in her high school-aged exterior.

My mind drifted back to the five-minute hypothesis. Let's assume for a moment that everything I remembered up until the night before was accurate—that all my memories represented real experiences rather than delusions or fantasies. If that was true, then it seemed likely that that morning, Chifuyu had been altered in such a way as to make her have retroactively been a high schooler all along. That seemed to explain the Chifuyu I was currently speaking to nicely...but if that was the case, then it seemed very probable that the modification had been flawed. Those flaws were why I'd been able to recognize the change in her character, and why she herself was starting to harbor doubts as well.

It struck me that the situation I'd been thrown into was, potentially, much more dangerous than I'd given it credit for. The world, I now realized, was *unstable*...and there was no telling when it might collapse under its own weight.

I ended up leading Chifuyu back to our classroom...or at least, leading her partway there.

"Ah! There you are, darling! I went to visit you in your classroom, but you weren't there—I've been looking everywhere for you! You weren't responding to my texts and LINEs at all! But anyway, it's finally lunchtime! Come on, let's go eat together!"

"Juu! Oh, good. I finally found you. Hey, let's eat lunch together, okay? I made a boxed lunch for you, full of all your favorite foods. I made the karaage that you told me you liked on the second Monday in June five years ago, and the meat and potato stew that you said you 'could eat every single day' on the first Tuesday of October two years ago too."

To make a long story short, love-drunk Kudou and yandere Hatoko had caught

up to me, so all four of us wound up eating lunch together. Both Kudou and Hatoko had been trying to get ahold of me by phone, by the way, but I'd set mine to silent mode and hadn't noticed at all. Why had I done that? Because the two of them had been spamming me with a genuinely ungodly number of messages, even before lunchtime had rolled around. *Both* of them had started messaging me no more than five minutes after we'd split up that morning. I wasn't ignoring the texts maliciously, to be clear, and I hadn't left them on read either. I was just...well, just too terrified to bring myself to look at them, that's all.

So, yeah—basically, Kudou and Hatoko were both coming on *way* too strong. I wasn't nearly brave enough to eat in the classroom with both the two of them *and* Chifuyu, so we all ended up making our way to the literary club's room for lunch instead.

"Okay, darling, say aah!"

"Open wide, Juu!"

Two bites of food—a piece of rolled omelet (made by Kudou) from one side and a piece of karaage (made by Hatoko) from the other—bore down upon me...

"Ahm! Ahm!"

...and were quickly intercepted and devoured by Chifuyu, who stuffed her little cheeks completely full with both bites, chewed, and gulped them down.

"Mmh. That was great," said Chifuyu. "Thanks, Kudou, Hatoko."

A deafening silence descended upon the room. Kudou and Hatoko scowled as they loaded up another round (of food) and took aim once more, holding their chopsticks with the grace and precision of a pair of trained snipers...

"Ahm! Ahm!"

...but it was no use. Chifuyu's defenses were impenetrable.

"Grr... Hey, Chifuyu!" shouted Kudou. "Why are you stopping me from expressing my love for my darling?!"

"If you want to feed Andou, you have to defeat me first," Chifuyu defiantly

replied.

“Okay then, Chifuyu—can you block *this*?” piped up Hatoko.

“Ugh... Hatoko, feeding him peppers is cheating.”

“Don’t worry! The peppers were stewed in the meat and potato stew, so they’re really tasty, even if they are a little bitter! Come on, don’t be picky! Eat up!”

“That’s right, Chifuyu,” chimed in Kudou. “You’ll never grow up if you don’t eat your vegetables! I’m sure your teacher scolds you if you don’t finish them when they serve veggies with your school lunch, right?”

“No,” Chifuyu said with a shake of her head. “Cookie eats them for me, so it’s always fine.”

Before I knew it, the three of them had started chatting away happily. I’d been in a majorly tough spot when Hatoko and Kudou had tried to feed me simultaneously, but being ignored entirely was hard to deal with in its own sort of way. Then again, that slight sense of isolation was nothing compared to the sense that something was distinctly *wrong* as I watched them chat.

Hatoko and Kudou were both treating Chifuyu, a high schooler, as if she were an elementary-school-aged child—and as best as I could tell, none of them had even noticed. The cracks really *were* starting to show, both in their characters and in the world itself.

“Is something wrong, Juu?” Hatoko asked. My anxiety must’ve shown through in my expression. “You look like you’re watching a comedian who’d made it big after one of their signature gags caught on, gotten invited onto a talk show, then had a sudden crisis onstage when they realized they didn’t know whether to act like the character from their famous bit or their actual, genuine self!”

“What sort of look is *that*?!” I yelped reflexively, but a moment later, it struck me that Hatoko’s comparison was actually pretty apt, in a sense. It wasn’t so much that I felt like something was out of place as I felt an impatient sort of unease. They were all acting like their personalities had been altered, but at the same time, their acts were flawed. I was feeling the restless frustration of watching someone play an unpolished, inconsistent representation of a

character I knew.

“Are you feeling sick, darling?”

“Nah, I’m fine,” I said after a moment of hesitation. “Don’t worry about me, Kudou.”

“Well, all right... *But*,” Kudou added with an irate pout and a pointed glare.

“Ah, uh... Mirei?” I frantically corrected myself.

Kudou’s expression, however, didn’t change this time. “Are you really *that* opposed to calling me by name?” she grumbled.

“N-No, I’m not *against* it! I’m just not used to it, that’s all...”

“You call everyone in the literary club by their names. You’re always so friendly with *them*.”

“Please stop sulking, okay...? It’s not like there’s some big reason why I use their given names. It just sort of happened...”

“Really? So you *didn’t* start using all of their given names because you were interested in someone in particular, but knew that singling just one of them out to call by name would make it obvious who you were aiming for?”

“You’re reading way, way too deep into this!”

“Hmph! Well, I’m not going to doubt your word, one way or another. I’ll try to do better,” said Kudou. “But while we’re on the subject, why *did* you join the literary club, darling?”

“Huh?” I grunted.

“The literary club. Why did you decide to join it?”

“Oh... I mean, it’s not like I had one big, clear reason for it, or anything. This is gonna sound sorta rude, but it was more or less process of elimination for me,” I explained.

With hindsight, I was incredibly glad I’d decided to join the club, of course, but I hadn’t had the sort of motive for choosing it that you could really make a story out of. If it weren’t for our school’s policy that mandated all its students join some sort of club, I probably would’ve just gone home in the afternoons

instead.

“I wasn’t into the idea of joining a sports club at all, so I started by looking through the cultural clubs... But, like, the brass band club and the chorus club seemed to take things super seriously, which I wasn’t into either. I wanted something with a pretty small number of members where I could kinda just take it easy. I’d ended up finding the art club, the computer club, and the Go club, and I was thinking of joining one of them,” I said, then I glanced over at a certain childhood friend of mine who’d already picked her club out at the time. “But then Hatoko invited me to join the literary club, and the rest is history.”

Indeed, Hatoko was the one who had pulled me into the literary club. That was common knowledge—the sort of factoid that would be written in my character profile on our anime’s promotional website—but looking back on it, I was shocked to realize that I’d never really had a proper conversation with her about the circumstances of my recruitment.

“Come to think of it, Hatoko, why did *you* decide to join the literary club?” I asked. I remembered her mentioning that she just hadn’t felt like playing soft tennis in high school, but I realized that I’d never actually learned why she’d picked the literary club in particular to replace it. It wasn’t like she was especially into reading or writing, so it seemed like an odd choice.

“Hmm. Well, I didn’t really have a *reason* either. It was process of elimination for me too—I’d wanted to join some sort of cultural club, just like you, and I’d picked the literary club in the end because...um...”

At that point, Hatoko seemed to hesitate. She fell silent for a moment, but then she smiled faintly and carried on, slowly and quietly adding, “I guess...I picked it because I wanted to understand you, Juu.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Do you remember the start of our second year in middle school, when I returned that light novel to you? The one I didn’t actually read?”

“Y-Yeah,” I replied. There was no way I could have forgotten it. That incident, after all, was the impetus that had led me to temporarily abandon my chuuni ways.



“Well...the truth is, I had always felt really bad about that.”

“You did? But...*why*? You didn’t do anything wrong, did you? I was the one who was obsessed with forcing my hobbies off on—”

“Yeah, maybe. You really do try to make people like the things that you do, sometimes. But I think...I might’ve wanted you to push even harder, in my case.”

I fell silent.

“I wanted to be someone you could always be pushy with—someone you could say anything to, no matter how selfish it was. We’re childhood friends, after all,” said Hatoko. “And...that’s why I decided to try joining the literary club. When I’d gone to the club room to check the club out and saw the bookshelves, I’d realized that they were full of light novels just like the one you’d loaned me. I’d thought that if I could read books with you here, and write them too, then maybe...maybe I’d be able to understand you just a little better.”

“So, you joined the literary club for *me*...?” I asked.

“No, not for you,” said Hatoko with a shake of her head. “I joined it for myself. To solve a problem that was eating at *me*.”

Once more, I didn’t know what to say.

“Of course, in the end, I didn’t figure much of anything out after all!” Hatoko said, doing her best to laugh the matter off, but I felt like I could still hear a hint of gloom in her voice. I knew for a fact that it wasn’t just the result of her being in yandere mode today either. “Sorry, Juu. I’m a real pain sometimes, aren’t I? I’d always thought it was annoying when you’d try to get me into your hobbies, honestly, but then when you stopped—for my sake—I ended up *wanting* you to start doing it again. Talk about obnoxious, right...?”

“Wrong,” I said. I put my foot down, clearly and immediately. “I mean, okay, maybe it *was* a pain in a sense, but it’s a sort of pain that *everyone* ends up turning into sometimes.”

I was no exception. Deep down, I’m sure that some part of me had known that Hatoko would never understand the things that I liked, but I’d still extolled

the virtues of my favorite media and shown off the cool names and poses that I'd made up to her at every chance. I'd done it because I'd wanted her to understand me—and, to the same extent, because I *hadn't* wanted her to understand me. I'd been a pain in the very particular sort of way that chuunis like me tended to.

"And anyway," I continued, "you don't always have to be the one getting stuff pushed off onto you, y'know? You can return the favor sometimes! I feel the same way you do—I want you to get pushy about the stuff you like sometimes."

"Huh?" Hatoko grunted.

"What's with the blank stare? Isn't that obvious? I'm your childhood friend as much as you are mine! I wouldn't cut you out of my life just because you were being a bit of a pain—come on!"

"Yeah... Yeah, of course you wouldn't."

"Right?"

"I've thought that you were being a *huuuge* pain plenty of times myself...but we're still together anyway, aren't we?"

"Yeah... Wait, a *huge* pain?! Plenty of times?! Am I really that obnoxious?"

"..."

"Why'd you clam up?! It's *that* bad?!"

My reaction, apparently, was just too over the top for Hatoko to take. She cracked up, and seconds later, I was laughing along with her.

*"She's not one of my beloved waifus. She's an obnoxious, pain-in-the-ass real-world girl."*

I suddenly remembered what Sagami had said about Hatoko, back when I'd learned about a side of her personality I'd never taken notice of before. I'd learned just how hard she'd been trying to understand me, and just how much pain her inability to do so had caused her.

Choosing a club was one of the biggest events in a student's high school career, and Hatoko had used it to further her quest to understand me. Some people would probably think that made her a pain. They'd say it was a weirdly

heavy thing of her to have done, most likely. I, however, was delighted by that sort of obnoxiousness. It made me feel more fond of her than ever. I was proud that my childhood friend would go to such lengths—more so than anyone else—just to understand me.

Hatoko wasn't in her right mind today, sure, but looking back, I was mortified that I'd decided to boil down her weirdness by saying she'd gone yandere on me. Hatoko was no yandere—the version of her I'd known up until now and the version of her I'd come to know today weren't such simple and straightforward people to be summed up in a single word like that, no matter what word it was. She was earnest, dedicated, honest, and just a bit of an excessively heavy pain in the rear...and above all else, she was just Hatoko, plain and simple.

After that, the three of us enjoyed the rest of our lunch period in calm and quiet...or that's what I'd *thought* would happen, until reality had surprised me yet again with another mid-meal disturbance. It'd happened as Hatoko and Kudou were busy feeding me the handmade lunches they'd brought.

"Kye ki ki!"

The next thing I knew, a girl with silvery hair and a pair of round sunglasses was standing *right* in front of me.

"What the— T-Tomoyo?!" I yelped.

"Nay, not Tomoyo. I am Endless Paradox!" Tomoyo shouted, flicking her unnaturally colored hair and swishing her coat with a satisfying snap.

I had *no* clue what was going on, so to start, I tried to get a grasp of my surroundings. I was not, it seemed, sitting in the club room anymore. Somehow, I'd ended up sitting on a small flight of stairs behind the club building, where students didn't tend to go very often.

"Did you...?" I began, then shook my head. "Nah, not like I even have to ask. You used *Closed Clock* and carried me here, right?"

"Kye ki ki! Insightful as ever, Guiltia," Tomoyo replied. "Yours is a keen eye to have seen through my methods!"

"I mean, I'm kinda just used to it at this point. Wasn't hard to figure out. Me

suddenly being in a totally different place and you being out of breath are both dead giveaways.”

“I-I am *not* out of breath!” Tomoyo shouted, which just made the fact that she *was* a bit out of breath all the more obvious. *Closed Clock* was a fearsome power indeed, but moving something while time was stopped still required a fair amount of heavy lifting on its user’s part.

“I’m actually kinda impressed you carried me all the way out here,” I said. “Hauling a teenage guy all the way through the school couldn’t have been easy, right?”

“Hmph! Your concern is unwarranted,” said Tomoyo. “I’ve memorized the locations of all the carts and trolleys in the school for precisely these occasions!”

“Just how much groundwork have you put into this...?” I sighed. Glancing around us, I noticed what looked like tire tracks—from, say, a handcart—on the ground nearby. *She seriously carted me over here? I mean, I guess it’s better than if she’d dragged me along the ground.*

Clearly, Tomoyo had spared no effort in ensuring she’d be able to show off her time-stopping power to its fullest potential. She’d made up for her lack of muscle mass through sheer ingenuity. It hadn’t been a *bad* idea on her part, by any means, but something about it still struck me as fundamentally stupid for reasons I couldn’t quite seem to articulate.

“So, what do you want, anyway?” I asked.

“I-I, well,” Tomoyo stammered, her arrogant persona vanishing into the ether as a helpless anxiety moved in to replace it. She reached up to pop her coat’s collar, partially concealing her face, while at the same time reaching behind her back with her other hand to produce...

“...A lunch box?”

“Agggh! N-No, no! This isn’t what it looks like!” Tomoyo shrieked as she tried to hide the cloth-wrapped parcel in her oversized coat.

“It isn’t? I mean, what else would it be? That’s totally a lunch box, right?”

“W-Well, it is, but, I mean...”

“Wait, did you want to eat together? You could’ve just joined in with everyone in the club room, you know?”

“Th-The thing is, um... Kye ki ki! I’ve no desire to dine in the presence of others. To eat is to render oneself vulnerable—such is the nature of all life—and so to eat with another is to put your very being at no small amount of risk,” said Tomoyo.

“Huh...? You mean, like, you *hide* to eat your lunch?”

“I do *not*!” Tomoyo shrieked as her persona vanished into the wind once again. “I-I’m saying, umm... Th-This!” she said after a few seconds of hesitation so intense and anguished I could see it in her eyes. She pulled out the lunch box she’d hidden in her coat once more and shoved it toward me.

“Uh... What about it?” I asked.

“Y-You, um...should have it for lunch. I’m giving it to you,” Tomoyo explained. I was a little dazed, at that point, but I accepted the box, freeing her hands so she could hide her rapidly reddening face.

“Did you *make* this?” I asked.

Tomoyo let out a barely audible gasp.

“Like, for *me*?”

The gasp turned into more of a pained groan. “*Look*,” said Tomoyo, “just hurry up and eat it already!”

This was a thoroughly unforeseen situation. I hadn’t been counting on Kudou and Hatoko making me lunch, but *Tomoyo* making me one too just doubled down on the shock. Apparently, she’d been so opposed to letting anyone else see her handing the lunch box over that she’d stopped time to make sure we were alone when it happened—that, or she’d just *really* not wanted me to compare her lunch with Hatoko’s or Kudou’s. One way or another, it was sorta cute of her...or maybe charming would be a better word for it?

“Well, okay. Thanks,” I said. I was already totally full, to be honest, but speaking as a guy, *not* eating it just didn’t feel like a valid option. I thanked her,

untied the cloth wrapped around the box, opened it up...and froze.

I doubted my own eyes, but no matter how long I stared, the contents of the lunch box remained the same as ever. It's not that they looked repulsive, or that it contained a single slab of pickled radish or a lump of unidentifiable dark matter. It wasn't exceptionally out-there in any particular way, really. In fact, in terms of appearance, it was about as average of a lunch box as you could find. The box itself was one of those cute little containers with dividers to keep each dish separate, and contained within were pieces of rolled omelet, karaage, hot dogs cut to look like little octopuses, and so on, plus a compartment of rice for good measure. Nothing about it was worthy of comment, but it looked well-balanced and appetizing overall.

There was just one thing—one single element of the lunch that'd caught my attention: the strips of seaweed laid out on the rice, which spelled out a series of words in a plain, angular typeface:

*"Love you, Tomoyo!"*

"...Hey, Tomo—" I began, but before I could even finish saying her name, the lunch box had vanished into thin air, wrapping, chopsticks, and all. Tomoyo, meanwhile, was suddenly standing in front of me, and on a second glance, I realized that *she* was now holding the once again sealed box.

"So...was that—"

"Forget it."

"Yeah, no, that's not happening. Wasn't that just—"

"I-I said forget it!" Tomoyo shouted desperately, but I wasn't having it this time. I couldn't let a fib like *that* slide without calling it out.

"You didn't make that lunch for me, did you?" I said. "Your *mom* made it for *you*, right?"

"I *told* you to *forget* it!" Tomoyo wailed, sinking to her knees as she clutched her head. That pretty much confirmed it: the lunch she'd tried to pass off as her own handiwork had, in fact, been made by her mother.

"Why on earth would you lie about something like that?" I sighed.

“I-I didn’t lie!” Tomoyo yelped. “For the record, I never said a single word about making it myself, or about having made it for you! That was all just *your* misunderstanding, okay?!”

“I mean, technically, I guess...but you didn’t say I was wrong either, did you? You had a bunch of chances to correct me. Seems pretty obvious you were trying to frame it in a way that I’d misunderstand.”

Tomoyo clammed up. I still didn’t know what the point of all this was, but clearly, I was right about her passing her mom’s cooking off as her own not being an accident. Considering that I had no idea whether or not Tomoyo was any good at cooking, she probably would’ve gotten away with it...if it weren’t for her mother deciding to write a supportive message to help her beloved daughter get through another school day.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Tomoyo finally shouted. “*Why?! Like, come on, mom, why?! Why would you write a message in my lunch today, of all friggin’ days?! Your lunches are usually totally normal, but you just had to go all out for once, didn’t you?!?*”

“Don’t go pinning this on your mom! She was just being nice!” I countered. “Look, Tomoyo, I’m not trying to give you the third degree about lying or anything. I just want to know—*why?*”

“I-I just, I mean... I sort of, well, panicked,” said Tomoyo.

“How so?” I asked, cocking my head in confusion.

Tomoyo—who, by the way, was still slumped over dejectedly on the ground—began to tell her story in a depressed mumble. “Kudou and Hatoko made lunch boxes for you today, right?” she said. “I saw you eating them in the club room earlier, and they both looked like they’d turned out really well, and...I’ve never even made my *own* lunch before, so... I sorta just...”

“Sorta just decided to show off by pretending that you made the lunch your mom made for you?”

“Yeah,” Tomoyo said with a listless nod.

“You fixate on the weirdest things sometimes, you know that? Honestly, why would you panic over us finding out that you can’t cook?”

"It's not like I *can't* cook! I've just never tried making a lunch box, that's all!"

"Oh, really? I dunno why, but I've always had the sense that you weren't interested in cooking and stuff like that."

"G-Give me *some* credit! I'm really good at all that housekeeping stuff, actually!"

"Oh, really? Okay, quiz time: what are the five S's of Japanese cooking?"

"Huh? U-Umm... S-Sugar, salt, soy sauce, um...salmon? And, uh...soda?"

"*Yikes*. That wasn't even wrong in a funny way—it was just plain wrong."

"Who asked you?!"

"Okay, next up: an opera singer suffering from a toothache once asked—"

"Chaliapin steak!"

"...Correct. Okay, last question: the French word for garnish—"

"Garniture!"

"Correct," I sighed. She didn't know the first thing about the fundamentals of cooking, but she *had* internalized every piece of trivia that'd been brought up in *Food Wars*. It was, well, very Tomoyo of her.

"A-Anyway!" Tomoyo shouted as she shot to her feet and pointed a finger toward me. "Next time I'll *actually* make a lunch box...f-for you, okay?!"

"For *me*?"

"Y-Yeah, that's right! 'Cause I have to prove to you that I can actually cook! I-It's not like I actually *want* to try making a lunch box or anything—I just don't like you looking down on me like this. I'm doing it because I have to!" Tomoyo concluded, crossing her arms with a mighty harumph.

"Oh? Okay, guess I'll look forward to that... *Pff!* Heh, hah hah, hah hah hah hah!"

"Wh-What's so funny?!"

"Nothing, it's just... Well, I was thinking that the Witch of Antinomy who Smirks in the Face of Twilight has turned out to be way more of a homemaker



than I'd figured she'd be."

Tomoyo looked confused for just a moment, then flinched. "K-Kye ki ki! E-Even I feel the need to amuse myself with trivial jests, from time to time!" she said, having finally remembered to get back into character.

Said character, however, was just all over the place at this point. Whether that was because the usual Tomoyo's and chuuni Tomoyo's personalities were clashing with each other or because chuuni Tomoyo's persona had *always* been unstable was an unsettled question, of course.

I didn't know any of the particulars of the situation, but there was one thing I could say for sure: I was, without question, dealing with the real Tomoyo. She was a stubborn show-off who could also be a bit of a scatterbrain, and she never seemed to stick the landing on any of the stunts she attempted, but she'd always dedicate herself wholeheartedly to everything she'd decide to do. It didn't matter that she was wearing her chuuni getup, or trying to drop back into her chuuni persona—none of it would change the fact that she was still the Tomoyo I knew at heart.

That didn't just apply to Tomoyo either. The same was true of Kudou, Hatoko, and Chifuyu as well. However much their characters shifted, and however deep the cracks in their personas grew, on a fundamental level, every one of them was still the same person I'd come to know so well. That understanding reaffirmed a conviction within me: I was, more than ever, dedicated to returning to my old world—to returning the world to the way it used to be.



The truth of the matter was that I had figured it all out from the very beginning. Everything about the sudden phenomenon that had manifested in our world—Tomoyo's onset of chuunibyou, Hatoko's yandere turn, Chifuyu's high school reinvention, Kudou's romance-addled confusion, and Sagami's feminization—had occurred on account of a cause that I had long since guessed.

And yet, I hadn't said a word about my conjecture to Andou. I'd feigned ignorance, putting on a show of my mystification. I knew very well that my conduct was cowardly and beneath me...but I couldn't help myself.

I sighed deeply as I gazed into one of the mirrors in the women's restroom,

then took off my glasses and lightly massaged the bridge of my nose and the area behind my ears. They felt ever so slightly sore, presumably because of my unfamiliar eyewear. In spite of the deep-seated love for glasses I felt within my heart—an attachment so strong you'd think I'd been wearing them my whole life—my body simply wasn't used to keeping them on for long periods of time. There was a gap between my psychology and physiology that made the inconsistency in my current character remarkably apparent.

Perhaps it wasn't just me. Perhaps the others' makeshift personalities had begun unraveling at the seams, as well. Something had to be done, and fast. I couldn't allow myself to leave it all to Andou. I knew that, intellectually...yet I simply couldn't bring myself to take that essential, pivotal step forward.

My doubts and internal conflict remained steadfast as I lifted my glasses once more, looking my mirror image in the eye as I raised them to my face, and...

"Those red glasses! I remember them very well—you tried to put them on in the park, way back whenever, only for me to stop you."

...that's when a voice rang out from somewhere to my side. I reflexively stood on guard, which was only natural, I believe. The voice in question was one that never should have emerged from this particular location—any woman would have been put on edge, really.

"S-Sagami?!" I yelped.

"Wearing glasses is a surefire way to throw the game. The glasses girl's the secondary heroine to the bitter end—it's an unwritten rule of fiction these days. I told you that, didn't I?" Sagami replied.

"You realize this is the women's restroom?!"

"I sure do."

"Then hurry up and—"

"Hurry up and what?"

"Huh...?"

"Is there some sort of problem with me being in the girls' room?" Sagami asked with a faint smile. He was wearing a skirt, which was certainly abnormal,

and his voice seemed higher pitched than usual. His face seemed a little more feminine as well. In fact, no matter how I looked at him, I could only see him as a girl.

*Oh, that's right.* The sense of nausea that had welled up within me the moment I'd realized who was in the room with me had, momentarily, caused me to forget that at the moment, Sagami was a girl himself. In other words, it was only natural for him to be in the women's room. It was perfectly natural...and yet, that knowledge did nothing to quell the intense discomfort that the situation caused me.

"Come on, Takanashi," said Sagami. "Sure, I might be a terminal deviant with literally no filter, but not even *I'd* have the creeper chops to stroll into the girls' room if I were still a guy. That would be *way* out of character for me! If I started doing stuff like that, we'd *know* we'd been trapped in a trash-tier spin-off."

I had to pause for a moment to collect myself. It was strange—he was on the verge of crossing several lines he shouldn't, and I couldn't for the life of me understand why. Why was he acting so provocatively—as if he *wanted* to pick a fight with anyone who might be observing?

*No. No, that's not it at all.* I'd been so preoccupied by his dangerously meta choice of subject matter that I'd very nearly let the portion of his speech that'd *actually* merited my attention slip past me. "*If I were still a guy*"?

"Sagami..." I said. "Are you—"

"That's right. I'm aware of everything that's changed," Sagami admitted with an almost stunning degree of ease. "I remember being a guy up until last night, and I'm very aware that Kudou and the rest of the literary club have all lost their marbles."

He'd perceived the changes in our world—just like me and Andou. That was a shocking enough revelation on its own, but it was about to be outdone.

"And that's not all," Sagami continued, so casually that you'd never have thought his next words would elicit a sense of shock and astonishment within me unlike any I'd felt throughout my entire life.

“I’ve also figured out that *your* power is to blame for this whole kerfuffle, Takanashi.”

“Wha...?” I said in a choking half gasp.

For a moment, I thought that my heart might stop. I could barely breathe, and droplets of cold sweat began to crawl down my back. Then there were his eyes. There was something terrifying about them—about the way he seemed to be looking straight through me. It seemed that whether he was a man or a woman, the unique perspective from which Sagami Shizumu saw the world would not change in the slightest. No, it remained as upsetting and revolting as ever.

“Your power, Takanashi. *Route of Origin*. The power to return anything to the way it was meant to be. Its effects are especially vague, as far as powers go, and that ambiguity is what’s led to the amusingly abnormal circumstances we’ve found ourselves in. Isn’t that right?”

“Sagami,” I said after a moment of hesitation. “You know about our powers?”

“That’s right. I certainly do,” Sagami replied.

“Did Andou tell—” I began, but I shook my head before I could even finish the question. There was no way that could be true. Andou would never have told him.

When the five of us had gained our powers, we’d made a series of promises to one another. Among those was the promise that we would never reveal the existence of our powers to anyone else, under any circumstances. There was simply no way that Andou would have broken that oath.

“No, Andou wasn’t my source—as if that even needs to be said,” said Sagami. “Don’t worry. The man you fell for isn’t anywhere near that loose-lipped.”

“Then, who...?”

“Who did I learn about the existence of supernatural powers from? Well...let me put it this way: I believe that if you were to seriously apply yourself to figuring out who my source was using the information you’ve gained up until now, you’d manage to puzzle it out without too much trouble. That, however, isn’t what’s important right now. What *is* important...is whether or not my

guess was on the mark,” said Sagami. “So? How about it? Did I call out the culprit? Were *you* the one behind this plot arc’s big problem?”

Once again, I hesitated. “What makes you think I was?” I finally said, a slight tremble entering my voice.

Sagami grinned. “Well, I’ll admit that I jumped to a number of conclusions,” he said. “I had you singled out as suspicious from the start, so I just boiled the situation down to its bare essentials, then figured out what direction to take my logic in from there. I used the Saikawa Souhei method, basically.”

“You suspected me...from the very beginning?”

“Well, yeah. It’s important to note that this all occurred the day after you stepped down from your position as club president—in other words, the day you declared you would profess your love to Andou. That alone is enough to make me assume that anything strange that’s happened was probably tied to you in some way or another.”

I fell silent, and Sagami spoke on.

“Once I proceeded under the assumption that you were suspicious, I quickly concluded that all of the phenomena that have impacted us today—the world-changing-level alterations to our characters—could have been brought about by *Route of Origin*.”

Sagami began to count on his fingers. “Kanzaki Tomoyo’s chuuni regression. Kushikawa Hatoko’s yandere turn. Himeki Chifuyu’s high schooler transformation. Takanashi Sayumi’s adoption of glasses. Kudou Mirei’s love-drunkenness. The phenomenon manifested in those five girls exactly. Given that, the simplest hypothesis would be that it impacted girls in possession of supernatural powers, but from my perspective—as someone who knows your intent to declare your affection—a *different* point of commonality springs to mind,” he said in a matter of fact tone. “All five of the girls in question have feelings for Andou.”

I clenched my teeth.

“When you assess the situation from *that* perspective, coupled with the fact that you were preparing for your big confession event, it’s pretty easy to

imagine what you did. Takanashi—you used *Route of Origin* on yourself. You attempted to return your feelings of love for Andou Jurai to the way they were meant to be...didn't you?" Sagami concluded.

He seemed to be waiting for me to confirm his theory, but I found myself at a loss for words. I felt so drained I feared I might fall to my knees, but given that I was still in the women's restroom, I did everything I could to resist the urge.

Sagami's explanation had been terrifyingly accurate from start to finish. My intention had, of course, been to reveal my feelings to Andou after school was over. I'd already asked him to meet up with me for that purpose, so backing out was no longer an option. However...when I'd woken up this morning, I'd found myself overcome with fear. I'd been scared of getting rejected—scared of ruining the relationship that we'd already established—and in spite of the fact that it had been my idea to finally tell him, I'd found myself unable to work up the courage to do so.

I had woken up earlier than usual, possibly thanks to my nervous anxiety, but my fear had kept me huddled up in my bed for quite some time regardless. As the minutes had ticked by, moment by painful, agonizing, excruciating moment, the time for me to leave for school had drawn closer, my inner turmoil had grown greater...and, finally, I'd used *Route of Origin* on myself. Like a drowning man grasping at straws, I'd clung to my power in a desperate attempt to save myself—I'd attempted to put the feelings I held for Andou in order, changing them into the way they were meant to be. That, I'd believed, would allow me to regain a measure of courage. The actual results of that act, however, proved far more impactful.

"I never imagined it would turn out like this," I said after a lengthy period of silence. "I'd certainly never intended for anyone else to be drawn into my power's effects."

"I guess you could say you lost control," said Sagami. "Or that using *Route of Origin* on something as vague and insubstantial as affection led to it more or less malfunctioning. That would explain why the other girls who've been affected are most certainly *not* the way *they're* meant to be at the moment."

What is a feeling of affection's ideal form? What sort of love is worthy of

praise? How were my feelings meant to be? The answer, in every case, was the same: nonexistent. I'd known perfectly well that there was no answer to be found, yet I had used my power anyway. It was hardly a surprise it had turned out this poorly.

"Judging by the way they've all changed, I'd say it's less that they've become the way they were meant to be and more that their deepest desires have all been brought to the surface, or something along those lines," Sagami continued. "I've gotta say, your power really is something! It can't do much as far as direct attacks go, sure, but it *can* rewrite the world itself! That certainly doesn't sound like a balanced ability to me."

"The way I see it, there's nothing more troublesome than an unbalanced ability that you're incapable of controlling," I countered.

*Route of Origin* allowed me to return anything in existence to the way it was meant to be. That applied to both items of organic and inorganic nature, of course, but when used in a more esoteric manner—or, as Andou would put it, when invoking its evolved form: *Route of Origin: Ouroboros's Circle*—I could return even the conceptual to the way it was meant to be. It was, in some senses, an almighty power, and I could hardly dispute the idea that it was unbalanced...were it not for my lack of control.

It wasn't that I couldn't control my power, precisely. No, the issue was that I couldn't control my own perceptions. An individual who couldn't even control their own sense of affection could never possibly hope to master a power that relies upon their perspective of the world to determine its effects.

"There's just one thing I don't understand," I said. "Sagami...why have you turned into a girl?"

"Oh, *well*," said Sagami, "this is a little embarrassing to admit, but the truth is, I've always wanted to get genderbent deep down! I'd say this is probably just that desire put into practice. It's such a good subgenre, honestly—I was really hooked on genderbender stuff a while back, and I've gotten into it all over again just recently as well. I think pretty much every guy's wanted to get turned into a hot girl at some point! One of those universal fantasies, you know? And thanks to you, I got to have that dream granted, so thanks! Seriously, I'm really grateful

for this. Wow, though—girls’ bodies really *are* something, aren’t they? I’ve heard all the rumors about how they’re more sensitive than guys’ bodies, of course, but I wasn’t expecting it to be quite *this* much... Honestly, I could get used to it. I tested a bunch of stuff out this morning, and my plan’s to do a lot more experimenting as soon as I’m back from school. But, well...to be totally serious for a second? I’m honestly pretty freaked out about what I’d do if my period starts. That’s, like, a blood *everywhere* sort of situation, right? Hey, Takanashi—if my period happens to start up during the school day today...help me out, will you? I’d really appreciate it if you’d show me the ropes, in detail.”

I took a deep breath. “That is not, in fact, what I meant,” I said as I held back the near overwhelming urge to punch him directly in the face. Considering that I was the cause of this particular incident, I had to exercise at least that much self-restraint. “I wasn’t asking why you were turned into a girl, as opposed to some other alteration. I was asking why you were affected in the first place.”

This whole incident had come about because I’d used *Route of Origin* on myself. That act had resulted in not just me, but everyone who viewed Andou in an especially favorable light being fundamentally altered. It followed, then, that if Sagami Shizumu’s character was also altered...

“Yes, well,” said Sagami. His eyes narrowed as a faint, somewhat bitter smile spread across his face. “I *do* love Andou, after all.”

It was like I’d been struck in the back of the head with a sledgehammer. The sense of impact was so pronounced, I could practically *hear* the crash.

“S-S-Sagami?! D-Did you—?! You just—?! You! Huh?! You finally admitted it?! It’s *canon*?! *Whaaat*?!”

“I’m sorry to ruin your moment of shipper’s euphoria, but tragically, I didn’t mean it in a BL sense. I meant that I love him as a friend... Or, no, not quite,” Sagami said, pausing for a moment to find the right words. “Not as a friend—not quite. It’s definitely not a romantic sort of love either, though... I think the best way to put it would be that he’s my favorite character.”

“Is that so?” I said flatly after a moment’s pause. It was, perhaps, the most characteristic answer that Sagami could have given. Or, to put it another way, it was the most Sagamiesque way of loving someone I could imagine.



“I mean, you know me,” said Sagami. “I’m a completely irredeemable piece of shit, right?”

“Quite,” I replied immediately. It was a moment of carelessness on my part—I’d simply agreed so strongly, I’d let my opinion slip out unfiltered.

Sagami chuckled. “Yup—I’m a scumbag, and everyone knows it, me included. I mean, the thing I do where I call myself a ‘reader’? That must be stupidly creepy, right?”

“...You were aware, then.”

“Oh, very much so. But being aware that it’s creepy doesn’t mean I’m planning on fixing it. People like me are the hardest type to deal with: the ones who *know* they’re hopeless trash-humans but like themselves anyway, just the way they are. We know we’re trash, but we’re not interested in fixing ourselves or hiding our nature. I’d go out on a limb and guess that we’re also the sort of people you despise more than anyone else, right, Takanashi?”

“I can’t deny it.”

“Anyway, me being like this drives people away from me like you wouldn’t believe. That’s never particularly bothered me, to be clear...but, you know,” Sagami said, a somewhat faraway expression coming across his face, “Andou’s the only one who’s still stuck around in spite of it all.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

“He treats a piece of living waste like me almost as if I’m his *friend*. I’ve never met anyone else like him,” Sagami said with a smile. It was a gentle, genial expression, but with a hint of sadness behind it. A quiet smile—almost the precise opposite of the hollow, flippant one he usually wore. “Jurai really is one interesting guy.”

As Sagami muttered those final words to himself—muttered the name that, supposedly, he’d sealed away years ago—he turned his back to me and began to walk away.

“Wh-Where are you going?” I asked.

“Back to class, of course. Our lunch break is ending,” he said blithely, glancing

back at me over his shoulder. “I didn’t come here to blame you for this, for what it’s worth! No need to worry about that. I really did *just* want to see if I’d guessed right. My whole theory was nothing but guesswork and conclusion jumping, so there was a chance I was completely off the mark about everything.”

“You were just checking your answer? That’s all? Really?”

“Really. I have nothing in particular to say to you as far as the actual incident goes. After all—I already said everything I wanted to back during the cultural festival.”

“...”

It had happened on the first day of the festival, right after the first showing of our play. Immediately after I’d declared my intention to profess my love to Andou, Sagami had said something to me. He hadn’t intended to encourage or discourage me, or for that matter to give me any form of advice at all. He’d simply given me his impression—told me the result he’d predicted my declaration of love would bring about when all was said and done.

“I take it that you took what I said into consideration before you decided to do things this way?” asked Sagami.

I paused, then nodded. “Yes.”

“Then I have nothing left to say to you. I’ll simply stand back and watch, like the reader I am. I’d like nothing more than to observe how Takanashi Sayumi’s time as a heroine comes to a close.”

## Chapter 6: The Only Praiseworthy Thing to Do

How had Sagami found out about our powers? He'd told me that I'd be able to puzzle it out if I just applied myself to the question, so I decided to try doing just that. Lo and behold, it took only a small amount of serious thought for me to reach my answer. It was easy, in fact, though I would call the process more akin to a word-association game than any serious deductive reasoning.

The main point that led me to my ultimate conclusion was the fact that he had been aware of my power's name, *Route of Origin*. Even if he'd happened to witness one of us using a power by chance, it wouldn't make sense for him to also know their names. Furthermore, the nature of my power in particular was exceptionally hard to grasp from an outside perspective, yet he'd been able to not only name it, but also describe its effects in accurate detail.

It was clear, then, that Sagami had been told of our powers. That being said, I found it very hard to believe that Andou—or, for that matter, any member of the literary club—had opened up to him about them. I had faith that my underclassmen would never make that foolish of a mistake, and I had faith that the same was true of Kudou as well.

But then, who? Who had revealed *Route of Origin's* name, a name that only we knew, to Sagami? The instant I formed the question, its answer sprang to mind of its own accord. There *was* one person—the sole individual, as far as I was aware, who was not a member of our group but who was aware of our powers' names.

A few months earlier, while we were leaving school together, Andou had split off from the group to run back and pick up a notebook full of his cringiest chuuni fantasies—his so-called *Bloody Bible*—that he'd forgotten in our club room. Before he'd had the chance, however, the book had been found by a man called Kiryuu Hajime, who happened to be Tomoyo's older brother.

Andou had later told us that Kiryuu had read the notebook at the time. Apparently, he'd picked up on Andou's intent to have the “route” in *Route of*

*Origin* serve as a double meaning, since it could also be interpreted as “root” when spoken out loud. I remembered very well how ecstatic Andou had been to find someone who understood his sense of naming aesthetics.

In short: Kiryuu had read the *Bloody Bible*, and he’d learned all about our powers in the process, from the names Andou had given them to the details of how they functioned. Although Andou was never shy about showing the notebook itself off to all and sundry, he was loath to let anyone actually read its contents. He would use it as a simple notepad from time to time, and he would share in those cases, but some of those pages had been written with the intent of never showing them to anyone—not even the rest of the literary club. The only people on this earth who would have seen those secret sections were the book’s owner, Andou, and the man who had read them more or less by accident, Kiryuu.

With all that established, my conclusion was simple: Sagami had learned the names and natures of our powers from Kiryuu. I’d already known that the two of them were acquainted, thanks to a conversation I’d had with Sagami in the past. They were connected through a set of circumstances that Tomoyo had had nothing to do with whatsoever, apparently, which might have explained why Kiryuu didn’t think anything of telling Sagami about our powers. Presumably, he’d thought of them as nothing more than a funny story to share.

Needless to say, I had no solid proof that the assumption I was beginning to lean toward was correct. I couldn’t be confident in it at all, but nevertheless, I found it compelling enough that I couldn’t let myself ignore it either. I was growing increasingly convinced that that man, Kiryuu Hajime, held the keys to everything that was happening around us. Perhaps he had only told Sagami about Andou’s names and knew nothing about our actual powers themselves. Perhaps he *did* know the powers were actual. Or perhaps...he was tied to us in a far, far deeper manner than I had even begun to realize.

There were a plethora of matters that I needed to think about. I had to tell my friends everything I’d learned, then start looking into Kiryuu Hajime at once—and for that sake, I needed to resolve the current abnormal circumstances as soon as I possibly could. My hesitation and cowardice had brought this alternate world into being, so it was my responsibility to set things right.

“Ah, Sayumi!”

School had ended for the day, and I’d made my way behind the gymnasium, which I found abandoned. A short wait later, Andou arrived to meet me.

“I had a feeling you’d be here,” said Andou as he jogged up to me.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m just glad that you came as well. I certainly wouldn’t have begrudged you for forgetting our promise, the circumstances being as they are.”

“I mean, a promise is a promise, right?” Andou said with a shrug. He had indeed been true to his word, and came to meet me alone at just the time he’d said he would the day before. “But anyway,” he continued, “to be totally honest...I just don’t think this is the right time for us to be having our rematch, Sayumi. We should really find a way to work out this situation, and *then* we can —”

“I’m sorry, Andou,” I said, cutting off his misunderstanding before it could steer the discussion in a silly direction and offering a deep, apologetic bow. “I’m afraid...that I lied to you.”

“Huh? Y-You did?”

“The truth is... The truth is that I know what’s going on. I know exactly what the cause of this phenomenon is, and I’ve known it from the start.”

I could hear the tremble in my own voice, and I felt a painful tightness in my chest, but I couldn’t stop. This was my responsibility—my indiscretion to make up for. I had to open up about the entire truth, and then tell Andou how I felt about him. That was the one way I knew that could bring the chaos that *Route of Origin*’s rampage had caused to an end.

This world had begun on account of my indecision, and so by overcoming that hesitation, I hoped to end it. I had no proof it would turn out that way—it was just speculation, really—but I felt an intuitive, instinctual sense that it would, in fact, work. It was almost as if *Route of Origin* itself was shouting it out loud—as if it was telling me to stop running away.

Whether or not my power was upset that I didn't throw it a birthday party was beyond me, but I *did* suspect that, just maybe, this was exactly the situation that it had desired. As matters stood, I couldn't bring this altered world to an end without telling Andou that I loved him. In other words, getting cold feet simply wasn't an option anymore. Just as I had driven myself into a corner by declaring my intentions to Sagami and asking Andou to meet me here, so too had *Route of Origin* walled me in further by way of its rampage.

*Oh, please. If there's one thing this thought process proves, it's that Andou's become a little too much of an influence on me.*

"Wait... From the very beginning? Seriously?" Andou asked, his eyes wide with shock.

I, however, couldn't bring myself to meet his gaze, and spoke on at a rapid pace as I glanced away. "It's all my fault. This whole situation, from start to finish, came about because of me."

"Sayumi..."

*"Route of Origin is deeply related to how everyone's personalities have become twisted. I could call it an accident, or say my power went out of control, and that wouldn't be wrong...but it also wouldn't change the fact that I am responsible. I'm truly sorry for hiding the truth from you."*

I'd come this far, yet still, I couldn't bring myself to tell him anything truly specific about what had happened. I just apologized, again and again. *How perfectly disgraceful*, I thought to myself. *My inability to manage my own power caused all this trouble for my friends, yet I can't so much as bring myself to admit it. Have I always been this shallow?*

I was humiliated—chagrined beyond measure. To think that at the very last second, I would expose such an inexcusably foolish side of myself to Andou... I felt a lump in my throat from the shame and disappointment welling up within me, and my face felt like it was aflame. I was so mortified that I wanted to break down in tears.

"So, wait," said Andou. "It was your fault...meaning that it was *Route of Origin's* fault, right?"

I took a deep breath. “Th-That’s correct, yes.”

There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that Andou would be disappointed in me. Up until yesterday, I had been the trusted president who pulled everyone in the club together, and now, I was acting like a child trying to conceal her involvement in a petty prank. I hung my head, horrified by the thought of seeing his dejection at my behavior showing on his face...

“Thought so.”

...until his calm, gentle words reached my ears, and I jerked my eyes back up again.

“Huh...? Wha...? Wh-What do you...?” I babbled. My confusion was plain to see, and Andou was nice enough to quickly clarify.

“I kinda had a feeling that *Route of Origin* was the cause of all of this,” he said. “It’s the only one of our powers that has the potential to change things on a world-altering scale, after all.”

“So then...you knew from the very beginning?” I asked.

“Nah, not the *very* beginning,” Andou replied. “I had a bunch of possibilities in mind, and it took a while for me to conclude that *Route of Origin* running out of control was the most likely scenario. Besides that—honestly, your whole attitude today was sort of a hint too. You’ve seemed kinda preoccupied, and it didn’t feel like you were really serious about figuring out how we could deal with the world going crazy.”

“In that case...why didn’t you say something sooner?” I asked, raising my voice slightly.

Andou hesitated for a moment, seeming to search for the right words. “I guess...I figured if you didn’t want to talk about it, I shouldn’t try to force you to,” he finally said. “Plus, finding out what *caused* the problem wouldn’t really help much, right? *Fixing* it was my highest priority.”

That was a lie—and a transparent one. Seeking the cause of the problem was an obvious and necessary step toward resolving it. Andou’s true motive, I was certain, was driven by consideration toward me. He’d chosen to respect my desire to keep my secrets by refraining from calling me out on them.

*How is he like this? Just how powerful is his drive to prioritize his friends' best interests?*

"Anyway, this wasn't your fault, Sayumi," Andou said, presumably in an effort to cheer me up. "No need to beat yourself up over your power going a little haywire! I dunno how to explain this exactly, but *Route of Origin's*, like...an easy power to lose control of, I guess?"

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

"I mean, it's *super* fuzzy how it even works, right?"

*Route of Origin* was the ability to return anything—truly, *anything* under the sun—to the way it was meant to be. The world could be rendered in any state so long as it was what the user perceived as "the way it was meant to be."

"You can alter the world itself if your perspective is in line with your desires," Andou observed, "but if your perspective *isn't* willing to play ball, your hands are completely tied. It seems like a pretty straightforward rule at a glance...but the problem's that people's perspectives and opinions are usually really vague and arbitrary when it comes down to it."

If I could align my perspective with my intentions, *Route of Origin* was indeed a power with an incredibly broad and potent set of capabilities. Unfortunately, my perspective was not so easy to freely manipulate.

"You can't just change your perspective that easily. Same goes for your values, morals, and ideologies too—at least, not intentionally. On the other hand, it's just as hard to *stop* them from changing as it is to change them on purpose. To live is to have the ways you experience and think about the world constantly adapt. Sometimes you can trace any transformations back to a single inciting incident, but sometimes your worldview shifts gradually and naturally. People's perspectives can totally metamorphose even when they're just living their normal lives," Andou said as he gazed off into the distance.

I had a feeling that he was thinking back on his time in the eighth grade as he spoke—to the moment when he'd met Tomoyo, the God of Chuunibyou, and had his perspective on reality and fiction turned on its head in an instant.

"It's not easy to change your perspective, yet sometimes, it can change in the



blink of an eye,” said Andou. “The hard part is manipulating it intentionally, whether you want it to stay the same or not. After all, such goals are based on your perspective of your perspective.”

I paused for a moment as his words sank in.

“So, yeah,” Andou continued. “In that sense, the ways we view the world are fluid and unstable in a way that makes it hard to tell whether they even *are* fluid or unstable in any given moment. *Route of Origin* relies on something formless and ambiguous to determine how it’ll turn out every time you use it.”

That was the power I’d awakened to in a nutshell. It was ambiguous in every way, with human subjectivity being all it had to give itself any sort of structure.

“Like, remember how you used *Route of Origin: Ouroboros’s Circle* to bring Hatoko back to the club room when she went missing? For all we know, you won’t be able to summon us there anymore now that you’re not the club president.”

I didn’t say a word.

“Or like how you used your power to undo *Grateful Robber’s* effects the other day—it’s totally possible that that wouldn’t work at all, depending on the time and circumstances when you tried it. Your attitude in any given moment can change your power’s capabilities entirely,” said Andou. “That’s why it’s only natural that its effects would be kind of unstable. There’s no way you could stop it from going out of control every once in a while. Of course you couldn’t! You’re still a kid, after all.”

“...Pff!”

“Wh-What? Why’re you cracking up?!”

“E-Excuse me,” I stammered. “It’s just that the thought that you might treat *me* like a child someday never so much as crossed my mind until this moment.”

“W-Well, you are, right? We’re both still kids, so it’s *fine* for the way we think about things to be inconsistent and arbitrary! Trying to set our perspectives in stone now would just make life harder for us when we grow up,” Andou said in a rapid but definitive tone.

I felt a certain warmth growing in my chest. “You’re certainly right, Andou. Our perspectives truly are inconsistent and arbitrary, and the ways we think about and view our world will keep changing for as long as we live. Falling in and out of love, for instance, is more or less an everyday occurrence,” I said, testing the waters.

Andou looked shocked. “That’s...kinda weird for you, huh? It’s not every day you bring romance into a conversation.”

“The thought just sprang to mind, is all. It struck me that feelings of love and romance are another matter of inconsistent and arbitrary perspective.”

If a child’s perspective is especially fluid, then perhaps a student’s romance is by its nature nothing more than giving in to a transient emotion and allowing it to sweep you away. Perhaps, I thought, that was true of my feelings for Andou as well.

As I was caught up in a spell of self-doubt, Andou seemed to sink deeply into thought himself. “You know...Sagami told me something like that too, a long time ago,” he eventually said.

“Did he?”

“Yeah. The whole thing was pretty cynical and depressing...but basically, he talked about how romance is nothing more than people falling for those who just happen to work with them, or happen to be in their club, or whatever—just picking someone who’s conveniently nearby—then declaring it to have been the work of fate itself. He said it’s all just an illusion, and that falling in love isn’t a grand, earth-shattering act so much as it is a vague and arbitrary one.”

“Well. That certainly is cynical and depressing,” I concurred...but at the same time, some part of me couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment.

I had feelings for Andou, yes—but would those feelings have developed if I hadn’t been in the same club as him? Would I have come to realize his charms if the awakening of our powers hadn’t thrust us into an extraordinary set of circumstances? I understood that pondering aimless what-ifs wasn’t productive in any sense, but they filled me with anxiety all the same.

“And how did you reply to Sagami?” I asked.

“I...well, I tried to argue with him.”

“You did?”

“He was really condescending about it, and it got under my skin. And more than anything, I was annoyed with myself for almost letting him talk me into agreeing.”

And so, Andou recounted the story. He repeated the argument he’d made so many years ago.

*“You might be right that romance is something pretty close to an illusion, and it’s true that not everyone ends up living out their perfect, ideal romance. Maybe schoolkids really do love to say that their relationships were the work of destiny or a miracle, even though the truth is that they just got together because they happened to be in the same class or club or whatever. But the way I see it...”*

“...the way I see it, that’s worth calling destiny anyway,” said Andou, looking me straight in the eye as he spoke.

*Destiny.* A word beloved by chuunibyou sufferers everywhere.

“If you fall for someone in your class, then why *not* let yourself think that you were bonded in a past life? If you fall from someone in your club, then why *not* believe that you were led together to fulfill a fated future? Romance may be nothing more than an illusion; love may be nothing more than a vague, ambiguous feeling; this world might have come into being five minutes ago; and existence itself may only be defined as real by way of observation—but still, at the end of the day, I’d rather call all of it destiny anyway.”

“After all,” he added, almost as an afterthought, “it’s way cooler that way.”

It was the strangest thing. Normally, a speech like that would have left me shaking my head with exasperation, but for some reason, it was resonating with me deeply today.

“Same for reuniting with Tomoyo, joining the literary club on Hatoko’s recommendation, Miss Satomi bringing Chifuyu to school with her, Kudou

mistaking my note for a love letter... The way I see it, all of that was written in destiny's ledger aeons ago...or, I mean, that's the way I *choose* to see it. Looking at it in that way's just, like... It's way more *exciting* that way, isn't it?" Andou explained, his eyes sparkling with glee.

Destiny. Anything, given the slightest excuse, was destiny. It all boiled down to destiny. A chuuni's favorite word—destiny. If not destiny, then some variant thereof—experiences from a past life, or truths writ in the Akashic Records. I *knew* that everything he was saying was so cheap and flimsy it should have reduced me to heaving conniptions...so why? Why was it hitting so, so close to home?

"I said that our perspectives were inconsistent and arbitrary a while back...but I don't think that necessarily means they're not worth something," said Andou. "Even if a perspective's fleeting, I'm still positive that it has meaning."

A fleeting perspective. I had to wonder: was he talking about chuunibyou itself? It was, after all, a sense of values that one could only bear for a fleeting period of one's life. It was a philosophy that, by its very nature, mandated its own abandonment after a given period of time. It was called eighth-grade sickness for a reason—its period of validity was baked into its very name. It was brought on by a sense of self-importance enlarged by one's ambiguous, unstable childhood perspective, and when one grew up and came to understand society at large, their ability to maintain that peculiar set of values would gradually slip away from them.

And yet... Just because a set of values would inevitably be lost didn't necessarily mean that it was, in and of itself, without value.

"I think that everything in this world has meaning and that all of it's part of one big destiny. That's why I figure that *Route of Origin's* rampage was probably just the gods deciding to impose a trial on the two of us. If that's what's going on, then all we can do is overcome it together, right? Plus, I *did* make that promise and all."

"What promise?" I asked.

Andou paused to glance around the area. His eyes drifted partially closed as a look of nostalgia came across his face.

“The one I made to you last year, right around this time of year...after our battle came to an end. I promised that if any of us ever lost control of our power, I would stop them.”

*Oh...that's right.* He really had said that, though the way I remembered it, it hadn't so much been a promise as a unilateral declaration. *Thinking back, that was the moment my feelings began to change...*

“When I make a promise, you'd better believe I'm gonna keep it. I wouldn't be myself if I didn't,” Andou said, grinning boldly as he struck a somewhat understated pose. I assumed he was under the impression it was a flawlessly cool thing to say, but the logic of the line fell apart under the slightest hint of rational scrutiny. It was exactly the sort of nonsensical, meaningless statement that having a case of chuunibyou made sound like the most incredible declaration in history.

It was comical. Truly laughable. And what was laughable above all else was the fact that such an absurd man had managed to fill my heart with such boundless euphoria that it was on the verge of bursting. *I* was the most laughable joke of all.

At that point, I lost all sense of self-control. I felt ecstatic, embarrassed, irritated, awkward, frustrated, and elated all at once. My feelings for Andou felt too great to contain, like my heart and mind would rupture under their pressure, and before I knew it, I'd stepped up to him, spread my arms wide, and thrown them around him. I embraced him, pulling the two of us together with all my might.



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“Huh? Uh— What? Whaaat?! S-Sayumi?!” Andou, perhaps understandably, yelped. Practically shrieked, really. “Wh-Where is this coming from? Did you have a head rush and almost fall over, or something?”

“Have you ever seen anyone proactively step forward to grab someone during a dizzy spell?” I countered.

“Well then, why...?”

Why indeed. Not even I had an answer to that. I simply hadn’t been able to suppress the impulse. Andou had just looked so dashing, so adorable, so cheeky, and so downright wonderful—my affection for him had grown too powerful for me to even comprehend what I could possibly do about it.

“A-Andou!” I said, doing my absolute best to keep my flustered panic from coming through in my voice, not releasing my grip on his torso for so much as a second. “Th-There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Wh-What is it?” asked Andou. “And a-actually, do you think you could let go first...?”

“No. Please just stay still and listen.”

I didn’t have to look in a mirror to know that my face was as red as a boiled lobster, and I wasn’t about to let the boy I had feelings for see me in such a state. Not to mention...I was simply too embarrassed to look Andou in the eye. I knew for a fact that I would be rendered entirely speechless if I did, so clinging to him as I pushed onward was my only option.

“B-But, Sayumi...”

“No buts. Just listen, please.”

“But...your, um, chest...”

“Hggkhkh?! I-It’s perfectly fine!”

It was not fine in the slightest. I was in a state of blind panic. My mind was entirely blank. I had gone into this with a plan, and I had known exactly what words I would use to communicate my feelings to him, but all of that had been expelled from my mind at the speed of sound. I tried desperately to remember even a handful of the words, but the pounding beat of my heart drowned out

everything else.

Still—I couldn't back down. Not now. I had to follow through and put an end to this. To the backward world we'd found ourselves in...and to the love within my own heart.

"Andou...thank you," I said. My plans had been scattered to the winds, and I couldn't recall a single line that I'd prepared, so instead, I found myself expressing my truly heartfelt gratitude to him. "You've done so much for me. Ever since we met, every day has been a joy. It was thanks to you that we were able to overcome the trial that awakening to our powers posed."

"O-Okay, why do you sound so serious all of a sudden?"

"When we first met...in complete honesty, I couldn't stand you. I saw you as nothing more than a cringey, irritating boy. But then you joined my club, and as we spent more time together, I came to appreciate your kindness and consideration—to appreciate that underneath it all, you were genuinely strong, and even manly."

"W-Wait, seriously, where is this coming from?!"

Andou was growing more and more agitated by the second, but I was confident that his agitation didn't hold a candle to mine. My heart was pounding at an unbelievable pace, and I felt certain that, considering how closely I was holding him, he could feel it through my...my, umm, chest. My hands were damp with sweat, and my legs were shifting restlessly. I was so nervous, it was almost making me dizzy.

But this was it. This was my chance. Now, I could finally say it.

"Andou, I—"

And that's when it happened. At that very instant—the moment I'd steeled my resolve to make my once-in-a-lifetime, do-or-die gamble—I heard a loud, ringing *crack*, as if something nearby had begun to break into pieces.

"Wha—?" I gasped, jerking my head up reflexively. There, right before my eyes, a crack had formed in the air. It was as if I was looking through a pane of glass that had taken such an intense impact that it was on the verge of shattering to pieces.



*Crack! Crack, crack!*

Again and again, the sound rang out, and more and more ruptures appeared in the air. Or, no, not in the air. Rather, it was as if space—as if the *world* itself was falling to pieces.

“S-Sayumi,” said Andou, “is this what I think it is? Is the world going back to normal?”

I gasped. He was right—the world was collapsing around us. Collapsing and returning to how it used to be...but *why*? Why would this be happening now, when I hadn’t even seen my goal through?

The fissures in space spiderwebbed outward, spreading at a terrifying speed, as if to laugh in the face of Andou’s and my bewilderment. The altered world—the world born of my hesitation—was falling to pieces.

*“I wouldn’t, if I were you.”*

Suddenly, a voice rose up from my memory—the voice of a certain reader. It was something he’d said to me on the first day of the cultural festival, right after I’d told him that I would reveal my feelings to Andou.

*“I’d really recommend against it, Takanashi.”*

*“Why is that?”*

*“Because it won’t go well.”*

*“Hmm. It’s almost refreshing to hear you put it so directly, somehow.”*

*“Oh, don’t get me wrong! I’m not saying it’ll turn out badly because of you. Take Kanzaki Tomoyo, for example—she’s the main heroine, and even she’d fail if she asked Andou out right now. After all, Andou’s ability to fall in love is frozen.”*

*“Frozen...?”*

*“I don’t think he’s realized it himself, but it’s pretty obvious just looking at him. He hasn’t gotten over his trauma at all yet. That’s why he’s so thickheaded when it comes to anything romantic.”*

*“And...that trauma would be the incident he went through in the eighth*

grade?”

*“Right. So, I guess you could say that this is partially my fault.”*

*“...”*

*“You know, Takanashi, if you’d just stuck to my plan and hadn’t betrayed me, my intent was to have you help me heal Andou’s trauma in the long term. After all, if nothing’s done to help him get over what happened in the eighth grade, he’ll never manage to fall in love or start up a relationship with anyone.”*

*“So...you mean to say that you were collaborating with me out of guilt? You wanted to save Andou from—”*

*“Oh, no, that’s giving me way too much credit. I guess I can’t say I didn’t feel that way at all, to be fair—it was partially my responsibility and everything—but considering how quickly I gave up on it, I think we can safely conclude that I was doing it more out of morbid curiosity than anything else.”*

*“...”*

*“Ever since back then...Andou hasn’t changed a bit. He’s still the same fanciful, idealistic child he used to be. His heart is trapped in the eighth grade, and the eighth-grade sickness within it has been left to fester.”*

Sagami’s advice had been clear, and in the end...I had ignored it. I hadn’t been able to believe what he’d told me—I hadn’t *wanted* to believe it. Even if he had been right about Andou’s trauma, I’d thought that I would just have to do something about that myself. I wouldn’t let it stop me.

But now here I was, my confession of love failing before my very eyes. It wasn’t being turned down or brushed off, but it was failing nonetheless. Not even Sagami could have possibly foreseen it happening in this manner, to be sure, but it had still turned out just the way he’d said it would.

*Why? Why is this happening?*

The world’s collapse continued without cease, and I simply stood there in a dumbfounded daze. The gymnasium vanished, followed by the schoolhouse, the sky, the land, and finally, before I knew it, Andou himself. Then, when everything except for me had faded and I was left alone in a world of

nothingness...I heard a faint voice.

“It seems like whenever there’s a time loop or the world gets altered in some big, inexplicable way, it always ends up turning out to have been caused by a major character’s emotional troubles, doesn’t it? It’s sort of a cliché, at this point.”

The voice wasn’t a familiar one. It was full of disdainful, sneering contempt—a voice that made it clear the speaker was looking down on everything, including you.

“It’s a conventional plot twist in every way—and I reject it.”

The instant those words rang out in faint but decisive denial, the world collapsed entirely. It had been born from my indecision, and it had ended before it could be explained, suddenly and without any sense of resolution. It was utterly irrational. How could the story be allowed to take a turn like this? How could it be forced to this premature end, before I could even make my feelings clear?

But then again...what if? What if Andou was right, and even *this* was part of some greater destiny? If there really was some deeper meaning to this seemingly nonsensical conclusion...then perhaps it was my just deserts.

I had joined forces with Sagami, deceived Andou, and forced him to open up about the darkest point in his past. I’d never apologized for that indiscretion. I’d simply let it sit unresolved, attempting to tell Andou my feelings in spite of it. Perhaps this, then, was the punishment the gods saw fit to grant me for my cowardice.

## Epilogue

I awoke to find myself in the club room...though perhaps “awoke” isn’t the appropriate wording, considering I hadn’t been asleep. Rather, the next thing I knew, I was present in a world in which I had already been in the club room. That may not be the clearest description, but it’s the best way I can articulate the sensation. In any case, Tomoyo, Hatoko, Chifuyu, and Kudou were all present with me.

“Uh. H-Huh? What befell— I mean, how’d I get here?”

“Hmm? That’s so weird. What am I doing in the club room?”

“The last thing I remember, I was chasing my darling outside, and...huh? *Nooo*, no no no no! Wh-Why did I just call him *darling*?! I would *never* say something that disgustingly sappy about anyone! Not once, not ever!”

“...Huh? My boobs are gone.”

Some aftereffects clearly remained, but on the whole, the other four seemed to have returned to their usual selves. I raised a hand to my own face and found that I was no longer wearing glasses.

“We’re back, then,” I said.

We had returned from the altered world to our own. As to how everything had gone back to normal, I couldn’t even begin to guess. The world we’d been in until moments before had been created by *Route of Origin*, so I had assumed that I would have some sort of sense of awareness of it when it was about to be dispelled, but I hadn’t—not in the least. It had simply ended, without warning. It was like how it felt to be playing a video game only for someone to pull the console’s plug.

*What on earth...no, who on earth did this? Just whose voice was it that I heard at the end of it all?*

“Uhh, so, wait— What the hell’s going on? Seriously, what just happened? I thought we were all outside searching for Andou just a second ago?”

“But wait, Tomoyo. Why *were* we searching for Juu in the first place?”

“Because... I don’t know. But I think, uh... Ah, right! While we were looking for him, some weirdo with a baseball cap showed up at school, right? And it was someone you knew, right, Kudou?”

“I guess you could say that, but it’s not like I know him particularly well. I’ve only actually met Hinoemata once. But...something seemed a little off when I saw him earlier. I tried talking to him, and he ignored me entirely.”

“My boobs...”

The four of them still seemed quite confused. The name Hinoemata, meanwhile, gave me pause. It wasn’t a name I was familiar with, but if he’d intruded into the school grounds, then perhaps he was the source of the voice I’d heard...?

Just then, I sat up with a start. I’d just remembered something very important—more important than anything. I frantically glanced around the room...but he wasn’t there. The boy who’d been with me just moments before was nowhere to be seen.

“...Andou?”



The next thing I knew, I had no clue where I was or how I’d gotten there.

The sun was setting in the sky, and I was seated on a patch of short, soft grass, with a river running just a little ways to my side. That settled the where, partially, but *how* I’d ended up seated by a riverbed was still in question.

The last thing I remembered was Sayumi hugging me, then the world around us suddenly beginning to fall to pieces. I hadn’t known how or why, but the world had seemed to be going back to the way it used to be—then, suddenly, I’d been whisked from my school to a place I’d never been before. It’d been one jaw-dropping plot twist after another, and I was getting a little sick of it.

Though, then again...the shock I felt when I saw *the person who was standing before me* made all the twists that had come before look downright petty in comparison.

“Ooh, now that’s a nasty glare! Cut it out, please. For what it’s worth, the way I see it, you actually owe me one for this. You were in trouble, and I helped you out of it, so where’s this aggression coming from? Kinda hurts, you know?” the teenager before me said in a rather aloof tone, their baseball cap pulled low enough to conceal their eyes. Their build was slender, but the jacket and jeans they were wearing gave them an extremely boyish look on the whole. They’d also freely introduced themselves moments before—as Hinoemata.

“What do you mean, you helped me?” I asked.

“It’s simple,” said Hinoemata. “I forced my way into the world Takanashi’s power created, and I negated it wholesale. Ruining that sort of thing is pretty much my power’s bread and butter.”

“Your power, huh...?”

My visitor had a supernatural power, then, no question about it—and they knew about our powers, to boot. Discounting Kudou, that made them the very first superpowered individual we’d encountered outside of the literary club.

“Hinoemata, you said...? That makes you the person Kudou made friends with online, doesn’t it?” I asked. “So, then...does that mean you had something to do with her awakening to her power?”

“Bingo. I’m impressed you put that together.”

“The timeline matched up, that’s all.”

The general span of time when Kudou had awakened to her power and the span of time when she’d befriended someone who called themselves Hinoemata more or less overlapped. Knowing that Hinoemata had a supernatural power made it very easy to suspect there was a deeper connection between the two events.

“Were you the one who gave us our powers too?” I asked.

“No,” said Hinoemata, “I had nothing to do with yours. That was someone else’s fault.”

*Someone else.* In other words, our powers really *hadn’t* come about as a natural or supernatural phenomenon—someone had *caused* us to awaken to

them.

“Okay, but really...why the intense stare? Your eyes are looking a little bloodshot over there,” said Hinoemata, sounding rather confused.

I hadn’t been paying enough attention to notice I was doing it, but even after they’d pointed it out, *not* glaring was sorta beyond me. I was dealing with multiple overlapping layers of shock, bewilderment, and indignation that made not staring an impossibility.

Honestly? I just couldn’t help myself. It was sickening, after all. I could hardly stand to listen to the way the person before me was speaking.

“How long are you planning on talking so *normally*?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha... Guess that got you *chafed*, huh?” said Hinoemata, chuckling at me as they removed their baseball cap, finally looking me in the eye. “Ha ha ha! Ahhh, my slip, okay? Just went on prattling the way I’ve been used to. Been in boy mode more often than not, latewise. Wasn’t on the noggin to swap back for you.”

That distinctive accent, so tonally flat and peculiar in word choice. Those familiar features, once hidden beneath the cap but now clear to see. The moment our eyes met, I broke out in a cold sweat, and a piercing pain shot through my stomach. I couldn’t look away, though—no, I met her gaze with a glare.

“Tamaki...!”

“Yup. Been a tick, Jurai,” Tamaki said with a broad smile. It was the same smile she’d shown me when we’d bumped into each other before summer vacation—the same smile she’d worn so often in the eighth grade—and that’s exactly why it filled me with such an indescribable sense of anxiety.

Futaba Tamaki—or, no, not “Futaba” anymore, most likely. She’d come to this town to stay with her grandparents on account of her parents’ divorce. That problem was resolved by now—well, actually, I didn’t really have any grounds to say that for sure? But the point is that I knew her parents’ divorce had been set in stone and she’d gone back to live with her mother again. That’s why she’d left town. Hinoemata, then, was probably her mother’s maiden name.

“So, Jurai, I ambled on by today to spend a spell with you,” said Tamaki.

She still had a smile on her face...but there was an intense animosity deep within her gaze now, flickering in and out of sight. It was like something was broken in her—like a line within her had been crossed—and I could tell in an instant that it was dangerous.

“I’m the Seventh Wing of *Fallen Black: Lost Regalia*, aka Hinoemata Tamaki,” she said, declaring her name and title in grand fashion. And what a title it was too, so exceptionally cool that I couldn’t imagine Tamaki herself had come up with it.

“All right, Jurai, let’s get it going. It’s time for one of those supernatural battles you love so much.”

And thus, I departed from the world of the everyday into an extraordinary new reality of supernatural battles—for real. It was a world I’d never so much as touched before, and I was being dragged into it by a girl who I’d thought would remain forever sealed within the depths of my memories.

The end of the beginning had, at long last...begun.





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## Afterword

If you were to define the word “perspective,” you might go with something to the tune of “one’s personal manner of looking at something.” “One” in this context generally means an individual—either “you” or “someone else”—but it seems to me that you could take it a step further and subdivide your own personal perspective as well. What I mean, in simple terms, is that over the course of a lifetime, the same person can hold all sorts of different opinions and perspectives. Which is obvious, right?

Let’s look at an example—a power in a certain popular manga that allows its user to create a vacuum cleaner that can suck up anything nonliving. That leads to the question: what exactly distinguishes living and nonliving objects, anyway? Are viruses living? What about individual parts of the human body? How much time has to pass after your heart stops for you to count as a corpse?

Those are all questions that one has to rely on their own perspective on life and death to answer, and that answer is likely to change over the course of one’s existence. Change is a natural thing, after all—in fact, *not* changing is dangerous. That’s why, if supernatural powers with effects that varied depending on one’s perspective really existed, I’m convinced that those powers’ effects would change as time passed by. Of course, all that is just my own personal perspective on the matter, and I might have a totally different one by this time next year!

With all that out of the way, it’s been a while! This is Kota Nozomi, and this has been this series’ momentous tenth volume! Unlike all the previous volumes, I wrote this one after having already seen the anime adaptation in its entirety, which you might be able to guess judging by its content. The anime may be over, but the novels will be carrying on for a while longer, so I hope you stick with them! Oh, also, an extremely petty fun fact: “Futaba” and “Hinoemata” are both names of towns in Fukushima.

Next, some thanks. To my editor, Nakamizo: thank you once again for your

work on this book! It sort of feels like you've been telling me over and over that this is a critical moment for us for the past year straight, but somehow, I get the feeling that said critical moment is still far from over yet. I guess every moment in life is a critical one, when it all comes down to it. Then, to the cover artist and character designer, 029: thank you once again for your beautiful illustrations! I guess this turned out to be Kudou's first color appearance, didn't it? Next, to the interior illustrator, Saito from Studio TRIGGER: thank you for your wonderful illustrations as well! I never imagined the anime's staff would go on to work on the novels too, and I'm looking forward to working with you in the future. And, finally, I offer my greatest and most sincere of thank-yous to all the readers who've kept reading all the way through volume 10!

And, that's all! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

**KOTA NOZAKURA**  
**ILLUSTRATOR**



© Kengo Saito (TRIGGER)



Himeki  
Chifuyu  
high school version



© Kengo Saito (TRIGGER)

Sagami  
Shizumu  
(girl)



## Bonus Translation Notes: ~~On Drama CDs: Part 2~~

Waaay back in volume 6, I wrote about the *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* drama CD. At the time, I teased the existence of a *second* drama CD for the series and promised to tell you all about it when volume 10—that is, the volume that said CD was originally packaged with—rolled around. I thought that it would be a section that’d practically write itself: the drama CD, I knew, featured the cast of the anime reprising their roles rather than the cast of the original CD, and between that contrast and the actual story of the CD—whatever that turned out to be—I thought there would be *easily* enough content to dedicate a whole TL note section to.

Cut to January 2023, when I explained this plan to my editor. “Isn’t the second drama CD also basically a live read of the light novel?” he asked. “If it is, it’s prooobably not gonna make for a full notes section on its own,” I conceded. “Thanks for the heads up on that—will definitely not count on it being a full notes section’s worth of content,” I added. Then I forgot about it entirely for the better part of a year.

Fast forward to sometime around December 2023 or so, when a line earlier on in this volume reminds me of my master plan and I pull up that drama CD that I had obtained and definitely should have listened to months beforehand. I load it up. It starts to play. It immediately strikes me that it sounds...*oddly* familiar.

It’s basically a live read of the light novel. Specifically, volume 8.

So, so much for that plan! The second drama CD’s still super fun, to be clear—hearing Andou attempt to say “Shakespeare” in a natural English accent is worth the price of admission alone, hearing Chifuyu do a Disney voice is exactly as disturbing as you’d think it would be, and it makes the *incredible* choice of having Andou constantly screaming chuuni stage-fight nonsense in the background during Tomoyo and Chifuyu’s backstage conversation. The problem, however, is that there’s just no plot to summarize that wasn’t directly

covered in volume 8 itself, and as such, there's not really much for me to write about it beyond "Yeah, it's pretty good."

I *could* speculate that volume 8 was picked as the story to adapt by virtue of it probably having been the most recent volume at the time the anime's recording wrapped up, but, well, I just did that, and it took all of half a sentence. I was, in other words, stuck—I had a whole notes section to write, and no remaining pieces of *Supernatural Battles* semi-lost media to write about that I hadn't already discussed...or *were* there?

Remember that bit in the third paragraph, where I said that "a line in the volume" reminded me of the drama CDs? The line in question was in chapter 1, where Andou speculated that Kuki and Kudou "could probably sing a mean duet together." I was vaguely aware of the fact that the Blu-ray release of the anime included bonus CDs with character songs on them, and my Kota Nozomi cheek-o-meter was immediately triggered. Could that line, I wondered, be an oblique reference to an *actual* character song sung by Kuki's and Kudou's voice actors?

I checked, and the answer was no—each of the character songs packed in with the six Blu-ray volumes were duets between *Andou* and one of the series' other characters. Kuki, much to my disappointment, wasn't featured in them at all. That being said, over the course of looking into those songs I discovered something much, *much* more important: the fact that they weren't the only things bundled in with those Blu-rays.

Do you remember how, back in volume 5's TL notes, I reassured you that there weren't any other pieces of *Supernatural Battles* media not featured in the novels beyond those two drama CDs, the anime, the manga, and the defunct gacha game? Well, it turns out I was lying. There *are* more pieces of media from the franchise—Blu-ray pack-ins, and there were actually *quite* a lot of them. I'm talking production pamphlets, the aforementioned character songs, short stories, *and*—most shockingly of all—*six* mini audio dramas, one per character song CD!

So, to sum up: while there wasn't much to discuss about the second drama CD, in the end, there will be a *lot* to discuss about the remaining six, not to mention all the other Blu-ray bonus bits! I've already obtained a boxed set of the Blu-rays, bonus pack-ins included (thanks once again to my editor, who



pointed out a convenient Yahoo! Auctions listing at just the right moment), so you can look forward to a full summary of all that jazz in the TL notes next volume!

As for what to do with the remaining space *this* volume...hey, is it just me, or do the black-and-white illustrations look a little different this time around?

## **Bonus Translation Notes: ~~On Art~~ (Pay no attention to the strikethrough—it's fine.)**

Obviously, the interior art for this volume was not drawn by 029! Rather, it was drawn by Saito Kengo, who served as animation director and key animator on a solid chunk of episodes from the *Supernatural Battles* anime. The remaining three volumes in the series will also each feature a new guest artist from Studio TRIGGER to handle the interior illustrations, while 029 will continue drawing the covers and color illustrations.

So, you might be wondering: why the rotating cast of guest artists? Unfortunately, the only answer that I can provide is that a formal explanation has never been given. As I mentioned back in volume 7's TL note section, where I discussed Kota Nozomi himself, the light novel industry is kind of a black box that takes great care to respect the privacy of those who work in it. That's perhaps even more true in 029's case than it is in Nozomi's—virtually nothing is publicly known about them, and if (as it seems natural to speculate) some circumstances in their life or work schedule prompted the need for the guest artists, that information has never been made public. I can say with reasonable confidence that the lack of clarification was a deliberate choice as well, considering I was able to find instances of both Kota Nozomi and 029 being asked about the situation on Twitter and refraining from replying at all.

Why dedicate a section of these notes to this topic if the only answer available is “nobody knows”? Partially because it seemed like a very natural question for our readers to be wondering about (and at least to me, a formal lack of an answer is more satisfying than an implicit lack of an answer), partially because it once again drives in the point I made previously about the privacy of creators in the light novel industry, and *mostly* because in the process of

searching for an answer, I turned up a few tangentially related fun facts that I just had to share, and then I found an absolute *mother lode* of information in the form of a thirty-minute Q and A livestream regarding the series that Kota Nozomi did toward the end of 2020, which I will now pivot to talking about! Taaake three!

## Bonus Translation Notes: On That One Livestream

The livestream in question was the second out of fourteen that Kota Nozomi did from late 2020 to early 2021. It opens with him explaining that he'd *wanted* the first livestream to be about *Supernatural Battles*, but he'd thought being so conspicuously eager to talk about his work would make him look ridiculous, prompting him to take a poll about what to talk about instead. He'd assumed that his listeners would surely ask to hear about the series, giving him a valid excuse to talk about it...only for them to vote for him to talk about how he met his wife instead. He'd learned from his mistake for this second broadcast, choosing to talk about *Supernatural Battles* unilaterally this time around.

Nozomi moves on to discuss the title of the series, which, as it turns out, was directly inspired by the title of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, as I Expected*, a massively successful series of light novels by Watari Wataru that started a few years before *Supernatural Battles*! Nozomi thought the way that series included “romantic comedy”—its own genre—in its title was a really fresh and cool idea, and he used it as inspiration/paid homage to it by doing the same thing with *Supernatural Battles*, including *both* of its primary genres in its title. The title was also inspired by a secondary source: a TV drama (adapted from a novel) called *The After-Dinner Mysteries*, which was also quite popular at the time. It's hard to tell in translation, but the Japanese titles of each work (“*Inou Battle wa Nichijoukei no Naka de*” and “*Nazotoki wa Dinner no Ato de*”) are indeed extremely similar in how they're structured. He also mentions that although you sometimes see horror stories online about editors naming a series unilaterally without consulting the author, in his case, all of his series' titles have been collaborative efforts between him and his editors, generally coming down to his decision in the end.

Now, that claim I made in the last paragraph about *Supernatural Battles*'s title

containing *two* genres is gonna require some clarification! The fact of the matter is that *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace*, while a very good title in its own right, doesn't convey one key element of the Japanese title: the fact that both the "Inou Battle" part *and* the "Nichijoukei" part refer to specific genres of media. If one were to translate it while focusing entirely on emphasizing that aspect, it'd look something like "Supernatural Battles in a Slice of Life." I certainly can't fault the team who translated the anime and came up with the series' English title for not conveying that aspect of it—it is, I would argue, a much less essential component of the series' tone in the anime than it is in the novels—but boy, has it made us go to some extra lengths to make sure that the frequent (*very* frequent) title drops in the novels land with the weight that they're supposed to!

Nozomi moves on to share a few tidbits that I'll breeze over because he already discussed them in previous volumes' afterwords, mostly revolving around the inspiration for the series on the whole (that being the question of "Who comes up with all those super cool power names that you see all the time in supernatural battle stories?"). He discusses how he focused on taking a tried-and-true light novel approach to the series' early structure, centering each of the first four novels around one of the four main heroines, then how he jumped the rails and wrote whatever he felt like from volume 5 onward, to the point that before long, not even *he* knew whether he was writing a rom-com, a supernatural battle story, or a *seikaikei* story (*seikaikei* being a genre category used in Japanese fandom circles that's way, way beyond the scope of a single parenthetical aside to properly define). He notes that when left to his own devices, it's only a matter of time before any story he writes ends up veering into the realm of metafiction.

Next up, prompted by a viewer's question, Nozomi explains that the *Supernatural Battles* anime adaptation was decided upon surprisingly early on in the series' life span—as he remembers it, he was told about the adaptation somewhere in the vicinity of volume 3 or 4, though he also notes that he might be misremembering that. He carries on to explain that he debuted as a novelist while he was still in college, around the time he was twenty-one and searching for a job (a search he gave up on the instant he learned about his debut), and he attributes that early success entirely to luck.

He also talks about how he wasn't super involved in the anime's production. Apparently, there's a widely held belief that when it comes to light novel adaptations, it's best for the original author to be either deeply involved or totally uninvolved in the project, with problems tending to arise when authors just sort of half-heartedly participate in the process. Nozomi chose to go the entirely uninvolved route because he felt that rather than trying to make sure that the anime adaptation would be exactly as he envisioned it, it would be better to leave it to the pros and let them make the show into something that Nozomi could never have made on his own.

He goes on to tell an anecdote about a manga series called *Maou: Juvenile Remix*, which was a very loose adaptation of a novel called *Grasshopper* by one Isaka Koutarou. It was an adaptation that made the story its own in a big way, and in an interview, Isaka apparently once said that he was entirely uninvolved in the manga and was just enjoying it from the perspective of a fan. Nozomi thought that was a very cool stance to take, so he chose to emulate it when his own work was up for adaptation. He says he only went to one recording session—the first one—when he was specifically invited, and the only piece of input that he gave (when specifically asked) was to nitpick the intonation of “Route of Origin” (and he ultimately ended up regretting ever bringing it up).

Nozomi speculates that if he *had* chosen to be more involved in the anime, the legendary Hatoko scene might not have turned out the way it did. He expresses his gratitude for how closely that scene stuck to the original novel, and he marvels at the fact that, from what he was told after the fact, Hatoko's voice actress Hayami Saori really did (as is often rumored) nail the speech in a single take. He notes that the speech scene was one that he'd planned since the very early stages of planning the series, and that he'd had it in mind even as he was writing volume 1. He believes the anime's staff must have found it as important as he did, since they deliberately rearranged the chronology of the series to put it more toward the end of the season and make it into more of a climactic moment.

Next, he talks about the bonus stories that he wrote for the Blu-ray release of the anime, explaining how he really let himself run loose and write whatever he wanted in them, pulling out all the meta stops without *really* thinking too much

about how it would all fit together since they weren't technically part of the main series. That, as he explains, would have amusing consequences down the line, but I'll just go ahead and breeze over that part since I'll be discussing how that went down in more detail in next volume's notes. He also mentions that there's an expectation these days for authors to write at least three or four bonus stories for every volume of their series (as JNC readers in particular are probably well aware), and that in his case, going full meta with them felt like one of the only ways to make that many without inadvertently introducing plot elements that *require* you to read the bonus stories to understand the main series' story.

As the livestream draws toward its end, Nozomi talks about how not even he has a clear idea about what genre *Supernatural Battles* really falls into, when all's said and done. At the prompting of another viewer question, he talks about how he didn't have the very ending of the series planned until right up to the last minute, but he does note that he's happy with how the series' ending turned out anyway. He feels it's an ending that only a series like *Supernatural Battles* could have gotten away with—though, of course, it'll be another three volumes before that comment gets put into context for all our English-language readers over here!

Finally, Nozomi talks about how he feels that *Supernatural Battles* was a series that he could only have written in his twenties, and he encourages any aspiring authors who might be listening to write something they could only write at the current moment as well. He says that technique, achievements, and experience all come in due time, and that although as you grow in those areas you'll be able to write all sorts of stories that you couldn't before, at the same time, you'll lose the ability to write the sorts of stories that can only be written by the young and inexperienced. He notes that if technique and experience were all that mattered, the industry would be completely dominated by veteran authors, but in reality, that's not the case at all. Plenty of total newcomers succeed, while some veterans end up writing series that just don't catch on. He concludes by encouraging people to not think that they have to build up the skills and experience to write their masterpiece, but rather to do what they can to write their masterpiece in the current moment instead, whatever that happens to be.

Nozomi's remaining thirteen livestreams don't seem to be *directly* related to *Supernatural Battles*, but some of them do seem like they could potentially be interesting regardless—one of them, for instance, is about how he comes up with plots, and one is about a common pitfall that rom-com light novels tend to run into—so, depending on whether or not I come up with something better between now and volume 12, you may end up hearing more about this topic in a future TL notes section!

Before we move along, though, a lightning round of tidbits that I turned up on Kota Nozomi's Twitter during my attempt at research! These were all fun facts that he tweeted out while the anime was airing. First up: in the initial plan for *Supernatural Battles*, the student council president who storms into the literary club's room was going to be a guy! Nozomi expresses his profound relief that he ended up going with Kudou's current character instead. Next (somewhat contradicting his claim about having been totally uninvolved in the anime beyond that one intonation comment), he notes he requested the opportunity to personally give the anime-original character Hagiura Naoe her name. Apparently, he disliked the idea of a character in his story having a name he didn't come up with—which, given the importance ascribed to names in *Supernatural Battles* on the whole, *completely* scans in my mind.

He also talks about how episode 4 of the anime includes an anime-original scene that was actually based off a sequence that was cut from the original draft of volume 3! That volume went through some pretty heavy revisions before publication, it seems, and at least one of those cut scenes was worked into the episode (supposedly *not* at Nozomi's request). Taking a look at the episode in question, I'm *pretty* sure that the scene he's referring to is the one where Hatoko talks with Chifuyu as she helps sew up a ripped seam on Squirrely. I have to wonder how that sequence read when it was part of the novel's original draft, and why it was cut. Finally, and on a related note, Nozomi shared a fun fact about Squirrely himself: he didn't exist at all in the series' original draft! It turns out that 029 independently decided to give Chifuyu a stuffed squirrel when they were coming up with her character design, and Nozomi thought the detail was so cute that he decided to make it canon and write it into the story itself.

And with that, I'm out of fun facts to share for the time being—which is good, because this section has run *way* longer than it was supposed to! Without further ado, let's move right along to the pop culture notes!

## Chapter 1

**△ *When do I get to abandon subtlety and walk around with silver chains wrapped around my arms like a real ancient Egyptian pharaoh...?***

In this line, Andou's half quoting an exchange between Yugi and the Pharaoh in *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, in which the latter critiques the former's fashion sense before an outing! The exchange, and the bit that Andou is quoting in particular, seems to have ended up becoming something of a low-key internet meme among the series's Japanese fanbase. If you're familiar with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* from the English dub of the anime and none of this sounds familiar, by the way, that would be because the entire exchange was rewritten from the ground up—this conversation just never happens in that version.

**△ *...plus Kudou acting as our silver or gold ranger, to put it in Sentai terms.***

A typical *Super Sentai* series opens with five rangers on the team! Red, blue, pink, yellow, and green was the color lineup in the very first *Super Sentai* series, and that's arguably the traditional distribution, but black, white, purple, and a few other colors have been featured in various core lineups as well.

Silver and gold rangers, meanwhile, traditionally play a different role: they're added to the team partway through the series, and they're often differentiated from the original members with a distinctive visual design. This general archetype is often referred to as "the sixth ranger," though confusingly enough, sixth rangers aren't necessarily the actual sixth member of any given Sentai team—take, for instance, *Uchu Sentai Kyuranger*, which features both the only silver in Sentai history to not be a late addition to the team, as well as a sixth ranger who's actually the *twelfth* member to join.

**△ *...WRYYYYYYYYYY!***

This is obviously a *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* reference, and we've been over Dio's signature shout at least once in one of these note sections before, so I won't belabor that point! I'm actually only including it in this notes section because in the original Japanese text of this novel, the noise was written as "URYYYYYYYYYYY," English alphabet and all, which I for one find extremely funny



and wanted to share.

***△ I'd seriously considered trying to pull off the Freak Quick Attack for a moment, but I'd ended up scuttling that idea after I realized how scary it would be to jump for a spike with my eyes closed in real life.***

The Freak Quick Attack is the signature volleyball move of two of *Haikyu!!*'s main characters! It involves one of said characters, an incredibly accurate setter, setting the ball to the other, who jumps for a spike *before* the ball has even been set and swings for it with his eyes closed, resulting in a freakishly fast and almost unreadable spike. As Andou realizes, this would definitely be a terrible idea to try in real life!

***△ This is what people mean when they talk about the view from the summit!***

And we're following that last note up immediately with another *Haikyu!!* reference! "The view from the summit" is both a quote, an episode/volume title, and a core concept from the series that gets called back to regularly.

***△ If this were one of the more recent Tales games, this would be the bit where we got a super cool cut-in animation!***

Given that this volume came out in March of 2015, the most recent *Tales of* game at the time would have been *Zestiria*—though considering that game came out just two months before this volume's publication, it seems much more likely that Andou's talking about the *Tales of Xillia* duology, which does indeed feature cool little cut-in animations when characters use special combo attacks.

***△ ...she could hit a Tezuka Phantom no matter what sport she was playing...***

The Tezuka Phantom is a move from *Prince of Tennis*, used by Tezuka Kunimitsu and associated with the Tezuka Zone, which Andou just barely avoided referencing back during volume 3's tennis sequence. It, like Crimson Dread, involves manipulating an opponent's shot to force the ball out of bounds.

***△ ...there's always that small part of you that wonders 'Why doesn't he open with the Spacium Beam?' or 'Why doesn't he just use the Spirit Bomb at***

***the start of the fight?’...***

*Dragon Ball*’s Spirit Bomb is almost certainly known to most of our readers, but the Spacium Beam is quite a bit more obscure from an English-speaking perspective! Not so for the Japanese audience, though, since it’s one of the signature moves of the original Ultraman, an incredibly popular tokusatsu superhero. When I say “incredibly popular,” I really do mean it—the pop-culture significance of *Ultraman* as a franchise cannot be overstated, and in a Japanese context, the Spacium Beam isn’t overshadowed by the Spirit Bomb in any sense of the phrase.

***△ ...the eyes of a girl who was, at most, a single step away from succumbing to the Dark Side.***

Although it may be one step removed from the source material in the sense that the Japanese internet has co-opted the English words “dark side” in a somewhat memetic manner, I am nonetheless pleased to report that, at least in terms of the phrase’s origins, this *is*, in fact, a *Star Wars* reference.

## Chapter 2

### **△ ...are you on Team Chocolate Mushroom or Team Chocolate Bamboo Shoot?**

The best way I can describe the ongoing mushroom-versus-bamboo-shoot debate is that it's something of a cultural meme. Both the chocolate mushroom and the chocolate bamboo shoot are made by Meiji, a Japanese chocolate company that I would characterize as similar to Hershey's in terms of cultural presence (only unlike Hershey's, Meiji chocolate does *not* taste distinctly of bile). They're extremely similar products, both involving a chocolate component and a cookie component—in fact, the only real difference is that one's shaped like a mushroom, the other is shaped like a bamboo shoot, and their respective cookie portions have *slightly* different textures.

The distinction, in other words, is almost entirely aesthetic, which makes it easy to sympathize with Andou's assertion that dividing up into teams over the issue is more than a little silly. Unsurprisingly, that doesn't stop people from taking it all too seriously, and Meiji even conducted a survey of people's preferences in 2020, the results of which were compiled into an exhaustive 162-page statistical analysis that you can read for yourself to this day, if you *really* have nothing better to do with your time. I swear to god I am not making this up, and I'm also not telling you which won, because the collective nation of Japan got it *wrong* and I'm bitter that the correct answer lost.

### **△ ...Kudou had apparently already been accepted into a college by recommendation.**

If you've made it to volume 10 of this series, you've probably also consumed enough Japanese media to know that college entrance exams in Japan are *really* serious business. It typically involves multiple rounds of testing, and getting admitted to *any* school isn't a given, much less your top choice. Less well-known, however, is the fact that a surprisingly large number of students are admitted to college based on a recommendation from their high school, thus circumventing the whole exam process. It's not necessarily that easy, to be clear—getting a recommendation sometimes just means taking a *different*

exam—but the point that I’m getting at is that there are many paths to college in Japan, and the exam hell so often portrayed in media is just one of them, with Kudou’s path being another equally real option.

***△ As far as actual literature goes, I’ve just read Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Miyazawa Kenji’s stuff since I thought it’d help me write better.***

Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Miyazawa Kenji are both extremely influential Japanese authors who were both born toward the end of the nineteenth century and who both died before the age of forty. Their works, and the many adaptations of said works, are widely read and viewed to this day, with Akutagawa having written *Rashomon*, *The Spider’s Thread*, and *The Nose*, among many others, and Miyazawa having most famously written *Night on the Galactic Railroad*.

***△ Well, when you put it that way, I guess I’ve read Shakespeare and Goethe’s stuff!***

Shakespeare needs no introduction—certainly not after volume 8, anyway—but Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is maybe slightly more worthy of description! Goethe was born in what is now Germany in the mid-eighteenth century, and he was an author, scientist, and something to the tune of half a dozen other things all at once. His works were prolific and highly influential, and many of them fell under the umbrella of the Sturm und Drang literary movement, which Andou happened to reference back in volume 6.

## Chapter 3

***△ Kudou's character, like a certain alien overlord whose name starts with the letter F, had progressed through four distinct forms up to this point.***

Once again, we're long past the point where I feel the need to explain that Frieza had four forms in *Dragon Ball*. Rather, I'm adding this note to point out that the "a certain alien overlord" description was, in fact, present in the original text—Andou danced around Frieza's name just as much in Japanese as you see here. Given that Frieza was referenced by name in volume 1, and (spoiler alert!) will be referenced by name *again* in the very next volume, I feel safe in concluding that Andou talking around the name was included solely for the sake of humor.

***△ I'd been caught in a Triangle Attack—I'd been struck by a Jet Stream Attack.***

The Triangle Attack is a special maneuver present in many *Fire Emblem* games that can be executed by arranging three pegasus knights around an enemy, allowing them to attack in unison. The Jet Stream Attack, meanwhile, is a maneuver executed by a three-man team of mobile suit pilots in the original *Mobile Suit Gundam*, and it similarly involves three soldiers assaulting a single target in a coordinated attack.

***△ This'll probably only make sense to a certain subset of people, but it was like she'd been hit by the Power to Change One's Opponent into a Lover of Glasses.***

The Power to Change One's Opponent into a Lover of Glasses is a particularly unhinged special ability from a particularly unhinged manga called *The Law of Ueki* by Fukushi Tsubasa. Other powers from the series include the power to turn towels into iron, the power to turn tomatoes into magma, and the power to turn trash into trees, which—believe it or not—is the main character's special ability. Note that the glasses power is rendered surprisingly useful by the fact that its user does, in fact, *wear* glasses. Personally, though, I think that Andou acknowledging the obscurity of this reference is actually the most shocking thing about it.

## Chapter 4

***△ “Okay, then—let’s approach this situation from another angle,” I said, making like George Joestar and changing my viewpoint.***

This is the second time that Andou has made this exact *JoJo*’s reference—he already busted it out back in volume 6, during his ill-fated crane game binge. I’d call him out on repeating material, but then again, it *has* been a solid three years in-universe and four volumes out, which is probably well past the acceptable reference repetition statute of limitations.

## Chapter 5

***△ That was common knowledge—the sort of factoid that would be written in my character profile on our anime’s promotional website...***

To absolutely no one’s surprise, this bit of trivia is, in fact, genuinely written in Andou’s character profile on the anime’s Japanese promotional website.

***△ She didn’t know the first thing about the fundamentals of cooking, but she had internalized every piece of trivia that’d been brought up in Food Wars.***

*Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma* is a manga that ran in *Shonen Jump* written by Tsukuda Yuuto and drawn by Saeki Shun. The series was equally as notable for its elaborately constructed, well-rendered recipes as its gradually escalating absurdity, which starts on a level of characters having their clothes blown off by the power of delicious food and only gets sillier from there. It’s also a series that (at least from a layman’s perspective) comes across as having really done its homework when it comes to cooking trivia—all the examples that Andou brings up are indeed fun facts that the series teaches.

***△ I used the Saikawa Souhei method, basically.***

Saikawa Souhei is the protagonist of *The Perfect Insider*, a mystery novel by Mori Hiroshi. The novel was a smash hit, and it inspired a wide variety of adaptations (including an anime that came out later on in the same year this volume was originally released). Souhei himself is a university professor who, as professors in mystery novels tend to do, helps solve a murder case, in the process employing the particular style of deductive reasoning that Sagami very briefly sums up.

## Afterword

***△ Let’s look at an example—a power in a certain popular manga that allows its user to create a vacuum cleaner that can suck up anything nonliving.***

This popular manga in question is *Hunter x Hunter*, and the power in question is used to commit horrific acts of violence, enabled in no small part by the

ambiguity that Kota Nozomi describes! As a side note, I do believe this is the first time we've had to put in a TL note regarding one of the afterwords, which feels like something of an achievement to me.

That's the last of the notes I have for you this time! See you again in volume 11 for the next batch!

-Tristan Hill



## **Author: Kota Nozomi**

### Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 10

I went through a phase where I took literally every excuse I could find to use the word “karma.” I’d be all, “I’m just a slave to karma,” or “Your karma has led you to this choice, so why not just take it?” and when someone would inevitably ask, “Wait, what’s karma?” I’d instantly clam the heck up.

## **Illustrator/Character Designer: 029 (Oniku)**

Illustrator for *The Devil Is a Part-Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works), *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan), and *The 8th Cafeteria Girl* (Published by Shueisha).

With TRIGGER’s staff helping out, *Supernatural Battles* will be more exciting than ever from now on! I hope you’ll keep cheering us on in the upcoming year!

## **Interior Illustrator: Saito Kengo (TRIGGER)**

Hello! I’m part of the anime’s staff, stepping in to lend a hand. My illustration style is quite different from 029’s, but I hope you enjoyed it. Also, Kudou is just downright adorable...

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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 10

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by Kota Nozomi

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