

Author
**Kota
Nozomi**
Illustrator
029

**When
supernatural
Battles** 17
**Became
Commonplace**



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Supernatural
Battle



Sunfish



Prologue ★ Are You Ready?

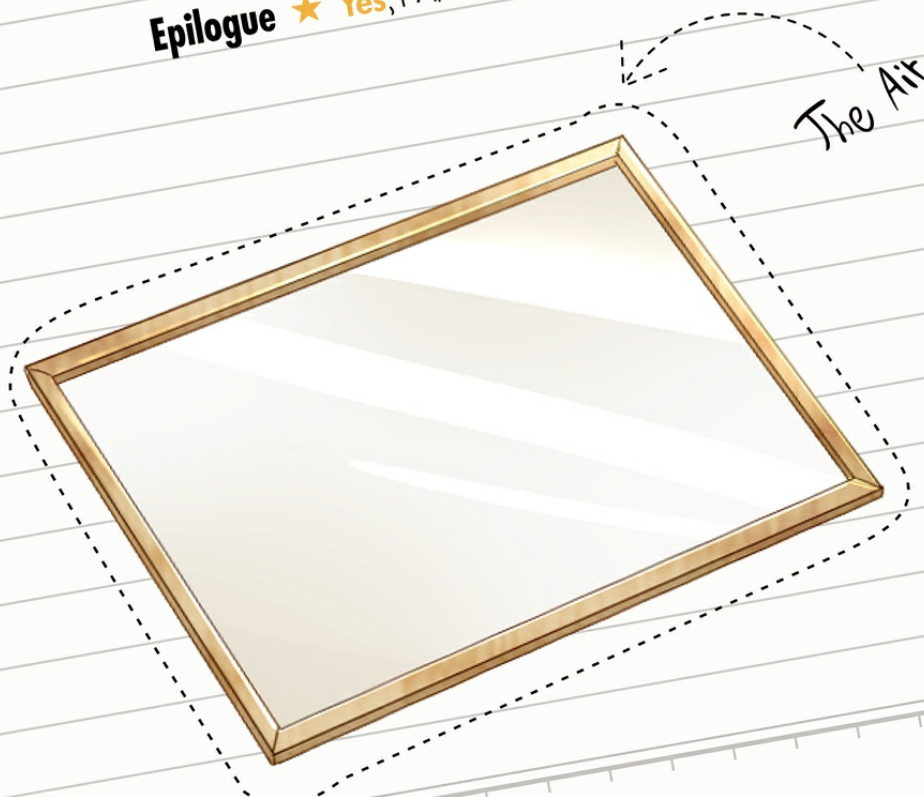
Chapter 1 ★ July and the Princess of a Thousand Winters Go to the Pool with the Nine-Headed Demon

Chapter 2 ★ July and the Emblem of Peace Go to the Ocean with Their Families

Chapter 3 ★ July and a Tense Colorful Bow Go to the Pool with a Reader

Chapter 4 ★ July and a Girl Who Lights Up the World Go to...

Epilogue ★ Yes, I Am a Lady in Love!



The Air



The Obsidian
Orca

A black and white illustration of a young girl with short, dark hair and bangs. She is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt with a large bow. She is making a peace sign with her right hand and winking with her left eye. The background features a grid of various symbols like a bird, a book, a cat, and a flame.

Kanzaki
Tomoyo

CHARACTERS

ILLUSTRATOR:

029



CLOSED CLOCK

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



**Kushikawa
Hatoko**

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

**OVER
ELEMENT**

**Takanashi
Sayumi**

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



**ROUTE OF
ORIGIN**

**DARK
AND DARK**



**Andou
Jurai**

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

**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 ★ Are You Ready?

I scrolled back up and started reading again from the top of the list. I ran through the results over and over, taking extra care to ensure I hadn't overlooked or misread a single entry, opening my eyes as wide as dinner plates and gluing them to my laptop's screen as I processed the words displayed on it. I believed with all my heart that the one string I was looking for was hidden somewhere within that sea of letters, and I kept searching until my eyes were dry and bloodshot. In the end, though...I never tracked it down. I read the whole list twenty times over, and it was simply nowhere to be found.

Yugami Hizumi. Yugami, written with the characters for "a playful god," and Hizumi, written with the characters for "clearest crimson," both surname and given name meaning "distortion" when read out loud. I'd chosen a pretty stylish pen name, if I do say so myself, but it didn't appear on the list of the twenty-two writers who'd passed the second round of judging. That meant, in short, that the manuscript I'd submitted had been rejected.

"So, I looost," I groaned. I let out a deep sigh as I detached my eyeballs from the laptop screen and slumped back into my chair, using my freshly disenthralled peepers to gawk listlessly at my room's ceiling. "Ugh. Ugggh. Ugaaahhhhhhhhh..."

It wasn't quite a scream, and it wasn't quite a moan. It was a sort of weird, half-shouted midpoint of a mouth noise, and I kept it going all the while as I stood up, walked over to my bed, and flopped down into it face-first. Then I started rolling around for no particular reason, kicking my feet pointlessly and battering my old body pillow like a sandbag as I unleashed a full Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four Palms taijutsu on it. I knew all this flailing was pointless, and I knew people would probably be weirded out if they saw me behaving this way, but a bitter frustration had escaped from the depths of my heart and was now coursing through my body at a breakneck pace, driving me to these outlandish antics as it vented out into the atmosphere.

I made it all the way to the Eight Trigrams Three-Hundred Sixty-One Style—a game-original move—then stopped to let out another sigh and take a deep breath. My wild outburst *had*, in the end, helped me calm down a little.

“Sorry, pillow,” I said. I’d pummeled and poked the poor thing into oblivion, and before anything else, an apology seemed in order. Then I stood up, walked back over to my desk, and took another look at my laptop’s screen.

I’d submitted my story to a light novel publishing label’s up-and-coming author competition. About a week after summer vacation had begun—that is to say, earlier today—their editorial department sent out a tweet to announce that the results of the second round of judging had been posted, and I’d nervously and excitedly navigated my way to the announcement page, praying feverishly all the while that I’d manage to pass. And in the end...I’d been rejected. Tragically, it seemed that God wasn’t the sort of entity who’d be sure to hear you when you were at your most desperate.

The first round of judging had pared an initial 534 entries down to 127. In other words, I’d managed to clear roughly one-in-five odds to make it through the first round, only to fall short of the final twenty-two entries in the second.

I found myself staring vacantly at those twenty-two pen names and titles, all of which—at least in the eyes of the editorial department—belonged to better works than mine. The eventual winners would have summaries and critiques of their stories, information about the author’s age and hometown, and other similar stuff listed publicly, but at this stage, all that was available was the names of the authors and their stories. And so, in spite of the fact that I knew next to nothing about them, I found myself scanning through the list of works and muttering things like “Okay, no *way* that one can sell” and “Oof, *somebody’s* a real bandwagon chaser.” And yet, when I thought that those were the titles that had left mine in the dust and moved on past the second round...

“Okay, no. This is pathetic,” I muttered as I gave my head a smack and tried to move away from the unsightly jealousy that was rapidly overtaking me. A small part of me considered giving the editorial department a call, but I frantically shook my head and drove that idea away. *Absolutely not—that’s the most pathetic thing an aspiring author can possibly do! If you wash out, then you wash out. You have to take the results you’re given and accept them.*

“Agggh! I *know* I have to accept it, but still, this one hurt...”

I’d submitted stories to this competition three times to date. I’d been dropped in the first round of judging twice, and now the second round once. I’d been really hyped at making it through the initial round for the first time, but the excitement hadn’t lasted. Winning an award was still far out of my reach. Three submissions wasn’t very many at all, on a relative scale, and I was still in high school, so it might’ve been silly for me to get this depressed over my rejection...but there were also plenty of people out there who’d debuted with their very first work, and novelists making their pro debut in high school wasn’t unheard of either. So, yeah—it still hurt, in the end.

“Maybe I just don’t have any talent,” I mumbled, when suddenly, a memory buried deep within my subconscious sprang to the forefront. A man’s face leaped into my mind’s eye, grinning dauntlessly as he opened his mouth to speak.

“You hear people assert that talent and effort are polar opposites all the time, but the truth is that on a fundamental level, they’re exactly the same thing. They’re both nothing more than a means by which results are brought about.”

So said Kiryuu Hajime, also known as Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First—my half brother. We shared a father, we’d lived together since I was little, and I’d always referred to him as “O brother of” — No, scratch that last part. That’d never happened. I’d always called him Hajime, like a normal person would.

“Your talent, your effort—and for that matter, your environment, the era you live in, and your genes as well—none of them mean anything except in retrospect. Your success or your failure comes first, and only once that determination has been made will the people around you claim that you’d only succeeded because you’d had talent or put in the effort, or that you’d only failed because you’d lacked talent or motivation. They’re excuses, justifications, and they can only be applied *after* a result has already been reached.”

I can’t really remember what’d set Hajime off on this particular ramble. Most of the time he ended up in this mode, it’d happen while he was tutoring me on something, and this’d probably been no exception. Hajime had been smart enough to compete at a top level in the national practice exams, so every once

in a while, I'd have him help me with my studies. I figure I'd probably said something along the lines of, "I'm not talented like you are, so this doesn't come naturally to me," and the rest was history.

"Per the quantum uncertainty principle, the very nature of all things under creation is only established upon their observation. It's the same thing, really."

...And this is exactly why I only had him help me *every once in a while*. My brother was the sort of person who'd casually drop quantum mechanics and metaphysical mumbo jumbo into a lesson he was teaching a girl whose courses still had names like "science" and "social studies." He was, in short, not an ideal tutor.

"The ignorant masses believe that it's a matter of process—that by going through the motions, step by step, results are produced. They believe that steady, consistent effort paves the road to success. The truth, however, is the exact opposite," said Hajime, his tone carrying a certain sense of self-aggrandizing exuberance. "Going through the motions doesn't produce results. No, the 'motions' themselves are born retroactively from a predetermined result. The present does not exist by virtue of the past—the past is born by virtue of us, here in the present, seeking answers that lie there."

I'm not really sure what sort of face I'd been making throughout all this, but if I had to guess, I'd say it was probably an "I have no clue what to make of all the gobbledygook you're spewing at me" expression. That, I figure, is why Hajime started breaking his theory down and explaining it in slightly simpler terms.

"Imagine, if you will, an incredibly talented pitcher—the sort of national hero who's achieved great things domestically and abroad, writing his name into the sport's history. The news media would put him right up on a pedestal and declare him a gifted athlete, I'm sure. Meanwhile, documentary programs would dig into his time as a student, or the time he'd been in a slump, telling the moving tale about how *really*, he'd always put in more effort than anyone. *Those* are the moments when effort and talent come into being, for the purpose of rationalization and nothing else."

I just stared blankly at him.

"You just used the word 'talent' to rationalize something as well. Perhaps the

actual scenario was ‘I can’t solve the problem myself’ or ‘I can’t get the sort of grades that *he* does.’ Whatever the case, you concluded the issue stemmed from a lack of academic talent *because* you already knew the result and desired to rationalize it. Oh, but don’t get me wrong—I’m not *criticizing* you, of course! Rationalizing is simply second nature for humans, after all.”

Finally, Hajime was nearing his conclusion.

“When presented with a result, mankind is wont to seek out a process that led to it. Just as we only rationalize our dreams to be dreams at the moment we awaken from them, so too do we begin with the result then seek out an explanation—a process—that can convince us and others why said result turned out that way. Such is the way of this world,” Hajime declared smugly, finishing his explanation with a rhetorical flourish.

Having listened to his whole speech from start to finish, only one thought came to mind.

So friggin’ what?!

At the end of his long, looong, rambling explanation, absolutely nothing had been resolved or established whatsoever. He hadn’t rebuked me, and he sure as hell hadn’t encouraged me. He’d just spouted off his little pet theory, and that was the end of it. I could only assume he’d been in the mood to brag to me about the philosophical concept he’d come up with and chosen to seize a flimsy excuse to do so. It wasn’t the first time he’d pulled that move either—my brother had always been kind of a handful like that. I’ve taken to calling those lectures he gave me his chuunversion sessions when I reminisce about them.

“And the worst part about it is that I could never *quite* argue against the stuff he told me,” I sighed. I also had to admit: I’d never really minded when an extended lecture from him left me with “So what?” as my only reaction. There was a certain enjoyment to be had in the act of learning that sort of philosophical trivia. That was why I’d chosen ethics as my elective course in school and why I enjoyed it as much as I did. The fact that Andou had said pretty much the same thing to me at one point was one of the things that made me realize that the two of us actually saw eye to eye—

“Oh! That’s right... I told Andou about all this, didn’t I?”

Back when I'd passed the first round of judging, I'd told Andou about it. Worse still, he'd thrown me a little celebration and everything. We'd gone out for cake together, spent ages browsing in a bookstore...and bumped into Tamaki, a girl with an incredibly thick accent and a distinctively rustic sense of fashion. She was an old friend of Andou's from when he was in the eighth grade, and also Sagami's ex-girlfriend.

"I should tell him how it turned out, shouldn't I? He celebrated for me and everything, so it feels like I *have* to now..."

Andou hadn't asked me about the judging process even once since then. He could be surprisingly considerate about that sort of thing when push came to shove. I was pretty sure he actually understood that I—or really, that aspiring authors in general—wouldn't appreciate being questioned about how it was going. I had all sorts of things that I didn't want to be asked about...but at the same time, I had all sorts of things that I *wanted* to say as well. I didn't want people to interrogate me about how my writing was going, or how the contest had turned out, but I *did* want to brag whenever things were going well. I had to admit, it must've been a real pain to deal with me and my ambitions sometimes.

In any case, I wanted to tell Andou. It's not that I wanted him to comfort me or try to cheer me up. It was just that since I'd told him about my early results, I felt like I had a duty to keep him up to date.

Yeah. That's right. A duty. That's all this is.

I stood there silently for a moment, then glanced over to the side of my computer. There, on my desk, was the ticket I'd received a few days earlier. A ticket for free entry to the public pool—specifically, a ticket for two. My mom had given it to me, and it'd been lying there ever since, untouched.

"Oh, for the... Come on, *seriously?*" I grumbled, pressing a hand to my forehead before I knew it. The air conditioner in my room was running at full blast, but I could feel my face growing hotter by the second. "What am I *thinking?* Why would I even *consider* using this as an excuse...?"

"*I bet you've got a boy you have your eye on to invite along,*" my mom had said, and the first face to pop into my mind had been *that* dumbass's.

B-But, I mean...it's not like I have any other guy friends I'm really close to! It's only natural that he'd be the first one to come to mind... Y-Yeah, this doesn't mean anything about how I feel about him at all... He's just a clubmate, nothing more and nothing less... I-I'm just getting all weird about this because of all that stuff Hatoko said, that's all—

Suddenly, I felt a prickling pain in my chest. Just a tiny, sharp sting, like I'd jabbed myself on a rose's thorn. The conversation I'd had with Hatoko in the club room right before summer vacation entered the forefront of my mind once more. She was always such a gentle, pleasant girl, but the declaration of love she'd made in that moment had jabbed me like a sword of pure ice. *So why didn't I...?*

"Ahhh! Seriously, *screw* this!"

My mind was such a mess it felt like my brain might just pop under the pressure of it all, and I let my emotions carry me away. I slammed my fist into my desk, then kept that momentum going and pulled out my phone, brought up my contact list, selected the very first name in it, and hit the call button.

"H-Hello?"



"Yeah, sure. Sounds good. Okay, then—in two years, at the Sabaody Archipelago."

"I am *not* meeting you there!"

With that last little bit of banter, my phone call with Tomoyo came to a close. I'd been sprawled out on my bed reading manga when she'd called, but now I was sitting up to look at the calendar hanging on my wall. She'd invited me to the public pool, and I had to update it accordingly.

"Hmm. I sure wasn't counting on this," I muttered as I wrote "Frolic with the Witch of Antinomy: Endless Paradox in the Wellspring of Eden" into my schedule. I wasn't opposed to going to the pool with Tomoyo, of course. I was pretty fond of swimming, and going to the pool was a summer staple in my mind.

Indeed, summer meant pools and swimsuits, the third or fourth volume of a

light novel meant an obligatory swimsuit arc, and an anime adaptation meant an also obligatory swimsuit episode, whether or not there was one in the source material. By the way, the reason the third volume of your average light novel series is so likely to contain a swimsuit arc has to do with the fact that tons of series open in April, at the start of the Japanese academic and fiscal year. That means that most stories ended up getting to the summer season right around the third volume or so, and that's really all there is to it. It's kinda just standard practice to start school stories at the beginning of the school year. But I digress.

Back to the point at hand: I was totally in favor of going to the pool in and of itself, but in this case, I guess you could say it put me in a bit of a fix—or rather, it played into a strange and ongoing sequence of events. I looked at my calendar once more, scanning back across the three days before my meeting with Tomoyo, all of which had plans already penned in.

“I never expected *everyone* in the literary club to invite me to the pool independently, that's for sure...”

Truth really is stranger than fiction, sometimes.

Chapter 1 ★ July and the Princess of a Thousand Winters Go to the Pool with the Nine-Headed Demon

Hello, everyone! My name is Kuki Madoka, and I'm a fourth grader in class 1 at Yokoi Elementary School.

The first week of summer vacation passed by before I knew it, and a day I'd been planning for ages had finally arrived: it was the day I'd be going out to play at our city's water park! My best friend, Chii, and I were going there together.

"Isn't the weather great today, Chii? It's the perfect day for a trip to the pool!" I said as I looked up at the sky. We were sitting together on a bench at the bus stop, and the sun was shining away above us. There was nothing subtle about the weather that day. It was the height of summer, and nature was making a show of it.

Chii, who was sitting beside me, gave me a little nod. She was carrying Squirrely, the stuffed animal she always brought everywhere with her, as well as a bag stuffed full of individually wrapped strawberry-jam-filled marshmallows. She took out one of the little packets, tore it open, and popped a marshmallow into her mouth.

"By the way, Chii, have you started on your summer homework yet?" I asked as she passed me the empty wrapper, doing my best to sound like I was just making casual small talk.

Chii gave me a grumpy glare. "I hate you, Cookie."

"Why?!" I shouted, reeling with astonishment. *No way! Did I really just ruin our friendship?!*

"I hate people with no common sense," Chii continued.

N-No common sense? I never imagined I'd receive that piece of criticism, especially not from Chii. It was a painful enough thing to hear on its own, and she was the last person I'd ever wanted to hear it from. It was like getting a lecture on the importance of washing your hands from Bacteriaman.

“Listen, Cookie,” said Chifuyu, looking me in the eye with a very serious look on her face. “Summer vacation is a vacation. You don’t think about homework on vacations. That’s common sense. Okay?”

I gaped. I’d never thought that just mentioning homework would make her *this* upset with me. It seemed that the word “homework” itself was taboo, as far as Chii was concerned. “O-Okay,” I said. “I’m sorry, Chii. I should’ve known better.”

“As long as you understand,” said Chii, seemingly satisfied.

I knew perfectly well that around the end of summer vacation, she’d be begging me to let her copy my homework. That was what had happened last year and the year before that, after all. She couldn’t do anything without me around to help her. *Hee hee hee!*

“Heeey, Chifuyu! Kuki!” a boorish, boyish voice rang out, cutting off our friendly chat. The boy in question, Andou, was waving at us as he ran toward the bus stop. “Hey, guys! It’s been a while, huh?” he said, greeting us with a friendly smile as he jogged up to our bench.

Chii stood up and raised a hand to return his greeting. “Long time no see, Andou,” she said.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Andou replied. “And man, talk about great weather, right? We sure got lucky it ended up being so sunny out today!”

“I made a rain charm to make sure it would be,” Chii proudly declared.

“Oh, that’d explain it! Guess we have your charm to thank for it being such a clear day, then.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Charmy.”

“U-Uhh... Chifuyu? Are you talking to that...wadded-up ball of tissue you just pulled out of your pocket?” Andou asked concernedly. “That, uhh, *really* sounds like the sorta name you’d give to the rain charm you made, doesn’t it?”

“This is Charmy’s brain.”

“Its *brain*?!”

“It’s where Charmy’s thoughts, feelings, and memories are all stored.”

“Holy *crap*, Chifuyu! I mean, like...I guess you *do* put a wadded-up tissue in those charms to pad out their heads, and that *would* sorta count as their brains, but, seriously, just no! Carrying around the inside bit’s not the same thing as carrying around an actual charm! What happened to the outer tissue?!”

“It ran away.”

“Your rain charm’s body *ran away* and left its brains behind?!”

“It’s okay. The body has a new brain in it now.”

“That... Huh. This is weird, actually. That’s not really all that different from how Anpanman swaps out his head, but getting all anatomical and calling it his *brain* introduces a whole deep, philosophical dilemma to the scenario... Like, doesn’t this raise all sorts of questions about what part of us is *us*, and where our consciousness is stored, and stuff?”

“Charmy’s brain is still Charmy, even without a body.”

“Right. So, Chifuyu, I think it’s about time you told us the truth. Why doesn’t Charmy have a body, a face, or any of that stuff?”

“I got bored.”

“Oooh, okay. Yeah, I see how this happened. You *do* get bored and give up on stuff all the time. Like how you were gonna fold a thousand cranes the other day, but only actually folded one baby crane in the end...”

The moment Andou had shown up, the two of them kicked off a whole cheerful conversation with each other, which I now decided to cut into.

“Andou!” I said. “Thank you very much for being our chaperone to the pool today! I really appreciate you being willing to accompany us on such short notice!”

“You sure are conscientious about this stuff, huh, Kuki? It’s cool, and you don’t have to be all formal with me! Heck, I’m actually glad you bothered to invite me,” said Andou with a slightly awkward grin. “I mean, like... Y’know. We sorta had that whole *thing* last time... I was kinda worried you hated my guts after all that, honestly.”

“Ha ha ha, what on earth would make you think that?” I said with a perfect

smile. “That was a long time ago, and I’ve let bygones be bygones! I certainly never would’ve invited you to chaperone us at the pool if I *hated* you!”

“Y-Yeah, true enough! Guess I was worrying for nothing, huh?” Andou said, then let out a sigh of relief.

I *hadn’t* forgotten what had happened last time, of course. I remembered *very* well that Andou was a hopeless lolicon: the sort of irredeemable pervert who gets aroused by girls who are *far* too young for him. Did I hate him? Certainly not. My opinion of Andou wasn’t even close to that mild. The dark, violent emotion that surged from deep down in the pit of my stomach, rushing through my whole body, could never have been described so simply as the single word *hate*. The sin that scummy lolicon had committed—the sin of deceiving Chii and luring her to his side—was deeper than the deepest ocean and heavier than the largest mountain.

“Oh, the bus is here! Hey, do you two have your tickets? Want me to hold on to them just to make sure nobody loses theirs?” Andou offered. It seemed he was trying to act reliable, maybe since he was the oldest of us.

I wasn’t going to let him trick me with that kind front, though. He’d jumped at the chance to portray himself as a nice, helpful role model, but that didn’t change the fact that deep down, he was a genuine lolicon. I knew exactly what sort of wicked intentions he was hiding behind that helpful mask of his.

Heh heh heh! Prepare yourself, Andou! Today, I’m going to tear that mask right off and expose you for who you really are!

“Ugh...”

“What is it, Andou?”

“Nothing, really... I just got this crazy chill all of a sudden. Maybe I’m coming down with a summer cold?”

“I...think I might die.”

“I’ve been feeling my chest get all thumpy...”

“It gets thumpy, and then it’s like it’s getting squeezed...and my face gets red,

and I can't focus..."

"When Andou..."

"When Andou's nearby. Or when I think about him. My chest gets really thumpy then..."

Chii had come to my home and said all of that to me, blushing faintly the whole time, just a little while before summer vacation had started. Back then, I'd tried to sort of forcibly distract her from the truth by telling her that she should just eat a marshmallow whenever she was starting to feel any of the symptoms she'd described to me. It hadn't been a great diversion, but Chii had been content to just heed my advice and had told me she felt like she was all better again before she left. Still, after all that, I'd become certain: Chii, apparently, had fallen in love with Andou Jurai.

I felt like I had an okay grasp of Chii's relationships with everyone in the Senkou High literary club. Their group had a big secret, and I'd gotten into a bit of a fight with Chii over it, but at this point I'd already learned the truth: their secret was that Andou suffered from a terrible and incurable disease known as the lolita complex. He'd admitted it to me personally, so there was no mistaking it. He'd told me that it was only thanks to Chii keeping him company that he was able to suppress his attraction to little girls.

When I really stopped to think about it, the whole story was ridiculous, but I'd decided that as long as Chii was satisfied with that explanation, I would respect her wishes and not protest it. But. *But*. If the two of them showed any signs of trying to move their relationship *past* that point, then that would be a *very* different story. Speaking as her friend—as her *best* friend—I wasn't about to let Chii fall into the hands of some lying, stinking lolicon!

Chii had apparently started to develop romantic feelings for Andou, but I knew that was just because she was such an incredibly nice girl. I was certain that she just felt so much pity for that laughably pathetic scumbag that she couldn't bear to leave him on his own and ended up sympathizing with him as a result. She'd been taking care of him like he was a strange, endangered animal she'd saved from the streets, and she had mistaken those feelings for ones of real affection.

Yes, that must be what's happening. I'm sure of it! And there's no way I'll let that man get away with taking advantage of her kindness!

If there was one upside to the situation, it was that Chii had yet to realize how she felt about him. Thankfully, she still believed that eating a marshmallow was all it'd take to stop her heart from going all pitter-patter for him. On the other hand, that meant that if I was going to make a move, I would have to do it now, before it was too late. That was why I'd decided to set things up so that the three of us would go to the pool together. I called it "Operation Ruin Andou's Public Image!"

I'd laid all sorts of secret schemes in preparation for today. I'd stayed up really late last night, not going to bed until *10 p.m.* to polish my plan to perfection. I knew that once I'd finished carrying out my plan, Chii's opinion of Andou would drop dramatically, and when it did, the budding flower of love within her would wither and die before it could ever manage to bloom. I felt a little guilty, yes...but I knew that I had to harden my heart and do what had to be done to protect my friend.

Chii's the most important person in the world to me, and I'll do my best for her sake!

"Woow," Chifuyu said, her eyes sparkling with amazement.

Just one glance at the scene before us was enough to let us know we were in for a good time. There were so many water-based attractions, I couldn't even count them. They had a lazy river, a water slide, and even a big area made to look like a pirate ship! There was also a stage for holding events and performances. Everything was designed to delight and excite, and each attraction glimmered in the summer sunlight.

"This place looks great, doesn't it, Chii?" I said.

"Yeah," Chii replied.

"We're gonna have tons of fun today, right?" I asked.

"Yeah," Chii grunted. She was a girl of few words, but one look at her face told me that she was practically beside herself with excitement. She was so worked

up, she was almost hyperventilating!

We headed into the locker room, changed into our swimsuits, then went out to a meeting place we'd picked earlier, holding hands along the way to make sure we didn't get separated by the crowd. Chii was wearing a frilly one-piece swimsuit, and I had on one of the same design, though in a different color. We'd bought them together specifically for today's outing, and I'm sure that everyone around us could tell how good of friends we were by our matching swimsuits. *Heh heh!*

"Andou really is taking his time, isn't he?" I muttered. We'd changed in different locker rooms, needless to say, and we'd promised to wait for him out by the entrance, but we'd been waiting a while, and he still hadn't come out yet. I thought that boys were usually supposed to get changed faster than girls, so I was confused. *What is he doing in there?*

"Ah. I see him," said Chii, pointing toward the locker rooms.

I looked over, and there he was, walking toward us in a pair of swim trunks designed to look like shorts. He'd certainly taken his sweet time...and actually, he still was. For some reason, he was plodding toward us at a really slow pace, his shoulders slumped and his expression gloomy.

"Andou, you're late," said Chii.

"Yeah... Sorry, Chifuyu," Andou sighed.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Sorta... Look at this, Kuki," Andou said as he held out a hand toward us. He was holding a pair of swimming goggles. They looked like a perfectly ordinary pair you could've bought in just about any store, but one of their lenses had a huge crack running through it.

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"I accidentally stepped on them while I was getting changed," Andou moaned.

"You stepped on them? Is your foot all right?"

"Oh! Yeah, I'm totally fine. These lenses are plastic, so it barely even scratched me. It's just, y'know...I just bought the things, so this was a real blow,

mentally speaking,” Andou said. He sounded really depressed.

It was an unfortunate accident, but still, this was supposed to be the start of a fun day for all of us, and I didn’t like how he was bringing the mood down for me and Chii. *Couldn’t he at least try not to drag us down with him?*

“Wouldn’t wearing those be kind of dangerous? You should probably throw them away,” I said.

“Yeah, but, like, I literally *just* bought them,” said Andou. “I just can’t bring myself to throw them out, you know?”

And now he’s proving that he doesn’t know when to let go. As a guy, he should man up about stuff like this! This just proves that I can’t leave Chii in his hands!

“Plus, I figured I could ask Sayumi to take care of them,” Andou continued.

I cocked my head. “You mean Takanashi?”

“Ah!” Andou gasped. “Nope, never mind! It’s nothing! Yeah, you’re right, I’d better just throw ‘em out!”

“Andou...” Chii sighed as she shot him an exasperated glance.

“S-Sorry! My bad, honestly,” Andou said. I wasn’t really sure what had just happened, but apparently, Chii’s opinion of him had gone down a step or two, so I was willing to call it a victory!

With that, the three of us started making our way toward the lazy river.

“I want a swim ring,” Chii said, so we went over to line up at a stand that was renting them out. The pool was pretty crowded, so we were going to have to wait for quite a while, and that meant this was my chance. I’d been handed the perfect opportunity to put one of the plans I’d thought up into action.

Plan number 1: Operation Nobody Likes a Pervert!

My first strategy was ingeniously crafty, and it would make full use of the unique traits of the poolside environment we’d be spending the day in. This very plan was actually one of the reasons why I’d decided to make a water park our destination!

It was summer vacation, and that meant lots of people would be coming to

the pool to play. Lots of those people, of course, would happen to be pretty ladies. My hope was that if Chii could catch Andou ogling some girl in a sexy swimsuit, she'd be disillusioned and lose interest in him. No love could be strong enough to survive a face-to-face encounter with that man's base, perverted true self!

As luck would have it, a group of young, spirited ladies happened to pass right by us as we were waiting in line. They were probably college students, I think? They definitely looked mature, at least, and their figures accentuated by the bikinis they were wearing made them give off an aura so lewd I couldn't even put it into words. They were also all cute enough that each of them could've easily cleaned up if their school ran a beauty pageant! Overall, the college crew (as I had quickly started calling them in my head) had the eye-catching looks to turn the heads of most of the men in the area.

Look at them! They're so pretty! Andou must be staring too, I thought as I spun around, excited to catch him in the act...

"Ugggh... Man, I *just* bought those goggles too..."

"It's okay, Andou."

...only to find him still totally fixated on his broken goggles. He didn't even spare the pretty ladies walking past us a glance. It was like they didn't register with him at all! *Just how long is he going to be distracted by those goggles?*

In the end, the college crew passed by without Andou expressing even a little bit of interest in them. *Hmph. Well, fine!* There were still *plenty* of pretty ladies hanging out by the pool. The college crew was just the beginning!

And, as expected, it wasn't long before another one passed right by us. *Hmm,* I thought to myself. This new lady was *really* something. She was wearing a super revealing bikini, but that wasn't what made her so eye-catching. No, what *really* caught my attention were her boobs. They were *huge*, and they were bouncing around with every step she took!

Oh, my— Wow! I'm actually a little overwhelmed! She had a textbook hourglass figure, and she was showing it off without the slightest hesitation. Naturally, most of the nearby men had their eyes glued to her. Even the lifeguard who was *supposed* to be keeping an eye out for anyone in need of

help had his binoculars pointed squarely at her instead! *Ugh, talk about crass! I guess that's just how all men are, deep down. So, how do you like that, Andou? There's no way you could ignore a woman like—*

“Actually...wait a second! Don't these goggles kinda *work* like this? Like, the way only one of the lenses is cracked gives them that sorta 'fresh off the battlefield' vibe, doesn't it?! Like I took a bullet to the goggles and barely escaped with my life after the glass deflected it!”

He's still obsessing over his stupid goggles?! And he's talking gibberish to boot! "Fresh off the battlefield"?! What on earth is he on about?!

“Mwa ha ha... Yes, the wounds these goggles have suffered are proof of the glorious deeds they've witnessed! A bit of battle damage makes them so much cooler! These are goggles that a heroic soldier would wear on his return from the fields of valor! *Hella* cool! Cool like the goggles Hange's wearing in that one cut from the second *Attack on Titan* OP!”

It was no use. Andou was completely absorbed in his goggles and wasn't so much as glancing at the buxom beauty walking past him. Then he actually went and put them on, even though one of the lenses was totally cracked!

“Hey, look at me, Chifuyu!” said Andou. “What do you think? Bet I look like I just got back from the battlefield, right?”

“Not really,” said Chii.

“Wha...?! Curses! Maybe they're not battle-damaged *enough*?” Andou muttered to himself. Then he started deliberately breaking his goggles more than they already were, with his own two hands! I was completely lost. He'd taken his bizarre behavior so far, I didn't even know *what* to think.

What should I do now? It wouldn't be long before the super stacked lady would be out of eyeshot, so in a moment of panic, I decided to throw caution to the wind and call Andou's attention to her directly. *Right, this should work! The problem's that he's so focused on his goggles, he hasn't even noticed her! The moment he does see her, though, he'll reveal his base, male nature!*

“A-Andou, look at her!” I said. “That lady's figure is—”

“Gimme some quiet for a minute! Whatever it is, I don't have time right

now!” Andou snapped.

I fell into a shocked silence. *H-H-He shouted at me?! Wh-Wh-What the heck? That was scary!*

“Dammit... Am I taking it too far? At this point, I might as well smash the other lens too... No, no, that won’t work. I can’t sacrifice the asymmetry element—that’d totally ruin the disequilibrium of its *je ne sais quoi*...”

Now my silence was a little more befuddled than shocked. *What on earth is so fun about playing around with goggles, anyway? Is modifying his goggles really more important to Andou than gawking at a sexy lady?* Said lady, by the way, was long gone by now, and my shoulders slumped as I regretted the loss of the one-in-a-million chance I’d been given. The odds of *another* lady as sexy as the first one showing up were just impossibly low...or so I’d thought, but just then, I heard a commotion nearby. I looked over out of curiosity, and there she was: a really, *really* pretty lady wearing a swimsuit so sexy it was just plain ridiculous!

Her figure was as good as a figure could be, and she had on... Actually, no. “Had on” isn’t suitable to describe what I was witnessing. Her figure was *garnished* by her swimsuit, at most. Her attire was basically a super thin, V-shaped strip of fabric that *barely* hid her chest and her crotch. It was only *just* doing its job as a bathing suit, really.

I gasped and felt my face flush in an instant. *Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What in the world is that?! I can see just about everything! That’s more string than cloth! Walking around naked would probably be less embarrassing!* Her figure and looks were more or less on the same level as those of the sexy lady from before, but she was showing so much more skin, it was just crazy! Most of her boobs and butt were totally exposed! The way she was walking seemed weirdly sexy too. I couldn’t help but feel flustered looking at her, and I’m a girl!

What is this strange fascination that’s brewing within me? I feel frustrated and suffocated, but I also feel a surge of passion too... Is this what people mean when they go on about “eroticism”? Suddenly, I felt like I’d gained a profound, instinctual understanding of the meaning of the word “erotic.” That woman was eroticism given human form. She was the avatar of eroticism, descended from the heavens! She *had* to be!

That purely erotic woman's voluptuous figure and captivating walk were drawing men from all across the pool toward her. They were like a swarm of ants lured in by her powerful pheromones. It was weird, though—for some reason, all of them were kind of hunched over? I wasn't sure what was up with that. Do men just hunch naturally when they see pretty ladies? I was starting to get curious, so I decided to look it up when I got home.

Then, as the gazes of countless men were focused on her...something terrible happened. The woman stumbled, and as the rhythm of her gait was thrown off, the portion of her V-shaped swimsuit that covered her chest was dislodged. For a swimsuit that scanty, even the slightest of impacts was apparently enough to cause total devastation. She spilled right out of it for the world to see, her bountiful bosom dancing about in the air.

I gasped even louder this time. *I-I-I can see everything...* I knew I shouldn't have been looking, but the sheer volume—the sheer beauty—had me staring in spite of myself. *I-Incredible... They're too incredible. Just look at them jiggle. No way you could get away with showing this on TV, and here it is, staring me in the face... Oh, my.*

The erotic lady let out a sexy little scream and covered her chest with her hands. At the same moment, all of the men in the area let out a cry of delight, then they started jostling with each other in the hopes of securing a better position and catching another glimpse of her naked chest. A bunch of people jumped out of the line we were waiting in to get in on the action, and the next thing I knew, the whole poolside had descended into chaos. Just one woman—just two boobs—had drawn all those men into a conflict so brutal, I could hardly bear to watch. I couldn't blame them, though. *Any* man would be irresistibly charmed by a woman baring that much eroticism for him to see.

All right, Andou! What do you think of that?! Not even you could turn a blind eye to a scene like this! I bet you don't even care about your stupid goggles anymore!

"Come on, kid. You *know* you shouldn't be playing around with broken goggles like that. The lenses could shatter any moment now, and getting chunks of *those* in your eye could blind you, in the worst case. You get that, right?"

“I do... I’m really sorry.”

He’s getting chewed out?! Andou was getting scolded by some lifeguard lady about his broken goggles! He was getting a plain old lecture, and he seemed plain old depressed about it!

“Why would you even wear these things in the first place?”

“Umm... Well, I... I kinda just...thought they’d look cool, I guess? Like, they’d have that back-from-the-battlefield sorta vibe, or something...”

“They’d *what*?”

“Never mind. Sorry. Just forget about it.”

“Well, in any case, I’ll be throwing these out for you.”

“N-No waaay... Ahhh,” Andou moaned with incredibly intense regret as the lifeguard took his goggles and walked away.

When you really stopped to think about it, wearing those *would* be pretty dangerous, so in my opinion, she was in the right to confiscate them. The thing is, her lecture had *also* distracted Andou so badly that he hadn’t noticed the avatar of eroticism at all. No woman, no matter how beautiful, could draw his attention away from his goggles.

“Ugh... My poor goggles! My back-from-the-battlefield costume...”

“Sorry, Andou,” said Chii.

“Thanks, Chifuyu...” Andou moaned, then glanced around. “Wait, huh? What happened to the crowd? I thought the line was way longer than this.”

“A bunch of the boys ran away for some reason,” Chii explained.

“Huuuh. That’s pretty weird, but lucky us, I guess! Let’s go get you that swim ring!”

“Kay.”

“Hey, Kuki, what’re you doing? Come on, let’s get moving!”

I hesitated for just a moment longer. “Okay,” I finally sighed, then plodded along after Andou and Chii as they happily strolled over to the rental counter.

Operation Nobody Likes a Pervert: failed.

We spent a while playing around in the lazy river, and before long, it was time for lunch. We made our way over to the food court, where a bunch of stalls were set up.

“You two feel free to get whatever you want for lunch! It’s my treat,” said Andou.

“Really?” asked Chii.

“Yup! Think of it as a thank-you for inviting me. And anyway, I bet I’m the only one who’s carrying a wallet, right? Getting you guys to pay me back later would just be a pain, so might as well make this easy on all of us,” Andou said with a friendly smile.

I pumped an internal fist. It was time for plan number 2: Operation Nobody Likes a Cheapskate!

1. Andou offers to treat us to lunch.
2. I order a mountain of food.
3. Andou goes “Durr, I *said* I’d treat you, but that’s too much...”
4. Chii’s super disappointed in him.

Operation Nobody Likes a Pervert might’ve been flawed from the get-go, considering that I hadn’t taken the fact that Andou was an irredeemable lolicon into account. Even lolicons were sure to value their money, though, so I knew this one would work!

“I want some of the yakisoba from that stall over there, Andou!” I piped up immediately.

“Yeah, sure,” said Andou, casually agreeing without missing a beat. He never suspected a thing.

Heh heh heh! Just you wait, Andou. The yakisoba is only the beginning! I’m going to make you order something from every stall in the food court and eat my way through your wallet until nothing’s left!

Ten minutes later...I found myself face-to-face with a fatal flaw in my plan's foundation.

"Are you okay, Cookie?"

"H-Hey, it's fine, Kuki! You don't have to eat *all* of it!"

"Ugh... U-Urp!"

I'd failed to account for one simple fact: I wasn't a heavy eater. I was the sort of girl who felt pretty much full after a single small bowl of rice. I'd fail to finish my school lunch so often that the kids in my class had learned to give me less when they were on serving duty.

"I'm...fine..." I gasped, forcing a smile as I clutched at my bulging stomach. I reached out for the pile of yakisoba—half of which still remained uneaten—but I just couldn't bring myself to stretch my chopsticks those last few inches and actually take another bite.

The guy who was manning the stand had taken one look at me and said, "Oh, aren't you a cutie! Here's a little extra for the little lady," then given me an especially humongous helping that I hadn't asked for and did *not* appreciate. I'd been planning on eating my way from one end of the food court to the other, but in the end, I gave up before finishing off a single plate.

"Kuki," Andou said, sounding a little worried. "Not wasting food is a good thing, and I'm proud of you for wanting to clean your plate, but you don't have to force it down if you're full! I can eat whatever you don't finish."

If I agreed to that, it would ruin the whole mission in an instant. How was I supposed to ask for a second helping if I couldn't even finish the first one? Considering that first serving had me stuffed to my limit, though...there just wasn't anything I could do to salvage the situation. I gave Andou a silent nod and pushed my remaining yakisoba over to him.

"Are you still hungry, Andou?" asked Chii. "You already ate the leftover half of mine too."

"Yeah, I should be able to handle a bit more," said Andou.

“Oh...” Chii muttered.

“Huh? What?”

“I get full so quickly, and I can never eat much at all, so...”

“So...?”

“I think it’s amazing that you can eat so much.”

“Ha ha ha. Thanks, I guess? Kinda embarrassing when you put it that way.”

Ahh, no! They’re getting along better than ever now! Look at how she’s staring at him—it’s like she’s admiring him! I wanted to shout about how there were tons of people out there who could eat a lot, so he wasn’t special, but having just left half of my own meal to him to finish off, I didn’t have a leg to stand on. Ugggh... This plan couldn’t have gone worse! I wanted to make him look bad, but I ended up letting him show off to her instead! It got totally turned around on me!

Operation Nobody Likes a Cheapskate: failed.

After lunch, we were planning on playing with a beach ball together. Were planning.

“S-Sorry, Chii. I think...I shouldn’t move for a little while...” I groaned. I was still suffering from the damage I’d incurred over the course of my last failed operation. My stomach was so full, it was actually painful. “I’m going to sit around here for a little, but you two should go have fun while I rest.”

“But...” Chii said with a disappointed look on her face.

“In that case, how about we stick around close enough that we can see her?” Andou suggested.

“Okay. Good idea, Andou,” said Chii with a nod, cheerful once more.

The two of them went over to a nearby pool that was shallow enough for kids to stand in. Meanwhile, I squatted down in the shade of a palm tree to rest and digest while I watched them play. They batted their watermelon-patterned beach ball back and forth, looking like they were having the time of their lives.

Chii was maybe just a little bit unathletic, but Andou was really good at controlling the ball and managed to keep their rally going anyway. That said, I was a little confused by how he kept shouting stuff like “Devil Laser Bullet!” and “Ultimate Dragon Pitch!” and “Ignite Pass: Kai!” *What on earth is he screaming his lungs out for?* He looked like he was having even more fun than Chii.

After spending some time watching them pass the ball to each other, my stomach finally started feeling better. “All right,” I said to myself as I stood up and set off...but not toward Andou and Chii. I wasn’t planning on joining in on their game, as much as I wanted to. Instead, I walked off in the opposite direction. After all—I had a mission to accomplish, no matter what.

Plan number 3: Operation Nobody Likes a Wimp!

1. I find someone nearby who looks scary and play a prank on them.
2. When the scary person tries to get even with me, I run over to Andou and beg for help.
3. Andou goes “Durr, I’m scaaaared, I don’t wanna fight...”
4. Chii’s super disappointed in him.

When push comes to shove, it’s a man’s duty to stand strong and protect the ladies he’s accompanying! A real man needs the strength and courage to fight back against any opponent! And Andou was, well, how to put it...really, really obviously a weenie. He had the aura of a man who’d get down on his hands and knees if you so much as pounded on a wall in his presence. That’s why I figured that if I picked a fight with someone who seemed a little scary, he’d reveal his wimpy true self for sure!

I looked around the nearby area, searching for someone who would do the trick, and found the perfect candidate right away. It was a man, napping on a beach chair by the poolside. His head was clean-shaven, which made for a poor match with his scruffy beard. He was wearing a pair of pitch-black sunglasses too, and he was so muscular it looked like each of his arms was as thick as my torso. In short, he looked really scary and really tough. Normally, I’d have tried to stay at *least* three meters away from a guy like him at all times, but he was

the perfect candidate to pull into my operation, no two ways about it.

Now that I'd settled on making the bald guy my target, I tiptoed over toward him, ready to play my prank...only to gasp as I found myself face-to-face with another fatal flaw in my plan's foundation: I was kind of a coward.

I was shy, and timid, and *very* easily spooked, and I was supposed to play a prank on a terrifying guy like *him*? *N-No way! I can't! I'm way too scared!*

B-But, well, then again...this is probably for the best, right? When I really think about it, pulling some total stranger into my personal operation would be a really bad thing to do. Yeah, for sure! I can't go around causing trouble for people like that! Okay, plan's over, too bad, what a failure! Just when I'd convinced myself to give up, though...

"Hm? What's up, kid?"

...the bald guy *noticed me*! I let out a squeal as my heart seemed to leap all the way up into my mouth. I was so surprised that I just froze up, unable to move an inch.

"You lost or somethin'?" asked the man.

"U-Umm," I stammered.

"Mommy and daddy wandered off somewhere, eh? How 'bout I take you over to the lost kiddies desk?"

"Ah, ugh," I gasped. The incredible, terrifying force of his stare had me overwhelmed and speechless, and the curt, casual way *he* was speaking to *me* only amplified the effect. I was so scared and tense it felt like I might just pop under the pressure. I had *no* idea what I should do, and I was just about to break down in tears...when a voice rang out.

"Hey, Kuki!" Andou called from behind me. "*There* you are! Sheesh, you had us worried! Why'd you vanish all of a— Uh, huh? Wh-What's going on here?"

I took just enough time to turn around and make sure it was really Andou, then flung myself toward him, wrapping my arms around his torso and squeezing him as hard as I could. I was just about sobbing at that point. *Waaah! I was so scaaaared!*

“Hey, boy,” said the scary bald man. “You this li’l chick’s brother, or what?”

“No, but, uh...I guess I’m her guardian, basically,” said Andou.

“Then keep a closer eye on her, for cryin’ out loud! You can’t just leave squirts on their own like that. Don’tcha feel sorry for her?”

“You’re totally right! My bad. I’ll be more careful,” Andou politely replied, then led me away by the hand. Our encounter with the bald man was over.

“H-Hey, Andou?” I said, still holding on to his hand for dear life. “W-W-Weren’t you scared?”

“Huh?” Andou blinked. “By what?”

“That guy,” I whimpered.

“Oooh,” said Andou. “Yeah, I guess he *did* have a pretty wild look going. He seemed like a nice guy, though, didn’t he? Like, it looked like he was worried about you and wanted to help and all.”

Actually...I guess that might be true, when he puts it that way. The bald man hadn’t done anything wrong at all—I’d just freaked out at him for no reason. *I’m sorry for being so scared, Mr. Bald Man. And I’m sorry I was planning on pranking you too.*

Operation Nobody Likes a Wimp: failed.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Huh? Where’re you going, Chifuyu?”

“That’s not something you should ask a lady.”

“Oooh, okay. Gotcha.”

Chii wandered off toward the restroom, leaving me and Andou alone together.

“Guess we can just hang out around here until she’s— *Whoa*, Kuki?!” Andou yelped, doing a double take as he turned around and found me slumped on the ground like a corpse. I’d collapsed the second Chii went away.

I let out a long, exhausted sigh. The failure of one operation after another had

started seriously wearing on me, emotionally speaking. I'd been keeping up a tough act in front of Chii, but now that she wasn't around and only Andou was watching, I just couldn't be bothered anymore. *Ugh... I'm starting to hate how little I can actually accomplish*, I thought. I'd stayed up all the way until *ten o'clock* thinking up those plans, and none of them had been even remotely effective. It was the first time in my life I'd burned the midnight oil like that, and it hadn't earned me a thing in the end.

"H-Hey, Kuki?" said Andou. "Are you okay? You look like a washed-up sea cucumber down there..."

His sympathy only enhanced my self-loathing. Also, calling me a sea cucumber was really mean of him. "Don't mind me, Andou," I groaned. "I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"O-Oh, that so...? You're *sure* you're okay?" Andou repeated.

He looked like he was really concerned about me. Sure, he was the monster who was deceiving my beloved best friend, and sure, I considered him my sworn enemy...but when all was said and done, I had to admit that he came across as a fundamentally kind and decent young man. He'd just saved me when I was paralyzed with fright by the scary bald man, after all. I was starting to understand, ever so slightly, why Chii had fallen for him. Just a little, though. Really.

"So, uhh...nice weather today, huh?" Andou said, suddenly changing the topic. Apparently, trying to keep a conversation with me flowing while I was collapsed on the ground wasn't easy. "Guess we have Chii and Charmy to thank for that, huh?"

"That's right. It's all thanks to Chii...and Charmy's brains," I said.

Andou winced. "So, is Chifuyu, y'know...like *that* at school too? Always coming up with crazy, out-there ideas and stuff?"

"She is," I said. "Chii's always herself, no matter the time or place. That stuff about Charmy's brain was totally normal compared to some of the stuff she does."

"That was normal?!"

“For example, last summer vacation, we were supposed to draw a landscape we could see from our houses as homework for our art class. Chii turned in a blank piece of paper and said it was titled *The Air*.”

“Yup, that’s pretty out-there, all right! No corners left to cut on that one!”

“Our art teacher got really mad at her, of course, but then Chii argued back using 4’33” as a counter-example.”

“4’33”...? Isn’t that, like, that really weird orchestral piece where the musicians don’t play anything at all and just sit there in total silence for a full 273 seconds? And the idea’s supposed to be that the audience listens to the sounds that *they* make in the silence, and that ambient noise is the piece or something?”

“Yes, that’s right. Chii insisted that *The Air* was art in the same sort of way and refused to back down. She dug her heels in and never admitted that she could even possibly be in the wrong.”

“Wow, that’s... I mean, wouldn’t it be easier to just draw an actual picture, at that point?”

“Chii spares no effort when it comes to being lazy.”

“She’s a real walking paradox, huh?”

“In the end, our art teacher backed down and declared *The Air* to be a legitimate painting.”

“A blank sheet of paper?! Seriously?! Is your art teacher, y’know, *okay*?!”

“Maybe not, actually. Our teacher went a little crazy after that and submitted *The Air* to a national art competition. It didn’t *win*...but supposedly, the judging committee ended up with a split opinion and got into a really heated debate over it.”

“So she slacked her way into being treated like a super cutting-edge, avant-garde artist...? Man, I can never decide whether Chifuyu’s really incredible or not incredible in the slightest,” said Andou with a bewildered shake of his head. He looked pretty conflicted. “You have it rough too, huh, Kuki? Don’t your classmates call you Chifuyu’s mom, or something?”

That nickname—or maybe I should call it a popular opinion—had spread through my class before I knew it, and it had even made it as far as my teachers. I hadn't liked it at first since I thought they were making fun of me, but when I realized that Chii wasn't upset at all about them saying that about me...it might've made me a little happy. That was why it didn't bother me at all anymore.

"I don't have it rough at all," I said. I was still lying on the ground, but I spoke up as loud as I could and made that point very clear. "After all, Chii's my friend. She's important to me."

And that's exactly why I can't hand her off to some boy before I make very sure that he's worthy of her. That's my responsibility as Chii's school mom!

Just then, a ringing noise played over the pool's announcement system, followed by a voice. "This is an announcement to all park guests. The Pets & Pups Quiz Show will be held at the central event stage. If you wish to participate, please proceed..."

I went from spawled out on the ground to sitting bolt upright in a split second. It was finally time for the final operation to begin!

The Pets & Pups Quiz Show was the day's main event. Information about it had been plastered all over the flyer that I'd found in my family's mailbox advertising the pool. It was a special summer vacation attraction that would be running for the next three days, it seemed.

"Let's see here," Andou muttered as he looked over the informational flyer posted by the venue. "Participation's open to everyone as long as you have a kid who's elementary-school-aged or younger in your group, and each group can have up to five people, huh? I guess that means the three of us could join in."

The event area was packed with people. We got in line and waited for our turn to handle our registration. When we were just one team away from the front, though, a thought seemed to strike Andou.

"Wait a second... Hey, Chifuyu, Kuki! See that poster over there? It says that since they're expecting a ton of interest in the event, you have to sign up for it

in advance. I think they're probably gonna turn us away, aren't they?"

"No, they won't. I already signed us up," I explained just as the team ahead of us finished. I stepped up to the receptionist, gave her my name, and she handed me three participant badges on lanyards: one for each of us to wear.

"Whoa, so you were planning on participating in this quiz thing from the very start?" asked Andou, his eyes wide with shock.

"That's right," I said. "In fact, you could even say that we came here today for the sake of this quiz show. Right, Chii?"

"Mmhmm. That's right," said Chii with an excited nod.

"Huh! I had no idea. You could've just told me, y'know?" said Andou.

Oh, but of course I couldn't! After all, if I'd told you about the quiz, you might have figured out my scheme!

Plan number 4: Operation Nobody Likes a Moron!

1. We join the quiz show. Chii and I do super well.
2. Andou's totally useless. "Durr, these questions are haaard..."
3. Chii's super disappointed in him.

This was the final and ultimate plan that I'd be carrying out today. The biggest reason I'd chosen this place as our destination was their quiz show. Normally, you'd think that a high schooler like Andou would be a lot more prepared to answer trivia questions than a couple elementary schoolers like us...but *this* quiz was themed around animals, and *that* changed things entirely!

"All right, it's time for us to begin! Contestants, please make your way to the stage!" said a lady with a microphone who seemed to be working as the quiz show's announcer.

Ten groups in total, mostly made up of families, filed their way onto the stage. Each team was assigned to a desk, and the desks had partitions separating them from the other teams to make sure that nobody could peek at another group's answers. Our participation badges told us that we were team number 3, so we

made our way to the third desk in the row and stood behind it.

Once all the teams were in position, the announcer lady started explaining the rules. “Okay, everyone,” she said, “Today, we’ll be asking you ten questions about animals! Your parents and siblings can help out as much as they want, so do your best to work together and solve all of them! Once you’ve decided on your answer, please write it on your group’s whiteboard and hold it up for us to see. And last but not least...we have a range of wonderful prizes in store for any group that can get enough questions correct! First up, for families that answer at least three questions correctly...”

As the announcer carried on with her explanation, Andou leaned over to whisper into Chii’s ear. “Hey, Chifuyu,” he said. “You seem pretty into this whole quiz thing, huh? Is there a prize you’re aiming for?”

“That,” Chii said as she pointed toward the corner of the stage where the prizes were displayed. Specifically, she pointed at a *huge* stuffed whale. It must have been over two meters long—not life-sized, sure, but still big enough to be...kind of off-putting, honestly. It was just...so big.

“The whale, huh? Looks like we need to get eight questions right to get that one. We’ve got our work cut out for us,” said Andou.

“I’ll do it. That’s what I came here for,” said Chii, her eyes sparkling with a sort of enthusiasm that was rare for her.

Seeing her act that excited made all the effort it had taken to plan this outing feel like it was worth it. My ultimate plan would make Chii happy *and* deal a blow to her image of Andou! It was a super plan that would net me two birds with one stone! *Heh heh heh!*

“And the final prize! If you make a clean sweep of the quiz and answer all ten questions correctly, you’ll receive...ta-daaa!” the host shouted as a drape that had been concealing the final prize dropped away, revealing a shiny white car. “That’s right! You’ll receive a brand new Pajero!”

“A *P-P-Pajero*?!” Andou shrieked, his eyes bulging with shock.

“What’s wrong, Andou?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?!” Andou shouted. “They’re giving away a friggin’ *Pajero*?!”

Why?! Those things are pretty dang expensive! That's a crazy jump in value from the next fanciest prize! I mean, sure, giving out cars on quiz shows is a thing sometimes, but this is just ridiculous!"

"I-Is it? I don't really know much about cars, so I guess I'll have to take your word for it," I said.

"Huh?! You don't know about Pajeros, Kuki?" Andou exclaimed.

"No, I don't."

"N-No way... Come on, you *must've* heard of them! Y'know, there's that one game show where they do the chant? 'Pajero, Pajero!'"

"Uh?"

"Seriously...? Of all the things to make me feel the generation gap... Guess elementary school kids these days just don't watch *Friend Park*... Guess they probably don't know about the comically short roller coaster the contestants make their entrance on, or how people get so competitive in the air hockey part that it's honestly kinda creepy..."

I didn't really understand, but at the very least, I could tell that there was something about the Pajero that had left Andou profoundly shaken.

"But man, holy crap! I can't believe they're giving away a Pajero in a quiz show that any random person can sign up for. They're not even charging us to participate! No wonder all the parents seemed so hyped up about this," Andou muttered to himself.

"I don't care about any of that," Chii bluntly remarked. "The whale is the only prize I want," she continued with such an unusually serious look on her face, I never would've even been able to imagine her making it if I hadn't seen it for myself. She reached up, undid her pigtails, then tied her hair back in a single ponytail, just like mine.

"Chii...I can't believe you're *that* serious about this," I said.

"Huh?" Andou grunted. "W-Wait, what...? What's going on, Kuki? Does Chifuyu tying her hair in a ponytail, like, mean something?"

"Chii only ever ties her hair back like that when she's really serious about

something,” I explained.

“News to me...but I guess I get it. It’s sort of a routine to help her concentrate, right?”

“When Chii ties her hair back...her ability to concentrate rises to five times its usual level!”

“*Dang!*”

“In other words—about one or two times the average person’s concentration ability!”

“D-Dang,” Andou repeated, suddenly looking more than a little doubtful.

Really, now. He doesn’t understand how significant this is at all! How could he not see that Chii being able to concentrate on the same level as a normal person is basically a miracle in and of itself?

“Try talking to her, Andou,” I said. “I’m guessing she’s already concentrating so fully, she won’t even be able to hear you.”

“Oh, *really*? In that case, I guess I’ll just have to give it a try!” Andou said, then stealthily slipped over to Chii’s side, leaned in...and *blew into her ear*!

“Mnaaaah! Ah...mnh...ahh...” Chii squeaked. For someone who was supposedly concentrating as hard as possible, she was doing quite a lot of twitching and shivering. She looked like she was so weak in the knees she might collapse at any second, even! Pretty soon she started blushing and tearing up, and finally, she clasped her hands over her ears. “Stop,” she muttered. “I can’t...take it... My ears are...sensitive...”

“Wh-Wh-What are you *doing*, Andou?!” I shouted.

“Wha— No, it’s not what you think! I just thought that if she was concentrating that hard, it’d be fun to play a little prank on her!”

“So you decided to *blow in her ear*?!”

“I’m sorry, seriously! I had no idea her ears were her weak point!”

“H-Her *weak point*?! Why would you say it like *that*?! Pervert! Andou, you’re a filthy degenerate!”

“Okay, now I’m just being falsely accused!”

“Pervert! This man’s a pervert! You stupid lolicon!”

“Nooo, *stop*! You can’t shout stuff like that in public!”

“Ugggh... Andou, you jerk,” Chii grumbled off to the side.

While our group descended into a state of chaos, the announcer kept explaining the rules and moving the quiz along. Before long, it was time for the first question.

“Okay, you two,” said Andou, “this is no time to be squabbling about nonsense like this! We have to come together and take this quiz on with everything we’ve got! Our hearts are as one! All for one...!”

“...”

“...”

“...A-And...one for all... Hurraaay...”

Chii and I ignored Andou and his stupid antics, instead turning our attention to the big screen where the questions would be displayed.

Question 1: Name the following animal.

—These animals are found in Africa and are famous for their pink sweat, which works as a disinfectant and moisturizes their skin in the harsh, arid environments they inhabit. Zookeepers also sometimes rub them down with olive oil to help protect their skin.

“Huh? Wait, seriously...? That’s the *first* question? Isn’t that kinda hard? Who puts a question like *that* in a quiz for little kids, for crying out loud?! I guess it makes sense you’d have to earn that Pajero, but still,” Andou said, sounding a little dejected. “And, like, olive oil? Seriously, *olive oil*? Where’s that even coming from? Is that seriously a thing? Was the zookeeper Hayami Mocomichi? Is this just *Moco’s Kitchen*?!”

“Do you know the answer, Andou?” I asked.

Andou hesitated. “Sorry, but nope. No clue. What do you guys think? Maybe we can come up with a decent guess if we put our heads together and—”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” I said, curtly shutting down his pointless suggestion. “A question like *that* is child’s play for us.”

“Wait, what do you... *Huh?!*” Andou yelped as he looked over at Chii, his eyes widening with shock. She’d taken up her marker and started writing her answer without so much as a hint of doubt or hesitation. She’d gone into the zone the second the quiz had started, and now she was directing every ounce of her enhanced concentration toward answering the question. The speed with which her marker zoomed across the whiteboard was downright unnatural.

“Wh-Whoa, she really *is* concentrating crazy hard on this,” said Andou. “She’s like the TV version of Detective Galileo, seriously... Actually, wait—you said ‘for *us*,’ right? Do *both* of you know the answer?”

“Yes,” I said with a nod. “Chii and I are both well versed when it comes to animals. Chii’s family has lots of illustrated animal encyclopedias in their home, and the two of us read them together all the time.”

“Oh, huh... That’s really something.”

“Really, though, I can hardly hold a candle to Chii’s level of knowledge,” I continued.

Chii loved animals, and she knew all sorts of trivia about them. She’d read the encyclopedias in her house so many times that she practically had them memorized front to back. It was no wonder she’d gotten so unusually worked up over the quiz show once she’d learned it was about animals.

Before long, Chii finished writing and held up her whiteboard, upon which she’d written “hippo.”

“And the correct answer is...the hippo!” said the announcer. We’d gotten the first answer right!

“You did it, Chii!” I said.

“Mnh,” Chii grunted as she high-fived me. “I’m just getting started.”

I’ll admit...I was a *little* bothered by the fact that she’d spent so long

concentrating like live-action Detective Galileo, scribbling away on the whiteboard with so much intensity, only to write such a short word, but I decided not to question it.

“Oh, huh! Hippos have pink sweat, and zookeepers rub them down with olive oil? That’s wild,” said Andou.

“I guess you didn’t know any of that, then?” I said with a slightly mocking smirk.

Andou’s eyebrow twitched. “N-No, I mean... I-I knew that, totally! I just didn’t want to steal your moment in the spotlight, you know? Like, what sorta self-respecting adult barges into a kids’ quiz and gives away all the answers, right?”

“Suspicious,” Chii grunted, giving him a disappointed glance.

“Chifuyu, nooo! Don’t look at me like that!” Andou wailed. His desperate excuses had only worked against him!

Excellent. This is going just as planned!

“I see about half of our participating teams got the question correct,” said the announcer. “Maybe that was juuust a little hard for the first question? Feel free to help out, parents—that’s what you’re here for! Moving right along to question two!”

Question 2: Name the following animal.

—This species is the largest type of bony fish in the world. They lack scales, and their skin is covered in a layer of mucus that makes them vulnerable to a wide variety of parasites. These fish are unusually clumsy swimmers, and they are known to be quite difficult to raise in aquariums thanks to their tendency to crash into the tank’s wall and die of blunt trauma.

“What sort of stupid fish is *that*? They kill themselves by running into walls? That’s just plain sad...”

Andou was muttering nonsense to himself again, and meanwhile, Chii was still in full concentration mode, applying her one-to-two-times-the-average

concentration ability to scribble down an answer to the question: “ocean sunfish.”

“And the answer is...the ocean sunfish!” said the announcer. Chii had nailed it once again.

“Great work, Chii!” I shouted.

“Woohoo,” said Chii, giving me another high five.

“Seriously?” said Andou. “Sunfish really lead that tragic of an existence...?”

“That’s right, Andou,” I said with a solemn nod. “Ocean sunfish walk a terribly perilous path in life.” *Well, it’s more like they swim one than walk it, really. And I guess they’d follow a current instead of a path.*

In any case, I began to explain to Andou the tragic truth of the sunfish’s way of life. “You see...”

- Even though they can only swim at a speed of about two kilometers an hour, they evolved to have fins that are so small and useless that they still can’t change course well, so they frequently run into rocks...and die.
- Sometimes when they sunbathe on the ocean’s surface, they accidentally wash up onto the shore...and die.
- Sometimes during their sunbathing, they get attacked by birds...and die.
- Sometimes they eat crabs or shrimp, whose shells can perforate their innards...and die.
- They’re terrible at swimming, but they also can’t breathe unless they swim, so sometimes they can’t find a way to keep moving...and die.
- They like to jump out from the water to try to shake parasites off their bodies, but they’re not very impact resistant, so sometimes they’ll slam against the surface too hard...and die.
- They’re basically just vulnerable to physical and mental stress on a fundamental level, so more often than not, they sort of just give up...and die.”

“Okay, that’s *gotta* be too much random death!” Andou screamed, his words laced with a tragic despair. And he was right. Sunfish, very simply, die way too often. They live short, tragic lives...and die.

“You’re kidding, right?” he pleaded with exasperation. “Is that seriously how sunfish work? That’s not living on hard mode—it’s living on Sunfish Must Die mode! Their name’s so bright and sunny, but deep down, each and every one of them bears a terrible fate... How are they not extinct, seriously?”

“Sunfish females lay lots and lots of eggs,” I explained. “That’s how they’ve avoided being wiped out, I think. They’re said to lay the most eggs out of any vertebrate, actually—they can lay up to three hundred million of them at once!”

“Three hundred million?! Holy crap!”

“But only a very, *very* small number of those eggs hatch and live to see adulthood.”

“No way... How are sunfish *this* tragic? They survive one in three hundred million odds only to crash into rocks and die?”

“Poor Andous,” Chii muttered sadly, then looked up at Andou. “You should be nice to all the Andous from now on, Sunfish.”

“Uh, Chifuyu...? I know this isn’t really the moment to correct this sort of thing, but you had that backwards. You know I’m not a sunfish, right?”

“Ah— I think it’s time for the next question, Sunfish.”

“Not you too, Kuki?! Stop it! I really don’t want that nickname to stick!”

Reality is a cold, heartless mistress, and all I could do was turn a blind eye to the sunfish’s tragic fate and return my attention to the quiz as it moved along.

The questions they threw at us continued to be pretty high level, but none of them were enough to give Chii trouble at all. By the time the seventh question wrapped up, we were the only group that had answered every one of them correctly.

“Just one more question, and you’ll have your whale, Chii! We can do it!” I said.

“Yeah,” said Chii, “I’ll do my best. I’ll try *super* hard.”

“Honestly, Chii, you’re incredible! Not even I knew a few of those answers!”

“You’re amazing too, Cookie. I only got the seventh one right because you helped me think it through.”

“Oh, I didn’t do anything, really! I was just spitballing! *You’re* the amazing one, Chii! Especially compared to a certain *someone*,” I added as I glanced behind me at the man who was both the oldest in our group *and* the least useful member by a wide margin. He’d crouched down at some point, and he looked like he was sulking. It seemed his own uselessness was getting to him. “You haven’t been able to answer a single question so far, have you, Sunfish?”

“You know what...? I deserve this. I’m fine with being a sunfish. Maybe I’ll just go find a rock to crash into and die on,” Andou muttered. He’d ended up in an even more negative mindset than I’d expected.

“You’re useless, Andou,” said Chii, looking down on him scornfully. That, it seemed, dealt the finishing blow, and Andou slumped prone to the ground.

Heh heh heh! My plan’s working out perfectly! Chii’s opinion of him is dropping like a rock!

“All right,” said the announcer, “It’s time for question number 8! These last three questions will be juuust a little harder, but do your best to solve them all!”

I thought that everything was going perfectly...but then the eighth question came along and threw a wrench into the works.

Question 8: Name the following scientific experiment.

—This thought experiment was formulated by a European physicist in order to explain an aspect of quantum theory. The proposed experiment involved shutting a cat in a box with a dose of lethal gas, which, according to quantum mechanics, would leave it in a superimposed state of being simultaneously alive and dead.

“*Wha—?!*” I choked. I was at a total loss for words. *A physicist? Quantum theory? I-I’ve never heard of any of this stuff!* The question was a complete departure from the animal trivia we’d been answering up until that point. They

hadn't raised the difficulty level—they'd shunted the whole quiz into a completely different subject! The only way it was even remotely related to the quiz's theme was that it technically involved a cat! "Why would they *do* that...?"

There was just no way a kid could know the answer to a question like that. Actually, I didn't think most adults would be able to answer it either! All of the parents to either side of me certainly seemed to be throwing up their hands in befuddlement. Nobody could have been happy with the fact that we'd gotten slammed with a question like *that* out of nowhere. It was an outrage, and I was sure the other participants would agree with me...but when I took a closer look at them, I was shocked.

"I guess they *would*, huh?" said one of the parents.

"No way they'd *actually* let us win a Pajero from a quiz like this, right?" quipped another.

"Yeah, I saw this coming a mile away! Ha ha ha!"

All of the parents seemed completely unsurprised. The people running the quiz obviously had no intention of letting anyone get every answer correct, but the participants weren't mad about it at all.

Could it be...they all think this is reasonable? The quiz was scheduled to run two more times, tomorrow and the day after. The people running it probably thought that they couldn't afford to let their grand prize get snatched away on day one. In a certain sense, it was a given that they'd fine-tune the difficulty on the fly as the quiz went on.

Or maybe, in truth, they'd never had any intention of handing over the Pajero to begin with. Maybe they'd been willing to raise the difficulty as high as it took to make sure that nobody managed to answer every single question. Some of the participants might resent that, sure, but it wasn't like we'd paid to participate in the quiz, so surely nobody would bother kicking up *that* much of a fuss about it. Maybe there'd been a tacit understanding between the organizers and the adult participants that there'd be a degree of fine-tuning and string-pulling going on behind the scenes, and when all was said and done, the adults were just here to enjoy themselves. But, if that were the case...

"...That's not fair," Chii muttered. Her fingers were clenched so hard around

her marker they were shaking. “This isn’t an animal quiz at all!”

The half-shouted words that spilled from Chii’s mouth were laced with bitter frustration. She couldn’t have cared less about the needs and convenience of the adults running the show. She truly loved animals, and she’d approached this challenge with complete sincerity. Her frustration wasn’t about being denied her prize—it was about being torn from the experience. She’d been concentrating her hardest, fully engrossed in the quiz, and enjoying it more than anyone else...but in the end, it had betrayed her, and in a really harsh way.

Oh...this is my fault, isn't it? If only I'd thought this through more. If only I hadn't roped her into participating in this sad excuse for a quiz...

“Chii,” I began, but I couldn’t find the right words to say to her. My heart was full of guilt and self-loathing. Chii was right there, looking like she might break down in tears right in front of me, but I couldn’t do anything at all to help.

But that’s when *he* spoke up.

“Are you frustrated, Chifuyu?” Andou asked, laying a big, gentle hand down on her head.

“Andou,” muttered Chii.

“Do you despise those adults for resorting to such underhanded means?” he asked, speaking slowly and calmly. He was smiling—a smile that was so warm and kind it felt like it could wrap the whole world up in its gentle embrace, but one that also bore a profound strength.

“Yeah,” said Chii. “I’m frustrated. I’m really, really mad...”

“In that case,” said Andou, “how about we smash it all to pieces? We’ll tear those adults’ ugly, rotten world down to its foundations.”

Chii looked up at him. “Can you? Can you really do that, Andou?”

“I sure can,” said Andou. “I’ll make the world itself my enemy, if you so will it.”

“Then do it. Tear it down, Andou... No,” Chii began, then shook her head. “Tear it down, Guiltia Sin Jurai,” she said, reciting the name as if it were the title of a legendary hero.

Andou's eyes lit up. A fearless, intrepid grin spread across his face.

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Andou took up Chii's marker, scrawled an answer onto the whiteboard without wasting a second, then thrust it up for the announcer to see.

"‘Sch-Schrödinger's cat.’ Th-That's correct!" the host said, her smile twitching ever so slightly. It seemed she was pretty surprised by this turn of events, and I was too! Not even in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that Andou was knowledgeable about physics!

"Th-That was amazing!" I said. "But how did you know?"

"Oh, please," said Andou. "Schrödinger's cat is common knowledge! Hah hah hah!"

"‘Common knowledge’? Well, I've certainly never heard of it before. What on earth is an experiment like that supposed to prove?! Teach me, please! In detail!"

A lengthy pause ensued. "C-Come on, Kuki," Andou finally said. "Nobody likes hearing someone prattle on and on about their pet subjects, right? No matter *how* knowledgeable they are about them!"

What?! Not only is he well educated, he's also humble enough to not show it off?! That's so admirable!

"W-Well, it looks like only one group got that question right," said the announcer. "In fact, they've gotten *every* question right so far! You're almost there, but the next question's going to be even harder than the last one! Good luck!"

Question 9: Name the following weapon.

—This weapon is known as one of the three most famous spears in Japanese history. Wielded by Honda Tadakatsu, a general in the Warring States period, it earned its name when a certain insect landed on its head and split clean in half on account of the spear's preternatural sharpness.

A w-weapon?! Really?! This doesn't have anything to do with animals anymore! The last question involved a cat, at least, but this time, the closest the question comes to including the quiz's theme is referencing an insect! Are they trying to say that bugs count as animals too?! It'd be one thing if they were asking for the general's name, but asking for the name of his spear is just plain dirty! You'd have to be some sort of history professor to know that!

...Or so I'd thought. Andou, however, once again started scribbling onto our whiteboard, holding it up and shouting his answer at the same time.

"The Dragonfly Cutter!"

"Th-That's correct!"

And he got it right, again!

"Mwa ha ha! No matter how low my foe chooses to stoop, I shall bring my all to bear and defeat them without resorting to trickery!" Andou declared. He was really hamming it up, but I didn't mind. He'd earned it.

"That was *incredible*, Andou! I can't believe you have the names of famous generals' weapons memorized!" I gushed.

"Heh heh heh! Come now—who *doesn't* have the three great spears and five great swords of Japan committed to memory?" said Andou.

"You know *so much* about history! I can't believe it! By the way, what sort of person was Honda Tadakatsu?"

"Hmm—broadly speaking, he's one of the series's most powerful characters! Going up against him is just about as rough as taking on Lü Bu. He's got high stats all around, which makes him a really straightforward character to play as, and he's also got this really great skill that fills up a bar of the Musou Gauge!"

"A...powerful character? The...*what* gauge? Excuse me?"

Andou paused for a moment. "Y-Y'know what, Kuki? There's no point in fixating on a question you've already answered! Let's get our minds in gear for the last question instead!"

Oh, wow! He's already thinking ahead and preparing for the next challenge! I guess he's not one to rest on his laurels! There's always another battle to fight,

whether you're competing in a quiz show or leading samurai onto the fields of war!

"It's finally time for our last question, and if you manage to answer it correctly...the Pajero is all yours! I'm not sure, though—this last one might be downright impossible! It's so hard, you wouldn't believe it," said the announcer, who was visibly sweating. The other teams had all given up at that point, and since we were the ones on the verge of winning a Pajero, we had naturally ended up the center of everyone's attention. All eyes were fixed on us as the final question was read out.

Question 10: Name the following object.

—This device was used as an implement of torture in ancient Greece. Made from brass and shaped like a cow, its victims were shoved into—

"The Bull of Phalaris!"

That was instant! This is the last question, and he didn't even wait for her to finish! That made him look so rude it's ridiculous, but he doesn't even care! Incredible!

"Th-That's correct! That's *absolutely* correct! You've answered every question flawlessly, and with that, the Pajero's yours!" wailed the announcer, whose sweat was now pouring down her face in a waterfall. The crowd, meanwhile, was going *crazy*, clapping and cheering for us with wild abandon. I couldn't even describe the sense of joy and accomplishment I was filled with—I just didn't know what to do with myself!

"Andou," said Chii.

"How'd you like that, Chifuyu?" said Andou. "Satisfied now?"

"Yeah!"

The two of them beamed at each other and exchanged a victory high five.

My ultimate plan, Operation Nobody Likes a Moron: failed. Failed miserably, even. As miserably as a plan could fail. I hadn't made Andou look bad in Chii's

eyes—I'd given him the perfect chance to save her in a moment of crisis. She probably admired him more than ever now...and even / found myself thinking that he might actually be pretty cool.

The quiz drew to a close, leaving the event staff in a full-blown panic.

"What do you *mean* they got them all right?! What the *hell* are we supposed to do now?! That car's a *rental*, dammit!"

"Hey, don't act like this is *my* fault! I just read the slides like they told me to! If anyone's to blame here, it's whoever wrote those stupid questions!"

"Oh no you don't! This isn't my fault either! Hell, I was against this whole stunt from the start!"

"Well...shit. I think we might be hosed, guys. I mean, *somebody's* gonna have to foot the bill for this car."

I managed to catch bits and pieces of a foulmouthed exchange, mostly consisting of the organizers trying to foist responsibility for the problem onto each other. It was pretty clear now that they really *hadn't* ever planned on actually giving the Pajero to anyone. Before their scandalous spat could reach any sort of conclusion, though, Andou walked up to them.

"Oh! H-Hello, sir," said one of the staff members, cutting off their argument and stiffening his posture in a second. He was showing an awful lot of diffidence, considering Andou was just a high schooler.

"Hey, hopefully this isn't too much trouble, but about the prize...can we have the one you get for eight correct answers instead? Y'know, the stuffed whale?" asked Andou.

Every member of the event staff gaped at him. They were completely blown away by his request.

"*Huh?!*" one of them exclaimed. "I mean... R-Really?!"

"Yeah," said Andou. "That wouldn't be a problem or anything, right?"

"O-O-Of course not! Th-That's totally fine, no issues at all...b-but, are you *really* sure?"

“Yeah, we were after the whale from the start, honestly. And, like, I don’t even have a license! Plus, it just feels wrong to win a Pajero unless there’s a dartboard involved,” said Andou.

Before I knew it, the staff were bowing as deeply as they could to him and thanking him profusely.

“It’s cool. Just be sure to play fair next time, okay?” Andou said with a slightly smug grin, then walked back over to me and Chii. “I know this might not sit totally right with you, Chifuyu...but this is what’s best for everyone, right? I’d feel kinda bad for all the staff people if we *actually* demanded they hand over the car,” he said.

“Yeah. I understand,” said Chii. “It’s okay.”

“Are you cool with this too, Kuki?” he asked, turning to me next.

Obviously, I didn’t mind at all, and I nodded in agreement. “But...don’t *you* mind, Andou?”

“Mind what?”

“Well, you worked so hard, but *you’re* not getting anything in the end! You could’ve had a brand-new car, but you’re just giving it away!”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong. I *already* got something,” said Andou, sliding his hands into his swim trunks’ pockets and turning his back to us. Then he set off, never looking back, as he delivered his final line. “Your smiles are the best reward I could ask for.”

“...”

So.

So. So. So.

So! Cooooooooooooool!



Around three in the afternoon, we decided to get ready to leave. Chii and I headed for the women's locker room, where I wrapped myself up in a towel to protect my modesty and got changed beneath it. A few moments of rustling around like a moth in its cocoon later, I emerged fully clothed and headed over to the sinks, where I dried my hair off with a blow-dryer. I certainly couldn't walk around with wet hair, after all! After I was all dry, I got to work drying Chii's hair as well.

"Andou was amazing today, wasn't he?" I said as I carefully blow-dried her long, beautiful hair.

"Yeah. He usually is," said Chii. It almost sounded like she was bragging about him. "Andou knows lots of complicated words."

"He really does. He must be smart," I agreed.

"Well...I don't know," said Chii.

H-Huh? I thought that using lots of big words guarantees that you're smart! Was I wrong?

"Andou's a dummy, after all," Chii continued. It was a scathing critique, but she wasn't done yet. "He's a dummy, but...he always helps me too."

I could see Chii's face reflected in the mirror before us. She was smiling faintly as she talked about him, and her cheeks were a little flushed, even though she'd just gotten out of the pool and *had* to be feeling chilly.

I felt a sense of crushing isolation in my chest as I gazed at her absentminded smile. *I think I see now. It could be that this was never about Andou in particular. It might not've mattered to me if he was a lolicon or not. Maybe no matter whom she fell for, I would've done my best to get between the two of them and test her partner for all I was worth.*

It seemed that, in the end, all that had really mattered to me was the fact that I didn't want someone else to steal her away. I'd been driven by my jealousy and my desire to monopolize her attention, and I'd ended up acting really possessive as a result. I *knew* that the time I'd tried to force her to choose between me and her club had just made her miserable...but it turned out I hadn't learned from the experience at all.

“Thanks for today, Cookie,” said Chii, her cheerful words cutting through the gloom I was sinking into. “It was really fun.”

“You shouldn’t thank me. I mean, I was...” I said, then trailed off as I felt a stinging pain in my chest. I’d planned out this whole trip with the hope that it would make her hate Andou. “Hey, Chii,” I said. “Do you like me?”

“Yeah,” said Chii.

“Okay—then do you like Andou?”

Chii paused, and silence fell, broken only by the whirr of the blow-dryer. Finally, she muttered her reply.

“Yeah... I like him.”

Her response was completely different this time. It was obvious. The same single, simple word carried a totally different meaning.

“I gotta go,” Chii said, then stood up without warning. I wasn’t finished blow-drying her hair yet, but she dashed out of the locker room anyway.

“H-Huh? Ch-Chii! Where’re you going?!” I called after her.

“To Andou. I have to tell him something,” said Chii, and with that determined declaration, she was gone.

“Something to tell him...? N-No way!” I yelped. I was about to chase after her, but then I remembered that all of our stuff was still in the locker room. I quickly grabbed the bags that Chii and I had packed our swimsuits in, returned the blow-dryer to its proper position, and *then* sprinted after her.

This is awful... She’s going to tell him that she likes him, I just know it! She’s going to lay her feelings bare and whisper “I love you, I need you” in his ear! B-But she can’t! Not to him! I just can’t let Andou be her partner! Sure, I might see him in a new light after today, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’d be a lolicon dating a grade schooler—though I mean, I guess Chii will be a middle schooler in just three years...and wait, lolicons might not even like middle schoolers, but no, it doesn’t even matter who he is, the point is that I won’t let anyone date Chii because she’s my best friend, and I know that means I should support her instead of getting in her way, but Chii’s Chii, so if I let her do it all

her way, she'll Chii it all up for sure...

B-But whatever! Wait for me, Chiiiii!

I-I'm too late...

By the time I made it to our meetup spot in the entrance lobby, Chii had already gotten Andou's attention. Andou was straining under the bulk of the stuffed whale we'd won in the quiz, which he had slung over his back. It looked like it might crush him at any second, but with labored panting, he managed to turn to face Chii as she ran up to him.

Andou's eyes widened. "Chifuyu...? What's got you so worked up? And where's Kuki?" he asked.

I dove behind a nearby decorative plant, doing my best to stay out of eyeshot as I peeked through its leaves and spectated their conversation. I knew there wasn't anything I could do to stop this anymore, but as Chii's friend, I felt it was my duty to see it through to the end. Which is *not* the same thing as being a peeping Tom, so don't even say it, please.

"Andou," Chii said after taking a moment to catch her breath. "I want to talk."

Ahh! She's finally going to say it! I think I'm more nervous than she is! I've got chests in my butterflies!

"Uh, okay," said Andou, sounding a little confused. "I mean, that's fine, I guess, but before that, do you know your address? The staff people said they can ship the whale to your house, so it'd be a big help if you could write it down for them."

Andou, please, take a freaking hint! Nobody cares about the stupid stuffed whale right now! I shouted internally, using some really rough mental language that was *very* out of character for me. I was just that indignant! I was clenching the plant's stalk so tightly it felt like I might crush it, even...but I was soon shocked to learn that Chii really *had* wanted to talk with him about the whale after all.

"I don't need it," she said, shaking her head.

“Huh?”

“I don’t need the whale,” Chii repeated.

“Huuuh? B-But...*why*, though? I thought you joined the quiz to get this thing?” Andou protested.

I was just as bewildered as he was. *Why, Chii? You seemed so excited when I showed you the flyer for the quiz! You latched onto the idea right away! Didn’t you try your hardest to win because you wanted it so badly?*

“It’s for you,” said Chii, raising her voice just a little louder than usual. “You can have it, Andou.”

“Wait, *me*?” said Andou incredulously.

Chii nodded. “I was always planning on giving you the whale,” she said.

“You, uh, were?”

“Yeah. That’s why I did my best...even though you had to save me in the end.”

I was stunned. I’d had no idea that that was what she’d been after, and I’d had no idea that she’d gotten so fired up over the quiz because she was participating for Andou’s sake.

“Okay, but...*why*?” said Andou. “I mean, that’s really nice of you, and I’m really grateful, don’t get me wrong, but, like...where’s this *coming* from?”

“To pay you back,” said Chii.

“Pay me back for what?”

“For Squirrely. You got him for me.”

“Huh? Wait. Huh? Sorry, did I just hear that right? I...got Squirrely for you? But I thought Miss Satomi was the one who gave him to you? She said that she won him from a crane game...”

I’d heard that same story. Squirrely, the stuffed animal that Chii carried almost everywhere with her, was a gift she’d received from her aunt to celebrate her starting elementary school.

“Shiharu won him from a crane game,” said Chii.

“Right, yeah,” said Andou.

“She won him in one try. It took two hundred yen.”

“Oh, dang! That’s pretty impressive.”

“Someone else was playing first. He spent tons and tons of money and moved Squirrely into the perfect spot.”

“Ha ha! Yeah, that happens, all right. There’s always some moron who gets hit with the crane game curse and blows a huge chunk of cash on... Wait, that was *meeeeeee!*” Andou suddenly screamed. It was so abrupt he made me jump, not to mention a few of the other people who happened to be nearby too.

“Oh, *god*, that’s right! I totally remember now!” Andou yelled. “He was the one that was *so close*, but just didn’t quite fall in! This explains *so much*, jeez! I always *thought* I’d seen him somewhere before! Man, seriously, it all makes sense now!” Andou said, then he took a long, hard look at Squirrely, whom Chii had clutched to her chest at that very moment. “So, I guess that means *you* were the super cute little girl Sagami had mentioned... I can’t believe the two of us almost ran into each other way back then.”

I wasn’t completely following the story...but the phrase “super cute little girl” certainly caught my attention. *So he really is a lolicon, then! This proves it!*

“Seriously, that’s just *wild!* Talk about a crazy coincidence. But wait—why didn’t you ever say anything about it before now?” asked Andou.

“Because I wasn’t confident enough,” said Chii.

“Ahh... Yeah, I get that. You probably didn’t get a great look at my face, or anything.”

“I thought it’d be nice if it were true, though,” Chii added as she squeezed Squirrely a little tighter than before. “I wanted you to be the one who gave him to me,” she continued, breaking eye contact and hanging her head, as if to run from his gaze. Her cheeks were bright red, and she kept glancing around all over the place. She looked really, really nervous.

“I met Squirrely thanks to you,” said Chii. “You always play with me when I go to the literary club too. And you helped me when I was fighting with Cookie.

And...you helped me today too... You're always helping me, so...I'm giving the whale to you," she continued. Her voice grew quieter and quieter with every word, but her feelings still came through very clearly.

"Thank you for everything, Andou," Chii concluded, then buried her face in Squirrely to hide it away from him. From my vantage point, however, I could still clearly see how brightly she was blushing.

It seemed that I'd been jumping to conclusions. Chii hadn't wanted to tell Andou she loved him. She'd just wanted to thank him. For someone as spacey, lackadaisical, and whimsical as Chii, looking him in the eye and saying an earnest "Thank you" was probably as embarrassing as it could get. No wonder she was still cowering behind Squirrely.

Andou placed a hand on Chii's head, giving her a gentle pat. "No, thank *you*, Chifuyu," he said. "I'll take good care of him."

"Yeah," said Chii. "Hey, Andou? Give him a name too."

"Oh *ho*? A *name*, you say? Let me think... Hmm. He *is* a whale and all, so I could always take the classic approach and call him Moby Dick. Do you know about *Moby Dick*, Chifuyu? It's the title of a novel by a guy named Herman Melville, and they named a movie in *Prince of Tennis* and a boat in *One Piece* after it!"

"That's a good name," said Chii. "He can be Mr. Moo."

"What? No, wait a sec, Chifuyu. Doesn't 'Mr. Moo' sound like, y'know... Like, that's *totally* a cow name, right?"

"S-Sorry for the wait!" I called out. This seemed like a good moment for me to join the conversation...or rather, it seemed like if I waited any longer, there wouldn't be any good moments left for me to show up at. Anyway, I acted as if I'd just arrived and jogged up to the two of them.

"You're slow, Cookie," Chii grumbled.

How can you say that after you ran off and left me to bring you your belongings? Not that I really minded, though. That's just how Chii was.

While Andou went off to write down his address and get Mister Moo mailed

to his house, Chii and I went outside to double-check the bus schedule.

“Hey, Chii?” I said. “How do you feel? Is your heart going pitter-patter?”

“Yeah,” she said. “A little bit.”

“Are you going to eat a marshmallow?”

Chii hesitated for just a moment. “No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I don’t need one. This time...it feels a little nice.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, then chuckled. I’d assumed that Chii was in love with Andou, but I’d started to realize that, just maybe, I’d been mistaken. I was starting to think that the way she felt about him was closer to a familial sort of love. Or maybe it was something closer to friendship, or she looked up to him as a sort of father figure, or maybe it really *was* love-love after all.

But it doesn’t matter, I thought. In the end, there’s no way to tell. Certainly not for me, and not for Chii either, at the moment. That was fine, though. It was better for things to be hazy and ambiguous like that. We were still grade schoolers, after all—still children. The feelings that Chii had wanted to express when she’d thanked him were probably as pure and precious as feelings could be, and making a big fuss about what sort of love they might’ve represented just felt sort of crass at this point. And, in any case...

“Today sure was fun, wasn’t it, Chii?”

“Yeah. It was super great.”

Chii seemed to have had a blast, so I was willing to mark off the day as a good one regardless.

Chapter 2 ★ July and the Emblem of Peace Go to the Ocean with Their Families

“You know, I *hate* meta!”

Hatoko dropped *that* bombshell of a declaration out of absolutely nowhere. I couldn’t say what it was that made it such a bombshell in my mind, but for some reason, it felt like she was *really* playing with fire with that one.

I’d been sitting in the back seat of the car we were riding in, idly enjoying the scenery as we sped by it, but now I turned to stare at her. “Wh-Where did *that* come from?” I asked.

“Huh?” said Hatoko. “Nowhere, really? I was just making small talk, that’s all.”

Hatoko, please, some subjects just aren’t safe for small talk! I don’t really get why this one’s not safe, but, I mean...it just isn’t, okay? Setting that whole deal aside, I was struck by the fact that Hatoko had actually used the word “hate.” It was really rare for her to be that definitive about disliking something.

“Anyway,” I said, “are you even sure you’re using that word right? ‘Meta’ isn’t *just* a wacky sound effect you see in battle manga sometimes, y’know?”

“Yeah, I know!” said Hatoko. “It’s when a story starts talking about its own genre and stuff like that, right?”

Hmm. I mean, yeah, I guess that’s basically right. I couldn’t actually say that I understood all of the word’s nuances either, so I would’ve been sorta put on the spot if she’d asked me to explain it to her in perfect detail.

Meta: a prefix dating back to ancient Greece, meaning something to the tune of “extremely” or “the most.” These days, though, it’s most often used in the context of the term “metafiction.” Metafiction refers to works of media that are self-referential in regard to their medium or genre—a novel referring to the fact that it’s a novel, a manga that it’s a manga, a mystery that it’s a mystery, a fantasy that it’s a fantasy—or that feature characters who break the fourth wall, talking about things they couldn’t possibly know regarding the real,

nonfictional world. Basically, it refers to fiction that acknowledges the fact that it's fiction within its own fictional context.

Of course, when I try to put it into words like that, it stops making sense to *me*, even, so let's go with some examples instead! Imagine if the protagonist of a manga ends up catching a *really* unlucky break, and shouts something to the tune of "Why is this happening to me?! Aren't I supposed to be the protagonist?!" Or, alternatively, imagine a character in a mystery novel who expounds at length about the mystery genre, talking about its rules, storytelling theories, aesthetics, and history. Or a game character who says "You won't be able to save past this point!" or "Press the A button," speaking directly to the player.

Some famous lines like that that actually made it into print include "I'll wrap this up in a two-page spread!" "I win! Part Three is over!" and "Wow, Nobita, you never sound that cool in our normal-length chapters!" Oh, and this last one's purely subjective on my part, but in my book, "Krillin, think about it! You've got no nose!" is a *crazy* high-level example of meta humor. In short: if there's a line between fiction and reality that's generally best left uncrossed, or even *impossible* to cross by all reasonable standards, then metafiction refers to works that toe that line as precariously as they can possibly manage.

"Okay, but *why* do you hate meta stuff?" I asked. "And where are you even seeing it in the first place? Manga? Novels?"

"Hmm. Comedy, I guess," said Hatoko.

"Comedy?" I repeated. "Is meta humor even, like, a *thing* for the comedy groups you watch?"

"Huh? Well, not *really*, but...hmm. I was just watching a comedy program on TV the other day, and I sort of found myself thinking, 'Boy, a lot of comedy groups sure are going for meta jokes more often these days, huh?' Maybe I was wrong, though?"

Hatoko seemed just as bewildered as I was, and neither of us knew what to say next. At the very least, the fact that this was about comedy made her use of the word "hate" feel a little less shocking to me. Hatoko *really* liked comedy—in particular, a style of comedy called "manzai" performed by two-man groups,

though she also watched plenty of variety comedy shows—and she could be, well...a bit of a snob about it, honestly.

She was *usually* really lax when it came to judging stuff harshly on the whole. When she watched a new TV show or tried a new food, her typical reaction would be “That’s so cool,” or “It was interesting,” or “I liked it,” or “It was delicious!” Basically, she refused to express any opinion that wasn’t positive. Comedy, however, was different. Her opinions on *that* subject could get downright harsh.

“Okay, can we start by having you explain what you’re talking about a little more specifically?” I asked.

“Umm, okay,” said Hatoko. “So...I mostly mean comedians who’ll pause their skits or bits partway through and comment on their act as part of the act, I guess? Like, when they say stuff like ‘I’ve been performing for such-and-such years, and I’m *still* doing this bit,’ or ‘I hope you like this one, ’cause my career’s riding on it!’”

“Ooh... Yeah, I guess I *have* seen people toss in jokes like that before.”

In a sense, I could see how that sort of material would count as the comedy equivalent of meta humor. Whether you’re performing solo stand-up or a comedic dialogue, the act is supposed to *be* the act. Pulling in the circumstances surrounding the act or your own personal life *did* feel like it could be called meta, by a certain standard.

“I think of a comedian’s material as their work in the same way a comic or novel’s an author’s work, basically,” said Hatoko. “And when people start poking holes in their own work like that, it just feels, I don’t know...a little off?”

“Okay, but that’s not really a fair comparison, is it?” I said. “Like, manga and anime and stuff are *fiction*! That’s pretty different from comedy material, right? Isn’t turning your personal life into something worth laughing about what comedy’s all about for some people?”

“Yeah, that’s true, of course,” Hatoko admitted. “I suppose this is really just me not having the taste for that sort of joke. I like my comedy to be more traditional with its material.”

“Huuuh. Well, I guess meta humor’s always kind of divisive, no matter what media it’s in.”

If normal humor’s a fastball, then meta humor’s a curveball. If normal humor’s orthodox, then meta humor’s heresy.

“But, I mean...it sorta feels like any time a piece of media tries something really new or unusual, it ends up counting as meta,” I continued. “It comes across as you critiquing the genre your work falls into, or at least referencing it.”

Take, for instance, what we now call postmodern literature. From what I’d heard, when the movement was born, it served as a sort of antithesis to modern literature, and works that fell under its umbrella tended to be *very* metafictional in nature, but now it’s considered a genre in and of itself. And in the light novel world, you can take *Slayers* as a good example. That series is a landmark work in the medium’s history, and it’s considered an establishing piece of orthodox light novel fantasy these days. Back when it was first published, though, *Slayers* departed dramatically from the established fantasy conventions of the era and was popularly considered to be a work of meta fantasy.

“I guess that when people start making metafictional works in a genre, it’s proof that the genre’s become really well established?” I said. “Orthodox plotlines, tropes... Until all of them are established enough for us to acknowledge them as clichés, there’s no real point in getting meta about them.”

“Ahh, yeah, that makes sense,” said Hatoko. “After all, pair comedy has all sorts of standard patterns that seem pretty set by now! It makes sense that trying to do something new would end up leading to a meta sort of direction.”

“And when that sort of meta content gets popular, it starts to gradually shift from meta to mainstream...and then it’s only a matter of time before somebody shows up and decides to get meta about the meta. That’s how trends and movements get rolling, and how literature develops on the whole.”

Take recent mysteries, suspense stories, and police dramas. Lately, it feels like stories in those genres that *don’t* include some sort of meta element are actually rarer than the alternative. Almost all of them make *some* sort of

reference to some past work. Aspiring detectives who want to be just like Sherlock Holmes and police officers who grew up watching cop dramas are tropes in their own right, at this point.

“You said that you like it when comedy’s more traditional, but that’s kind of a fuzzy word to use here, isn’t it? What’s traditional now probably wasn’t thought of as traditional in the past, and there’s no telling how long into the future it’ll be thought of that way either.”

Some people like to claim that widespread tropes are only widespread because they’re especially good, but in my book, that’s a little too broad of a generalization. What’s traditional, what’s a trope, and what’s a cliché are all things that flow and change with the ages, shifting at a breakneck pace with the whims of storytelling fashion.

“I see what you mean,” said Hatoko, sounding a little impressed. “Yeah, I get it now! It starts with a trend, then meta stuff springs up, then that meta becomes a trend to the point that new meta uses it to be meta!”

“Then it’s only a matter of time before *that* meta gets meta’d too, and then *more* meta—”

“If you dorks say the word ‘meta’ *one more time*, I swear to *god*!”

A *very* irritated shout rang out from the driver’s seat. My sister had been steering away in silence throughout our whole exchange, and she had chosen that moment to finally jump into the conversation.

“I *literally* have all of our lives in my hands up here, and you just go *on* and *on* about meta this, meta that, meta meta *meta*... Seriously, who the hell even *cares*? I’m gonna go meta on your ass if you don’t clam up, Jurai!”

“Wait, me?! Like, me, specifically?! That’s not fair, Machi! Hatoko’s the one who brought it up in the first place!”

“Y-Yeah, he’s right!” chimed in Hatoko. “If you meta him, you have to meta me too!”

“Wha...? Cut it out, Hatoko! It makes me look like a huge jerk when *you* say it!”

“Ah... Come on, Juu, I expected better from you! That was the *perfect* chance for you to jump in with a ‘No, do it to *me*,’ and then I could’ve gone ‘Well, you heard the man!’”

“Wait, you were setting up a gag?! Crap, sorry! I didn’t read that one right at all! Here, let’s run through it one more time, from the top!”

“We can’t do that! Repeating jokes is standard practice in comedy, but *redoing* them’s out of the question!”

“You’re *so* strict about this stuff, I swear!” *Seriously, who appointed her the reigning judge of comedy? I’m a total amateur, Hatoko, so cut me some slack!* “And come on, Machi, you’re *seriously* calling us out on being noisy here?” I added, venting a bit of my irritation on our driver in the form of some constructive criticism. “First you were all, ‘I can’t concentrate when you’re kicking up a racket,’ so we kept quiet, then you were all, ‘It’s too quiet! This is making me antsy, talk about something!’ And now you’re telling us to shut up again? Make up your mind, please!”

“Yeah, no, shut up. You gotta keep flexible about these things, okay? It’s good to keep that brain of yours nice and limber, you know?”

“Man...you’re stressing so badly it has you acting *that* corny? If driving’s that hard on you, you should’ve just asked someone else to handle it.”

“Like I would, dumbass! I’ll never get good at this if I don’t practice! It’s freaking me the hell out, but I’m doing my best, okay?!”

My sister was facing one of the classic conflicts of an inexperienced driver. She’d taken lessons at a driving school back during spring, and she’d finally managed to get her license just recently. At the end of all that practice, she’d finally decided to volunteer to be our driver today...but she wasn’t at all used to highway driving yet, and it seemed the pressure was really getting to her. Her face was pallid, and a river of sweat was running down her brow. Wasn’t exactly reassuring from a passenger’s perspective, let me tell you.

“Just don’t crash, okay?” I said.

“Then don’t jinx me, you little jerk!” Machi snapped back at me.

“And maybe speed up just a bit, while you’re at it?”

Machi winced. “Don’t ask the impossible,” she grumbled in a *very* rare display of frailty. I was glad she wasn’t the sort of person who’d flip out and turn into a maniac the second they got behind the wheel, sure...but *man*, were we ever moving at a snail’s pace.

“Ah. There goes another one,” I commented as yet another car sped up to pass us. They must’ve finally lost patience with Machi’s pace, and I’d lost count of how many cars before them had pulled the same maneuver.

“My mom says everyone else is already at the hotel,” said Hatoko as she glanced at her phone. Our parents and Hatoko’s family had driven in a separate car, and it seemed they’d beaten us to our destination by quite a solid margin. We’d left at the same time, so they must’ve been going at a way faster pace than Machi was.

“How much longer till we get there, Machi?” I asked.

“Don’t ask me! I’ve only got eyes for the road right now.”

“Okay...I’ll admit that sounded *kinda* cool, but make sure to check your mirrors and stuff too, all right?”

While I was making a mental note to keep an eye out behind us and to our sides on my sister’s behalf, Hatoko piped up again.

“Aaah, I see it! Juu, Machi, look!” she shouted happily. “The sea! I can see the sea!”

I looked out the window again, and sure enough, the seemingly endless parade of lush, green mountains had given way to the refreshing blue of the ocean and the sky above it.

“All *right*, we made it! It’s the sea, Hatoko!”

“It really is, Juu! The sea!”

We saw it every single year, but somehow, that first glance still got us riled up each and every time. I felt particularly obligated to enjoy that endless blue expanse on Machi’s behalf this year, since she sure as heck wouldn’t be turning to look any time soon.

This was an annual custom for the Andou and Kushikawa families. Every

summer, we'd get together and drive out for a trip to the beach, and though it sort of felt like we'd stumbled coming out of the gate thanks to our driver this year, our destination was finally in sight.



Our families got together to go to the beach every summer vacation, but this year, I, Kushikawa Hatoko, went into the trip with more determination burning away in my heart than ever before. I had a goal: to do everything I could to entice Juu! I'd force him to look at me as a girl, not just as a friend!

"But...this is gonna be sooo embarrassing," I moaned, cradling my head in my hands as I rolled around on the floor of the room we were staying in. We'd booked rooms in a traditional Japanese inn, and right now, I was the only one inside mine. I was staying with my parents, who had already gone out and about, and the Andous had a separate room for themselves.

Machi *did* drive us all the way to the inn in the end, though we'd arrived about a half hour after our parents had. Our parents had all gone out to visit a spa that had heated stone beds to lay on and that offered therapeutic massages, and in the meantime, Juu, Machi, and I were going to play around on the beach. We'd been planning on heading out right away to make up for lost time...but I was still stuck in my room, paralyzed by indecision.

I sighed. "Bamboo floor mats always feel so nice and cool in the summer... Wait, no! This isn't the time for that! I have to hurry! I can't make Juu and Machi wait any longer for me!" However much I tried to make myself rush, though, I just couldn't break through my hesitation.

Juu and I were childhood friends. We'd been together for pretty much our whole lives, and it almost felt like we were siblings sometimes! Neither of us precisely felt like the older sibling, though. I was born in spring, which meant my birthday came a few months before his, but Juu had already had his birthday this year as well, making both of us seventeen, and you know what they say about seventeen-year-olds! That's the age when guys and gals, well... They, umm, you know... They start getting interested in, *ahem*, well...stuff!

But, in the end...that sort of *stuff* was still really embarrassing to me, across the board. I hadn't even considered any of it up until really recently, and I was

totally clueless about how to go about *any* of it. But! But but but, I couldn't hem and haw about it any longer! After all, right before summer vacation started, I'd had that conversation with Tomoyo...

I fell still. *That's right. The chips are already down, and I'm the one who put them there.*

"True happiness...is to be chosen."

"Everybody wants to be the chosen one."

I wasn't sure who'd said those words to me. Maybe I'd just dreamed them up myself. One way or another, though, they still lingered on deep within my heart. They'd settled in like a layer of sediment, and nothing I did could dislodge them.

I wanted Juu to choose me. The thought that he might *not* choose me scared me more than anything.

"I-I know! I'll go over everything one last time!" I said to myself, then rushed over to my travel bag, turned it out on the ground, and pulled out a magazine I'd brought with me, along with the little booklet that had come with it. That booklet's title: ♥ *A How-to Guide to Beachside Summer Romance* ♥.

I let out a little whimper. The title was just so...so *direct*! Just *looking* at it was making me blush like crazy! I'd never bought a magazine marketed toward trendy high school girls before, so I'd been nervous as all get out when I went to buy it. I'd felt so ashamed, in fact, that I'd sandwiched it between two cookbooks to bring it up to the register, which honestly struck me as kind of funny in retrospect. The cookbooks hadn't been the right size at all, so it had turned out less like a sandwich and more like an overstuffed taco.

Anyway, I'd read the booklet over and over already, but now I cracked its heavily annotated, sticky-note-laden pages one more time for one final review session. There, below a drawing of a boy and a girl chasing each other along a beach, were a series of *incredibly* informative instructions.

Follow these five rules to steal the heart of the man of your dreams this summer!

1. *Never let that smile slip!*
2. *Body contact's your best friend!*
3. *Be happy, be healthy, and be just a little sexy!*
4. *No man can resist a cute girl's puppy dog eyes!*
5. *Give him a chance to make his move by acting defenseless!*

"Hmm, hmm, hmm... All right!" I said as I shut the manual and shot to my feet. With its instructions to guide me, there was no way this could go wrong! All I had to do was follow its advice to the letter, and Juu would be complimenting me on how womanly I'd become before I knew it!



"Jurai... I'm done for... Wait for me on the other side..."

"Wait, you mean 'I'll wait for you on the other side,' right? You have it backward! You're making it sound like *I'm* the one who's dying here!"

My sister was down for the count. We'd made our way to the beachside and found it packed to the brim with visitors here to enjoy their summer. I'd set up the big beach parasol and plastic sheet we'd brought with us from home, and the second I was finished, Machi had sprawled out in the shade. Best as I could tell, the mental exhaustion that had built up over the course of the drive had finally done her in. It *had* been quite the drive, to be fair, most of it along winding mountain roads, so I couldn't really blame her. A trip like that seemed like it'd be rough on someone who still hadn't taken the "student driver" sticker off her car yet.

"You could've lain down in our room, y'know," I commented.

"Nah, screw that," said Machi. "Like hell I'm gonna come all the way out to the beach and not even wear my swimsuit! Anyway, I'm gonna nap now, so you go ahead and pile some sand up on me. Make it a big ol' mound."

Machi stretched out on the sheet, all ready to play around in the sand while simultaneously taking a snooze. It sounded like a huge pain to me, but being the little brother in the equation, I had no right to veto her suggestion and obediently got down onto my knees to start moving sand around. *Eh, this*

works, I guess. There's plenty of ways for me to have my own sort of sandy fun, even while I'm doing her bidding! Witness my personal style of sand arts!

"Oh, right. No shouting any of Gaara's or Crocodile's special moves while you work, Jurai. That'd get old *real* fast."

"Ugh!"

She just stole away all the fun of playing around on a beach in an instant! I'd been planning on cleansing the grudge that had built up within me by shouting "Sand Burial!" while I piled sand on top of her, but that was out the window now. I had to admit, I was a little impressed by how well she'd seen through my thought process.

Curses! What other sand users are there, anyway...? Iggy's a dog, so he's out, and Sandman didn't actually have anything to do with sand at all in the end! I guess Kite Eishirou threw sand in his opponent's face that one time, but he's still just a tennis player, even if they did call him The Hit man.

I could think of plenty of characters with power over earth, or characters who used earth magic, but personally speaking, I'd always drawn a clear conceptual line between earth users and sand users. Like, sand obviously falls *within* the category of earth, I'll admit...but, I mean, it's like how *Pokémon* has Ground, Rock, and Steel as different types, you know? They feel like they should *basically* all be in the same category, sure, but there's *something* that makes them different. Sand's, like...it *flows*, I guess, in a way I've always been kinda into. There's a *smoothness* to a sand user's powerset that an earth user's just couldn't compare to. Not to mention the dryness—*that* just can't be beat!

When you look at the four basic elements—earth, wind, fire, and water—earth has a kinda tough, stocky image, and it's subtly lacking in stylishness as a result. I sorta figure that might be why bit villains in sword and sorcery stories tend to use earth magic so often. On a personal level, I gotta say that I've never been a huge fan of the earth-element image either. If I had to rank them, my list would go fire, water, wind, and then earth—but *only* if ice gets lumped in with water! If they're counted separately, then water and wind would trade places. Fire's got first place locked down, though.

So, yeah—earth gets a pretty meh score as far as elements go, in my mind,

but *sand users* are special. They're an exception among exceptions—a mutation—a singularity! *Sand users: hella cool!*

“Man, though...Hatoko sure is late, huh?” I grumbled as I piled sand on my sister's upper body, paying absolutely no attention to her bikini because seriously, what kind of weirdo would get worked up like that over his sister?

“Yeah, true enough,” said Machi. “Guess she might be having some trouble getting changed or something.”

“Huh?” I grunted. “What's that supposed to mean? Did she pick out a swimsuit that's really hard to put on, or something?”

“Nah, I'm not talking about the clothes! I mean, like, in a mental sense,” Machi said, leaving me more confused than ever. “See, we got a little girls' talk in earlier today... Long story short, she's got a lot on her mind in her own special sorta way.”

“Sorry, ‘girls' talk’? You're not exactly a girl anymore, are you? Like, c'mon, you'll be *twenty* next year.”

“Say *what?*” Machi growled. Suddenly, a palpable aura of imminent murder began to emanate from under the mound of sand I'd piled atop her. “You little punk... You've just made an enemy of every woman who's ever had a girls' night out past the age of nineteen. You get that, right?”

“S-Sorry! I was just kidding! You'll be a girl till the day you die! Seventeen for life, I'm telling you! You'll pass as seventeen even when you're pushing thirty-seven, at least!” I shouted, then started frantically piling up a proper sand dune—scratch that, a *pyramid's* worth of sand on her in a desperate attempt to quell the rage of Hurricane Machi. *Quick! Seal her away! Apply the Evil Sealing Method! Let this raging demon be lulled back to slumber!*

The two of us spent a while messing around in the sand like we were a solid decade younger than we really were, until finally...

“Sorry I'm so laaate!”

...Hatoko arrived on the scene.

“You sure took your time! What was the holdup? Did you find a wild hippo

that needed you to rub it down with olive oil, or—" I began, all ready to show off the zoological fun fact I'd picked up the other day, only to be struck speechless before I could finish the thought.

Our beach trips were an annual tradition, so naturally, I'd seen Hatoko in a swimsuit every year since I was a kid. I hadn't exactly taken notes, but generally speaking, I remembered her having usually gone for swimsuits that I'd describe as cutesy if I were being nice, and kinda childish if I were being judgmental. She didn't go *quite* as far to that extreme as Kuki and Chifuyu had at the water park the other day, but she tended to gravitate toward one-piece swimsuits with floral or polka-dot patterns and stuff like that.

Today, though, the image Hatoko struck was the polar opposite of childlike. She was wearing a bikini, and a pretty revealing one at that. Its coloration was still rather cutesy, sure, but its design was pretty darn stylish, and it managed to roll that cuteness into a larger package that incorporated a hefty dose of mature sexiness as well.

"Hatoko," I muttered as I gaped at her. I couldn't tear my eyes away. A sexy swimsuit was the *last* thing I would've ever imagined her wearing, but somehow, it didn't look *wrong* on her in the slightest. Far from it—she was actually killing the look! The pair of big, bulky sunglasses she had pushed up onto her forehead and the hibiscus flower in her hair provided the perfect accent for the outfit as well. "You, uhh...got a new swimsuit, huh?" I said.

"Y-Yeah," Hatoko bashfully replied. "I just bought it earlier this year. So, umm...d-does it look weird on me? I've never worn anything like this before," she asked.

"Err... Yeah, it looks great," I replied. "You look like a model right off the pages of some high school fashion magazine."

"O-Oh, come on! You're just buttering me up now, jeez!"

"Or, really...I guess it'd be more accurate to say that you look like you found a model in some high school fashion magazine and bought the exact same outfit she was wearing."

"Wh-What?! How'd you know?!" Hatoko yelped. She looked downright shocked, but I mean...come *on*, seriously. It was just *way* too coordinated. It

looked like an outfit a pro would put together! The sunglasses and flower combo in particular was a dead giveaway.

I had to admit, though, that the origin of her outfit did nothing to change the fact that she was pulling it off perfectly. You'd never know it from the comfy, mild-mannered vibe she usually gave off, but Hatoko, well...she actually had an astonishingly nice figure, I guess. She was packing some major concealed weaponry, if you would. Being the guy I was, I couldn't help the fact that seeing her in a getup like that made me a little, well...flustered, I guess? Or nervous? Some carnal instincts were flaring, you could say. Point is, I was pretty embarrassed, which isn't *exactly* why I picked my next words, but it might've had some influence, at least.

"You've gotten pretty womanly lately, huh?" I said, doing my best to make it come off as a benign comment from an older brother, or something to that effect.

"I...huh?" said Hatoko with a wide-eyed look of shock. Her sunglasses tipped off her forehead and landed on her nose. "I-I'm womanly...? Me? Really?"

"Huh? U-Uh, I mean, yeah."

"So then...you see me as a girl, Juu...?"

"*Huh?* Uhh, duh? What *else* would I see you as? When have you ever been anything other than a girl?"

Hatoko seemed bewildered, though *why* she'd be feeling that way was totally beyond me. She looked like she wanted to say something but couldn't put it into words.

"I...I," Hatoko stammered.

"You...?"

"I'm done *alreadyyyyyyy*?! " Hatoko suddenly screamed to the high heavens. "Whyyyyyy?! Wh-What am I supposed to do now...? I've barely even started, and I *already* hit my goal, just like that!"

I blinked. "Uhh... I don't really get it, but isn't hitting your goal without even trying a good thing? Like, that sounds like a happy accident at worst."

“I know... I *know*, but *still*... Ugggh, ahhh,” Hatoko moaned as she clutched at her head. If I didn’t know better, I’d have said she was suffering from a sudden case of heartburn. “Wh-What now? What now?! I didn’t plan for this at *all*... Oh, what am I supposed to *do*...?” Hatoko muttered to herself as she spun around to face away from me. It looked like she’d started flipping through some sort of little booklet.

“Whatcha reading?” I asked.

“Wha?! Umm, th-this is just...it’s nothing!” Hatoko shouted as she spun around once more and hid the booklet behind her back, then scooted over to the sheet Machi was sleeping on and stashed it away in her bag. “*Anyway*,” she continued, “let’s get out there and hit the beach, Juu! Time for some fun in the sun! Wooo!”

Hatoko jogged off toward the beach, pulling me along by the hand. She was in a weirdly hyper mood, and I just went along with it.

“Huh...? Hey, where’re you two going? Wait a sec! It’s gonna look weird if I’m just lying here, buried in sand alone... Wait, huh...? I-I can’t move! No, seriously, I’m stuck! Dammit, Jurai, just how tightly did you pack this stuff?! And wait, when’d you draw this lame-ass magic circle around me?! Hey! Get me outta here! No, seriously... S-S-Someone, heeelp!”

I thought I might’ve heard some sort of incoherent shouting coming from behind me, and it might’ve sounded an awful lot like Machi’s voice, but I decided to ignore it.

Hatoko’s weirdly hyper mood, it turned out, was here to stay. I couldn’t tell if she was really hyped up for nothing in particular, if she was trying to mess with me and the joke just wasn’t landing, or what, but the point is, I just couldn’t get a grasp on what was up with her from start to finish. For convenience’s sake, allow me to provide some examples of her incomprehensible antics in a handy-dandy numbered list:

Example number 1: Cramping Hatoko.

“Aaauuugh!”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Hatoko?!”

We’d been playing around by the water, having a blast, when suddenly Hatoko collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony!

“M-My cheeeks,” she moaned. “My cheeks!”

“Wh-What? What’s wrong with your cheeks?”

“Th-They cramped up...”

“Your cheeks *cramped*?”

“Ahh, it hurts so muuuch,” Hatoko wailed as she clutched her cheeks. If she was trying to do Pinoko’s oh-my-goodness pose, she was nailing it.

“Jeez, are you okay...? I guess you *have* been grinning like a moron all day, come to think of it. That’s probably what did you in, right?”

“P-Probably...”

“Why *have* you been grinning like that, anyway? Have you lost all emotions other than your sense of inner peace, or something?”

“I-I, umm... I’m just trying not to let my smile slip,” Hatoko sorta reluctantly muttered. I had to wonder: didn’t she basically do that all the time without even trying?

Example number 2: Charging Hatoko.

“Hiyaaaah!” Hatoko shouted as she charged straight at me without warning.

“Wh-Whoa!”

“Eeeek!” Hatoko shrieked as I, of course, dodged out of the way, sending her sailing past me and crashing into the beach face-first. “Ugggh... Th-That was so mean, Juu! Blech, I got sand in my mouth! Peh, peh!”

“How am I the mean one here? What was *that*?”

“I-I was just trying to get some body contact in...”

“Body contact? That was more like a full-body tackle, if you ask me! I thought you were trying to hit me with a tetsuzanko for a hot second,” I grumbled, then

helped Hatoko to her feet. The impact from her dive into the sand *had* caused a bit of a wardrobe malfunction with her bikini top, but I'll just go ahead and leave out the details of that bit.

Example number 3: Posing Hatoko.

"..."

"..."

"So...Hatoko?" I said, breaking several seconds of drawn-out silence. "Why're you looking over your shoulder at me while you nibble your thumbnail?"

"W-Well, what do you think? Does this make me look sexy...?"

"Seriously? Maybe it would've, like, a couple decades ago, but that's *way* out of style now! You don't even see sexy poses like *that* in smutty swimsuit magazines these days!"

"..."

"What? Why'd you freeze up?"

"Umm... So, I guess...that means you read that sort of magazine, huh, Juu...?"

"N-N-No, I don't! They just put sections for that sorta stuff in manga magazines sometimes, that's all!"

Is it just me? Am I the only one who feels more embarrassed about people thinking I buy smutty swimsuit magazines than people thinking I buy outright porn?

Example number 4: Eye-rolling Hatoko.

"Hey, Juu? I could really go for some shaved ice right about now," Hatoko said in an almost saccharinely pleading voice around lunchtime.

"Yeah, good idea. I could go for some too, now that you— *Whoooooooooough?!'*" I shrieked as I turned around to face her, on account of the fact that for who the hell knows *what* reason, Hatoko had her eyes rolled all the way back into her head! "H-Holy crap, what's wrong, Hatoko?! Did you pass out on your feet?! Or,

what, is that supposed to be Nishikawa Akihiro's signature pose?!"

"What? No, I just...umm, well, I was t-trying to do puppy dog eyes..."

"*Puppy dog eyes*?! Nooope nope nope, that is *way* off! Not even *close*!"

"N-No waaay... But I thought that 'puppy dog eyes' just meant rolling your eyes up! Like...*schlorp*, done! You know?"

"Okay, first off, 'schlorp' is *not* the right sound effect for that! And second, ugh, that's seriously creepy!"

"Creepy?! C-Come ooon, I can't believe you'd even say that..."

"I'm just telling the truth! Agh, don't *cry* with your eyes rolled back, that makes it so much worse!"

Needless to say, we imposed a strict ban on Hatoko doing puppy dog eyes from that point forward.

Example number 5: Submitting Hatoko.

"Ahh... I'm so full! I think I might've eaten too much!" Hatoko said as she lay down on the plastic sheet we'd spread out.

We'd just finished polishing off the yakisoba, curry, and shaved ice that we'd bought from a beachside restaurant. Hatoko was a big fan of the yakisoba from that particular place, and she'd stuffed her face with it every year, but for some inexplicable reason, she didn't even have a single bite this time. I asked her why, and she just muttered something about seaweed flakes in her teeth. I didn't get it at *all*.

"Careful, Hatoko! They say you'll turn into a cow if you nap right after eating, you know?"

"No way turning into a cow's *that* easy," Hatoko countered.

"They say you'll get a nasty case of acid reflux if you nap right after eating, you know?"

"That's...a little scary, actually, but I'll take the risk."

This is weird. I was usually the one who'd flop down to nap after lunch, and

Hatoko was the one who'd scold me for it, but today our roles had been reversed. I thought it was suspicious, and as I idly watched her stretch out on the sheet, she made a move that just confused me more than ever: she raised her arms up perpendicular to her chest, bent her wrists like a cat's paws, and pulled her knees up toward her chest as well.

Isn't that, like, that pose? The one that dogs and cats do to express total submission? Like, because showing their stomach like that proves that they're harmless or something?

"Hatoko? What're you *doing*?" I asked, more than a little dubious about this new development. "Is there some nasty enemy around you're surrendering to that I'm not seeing, or what?"

"W-Well, what do you think? I bet I look super defenseless right now, don't I?" Hatoko asked, looking a little proud of herself.

"Well, I mean...*yeah*, but, like... Wait, are you using Bahamut as your reference point for this?"

"That's right! Bah does this cute little pose all the time!"

"You mean Bahamut. Bahamut, the God-Dragon of Ruin."

All questions of formal titles aside, that was a name that really took me back. *I haven't seen Bahamut in way too long, come to think of it. Hope he figures out how to take on his full dragon form soon! Then I could class-change to dragoon!*

"H-Hey, Juu?" said Hatoko. Her limbs were starting to tremble pretty badly. I guess that pose must've been tough to hold. "I'm totally defenseless now, you know?"

"Uh, yeah. I can see that."

"My guard's totally down, right in front of you!"

"Okaaay... So, what, are you telling me I should attack you, or something? Are you *asking* me to bust out a special move on your stomach?!"

"No way! That'd hurt!"

"No kidding!" *So what the heck are you telling me to do?!* Part of me thought that I might as well take the chance to tickle her stomach, but me being a guy

and her being a girl, I figured that would probably be skirting dangerously close to sexual harassment territory. Regardless, I didn't have the time to take that thought process any further.

"Juuuraaaiiiii!" A voice growled from behind me, in much the same tone a certain Kamen Rider might say "Aaamaazooon!" before transforming.

A chill shot down my spine, and an intense, all-consuming dread made me cower back in fear. I knew only one person who could emit a monstrous, soul-searing aura of death like *that*.

"You little punk," Machi growled, emerging onto the scene like a murderous demon-god stepping onto the battlefield. "You must have some guts to leave me stranded under a ton of sand, huh?!"

Impossible! How could she have broken through the seal?!

"So, would you rather I bury your corpse on the beach, or sink it in the sea?" Machi continued. It looked like getting abandoned under a pile of sand for hours on end had *really* set her off.

I had a pretty good grasp on her moods, and I could tell that this was one of the ones where no apology, no matter how sincere, would convince her to cut me a break. That meant there was only one option left. *Time to show her what I can do! I've just learned the perfect—nay, ultimate skill for this situation! A skill that surpasses even the mightiest of apologies!*

"Total submission pooose!"

"Ugh, gross!"

"Aaaaaaugh!"

My sister delivered a single powerful blow to my exposed and defenseless abdomen, and I was down for the count. Even I had to admit that, yeah, seeing a high school boy do that pose *would* be pretty gross.

So, yeah, I think you get the point. Hatoko spent pretty much the whole day acting super weird. If someone had asked me *how* she'd been weird, I would've been hard-pressed to put it into words, but in any case, the way she was

behaving now was plainly different from how she'd behaved when we'd gone to the beach every other year up until now. Plus, her weird behavior showed no sign of stopping.

"Tee hee hee! Catch me if you caaan!" Hatoko said as she ran along the beachside path, her tittering laugh coming across as some sort of half-baked attempt at a well-bred noble lady's affect.

It was pretty clear that she wanted to play tag, and I begrudgingly decided to humor her and chased after her. Hatoko was running at a pretty rapid clip, so I set my pace at a dash as well. There was just one problem.

"Hah... Haaah... Haaah..."

I was tired. Like, seriously, running on a beach is *so* friggin' tiring! It felt like my feet were getting caught up in the sand with each and every step, which made running the way I usually would impossible. It was like I was expending *several* times as much energy as it took to run on solid ground. I vaguely remembered seeing characters in sports manga talk about running or working out on the beach like it was some sort of super secret training method, and yeah, now that I was experiencing it for myself, I could definitely see it producing some real gains. A single game of tag on the beach, and it already felt like my legs were getting pushed to the next level! My reward: unbearable soreness the day after, probably.

"G-Got youuu!" I gasped as I slapped a hand onto Hatoko's shoulder, ten minutes of nonstop, all-out running later. *And that's how you make casual body contact, by the way!*

Hatoko was panting almost as heavily as I was. "Y-Yeah, you got me," she admitted before gasping, then breaking down in a coughing fit.

"How...are you so...fast?" I asked, then coughed, gasped, and started coughing again.

"Huh? Wh-What...?" Hatoko said, then went right back to panting for air.

"I just—" I began, then started hacking up a lung again before I could even get my third word out. Neither of us were even remotely capable of communicating through our desperate attempts to breathe. *Seriously, who goes that all out*

playing tag?

“Haaah... Nope, I’m out,” I said. “I gotta sit down for a minute and catch my breath...”

“Y-Yeah... Good idea,” said Hatoko. “I’m feeling really hot all of a sudden...”

The two of us more or less crumpled to our backsides. There wasn’t another person around to be seen. It seemed our eternal game of tag had taken us far away from the section of the beach where swimming was permitted. Big, rugged boulders stuck out from the beach here and there, and there were a bunch of tetrapod blocks just a little ways further along. The beach had been really noisy back by the swimming area, but that tumult had completely vanished, and now only the sound of the waves was left to serenade us...well, okay, the sound of the waves and both of our desperate, heaving attempts to, y’know, breathe. Wasn’t exactly the most picturesque scene, I’ll admit.

“So hey, Hatoko,” I said after I finally caught my breath. “What was the point of all this, anyway? Is today leg day for you or something?”

“U-Umm, well... I’m not really sure either, at this point. Heh heh,” Hatoko muttered with an awkward smile. Her motives were, in short, literally impossible to decipher.

For a moment, the two of us sank into silence.

“Hey, Juu?” Hatoko eventually said. She sounded almost determined—like she’d resolved herself for something. “Have I... Have I really gotten more womanly?”

“Huh?”

“Y-You know, like you said earlier!”

“Oh! Yeah... Well, I mean...I said it for a reason, right? So, yeah. I’d say you have, compared to how you used to be.”

“Okay, then...”

“Yeah.”

“So, umm... I think you’ve gotten manlier too, Juu. I mean...compared to how you used to be.”

“Oh? Well, thanks, I guess.”

Something about all of this felt, well...strange. Normally, being with Hatoko felt as comfortable and natural as could be, but this just felt *weird*, and *awkward*. I couldn't calm down, no matter how hard I tried. The conversation's flow was ungraspable, and the distance between us unfathomable.

“Hey, Juu...? Do you have a crush on anyone?” Hatoko asked out of absolutely nowhere. I was already feeling uneasy, and the question was so unlike her I felt even less comfortable than ever now.

“Wh-Whoa, talk about a Gáe Bulg from the blue,” I said in a panic. I was *not* prepared for love talk! It felt like high schoolers gossiping about love and romance was sort of supposed to be a fact of life, but as far as I could remember, Hatoko and I had never had a real, proper conversation about any of that sort of stuff before. It's not like I'd been *avoiding* it, or anything...

“...”

...Okay, no. Maybe I *had* been avoiding it. Maybe both of us had, unconsciously. Maybe we'd been trying as hard as we could to *not* have this conversation, dodging it over and over.

My mind drifted back to Sagami Shizumu and Futaba Tamaki. We'd had a kinda scattered relationship between the four of us—not a square or a triangle, but a less defined sort of association. Those two had seemed to make the most perfect, happy couple to Hatoko and me, and yet their relationship had ended in the most catastrophic of breakdowns—a tragic, disastrous implosion that had also been preordained since its very beginning.

“Nope, sure don't,” I said. “I just, like...I dunno. I don't really get stuff like that yet.”

I didn't *really* think I'd been traumatized or anything like that. I just didn't want to think about things in terms of romance. Back when I was in the eighth grade—when I'd given up my eighth-grade syndrome—I'd wound up looking up to a couple that, in truth, had never been much of a couple at all. The very first concrete example of romance I'd ever been involved with had looked perfect from the outside, but the moment I'd taken a peek under the surface, I'd found nothing but calamity within.

The world I'd idolized had turned out to be a cheap facade made of papier-mâché, and as a result, I'd found myself resenting the part of me that had ever aspired to have the sort of relationship I'd *thought* they had. I found the idea that I'd ever thought "I wish I could find a girlfriend like Sagami did," or "I hope I fall for someone as hard as Tamaki has" downright comical...and I found all of it just plain futile.

"Okay," Hatoko quietly said, her head slightly hung. She'd inched her way across a line that the two of us had left undisturbed for the entirety of our relationship, and I couldn't tell from her expression alone whether or not she'd done so intentionally.

"What about you? Do *you* have a thing for anyone?" I casually asked, then flinched back as I realized how close to me Hatoko had drawn.

We'd been sitting a solid half meter or so away from each other, but before I knew it, the gap had narrowed to ten centimeters or so—and to top it off, she was still getting closer, slowly but surely crawling toward me on all fours, her pose doing a very good job of emphasizing her bust. It also made her look like a carnivore about to leap upon its prey, which made *no* sense! It was *Hatoko*! She was named after a *bird*!

"Juu," said Hatoko. Our faces were incredibly close now, and I reeled back reflexively, but Hatoko just drew even closer in return, making the action moot. "You know what? I, well..." she said, her voice carrying a very suggestive sort of tone that felt like it was tickling my ear. Hatoko's voice was normally calm and gentle, but *this* tone couldn't have been further from the ordinary. *This* was the voice of a girl—of a woman.

"Hatoko...? W-Wait a second! Why're you g-getting so close?" I asked, turning my head away from her without even realizing it. My eyes, however, remained glued to her face. Whether I liked it or not, my gaze was irresistibly drawn to the childhood friend who was suddenly stirring up an excess of conflicting feelings within me.

Her cheeks were red, and each breath that passed through her lips felt like it carried a flirtatious weight to it. Her faintly clouded eyes were locked onto my face, and after all those failed attempts, she'd finally managed to use them for a

proper puppy dog stare. We were completely alone. Alone together, on the beach, with only the sound of the waves in the background...and I was bewildered. The whole situation had thrown my mind into a state of chaos.

“Juu...”

“H-Hatoko? Wh-Whoa,” I said as she finally leaned in far enough to push me over onto the sand. Her hands were on my shoulders, pinning me to the beach. It’s not like she was strong enough to hold me down, really, but for some reason, I couldn’t resist her.

I was face-up, and for a moment, the brilliant, piercingly blue summer sky dominated my vision, but before I knew it, Hatoko loomed large and blotted it out. My field of view became occupied entirely by the unduly sensual face of the girl above me, her expression carrying a sense of longing that made *me* feel something deep within me as well.

“Hatoko...”

“Juu, I... I...”

Hatoko’s gaze was fixed on me...or so I thought. A second later, though, her focus slipped off me, then started drifting all over the place. Almost spinning in circles, really, like a dizzy dragonfly.

“I...kinda feel...really, really dizzy...”

With that, Hatoko collapsed on top of me. I’m talking her entire body weight falling onto my chest all at once, by the way, causing *me* to let out a frog-like grunt of pain. Her skin was pressing right into mine, her abundant bosom squishing against my—wait, no, this is *not* the time to be describing this crap!

“Hatoko?! Hey, Hatoko?!”



...I got heatstroke.

It goes without saying how I ended up that way: our beachside game of tag—which *I’d* suggested—was to blame. I’d been running away from Juu as fast as I could under the blazing hot sun, on the poor footing of a sandy beach, so of *course* it had done me in.

Looking back on it, I couldn't even remember why I'd decided to take running away from him so seriously. *Did I think him catching me would mean the game was over...? But, wait— Huh? Would the game being over even have been a bad thing? Why is it such a thing for couples to play tag on the beach in the first place, anyway? What's the goal? What signals that the game's over? Hmm... I don't get this at all.*

I sighed deeply as I sat on the shore, looking out over the evening waves. The beach had been jam-packed with people in the afternoon, but now that night had fallen, barely anyone was around anymore. There tended to be a bunch of people playing with fireworks here at night in the past, but enough of them had failed to dispose of their trash properly that the beach had banned fireworks altogether last year.

I glanced up into the sky and was dazzled by the spread of stars above me. I picked out the Summer Triangle, made up of Deneb, Altair, and Vega. Then I found Scorpius, and right above it was...

Umm...wait, which was that one again? Ophi-something or other, I think?

"Was it...Ophisaurus?"

"It's Ophiuchus."

Just like that, without warning, a voice cut in and interrupted my muttered musing.

"The constellation Ophiuchus, made in the image of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. Asclepius was the son of Apollo, the god of the sun, and was known for being a prodigious practitioner of the healing arts. Too prodigious, in fact, for in his pursuit of his art, he became capable of even bringing the dead back to life—and in so doing, trod into the realm of unspeakable taboo. Resurrecting the dead, you see, brought the wrath of Hades, the god of the underworld, upon him. Hades sought counsel with Zeus, the king of all gods, who in turn struck down Asclepius with a bolt of lightning, ending his life. Indeed...the story of Asclepius is the story of talent so great it turned to tragedy. If he had only been born with the talents of a common man, he would have likely been spared the lightning's judgment. Mankind is wont to bemoan our lack of talent, but the tale of Asclepius begs the question: could not an

excess of talent prove just as miserable?”

His speech ended with a raised tone, as if he were asking a question. As if I would ever have an answer for something like *that*. “Juu,” I said.

“Hey,” said Juu as he sat down beside me. “You doing okay? I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Thought you’d be in your room at first, but nope.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. I’d drunk plenty of water and rested up over the course of the afternoon, and ended up feeling better before I knew it. I still felt a *little* sluggish, but not enough to cause me any real trouble. “And oh, that’s right. That one’s Ophiuchus!”

“Yup. Ophiuchus. *Not* Serpentarius.”

“And, umm...what was his name? Asper—no, Aspil...Pil...Pickle Pistacious?”

“What sorta cursed mixture of salty and savory did *that* name come from?! It’s Asclepius! Apollo’s son, *Asclepius*! A tragic god bequeathed with talent so extraordinary it led him into the realm of taboo!”

“The realm of tabouli? That sounds like a tasty place to visit!”

“*Taboo*, not *tabouli*! Asclepius never ventured into the realm of salad!”

Juu was almost *too* knowledgeable when it came to constellations. Or really, I guess it’d be better to say that he was knowledgeable when it came to Greek mythology, which just happened to be the background the constellations were drawn from. He’d never been interested in astrology or fortune-telling at all.

“Man, though, Ophiuchus really is one of the greats,” Juu said absentmindedly. “Gives me chills every time. The fact that it uses the snake as a symbol of immortality and rebirth is cool enough on its own, but then there’s *also* the fact that whether or not it gets counted determines whether there are twelve or thirteen constellations in the zodiac, which makes it feel super important too! Ophiuchus: *hella* cool!”

“You think? I like *your* constellation, Juu,” I said. It might’ve sounded like I was trying to butter him up, but really, I was just being honest. “The crab’s—”

“Don’t call it the crab!” Juu snapped. He *really* shouted it! I mean, super loudly!

Th-That's right... I'd totally forgotten that Juu was really, reeeally sensitive about his own star sign.

"For crying out loud, the *crab*? Seriously...? All the *other* zodiac signs get *cool* stuff like a lion or a scorpion, so why'd I have to get a friggin' *crab* of all things...?" Juu muttered as he clenched his fists with frustration.

His birthday, by the way, worked out to the sign of the crab whether you were using the twelve-sign system or the thirteen-sign system. He was a crab among crabs. The King Crab.

"And to make matters worse, the Greek myth it's modeled after is *super* lame! Y'know how Hercules fought the hydra? Well, the sign of the crab...is based off a crab that Hercules stepped on during the battle. Like, come *on*! There's bit characters, and then there's *this* crap! He could've at least had the decency to *stab* the stupid thing!"

"Well, *I* like crabs! They're delicious!" I said.

"No, you don't get it... That's just *not* the point! I like *eating* crabs too, but, like...your zodiac animal plays a role in determining your very *destiny*, and I got a friggin' arthropod! Heck, pretty much *all* the mythological crabs all across the world kinda suck! *Saint Seiya* treated its crab like crap, and the one in *Kamen Rider Ryuki* wasn't exactly great either... Oh, but I guess we *did* get a pretty awesome crab character in *Terra Formars* recently..."

Personally, I didn't understand what would make somebody's zodiac sign feel cool or not. The most *I'd* thought about them was thinking that Virgo was kind of cute when I learned some people call it "the maiden." *I'm sure Tomoyo would understand what he was talking about in an instant, if she were here—*

"..."

Oh. There I go again. Once again, I'd caught myself asking "But what if it were Tomoyo instead of me?" It was only recently that I'd figured out what was going on with that. I'd finally realized the identity of that strange, ambiguous sense of unease deep within me.

It was jealousy. That's what I was feeling.

"Hey, Juu?" I said, trying to draw his attention away from the constellation he

was still fixated on. “You know, I...did something pretty mean to Tomoyo the other day.”

“I have a crush on Juu.”

Not even I understood why I’d felt the need to go and say that. It was like I’d been making a show of it, or rubbing her face in it, or offering it as a declaration of war. Maybe it was because I felt jealous, or envious—or because I sensed an oncoming crisis.

“Do you have a crush on anyone?”

The one thing I knew for sure was that I’d hurt Tomoyo’s feelings. She hadn’t answered my awful, intentionally mean question, and had just run out from the club room. I hadn’t exchanged so much as a word with her since.

Why did I have to do that? What did I even want Tomoyo to say to me?

“You did something mean to Tomoyo...? *You?*” Juu said disbelievingly. “Sure didn’t have *that* on the list of things I expected to hear today. Whatever happened, are you sure you’re not just overthinking it?”

“No...I’m not,” I said with a shake of my head. I wasn’t overthinking it, and I wasn’t making a mountain out of a molehill. I’d been perfectly aware of how mean I was being even as I’d asked the question, after all.

“What did you do? Like, specifically?” asked Juu. I clammed up, and a moment later, he awkwardly added, “I mean, if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s cool too...”

“A chosen one,” I finally said. “I wanted to be a chosen one.”

Even I was a little put off by how abrupt of a segue that had been. Juu, unsurprisingly, arched an eyebrow and cocked his head in confusion. A second later, though, his eyes lit up with understanding.

“Ah, don’t tell me,” he said. “Does all that advice you were following from your *How-to Guide to Beachside Summer Romance* or whatever have something to do with being a chosen one too?”

“Yeah...I mean, sort of? They’re a little related, at— Wait, *whaaaaaaaaaat?!?*” I shrieked. My eyes went so wide they became more white than iris. “H-H-H-

How?! How do *you* know about that, Juu?!”

“Ah...sorry,” Juu said. “Y’know how I said I checked to see if you were in your room? It was lying out on the table.”

Ack! Come to think of it...I really did forget to put it away, didn’t I? Machi had brought my belongings back to the hotel for me after I’d collapsed, and all that lying around while I was recovering had gotten a little boring, so I’d dug the magazine and the guidebook out of my bag to read... *S-So, he really saw it...? O-Oh, jeez, just kill me now!*

“U-Ugggh,” I groaned. “I-I can’t believe you, Juu... You big jerkface...”

“H-Hey, I said I was sorry, okay?” said Juu. He really did look remorseful. “But, well...I guess that explains why you were acting so weird today,” he added. “When you say you wanted to be a chosen one, do you mean, like, you want to be popular? Is that it? You just wanted to see what it would be like to get some attention from guys?”

“U-Umm... That’s not quite right, but not quite wrong either... But, well, okay. Yeah, I guess I did. I guess I might’ve wanted to see what it felt like to be popular, a little,” I replied in vague agreement, unable to find the right words to deny it.

Juu, it seemed, thought that I’d been reading that manual because I wanted to be popular in general. The truth, though, was that I’d only wanted to be popular with him—to be chosen *by* him. He hadn’t figured that out yet, which was just as relieving as it was disappointing.

“Hey, Juu? Can you really become a chosen one if you just try hard enough?” I asked. “That’s not how it works, is it? Sometimes you try and try, but in the end, you don’t get chosen anyway, and that’s that, right?”

That’s exactly what makes being chosen such a special, joyous thing. Behind every chosen one stands a crowd of people who weren’t chosen.

“Maybe it’s all set in stone from the beginning,” I said. “Maybe whether or not you get chosen isn’t something you can change at all...”

Maybe it’s like how everyone has different strengths and weaknesses that they’re just born with. Like how I don’t have any “chuuni power,” whatever that

means, but Tomoyo has more than enough to spare.

“And anyway, doesn’t deciding that you *want* to be a chosen one rule you out to begin with? A real chosen one would never think something like that, would they...?”

“I’m, uh...not sure I’m really getting the point here,” said Juu, who definitely looked a little frazzled by everything I’d just dumped on him. “But, okay—when you say ‘chosen one,’ can I take that to mean, like, ‘someone who gets all sorts of stuff handed to them like they’re the main character of a story’? Like, a person who must’ve done something crazy good in a past life and is born with capabilities that put them on a pedestal compared to normal humans? Someone who you can only think must’ve been chosen by destiny itself?”

That wasn’t totally wrong, at least, so I nodded in agreement.

“Gotcha. In that case, yeah, I think you’re mostly right about all that stuff. I think everyone wants to be a chosen one at some point. I sure do—like, believe me, I *really* do—but, well...if you’re not chosen, then you’re not chosen, and that’s that.”

Juu paused for a moment, and I silently digested his words.

“But that doesn’t mean that *wanting* to be chosen’s a bad thing. I don’t think *that* at all,” he added with a tone of frank confidence that made me look back up at him with a start. “You remember that conversation we had on the drive out, right? About metafiction?”

“Y-Yeah,” I said. “Umm... You mean about how when a genre gets popular enough, more and more people start doing meta things to shake up its usual formulas, right?”

“Right—and when those meta things get popular enough, they end up getting rolled into the formula as well,” Juu said with a nod. “Like... Oh, what’s an example you’d get right away... Okay, I bet you’ve seen characters in shoujo manga say stuff like ‘I want to fall in love like the main character of a shoujo manga,’ right?”

I paused to think, and I realized that I *had* seen that. It felt like I’d seen it pretty often, actually.

“Well, when you really think about it, isn’t that just about the most meta-riffic motivation a character could possibly have? The protagonist of a shoujo manga wants to be the protagonist of a shoujo manga—I mean, come *on*! But these days, barely anyone would pick that out as being meta at all. After all, it’s pretty hard to find a girl these days who *doesn’t* read shoujo manga, at least a little. That’s why having a shoujo protagonist who aspires to be like a shoujo protagonist isn’t that shocking at all anymore. It’s just another trope, another cliché. Nobody would make a big deal out of it. In other words, it’s part of the formula.”

Once more, I found myself mulling over his words.

“I can think of a ton of other examples too,” Juu casually added. “Shonen protagonists who want to be like shonen protagonists are a thing as well, to start. Not to mention characters in police dramas who want to be like the main character in a police drama, or main characters in mystery novels who became detectives because they themselves were huge mystery nerds. Then there are heroes in stories who look up to legendary heroes *within* their stories, or superheroes who grew up wanting to be like the superheroes they saw on TV.”

Juu paused for a moment to look me in the eye.

“Do you see what I’m getting at, Hatoko? Protagonists who want to be protagonists *used to be* meta, sure. It was a way of poking fun at the clichéd protagonists who defined the established formula of the time, and it was a way of taking an unorthodox approach to storytelling. Before we knew it, though, that unorthodox approach became mainstream. In this day and age, a hero who wants to be a hero is an established archetype capable of winning over legions of fans.”

I returned his gaze, speechless.

“And *that* means that the desire to be like those protagonists—to be a chosen one—has merit. I think it’s an awesome desire to have, personally! Even if you *can’t* ever become a real hero, the *desire* to be one alone is special enough that it’s become a valid and accepted part of the standard storytelling formula.”

I wasn’t sure how to reply. If I’m being totally honest...I didn’t really understand what he was saying. All these theories about writing and media

were just a little beyond me. What I *did* understand, though, was the core of what he was trying to tell me: that there was nothing wrong whatsoever with my desire to be a chosen one.

“And what that means, Hatoko, is that there’s nothing wrong with putting in the work to get popular like you tried to do today. I mean, the fact that you *want* to be popular in the first place is kinda proof positive that you *aren’t* popular right now, sure, but in my book, it’s also the first step *toward* popularity!”

So...it seemed he’d gotten the wrong idea about what I was after in a really upsetting sort of way, and part of me wanted to start screaming and hollering about how it *wasn’t* like that, honestly...but I could tell that he was trying his absolute hardest to cheer me up. He was just being so earnest and considerate that instead, I found myself chuckling.

I leaned over and tilted my head, just enough to rest it on his shoulder. I was a little shocked by my own boldness, actually—it just happened before I knew what I was doing.

“Wh-What?” said Juu.

“Hmm,” I said. “Just practicing! To help me get popular, you know?”

“*Huh?*”

“So, how was it? Did I make your heart skip a beat? Do I have this casual contact thing figured out?”

“H-How should I know?” Juu mumbled bashfully as he looked away from me.

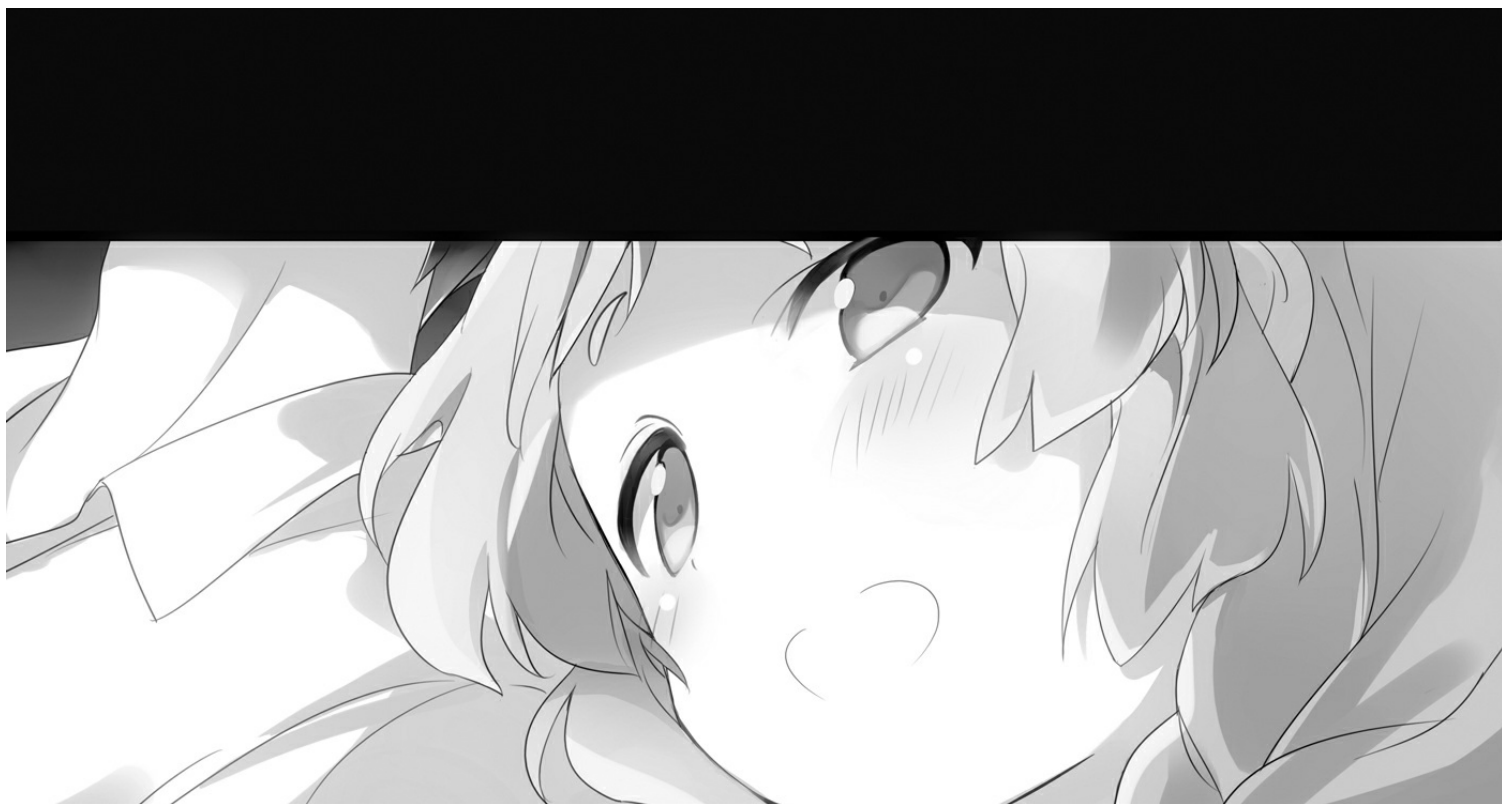
It was pretty cute, but then again, I was as embarrassed as he was...actually, *way more* embarrassed than he was, probably. I felt so awkward that part of me wanted to just stand up and shout, but at the same time, it felt sorta nice as well. It felt like I’d finally let out a long, deep breath I’d been holding—like a terrible, all-encompassing weight had been lifted from me and my heart had been set at ease.

The chosen one. I’d been clinging to those words, even though I had no memory of who’d said them to me in the first place, bound by the idea that I *had* to be chosen, no matter what. Now, though, it was as if those bindings had

been gently lifted from me. This whole time, I'd forgotten something incredibly important. Whether or not Juu chose me—whether or not I was chosen—was important too, don't get me wrong, but it wasn't the *most* important question at hand. It wasn't the start of all this.

Why had I wanted to be chosen? Because I was in love with Juu. That was it. That was where it all began. That was the most important fact. I loved him, so I wanted him to choose me. That was the one thing I should've kept sight of, no matter what. My desire to be the chosen one wasn't misplaced, but at the same time, I had a more important feeling that I had to confront first. I couldn't spend all my time fussing over the result—I had to give the feelings that led me to *want* to be chosen their proper due. And if I did...

“...Jurai.”



“*Pbbb!*” went Juu, choking on nothing. “H-Hatoko? Wh-What the *heck*? Why the sudden full name...?”

“Hee hee hee! Just had the urge to say it for fun!” I replied.

“M-Man. I don’t think you’ve called me that in *years*! Or, actually, was this the first time? You always called me Juu back in kindergarten, no matter how many times I told you to stop...”

“Jurai!”

“*Aaagh*, stop! God, that feels so *wrong*! I can’t deal with this!”

“Okay—then can I keep calling you Juu from now on, instead?” I asked.

“Knock yourself out,” Juu grumbled.

“Yaaay! It’s official, then! Juu, Juu!”

“Mwa ha ha... You and your silly little appellations will shake *them* off my true trail, so I shall tolerate your antics for the time being. I would easily pay such a price to mask the truth: that the sovereign lord of Hades, Guiltia Sin Jurai, is none other than my true—”

“Juu, Juu, Juu, Juu!”

“Hey! Are you even listening?!”

I think Juu was shouting about something, but I didn’t pay him any mind and just kept singing out my pet name for him over and over. I’d say it as many times as I possibly could, until my throat grew sore and my voice hoarse.

Chapter 3 ★ July and a Tense Colorful Bow Go to the Pool with a Reader

It was a perfectly lovely day out. The sun shone high in the sky, and the air was downright scorching. One could hardly have asked for more appropriate pool weather.

“By the way, Sayumi—don’t ‘scorching hot’ and ‘freezing cold’ have, like, a really cool two-sides-of-the-same-coin sort of aesthetic going on? They could totally be a paired set of special moves, or titles for a character with a split personality, or something... Oh, but wait! Maybe it’d be even cooler to swap them around? Like, one personality could be ‘The Freezing Hot’ and the other could be ‘The Scorching Cold’!”

I hadn’t the foggiest idea how to reply to Andou’s nonsensical gibberish, so I refrained from commenting entirely and just kept walking.

“But, man, tough luck, huh?” he continued. “Can’t believe Maiya ended up having summer classes right when you got a pair ticket to the pool!”

“Very much so, yes. A stroke of bad luck indeed,” I replied.

The two of us had just gotten off the bus and were now walking together toward the water park’s entrance. The bus in question had been full of couples...which is, perhaps, why I’d found myself feeling so oddly uncomfortable, in an awkward sort of way. In all likelihood, this was just me being paranoid, but nevertheless, I couldn’t help but think that the people around us were assuming that Andou and I were a couple as well. *He* had seemed entirely oblivious to the possibility, of course.

“Y’know, I actually ended up at this pool just about a week ago,” said Andou.

“Oh, is that so?” I replied.

“Yeah. Chifuyu and Kuki invited me, so the three of us came here together.”

“Well, then... I suppose I’ve imposed upon you by inviting you today.”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I meant! I wasn’t complaining!” Andou quickly clarified. “It’s not like the pool stops being fun after the first time you go, right? I don’t mind at all!”

“I appreciate the reassurance,” I said.

We stepped into the facility, presented our ticket at the reception desk, then reached the locker rooms.

“Okay, see you in a minute,” said Andou as he stepped into the men’s room.

“Quite. We’ll meet by the poolside,” I said, stepping into the women’s room in turn...or rather, *pretending* to do so. In truth, once I was certain that Andou was gone, I returned to the entrance lobby where the reception desk was located.

There, after passing by a few decorative plants, I spotted a particular young man seated on a nearby couch. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, a straw hat, and a pair of sunglasses. I had to assume that outfit was his attempt at going incognito, but it also gave the impression that he was enjoying his summer to the point of excess.

“Good morning to you, Takanashi,” the young man said cheerfully as he noticed me, then stood up.

“Frankly, I’d have to say it’s a little late for a greeting like that,” I replied. “We spent a whole bus ride together, after all.”

“Fair enough, I guess! Still, it just feels wrong to not give a real greeting when you meet someone face-to-face—so good morning, Takanashi,” he repeated for good measure. He was acting so polite and proper, it ended up coming across as disturbing in its own right.

“Good morning, Sagami,” I said in return.

Sagami gave me a satisfied smile. “Anyway, I’ve gotta say, you and Andou have a really nice mood going! I was watching you from the back of the bus the whole ride, and if I didn’t know better, I would’ve been convinced the two of you were a couple!”

I didn’t reply, and after a momentary pause, Sagami grinned. “Psych. But

would you have been happy if I really *did* mean it?” he asked as he leaned in to peer at my face. “Oh, the awkward pleasure of fretting over whether or not you look like a couple! Not to mention the frustration and irritation at the fact that your partner doesn’t seem to share *any* of those worries! I could feel *all* those conflicting emotions fighting within you, just by watching your back! *Very* nice, really. That’s *exactly* how a maiden in love is supposed to act!”

He wasn’t mincing words, to say the least. It felt like he was seeing through me—like he’d invited himself into my mind and was now stomping about without even bothering to wipe his shoes at the door.

But no. That’s not quite right. In *his* case, I could say with reasonable confidence that he hadn’t seen through me at all. He didn’t have any real, objective perspective into my mind—rather, he was theorizing. He’d observed my actions, my attitude, my expressions, and my word choice, and he’d used those factors to *guess* at the innermost subtleties of my heart, as if he were a reader, theorycrafting about the motivations of a character in the story he was consuming.

“All right, time’s a wasting! We’d better get started,” said Sagami, sounding like he was enjoying every second of this experience. “This’ll be a very special arc, featuring a rare opportunity for reader participation! ‘Make Takanashi Sayumi the Main Heroine Project, Round Two: The Heart-Throbbing Pool Chapter (Nip Slips Included!)’ kicks off, here and now!”

“...”

There will be no “nip slips.” Absolutely none whatsoever.

“I’m offering you my help. Feel like accepting it? If you do, I’ll make you into the main heroine.”

I suppose you could say that I’d clung to the proverbial spider’s thread, or chased the bluebird of happiness, or perhaps made a deal with the devil. However you wanted to describe it, the literal fact of the matter was that Andou’s so-called acquaintance had appeared before me and said those words shortly prior to the beginning of summer vacation.

Sagami Shizumu was an incomprehensible young man of unfathomable

origins and motives. He was a self-proclaimed “reader,” and you could understand where his unique sense of perspective and values were coming from just by the name he’d given his plan: the “Make Takanashi Sayumi the Main Heroine Project.” He seemed to have a proclivity for viewing himself as a reader of other people’s stories. He kept others at a distance, drawing a line between himself and the rest of the world such that he could observe it from that outside perspective. He just watched, treating the things he saw as if they were matters of no concern or a distant mirage, smiling happily all the while.

One might say that he was firmly dedicated to acting as an onlooker, but personally, I saw things with a slightly different nuance. After all, he seemed to have no ironclad principles and took pride in nothing whatsoever. The fact that he was willing to step in and meddle in my affairs was proof enough of that. He called himself a reader, but very much did not limit himself to that standard. He didn’t just watch—he intervened, when it suited his purposes. Perhaps, in his mind, the freedom to act so inconsistently is what defined the status of a reader?

Of course, in the end, no amount of pondering his motives would have done me any good. What really mattered was that he’d offered me a hand and I’d chosen to accept it. I was no drowning woman grasping at straws, to be clear. I had chosen to let myself be wrapped up in his scheme by my own free will, not under duress. I was no victim—I was the perpetrator, undeniably complicit in Sagami Shizumu’s misdeeds.

The project he championed was already well underway. Its first stage—“The Flashback Arc (A Staple of Any Long-Running Manga, As Long As You Don’t Drag It Out till It Gets Boring)” — had already come to a close. That development had occurred a few days after summer break began. I’d paid a visit to Andou’s house and heard the story of his time in the eighth grade, the time when he’d given up on his chuunibyou, straight from the horse’s mouth. One might call it his origin story—the story of how he’d become Guiltia Sin Jurai.

In unraveling that tale, I had learned about Andou’s past, and in doing so, I had learned who our story’s main heroine was—that is to say, whom Sagami Shizumu recognized as our story’s main heroine. That brought us to today, to the project’s second stage.

“All right, Takanashi,” said Sagami in an irritatingly gleeful tone. “I’ve brought a swimsuit for you to wear to the pool today, so I’ll need you to go ahead and put it on.”

“Absolutely not,” I replied, curtly, bluntly, and above all else, definitively. I’d anticipated that he would make a demand along those lines since the moment he’d proposed the pool as our destination today, but this was one thing that I had no intention whatsoever of taking his advice on.

I was Sagami’s accomplice, for the time being, and he had essentially entrenched himself as the mastermind of our plan, but that didn’t change the fact that I held the right to veto his decisions. I *also* had a sense of propriety, and while this may be a rude way of putting it, Sagami was an incorrigible degenerate whose sheer perversion beggared the imagination. I’d only interacted with him a sparing few times, but those meetings were more than enough to give me an uncomfortably clear understanding of that fact.

There was simply no way that I would ever wear a swimsuit *he* had chosen. All of my internal alarm bells were blaring at maximum volume. It was a given that he’d picked out something preposterously shameless.

“Oof,” said Sagami. “It kinda hurts to get rejected *that* bluntly! Don’t you trust me, Takanashi?”

“No. Not even slightly,” I replied. *Least of all when it comes to anything proximal to the erotic.*

“Ha ha ha! I like how you don’t sugarcoat things, actually!” said Sagami. “But, that said...I also had a feeling you’d say that, so I swapped your swimsuit out in advance.”

“...Pardon?” I said. I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Well, really, I got your little sister to do it. I asked her to swap it out with mine last night. I was pretty worried that you’d notice, honestly, but judging by how surprised you look, I guess you didn’t catch on after all.”

“That’s... You couldn’t *possibly* have...” I stammered, but then, a question even more important than the matter of my swimsuit struck me. “You’ve spoken with my sister, Sagami? How on Earth did you contact her...?”

“I mean, the normal way? She has a Twitter account, so I just followed her and slid into her DMs.”

Well, that’s...certainly a modern way of getting in touch with someone.

“Maiya sure is a great sister, huh?” Sagami continued. “She really did her part to help her big sis’s love life out! Or, at least, that’s how I’m gonna frame it, whether it’s true or not.”

“A word of warning, Sagami. If you lay so much as a hand on my little sister...well, I trust that you understand what sort of consequences you’ll face,” I said, making no effort to hide my hostility.

Sagami just shrugged. “Ooh, I’m *terrified*! Don’t worry though. Maiya’s a real cutie, don’t get me wrong...but the thing is, it looks like she’s already got a boyfriend. I’m a virgins-only sorta guy, so that puts her right out of my strike zone.”

I gritted my teeth. Hearing that my little sister was out of someone’s strike zone put me in a rather conflicted state of mind, but knowing that *he* in particular wasn’t interested in her was most definitely a good thing.

“By the way, Takanashi,” Sagami added, “how’s it feel to know that your little sister’s got some real romantic history while you haven’t even had your first boyfriend yet? From a big sister’s perspective, I mean.”

“I’d rather we drop this topic,” I replied. As it so happened, I felt rather conflicted about that as well.

Maiya was, well...to start, her personality could hardly have been less like mine. She was making the most of her time in middle school, enjoying her youth to the fullest, which was something I most certainly had *not* done. She boasted many things that I lacked, and I was proud of her for them, certainly...but when it came to love, I couldn’t help but feel that I was lagging behind her as well. You could say I had something of an inferiority complex brewing in that respect.

“Kay, I think that just about covers it for now,” said Sagami, bringing the conversation to a premature close. “I made sure to pick something that’d look good on you, so don’t go backing out on me, okay?”

“What? W-Wait just a—”

“Better hurry! You wouldn’t want to keep poor little Andou waiting much longer, would you?” Sagami said, brushing off my protests as he strolled away.

I walked into the changing room, stepped up to a locker...and felt like I was going to drop dead on the spot. The sheer weight of the regret and shame that assailed me was simply more than I could bear. Ruinous despair the likes of which I’d never felt before shrouded my heart in impenetrable darkness, and not so much as a glimmer of light was left in its wake.

I had yet to check inside the bag I’d packed my swimsuit in. I was afraid—petrified—to think that the moment I opened it, my life as a woman could very well come to a premature end. I was, well and truly, in an unprecedented fix. How could I have ever anticipated that Maiya would stab me in the back? Though, of course, *she* probably thought she was helping me rather than betraying me. This, frankly, was one time when I wished she’d just minded her own business.

I took a moment to breathe, then glanced down at my bag. It was perfectly nondescript in every possible way, yet it seemed to be emanating a palpable aura of darkness. Sagami had chosen a swimsuit for me...and I simply couldn’t imagine how that could ever turn out well. Would it be the sort of swimsuit an exhibitionist would choose? Or, considering the sort of person he was, was it more likely that he’d picked out the sort of school swimsuit that certain fetishists slaver over? Or perhaps he’d gone in the opposite direction and chosen a frilly, cutesy swimsuit that would never suit me in a million years...? *I wouldn’t put it past him to try and make me wear a...a l-l-loincloth, even!*

In spite of all those apprehensions, I couldn’t afford to stand in the locker room forever. Andou was almost certainly already waiting for me poolside. “All right,” I said to myself. *Whatever happens, happens!*

I mustered up all my resolve, then I opened the bag.

Please, let it be a school swimsuit! Just spare me the loincloth, if nothing else! I silently pleaded as I looked inside... And then, my eyes widened.

“H-Huh?”

“Ah, Takanashi! You put it on! Nice!” said Sagami as I stepped out from the locker room. He’d been lying in wait in the space between there and the poolside. He was still wearing the straw hat and sunglasses, but he’d also changed into a swimsuit. I’d been sure that he’d go home after making contact with me—or rather, I’d desperately hoped he’d go home after making contact with me—but it seemed he was planning on skulking around to watch us for some time longer.

“Yup, yup,” he said. “It really does look perfect on you. Better than I’d thought it would, even!”

“How very kind of you,” I muttered.

Sagami had prepared a plain white bikini for me. It was completely unembellished and perfectly simple in its design. The fact that it was a bikini made it somewhat revealing by default, of course, but as far as bikinis went, it covered perhaps an above-average amount of skin, and it was perfectly reasonable by any standard. After how I’d been trembling with fear at the thought of what sort of outrageous outfit he’d force me into, the reality of the situation almost felt like an anticlimax.

“Knowing you, I was certain you’d pick something far less reasonable than this,” I said.

“Ha ha ha! Oh, you wound me!” said Sagami. “You could try and have a *little* faith in me, at least! Think about it—how could I have given you a crazy sexy swimsuit when I had to have your little sister make the swap?”

“A valid point,” I said with a nod. “In any case, I’m relieved. Part of me was convinced you’d try to make me wear, well...a loincloth, for instance.”

“A *loincloth*...? You’ve got one hell of an imagination,” Sagami said. He sounded a little weirded out, and knowing how much of a pervert he was made that tone hit far harder than I’d expected. I’d been genuinely terrified by the prospect, so I wasn’t exactly happy about my fear being made light of.

“Anyway, it’s time for you to head to the pool! Andou’s already waiting for you farther in,” Sagami said as he glanced down the passageway. “I don’t have

any other orders left to give you, really. Just have a blast and make the most out of your pool day with Andou. I'm sure it'll make for a great memory," he said with a perfect, seemingly genuine smile.

"All right," I agreed, then stepped past him to make my way to the pool area.

Perhaps, I reflected, I've been reading too deeply into Sagami's actions.

Thanks to the story that Andou had told me, I'd wound up keeping a very high guard around Sagami, but I was coming to understand that he acted solely for the sake of his own entertainment. There wasn't anything *malicious* about the way he conducted himself. If I were to describe him in a positive fashion, I'd say that he was innocent but lacked self-awareness, and if I were to describe him in a negative fashion, I'd say that he was insensitive and unfeeling. For better or for worse, he was driven purely by curiosity and his sense of self-satisfaction.

Sagami was attempting to deepen my relationship with Andou exclusively because that was a scenario he wanted to see play out. As such, it seemed reasonable to assume that he wouldn't take any actions that would diminish my standing in Andou's eyes. In *that* sense, I was beginning to think that I might be able to trust him—or at least, that I could trust in his driving desire to entertain himself in whatever way he chose in the moment.

"Oh, right! Almost slipped my mind—one last thing," Sagami said in an incredibly unconvincing affect of forgetfulness just before I left the passageway.

"Y'know those swimsuits they use in porn shoots that go see-through the moment they get wet? You're wearing one, so watch out for that."

My mind went entirely blank. A wave of dizziness swept over me, and I very nearly fainted on the spot. He'd said it in a perfectly innocent, perfectly insensitive tone, and by the time I was able to process and understand the meaning of his words, I'd already stepped out into the pool area and into the line of sight of Andou, who was waiting there for me. "Ah, Sayumi! You sure took your time," he said as he walked toward me.

Ah.

Agggh.

Aaauuuggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

I was a fool. Trusting Sagami Shizumu for so much as a second had been the very *height* of stupidity.

To my dear departed grandmother,

I fear that this may be the end for me.

All throughout my life, I have diligently striven to be a woman as strong and beautiful as you were. I have my fair share of imperfections, but nevertheless, I have made self-improvement my constant and consistent ethos.

However...I have erred. Here, on this day, I may well have rendered all those efforts meaningless. My womanhood...may not live to see another dawn.

I can only beg you to forgive me for the shame I have brought upon myself. And if, perchance, my womanhood joins you in heaven before the day is out, I ask that you greet her with open arms and offer her the consolation she will surely need.

“Sayumi! Hey, stay with me, Sayumi! Wh-What the heck happened?! Your eyes rolled all the way back in your head for a second! Don’t tell me you totally suck at puppy dog eyes too?!”

“...Ah!” I gasped as I snapped back to reality. It seemed that I had very nearly passed out on my feet. The situation was so overwhelmingly irrational and humiliating, it had genuinely almost rendered me unconscious—no, it had very nearly killed me. Suddenly, I felt closer to my departed grandmother than I had in years...

“Excuse me,” I said. “I just had a slight dizzy spell, that’s all. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Really...? Well, if you say so,” said Andou. There was still a note of concern in his voice, but I was in no position to alleviate his worries.

A swimsuit that would turn transparent when wet... I wasn’t acquainted with pornography on the whole, unfortunately, so it goes without saying that I’d

never seen one of the swimsuits in question, but it wasn't hard to imagine their function and purpose. If I let myself be splashed with water...I would find myself in an obscene state of dress indeed.

I bit my lip with frustration. The sheer shame of it all felt like it might drive me mad. Could anything be more disgraceful than wearing a see-through swimsuit in a public venue? Just one slip, one splash, and I'd be labeled as an exhibitionist for the rest of my lifetime.

I-I'm still okay right now, aren't I? It's...It's not see-through yet, is it? Surely it wouldn't happen at random, would it?

"Anyway, that swimsuit—"

"Is something wrong with it?!" I yelped.

"Huh?" Andou said, gaping at me.

"I'm asking you if something's wrong with my swimsuit! Is there anything strange about it?! If there is, you have to tell me, now! Hurry!"

"Uh, I mean... Er, like... I was just gonna say you look good in it, that's all..."

"O-Oh. Is that so...? Well, thank you," I said, then sighed with relief. Thankfully, it seemed that so long as the swimsuit *wasn't* wet, it was entirely indistinguishable from an ordinary article of clothing. There was at least *some* semblance of a silver lining to the situation.

That being said...this wasn't sustainable. There was simply no chance that my mental fortitude would last if the situation didn't change for the better somehow. We were at a water park in the middle of summer, full of attractions and adventure. Water was constantly splashing about everywhere you looked. Spending a whole day here without exposing yourself to so much as a drop of it was an outright impossibility. My best option, clearly, was to leave and change back into my normal clothes at once. I could buy a replacement swimsuit from the park and avert disaster before it could strike.

"I'm sorry, Andou. I seem to have forgotten—" I began, then trailed off with a quiet gasp. The moment I'd turned around to beat a retreat, I was greeted by a truly gut-wrenching sight.

There, in the corner of my peripheral vision, hidden in the shade of one of the decorative trees by the poolside, was a sunglasses-wearing boy holding an assault rifle at the ready, its sights trained upon my, well...my groin. Needless to say, that boy was Sagami, and equally obviously, his assault rifle was a water gun.

The distance between us was considerable, but given the size of his water gun, I couldn't rule out the possibility that I was within its range. Sagami held its stock pressed to his shoulder, posing like a world-famous assassin as illustrated by someone who had *heard* of proper shooting technique, at best. Truly, it was a stance worthy of the phrase "I'll blow a hole through that pretty face of yours!"

Under ordinary circumstances, a water gun would be nothing to fear. At that particular moment, however, it was even more terrifying than an actual gun would have been. One pull of the trigger, and my womanhood would be sent to an early grave.

"H-Hey, Sayumi? Is something wrong? You're making a face like Golgo 13 and Jigen Daisuke both have you in their sights at the same time," said Andou.

I wanted to question what sort of face *that* was supposed to be, but I feared that the description was most likely entirely apt. It was the fearful, despairing face of a woman who knew that the right to determine whether she lived or died lay squarely in the hands of another.

"I-I'm fine, thank you," I said.

"Okaaay... Well, that's good, I guess," said Andou. "Anyway, you said you forgot something?"

I hesitated for just a moment. "No, never mind. I was just imagining it. It won't be an issue after all," I finally said.

No sooner had the words left my mouth than Sagami lowered his rifle. His sunglasses made it difficult to tell exactly where he was looking, but his delighted smile was plain to see. I wanted nothing more than to drive my fist *directly* into his stupid, smirking face.

In any case, it was plain to see that I would not be permitted to escape from

my predicament. I had no choice but to ride out my time at the pool while wearing that novelty swimsuit. *Why, oh why have I been dragged into this humiliation fetishist's dream scenario? Did I do something to earn the ire of a buddha in a past life, perhaps? Or otherwise...perhaps this is my punishment for taking advantage of Andou's goodwill and dragging the story of his past out of him?*

"Umm... Sayumi?"

"One, two, three, four!"

"Sayumiii?"

"Five, six, seven, eight!"

"Hey, Sayumi! I'm talking to you!"

"One, two... Oh? Is something the matter, Andou?"

"I mean, kinda...? Just how long are you planning on doing warm-up exercises for? You've been at it for thirty minutes already!"

"Andou," I said in a stern tone. "You mustn't underestimate the importance of warming up before you go for a swim."

"Right, I get that, but, like...*thirty minutes*? That's *gotta* be overkill!"

Yes. Yes, it most certainly is! I am well aware of that fact, thank you very much!

I wasn't trying to buy myself time, per se. I was just so scared of what was to come after my warm-up was over that I couldn't bring myself to bring it to a close. The thought of extending it in perpetuity and warming up until the day was over *did* cross my mind, but I was well aware that wouldn't be feasible.

I brought my warm-up to a close and headed toward the pool area with Andou. All sorts of people were frolicking about in all sorts of pools. There was a lazy river, a water slide, a shallow pool for children—the facility had something for everyone and could be enjoyed by any and all comers. Everywhere I looked, water abounded. A splash here. A wave there.

This is...truly terrifying. Who knew that a pool could be such a fearful facility? I

mustn't let my guard down for so much as a second!

Every time water splashed within my field of vision, I shuddered with fear. I couldn't stop myself from imagining the worst-case scenario, and each time it crossed my mind, I felt a chill race down my spine as my face blazed with heat. My body temperature was running entirely amok.

I'm certain now. I can't take this. There was simply no way that I could enjoy my time at the pool while I was in this state. More to the point, while this was the sort of pool where the ostensible goal of many of the attractions was to *not* fall in the water, going an entire day here without touching water in any capacity was simply impossible, no matter *how* athletic you were. *Perhaps I should feign a stomachache and suggest that we spend time somewhere I won't have to get in the water? The food court, say, or the footbath?* I felt a little guilty about the idea, but it seemed like my only reasonable option.

"Umm, Andou," I began.

"All *right*! We're gonna have a blast today!" Andou shouted with a full-faced grin before I could finish my suggestion. "You have no idea how much I've been looking forward to this, seriously!"

"..."

"Coming here with Chifuyu and Kuki was fun and all, but, like, I was the old one there, right? It sorta felt like I was their chaperone, so I didn't get to really go crazy or anything. Not today, though! I'm gonna pull out all the stops and go totally wild!"

"..."

"Let's make this a day to remember, Sayumi!"

"...Sure."

I-I can't. I can't say it! Just look at the excitement shining away in his eyes! How am I supposed to suggest we stay away from the pools in the face of an expression like that?! Ugh... How on earth did it come to this? I should be enjoying my day at the pool to the fullest, not jumping at splashes! I was just as excited for today as he is before everything went wrong!

“Sayumi, Sayumi! Look!” Andou shouted. He’d vanished from my side before I knew it, and when I looked over in the direction his voice was coming from, I saw him standing in a shallow pool intended for young children. “Take *this*! Water Style: Water Dragon Missile!” he shouted as he dipped his hands into the water, then splashed it in my direction!

In spite of the overblown attack name he’d shouted, in truth, all he’d done was splash water in my direction. It could hardly be considered an attack at all, assuming the person using it wasn’t named Arlong, and under ordinary circumstances, it wouldn’t have posed a problem to me at all. I certainly wasn’t petty enough to get upset about being splashed by a little water—that was, after all, what we’d come to the pool for in the first place.

These, however, were *not* ordinary circumstances. Today, a little water was a matter of life and death.

“*Hiyah!*”

In that split second, my body reacted on pure instinct. I kicked off the ground with such force you’d think I was trying to take flight, dodging away at just below the speed of sound. Every ounce of martial arts experience I’d accrued—all the judo, aikido, and practical self-defense skills I’d ingrained into my muscle memory—manifested in unison for the singular purpose of dodging that splash. And dodge it I did. By the time the water splattered harmlessly against the ground, I was several meters away.

I paused, speechless. If I may be frank...even *I* was somewhat horrified by the level of speed I’d just displayed. I’d been driven into a corner, pushed to an extreme, and it seemed my body had manifested a burst of superhuman strength in an effort to carry me to safety. It felt like I’d left sound behind me in my wake.

“Huh? Wait...wha?” Andou gasped with astonishment. He’d looked for me in entirely the wrong direction at first, as if I’d left an afterimage in my wake that had thrown off his perception. It took him a moment, but he finally turned to face me, his eyes as wide as dinner plates. “Wh-What the heck was *that*? Shunpo? Sonído? Or was it Hirenkyaku? Did you use Fullbring to pull that off, or what?!”

Frankly, I was just as shocked as he was. My body had moved on instinct, far faster than my mind could process. As a result, I'd managed to move faster and more fluidly than I ever had before. I had truly attained the Selfless State. It seemed I had taken another step toward understanding the true essence of the martial arts...though I would have preferred to have done so under absolutely any other circumstances, if at all possible.

"Sayumi..." said Andou. "You're not supposed to run by the pool, you know?"

"That's not an issue," I replied. "Strictly speaking, I crossed a great distance in a single, swift pace. I was, technically, not running."

"Okay, but that sounds a *lot* more dangerous than running, in my book... Also, what was that you shouted? 'Hiyah'? First, that was *super* friggin' cool, and second, it really made it look like you were using some sort of ancient secret martial arts maneuver!"

I wished he hadn't pointed that out. I'd shouted like that in the heat of the moment, and I already regretted it. The fact that he'd called it cool just made it all the more embarrassing to think about.

"Andou? You're going to give me a heart attack at this rate, so I'd prefer if you wouldn't try to splash me without any warning," I said.

"O-Okay, then," said Andou.

"And on a related note, I would appreciate it if you did *not* splash me today under *any* circumstances."

"Okaaay...?"

Andou looked downright mystified. I knew that he could be surprisingly perceptive and reasonable, though. If someone told him not to do something, he would most assuredly not do it, so I felt safe in assuming he wouldn't try to splash me for the remainder of the trip. Of course, a surprise splash was just one of myriad threats that I'd surely face before the day was up.

I took a moment to collect myself. *All right. It's about time I resigned myself to my plight.* No amount of standing around and regretting my mistakes would turn back the clock, and a master assassin was constantly lurking in the shadows, making escape an impossibility. I was well and truly stuck, with

enemies on all sides. The situation was beyond dire...but I was done hesitating. My shame had escalated so far it had wrapped around again and brought me into a state of total composure.

If this see-through swimsuit is a trial that the gods have chosen to impose upon me...then let it be so. I'll overcome any and all obstacles that are placed in my path! In the name of my grandmother, I shall prevail!

And so began my long, solitary struggle. It felt like I was forever ascending that thin, fragile spider's thread, dancing precariously in the air. I was fighting an endless battle, and even a moment's complacency would spell my instant and horrific demise. My opponent: the water park, and every last drop of liquid within it. Water itself was my foe. Well, *one* of my foes.

"Ah, look, Sayumi! That log bridge over there looks super fun, doesn't it?! Let's give it a try!"

Andou, who *theoretically* should have been firmly on my side, had wound up turning into a remarkably troublesome enemy.

"All right, let's gooo!" he shouted as he charged toward the floating obstacle course. It comprised logs, boats, bananas, and whatever else have you, all made out of soft, buoyant material. The goal was to jump from platform to platform, making your way across the pool without falling in. It was a lot like the obstacle courses you see on variety game shows every once in a while.

"Hup! Woo! Hiya— Ugyaaahhhhhh?!" Andou wailed. He'd made it all of three steps into the course before he lost his balance, his foot slipped, and he tumbled head-first into the water. Hop, step, jump, plummet—a perfect wipeout, truly. From an athletic standpoint, his performance scored a zero out of ten, but from an artistic standpoint, I gave him full marks.

"Pfhaaah!" Andou gasped as he surfaced. "Man, I sure took a dive there! Did you see that? Talk about a wipeout! That was downright artistic, if I do say so myself! C'mon, Sayumi, you give it a try— Wait, whaaat?!" he yelped, on account of the fact that by that time, I'd already made my way across the finish line.

Needless to say, I'd done so without coming into contact with so much as a

drop of water. I'd quickly and quietly conquered the obstacle course, using the bare minimum of motion to carry myself across the pool.

Andou still looked astonished by the time he dragged himself out of the pool and walked over to me. "When the heck did you cross the course, Sayumi?" he asked. "And, like, *how*? Those platforms are so slippery and wobbly!"

"Hah! Laughable!" I declared. "An obstacle course of this level is child's play in the face of the Takanashi-Style Art of Locomotion!"

"What the heck happened to your personality in the last thirty seconds?! And since when has the Takanashi Style been a thing?! Have you turned into one of those characters in school stories who go on and on about their family having run their Last-Name-Style dojo for generations in the blink of an eye, or what?!"

I had to admit, I was in a rather unusual mood...but if I didn't keep that nervous energy going, I knew I wouldn't be able to last through the day.

After the floating log course, we moved on to our next attraction. I was hoping that whatever it turned out to be, I could navigate it easily enough to avoid ending up in the water...

"Oh, let's try that one next! See it? The huge log roll one! Holy crap, that thing's tall! I bet it'd hurt like heck to fall off it, even with the water down below!"

...but alas, it seemed that Andou specifically gravitated to the sort of attractions that turned up on game shows—or at least, that was my best attempt at an explanation for his interests.

"Oh, man... I bet falling off that thing would make for such a good shot..."

A "good shot," really...? And is it just me, or is he already assuming that he'll be falling off it? I was right: his mind was firmly stuck in variety-TV land.

On one side stood a boy who was thinking entirely in terms of game shows that subjected comedians to slapstick contests of physical prowess. On the other stood a girl wearing a swimsuit that would turn transparent when exposed to water, special-made for the sake of pornography. I could only assume at this point that I was trapped in a smutty late-night TV program—one late enough that they could slip all sorts of questionable content past the

censors, specifically.

“C’mon, Sayumi! Hurry up!” Andou shouted as he led the way up toward the massive log. We had to climb a fair distance to reach its top, and as soon as we got there, he stepped right out onto it without hesitation.

“Whoa! This thing’s crazy slippery! I mean, like, *crazy* slippery!” Andou yelped. It had only taken a single step for his ebullient confidence to vanish into nothingness.

Upon a closer look, I noticed that water was being constantly pumped onto the log to keep it slick. Andou, in an attempt to cope with the unsure footing, got down onto his hands and knees and tried crawling across, trembling all the while like a newborn puppy.

“Wh-Whoooah! H-Holy crap, this is scary! I can’t stand up! I’m barely balancing as-is! And I’ve only taken a single step!”

“...”

“S-Seriously, just one step! I’m so close to the starting point, you could totally reach me if you wanted to! Oh nooo, you could push me at any second, and I wouldn’t be able to do *anything* to resist! I’d fall *right* away!”

“...”

“Sayumi! No matter what happens, do *not* push me! Do you hear me? No matter what!”

“...”

Please, don’t look at me like that. The weight of your expectations is too much to bear...

Andou made a habit of complaining about how Hatoko “never shuts up about comedy,” but Andou himself was extraordinarily proactive when it came to staging off-the-cuff comedy routines of his own. Perhaps, I reasoned, what he’d *really* missed when he came here with Chifuyu and her friend was the opportunity to indulge in this sort of slapstick cliché. It would, after all, be hard for an elementary schooler to pick up on the unspoken signals he was sending.

Personally speaking, I wasn’t especially interested in indulging him...but if I’d

left him to fend for himself, he would have just fallen into the water on his own anyway. Just trying to keep his balance already had him trembling, after all. It would've been amusing in its own right for him to fall before I could even push him, but I decided to prioritize the classical form of the joke instead.

"Oops," I said as I shoved Andou's back with both my hands, as hard as I could.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!" Andou screamed, putting on a textbook show of comedic terror as he plummeted into the water below with a wonderfully satisfying sploosh. "Pfffhah! Hah, hah! Damnations! You got me good this time!" he bellowed with rage. His expression, on the other hand, had "Thanks for that!" written all over it.

W-Well. I suppose what really matters is that he's having fun.

"Okay, your turn, Sayumi! It's my turn to be the pusher!" Andou called up to me.

I'm sorry—since when has the "Don't you dare push me" game been something you take turns playing?

Andou climbed out of the pool and raced back up toward the rolling log. He clearly had every intention of paying me back and pushing me off it. I, meanwhile, obviously had *no* intention of letting that happen.

"Okay, Sayumi, get ready for— Whahuh?!" Andou yelped with shock. By the time he'd made it back to the log, I was all but finished crossing over to the other side. "N-No friggin' way... You just walked straight across it?! But the footing was *terrible*! And you were walking like a model strolling down a runway, even!"

"Precisely," I said. "The worse your footing gets, the more important your posture becomes. Focus on the soles of your feet, keep your eyes wide open, and pay careful attention to each and every step that you take. If you can master that, then you'll be able to walk on even the most perilous of roads with ease."

"Wh-Whoa! That sounds really convincing, actually..."

"It is said that all things in this world arise from a single point of origin, and

however much they may change in form, that origin will never waver. Thus, if you can learn to ascertain that origin, all things in this world become paths for you to walk, whether they be the surface of water or the air itself!”

“Whoa! Now it sounds super sketchy!”

“To be is to not be, and to not be is to be. All is ever-shifting, and all is ever formless. There is more to this world than that which we see with our eyes. Empty your mind, and you will find that nothing is impossible.”

“And now we’ve gone full spiritualist!”

Well. In truth, all that I had done was walk carefully and take my time to ensure I didn’t fall. The rounded surface of the log was rendered quite slippery by the water flowing across it, but all it took to overcome that impediment was a little concentration. It was, after all, an attraction that had been designed for a water park. Of *course* they wouldn’t make it impossibly difficult to get across.

As to why Andou had flown into a panic, gotten down on all fours, and trembled like a leaf...I could only assume that his inner comedian had taken the wheel and dialed up the intensity of his reaction. *What other comedy clichés could I have him play out? Perhaps I’ll have him eat something incredibly hot and see how he reacts to that.*

“Aww, c’mon,” Andou sighed. “You should try *using* your mind before you empty it next time, Sayumi! If you make crossing the log look that easy, you’re gonna make it look like *I* was totally hamming it up on my turn!”

He had, in fact, been totally hamming it up, so I didn’t see a problem with that. Regardless, Andou kept grumbling as he held out his arms to balance himself and crossed over the log without issue. As expected, his newborn fawn act had been a complete and deliberate overreaction. I wasn’t planning on calling him out on it, though. After all, I was rather fond of watching his overblown reactions.

“He he he,” I giggled softly, then crouched down and took hold of the log—which Andou was still only halfway across—with both hands.

“Huh? Er, S-Sayumi...?”

“Now then, Andou,” I said as I flashed him the best smile I could muster. “I’m

sure you're familiar with the principle of comedic repetition?"

Then I shook it. It was a simple obstacle designed for children to surmount, yes, but I had a feeling that this single added factor would make its difficulty skyrocket. And, sure enough, Andou lost his footing almost immediately and plummeted toward the pool once more.

"Wait, wha— Ah. Aaaaaaaaaahhh!"

This time, there wasn't anything phony about his form as he fell or about his bloodcurdling scream. It was all *very* authentic.

Yes, that's much better. This is how comedic pratfalls should be. Staged, exaggerated incidents have their own appeal, to be sure, but in the end, nothing beats unvarnished reality.

He he he.

Andou dragged me here and there throughout the water park, subjecting me to dangerous attractions of all shapes and sizes, and I pushed my ability to concentrate to its absolute limit as I dodged one imminent crisis after another. I'd managed to spend the better part of the day at the pool without being splashed by so much as a drop of water so far, and without letting the boy who accompanied me catch on to what I was doing either.

I was, frankly, astonished by my own accomplishment. Speechless, even. It seemed that I was *quite* capable when push came to shove. I had found my resolve, and I had spared no effort in realizing my goal, but not even I'd anticipated that it would turn out quite as well as it had. With my virtue facing a moment of crisis, my mind had sharpened itself to a razor's edge, and with every predicament and near-death situation I overcame, I felt myself surpassing limits within me that I'd long since assumed were insurmountable.

Perhaps I was "in the zone," as they say. Alternately, perhaps I was experiencing a runner's high—or rather, considering the nature of the state of affairs I'd tumbled into, a nudist's high. Whatever the case, a switch had been flipped within me, and I'd gained the ability to *sense* the movements of any and all water within my vicinity as clearly as if I were touching it with my own two hands. I felt confident that if I were to walk out into a rainstorm in this state, I

could dodge every drop as it fell from the sky and emerge from the tempest bone-dry.

Practitioners of kendo have a saying: first comes vision, then footwork, then spirit, then strength. In other words, the most important ability for a kendo practitioner is the ability to observe—to perceive the world around you. At that moment, it felt like my perceptive ability had broken into an entirely new and unexplored realm. My eyes were opened, in a very literal sense, to a new form of strength. I could see *everything*—everything in this world was as if it rested in the palm of my hand, as if time had come to a stop.

Of course, one might wonder what the point of all this pontificating was. Why was now the time I was going through a power-up the likes of which one normally only saw in battle manga? I certainly hadn't *wanted* to discover a new wellspring of strength within me, and even if that had been an aspiration of mine, I would've preferred to have had it happen under a slightly more dignified set of circumstances. I would've traded my newfound powers of insight for the power to keep my swimsuit opaque any day of the week.

On a related note, I was deeply regretful of the fact that I had *not* been supplied with a swimsuit that would fall to pieces when exposed to water. If *that* were the gimmick I'd been dealing with, I would have been able to use *Route of Origin*—the power to return anything to the way it was meant to be—the moment my swimsuit came into contact with water, repairing it instantly. The one I was wearing, however, would only become *transparent* when wet. I could repair something that was broken, but I could *not* turn something that was transparent opaque.

To be fair, I imagine that in some people's minds, the swimsuit was meant to be in its nontransparent state. I, unfortunately, was of the opposite opinion: in my mind, it was meant to be see-through, if anything. After all, it was incredibly obvious that it had been made specifically for the sake of that quality. I'd been told that that style was typically used in pornography, so it stood to reason that the transparency was the entire point.

Within my circle of supernaturally gifted friends, the general consensus was that my power, *Route of Origin*, was the most broadly useful of all of our abilities. Unfortunately, its capabilities were based upon my subjective

perspective at a foundational level, and that was something I couldn't adjust freely. As such, the swimsuit Sagami had chosen had driven me into a corner. Not that I thought he'd done it on purpose, of course. He hadn't known about my power in the first place, so it was clearly an unfortunate coincidence.

"All right, Sayumi, I think it's finally time for today's main event!" said Andou, pulling me out of the contemplative state I'd lapsed into. "Let's give *that* one a ride!"

Andou pointed at the park's headline attraction: an enormous water slide that occupied an entire section of the pool area. It looked like a massive blue pipeline that corkscrewed and twisted its way through the air. It called to mind the hydra, a sea serpent straight out of Greek mythology.

"Y-Yes... I suppose that would be on the agenda, wouldn't it?" I stammered.

"You bet!" said Andou. "Heck, I'd almost say I came here today specifically to ride that thing! Grade schoolers aren't allowed on it, so I didn't get to try it out the last time I was here."

I had assumed as much. I knew perfectly well that Andou wasn't the sort of person who'd abandon Kuki and Chifuyu so that he could run off and enjoy himself on his own. That being said, while the water slide may have been the day's main event from his perspective, it looked more like a final boss from mine. It was a truly monstrous foe, on such a different level from all the attractions we'd experienced up to that point one could hardly even compare them.

No matter how you look at it, there's simply no way to descend a waterslide without getting wet. It's outright impossible. Utterly inconceivable. And yet...I couldn't help but think that, in my current state, I just might be able to manage it. With the new powers that had manifested within me over the course of the day, the impossible could, perhaps, become possible.

Thankfully, this particular water slide was one of the larger varieties that was ridden in an inflatable raft. In other words, if I could just perceive every drop of water that our descent propelled in my direction and deflect them with carefully placed palm strikes, there was an ever so slight chance that I could emerge from the ordeal unscathed. It was a preposterous notion, to be clear—

impossible by any reasonable standard—but I was still riding my nudist's high, and it felt like I could achieve any feat, no matter how superhuman.

Yes, indeed. I accept this trial. I shall confront it with all my might!

As the flames of determination burned bright within my breast, Andou glanced at the line for the waterslide. “Oh,” he grunted.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Nah, it's just... Umm, well, I was just thinking there sure are a lot of couples in line, that's all,” he explained.

Looking over, I found that he was right. There were indeed quite a few pairs of men and women waiting in line together. The slide allowed its patrons to ride two to a raft, which presumably made it a popular attraction for couples like them.

“Wonder if people think we look like a couple too?” Andou somewhat bashfully muttered. It seemed like he hadn't intended to say it—like the words had slipped out before he'd thought them though—but in spite of their offhanded nature, they grabbed a hold of my heart and shook it violently, sending all that concentration I'd built up to confront my final boss with into a state of turmoil.

“I... Wha?” I grunted.

“Oh. Sorry! I didn't mean it in, like, a weird way or anything,” Andou babbled. “It's just, like... Honestly, I've been wondering if we look, y'know, like *that* since we were on the bus. L-Like, it was full of couples and all, so... I just kinda got all awkward about it...”

I let out a gasp.

But, that can't be... Huh? W-Wait, wait, wait, does that mean Andou and I had been thinking along the same lines the whole bus ride? But...that can't be true! He hadn't looked like he was preoccupied at all! That's the whole reason I'd felt so ridiculous for making such a big deal out of it...and now you're telling me he really had felt the same way? He'd felt the same excruciating awkwardness I had? Why did he have to do such a good job of hiding it, then?! I'm well aware of how self-centered it is of me to think that, but how am I supposed to stop

myself...? But, no, I shouldn't be making such a big deal about any of this in the

—

“I mean, 'cause, y'know... You're just so *pretty*, right? Your figure's great too, and you're pulling off your swimsuit so well... So I sorta just thought people must be looking at us and thinking, 'Man, why's a girl like her walking around with a schlub like *him*?' and I started feeling kinda bad for putting you in that sort of position, or, y'know, something like that...”

I gasped again. Twice.

“Pretty”?! D-Did he just call me pretty?! To my face?! Why now, of all the times?! What is this boy thinking?! And anyway...commenting on how a girl has a good figure—or on her physical traits in general—could easily count as sexual harassment in this day and age, so he should be more careful about running his mouth in that direction! And I'm not just saying that because I'm embarrassed. Absolutely not! Maybe I have put considerable effort into maintaining my figure, and maybe it does feel nice to have it complimented in light of that fact, at least to some very minor extent—but I'm Takanashi Sayumi! I am by no means a woman who would fall prey to such empty flattery! What has he even been trying to say this whole time, anyway? What does he mean “Or, y'know, something like that”? If not that, then what?! Would it kill him to be decisive for once in his life?! Stop muddying the waters and tell me what you truly mean—what you truly think of me! Ah...no, that isn't what I meant! Pull yourself together, Takanashi Sayumi! You've drifted far off topic and jumped to perilously hasty conclusions! Ahh... I don't even know what's happening anymore. And moreover, this is no time to be letting myself be distracted like this! I'm supposed to be devoting myself heart and soul to fending off the ever-formidable foe that is this water park, not—

Splash!

“...Huh?”

It was—and, I was sure, would forever remain—the greatest mistake of my life. All too suddenly, the world had poured cold water on my plans in a very literal sense. The line for the waterslide was situated directly next to the end of the slide itself—in other words, where the rafts and their passengers splashed

down into the pool. Those rafts, it seemed, traveled at quite the pace, and the splashes resulting from their impact were proportionally tremendous.

Needless to say, that explosion of water sprayed all over the nearby line. I imagined it was deliberate on the designers' part—a way to alleviate the boredom of the wait, or something to that effect. After all, waiting around is a lot more exciting when a massive splash could hit you at any given moment. The people in front of us were soaked to the skin, but they were all smiling happily, as if this were exactly what made going to the pool such a fun experience. Andou was smiling along with them.

I, however, was not.

“A-Ahhhhhhhhh!” I shrieked in undignified terror as I crouched down on the spot, wrapping my arms around me in a desperate attempt to hide my chest and groin...though unfortunately, covering my rear end at the same time was beyond me.



How could I have failed so utterly? All it'd taken was the slightest wavering in my heart for the powers of concentration I'd honed so sharply to go dull in an instant. Suddenly, I'd no longer had any sense of my surroundings and had wound up floating off into my own little world.

Normally, getting distracted and getting a bucketful of water on your head would be a funny little mishap, but not today. Today, it was an irreparable mistake. I was completely soaked. Every nook and cranny of my body, from head to toe. I could tell that every inch of my swimsuit had been thoroughly drenched.

Well, then. It's all over. The pure-white fabric of my bikini was assuredly already translucent, rendering me into an obscene spectacle for all the people around us to gawk at. Their gazes poured down upon me like the very wave that had exposed my foolishness in the first place.

"Uh...Sayumi?" said Andou. My reflexive scream had been yet another colossal failure. Thanks to it, he—and everyone else nearby, for that matter—was staring right at me. I couldn't even begin to count how many eyes had turned upon me, ready to witness my shame.

"I... Ah... D-Don't look at me! Look away, please! I'm begging you..." I whimpered helplessly. All I could do was curl up in a ball, clamp my eyes shut, and plead for mercy.

The shame of knowing that I'd exposed myself in public was unbearable. It was the sort of shame that strained my dignity as a human being to its breaking point. I just didn't know *what* to do anymore, and I could feel tears pooling in my eyes. *Someone. Anyone. Please, help me...*

"Sayumi! Hey, Sayumi!"

I felt someone shake me by the shoulder, and looked up with a start. My eyes met Andou's. He was looking down at me, clearly concerned.

"Andou... This isn't what it looks like," I said. "It's not what you think, I swear... I'm innocent..."

"..."

“D-Don’t stare at me like that, please! Just don’t... I’m so humiliated... I might die of shame...”

“...”

“U-Ugh... I-I’m finished... No one will ever dare to marry me anymore. Andou, please...have mercy and take me as your bride... I’ll do anything, so please...”

“Umm, Sayumi?” said Andou. The combination of humiliation and despair had driven me to something akin to a bizarre, backward semi-proposal, but his reaction was quite restrained. “What’re you *doing*, exactly?” he asked, sounding entirely mystified.

I cautiously, fearfully opened my eyes, and found him still looking at me, obviously concerned about my well-being. The people around me seemed less curious and more plain old confused. Most of them, in fact, had apparently lost interest in me already and were returning their focus to the line for the slide.

That’s...strange. Is a girl wearing a see-through swimsuit really that uninteresting? I wondered as I dropped my gaze downward...then froze, aghast. The pure-white bikini I was wearing was as pure and as white as it had always been. It wasn’t see-through. Not in the least.

I was not, in fact, bewildered. It felt like one moment my mind had been boiling hot, and the next, liquid nitrogen had been dumped over me, instantly returning me to a state of calm, collected logic. I understood what had *really* happened immediately.

“Umm, hey, Sayumi? Do you, like, hate water slides, or something? Or are you scared of heights...?” Andou asked, but I didn’t reply. I couldn’t even hear him anymore. The shame that had dominated me, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, was rapidly morphing into an altogether different emotion.

It was the first time I’d ever felt this way. The first time I’d ever truly, genuinely understood how it felt to want to murder someone.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! Now *that* was a show, Takanashi! Not only did you take *me*—of all people!—at my word, you did *such* a good job trying to make it through the day! You were adorable, honestly! You just earned yourself a ton of new

fans, I promise! And, I mean...*really*? How could you have ever believed *that* swimsuit could turn see-through? It has pads in it to *stop* that from happening and everything! Trust me, you'd have *known* if it were one of the swimsuits they use for that sort of porn the second you put it on. You're clever, and you know all sorts of things, but I guess I've got a leg up on you when it comes to sexual stuff, at least— *Gouf*?!" Sagami croaked as I stepped right up to him and punched him in the face.

We were on a pathway connecting the pool area to the restrooms. Andou had told me that he "needed to visit the little boys' room," and while I was waiting, I'd spotted Sagami as he'd seemed to materialize out of nowhere from the shadow cast by one of the nearby attractions. Presumably, he'd been watching us from back there the whole time, and his smile had been so profoundly upsetting that I'd sprinted toward him as fast as my legs would carry me and driven my fist right into his face. There was no finesse or art to the blow—I'd simply pulled back my arm and let him have it, throwing all my strength into the swing.

Unilaterally punching a defenseless opponent who wasn't even behaving aggressively flew in the face of all the teachings that had been instilled in me over the course of the many, many lessons I'd taken, and it may very well have undone the martial revelation that I'd experienced shortly beforehand, but I simply couldn't have cared less. I wanted to punch that man so badly that a sacrifice like that seemed a small price to pay.

Sagami took the strike head-on and was sent flying across the poolside, half rolling, half sliding his way along the ground until he finally collided with a wall and let out a sputtering shout that came out sounding something to the tune of "*Hogwarpfhts*!" It was almost remarkable how much his grunt of pain had resembled the name of a certain magical academy.

"Oof, ouch... Ahh, crap! I really blew it," Sagami muttered as he staggered to his feet. "If I'd known I was gonna go 'gouf' when I got hit, I would've tried to be ready to go 'z'gok' when I landed..."

Is that really the part that he regrets? There was a mountain's worth of more significant things he should have regretted first, by my best estimate. "Having been born" would have been a good start.

“Seriously, though, that *hurt!*” said Sagami. “What are you thinking, Takanashi? Violent heroines went out of fashion *years* ago!”

“The archetype you’re referring to only applies when a heroine behaves excessively violently toward the protagonist or one of her other friends, beating them senseless because she can’t express her true feelings in any other way. It does *not* apply when a heroine bludgeons an enemy in a clear and deliberate attempt to inflict grievous bodily harm upon them. In those cases, no amount of violence is beyond the pale,” I retorted.

“Ha ha ha! Well, you’ve got me there,” Sagami said with a flippant chuckle. He didn’t seem shaken in the least. “Anyway, you really know how to punch a guy out! You got me right in the face, but none of my teeth are broken, and I’m not even bleeding! I’m impressed, honestly. That hurt even less than it did when Andou punched me back in middle school.”

“You’re not upset, I see,” I observed. “I succumbed to my anger and knocked you off your feet, yet you don’t seem to care at all.”

I’d fallen victim to Sagami’s fast-talking and ended up behaving in a genuinely humiliating fashion...but upon further consideration, I had also deliberately joined forces with him and agreed to follow his orders. That isn’t to say that I regretted punching him by any means—and in fact, I would’ve gladly given him another punch or two if given the opportunity—but from his perspective, I had to imagine I was biting the hand that had fed me.

“Nope, I’m not,” Sagami said blithely. “I did something bad enough to earn that punch, after all. Or I guess you could say that I tried it because I wouldn’t mind getting punched after it was over. I just wanted to see what would happen. To *watch* what would happen.”

“To see what would happen. To watch what would happen.”

Sagami gave me a polite, respectful bow. “Thank you very much, Takanashi,” he said. “I really enjoyed this.”

“I haven’t done a single thing for the sake of your enjoyment today, for the record,” I replied.

“True enough! You spent the day working your hardest to get with Andou,

after all.”

I found myself at a loss for words, while Sagami lowered his sunglasses and tipped his hat to hang low over his eyes. “All right, I think that’s enough for now,” he said. “The rest of the day’s up to you—I don’t have any orders in particular left to give. Feel free to get out there and live it up! I’ll be pulling out here. Wouldn’t do to overstay my welcome, after all.”

“You’re finished already?” I asked.

“Oh? What’s this? Don’t tell me you were hoping I’d stick around and keep messing with you? Aren’t *you* a greedy little girl!”

“...”

“Ah. I, umm, I-I was just kidding! Don’t *actually* punch me again, okay?”

I lowered my fist, and Sagami let out a sigh of relief. Needless to say, I wasn’t even remotely interested in being messed with by him any longer. That was one role I had no desire to be typecast in. That being said, the fact that he was leaving and telling me to do whatever I felt like was, in and of itself, suspicious. Had he really followed me all the way to the pool just for the sake of the (fake) see-through swimsuit scheme?

“Oh, please, have some faith in me! I swear that today’s plot is well and truly over. There’s only so much you can cram into a single day, after all,” Sagami said. “Haste makes waste, you know? A guy like Andou demands a slow and steady approach. There’ll be plenty of events that’ll help you get close to him from now on. You know, the cultural festival, Christmas, those sorts of things. Right now we’re just sowing the seeds for our future operations.”

I was ever so slightly taken aback. I’d been convinced that at least half of Sagami’s motivation for shoving his way into my love life—actually, make that ninety percent of his motivation—was simply for the fun of it. Shockingly enough, however, he seemed to have a serious long-term plan thought out. I’d been under the impression he was taking this about as seriously as a manga fan would take the sketch-comics they doodled in the margins of their school notebook, and I still wasn’t certain I was wrong about that, but at the very least, he apparently had *some* intent to see it through and turn his doodling into a finished product.

“Yeah—you’ll have to take it slowly and carefully,” Sagami quietly muttered as he turned his back to me. “Otherwise, you’ll never stand a chance of dragging Kanzaki Tomoyo out of the main heroine slot.”

For just a moment—just a single, fleeting instant as he said her name—the smile seemed to vanish from Sagami’s face. In that brief instant, I glimpsed a deep, almost abyssal darkness hidden away behind his ever-present flippant grin.

“As it so happens, I’ve known about Kanzaki Tomoyo since quite a long time ago.”

“You might say I’m an acquaintance of her brother.”

Kanzaki Tomoyo. Sagami viewed her as the main heroine of our story, while she didn’t seem to see him as anything more than Andou’s friend. I’d never seen the two of them exchange so much as a word, and to my understanding, they’d never been placed in the same class either. In spite of all that, I got the impression that Sagami had some sort of axe to grind with regard to her. What, I wondered, could it be that tied the two of them together? Or could it be that Sagami’s ties weren’t with Tomoyo herself, but rather with her brother?

“Oh, right! Try to keep what I told you the other day in mind, okay?” said Sagami.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Whatever you do, don’t let Andou figure out that the mysterious girl from his past is none other than Kanzaki Tomoyo.”

When Andou was in the eighth grade—when he’d renounced his chuunibyou and despaired at fiction’s false nature—he had ultimately been dragged back into the world he’d abandoned by a single girl. It was thanks to her influence that the Andou I knew had come to be. She’d given him the rules he lived by and become the root of his identity. Her name was Kanzaki Tomoyo.

“Andou hasn’t shown any sign of figuring it out so far, and it doesn’t look like Kanzaki plans on opening up about it any time soon either, but who knows how long that’ll last. Now’s your chance to do a little work behind the scenes and make sure the truth never comes to light, in my book,” Sagami said, driving his

point home as he walked away from me.

Oh, I see. Yes...I finally understand.

I knew now why Sagami had chosen me. I understood why he was laying the foundation to turn me into the main heroine...and if I was right, he hadn't had any particularly compelling reason to pick *me* in particular at all. In fact, I would almost go so far as to say that he didn't care *who* he picked...so long as she *wasn't* Kanzaki Tomoyo.

Sagami's ultimate objective was to take a girl who stood out front and center—the sort of girl who would be plastered across the cover of the first volume of a light novel series—and steal that position of importance away from her. He wanted to flout the conventional, ridicule the clichéd, defy the expected, and desecrate the sacrosanct. He wanted to raise the flag of rebellion against storytelling on the whole.

Andou and I spent the rest of the day simply enjoying our time at the pool. It was a perfectly ordinary and entirely wholesome afternoon. Never before had I realized what a wonderful thing it was to frolic about in the water while wearing a perfectly normal swimsuit that would pose you no problems, no matter how wet it got. *Viva ordinary swimsuits!*

“Man, today was seriously a blast, huh?” said Andou.

“Indeed,” I replied. “This will make for a wonderful summer memory.”

We'd changed out of our swimsuits and picked up souvenirs for our families from the water park's gift shop, and with that, our outing was complete. We'd made our way back to the bus stop, where we were currently waiting.

“I honestly didn't think you were the type to cut loose like that, Sayumi,” said Andou.

“Well... I have my moments,” I replied. All of the frustration that had built up in me over the course of the morning had led me to act in a manner that I must admit was rather unlike me in the afternoon. I'd run wild, enjoying all of the park's attractions to their fullest. “Of course, you're hardly one to talk,” I added as I glanced at his hand. “You wouldn't have bought that wooden sword if you

weren't cutting loose at least as much as I was."

Why a pool had been selling wooden swords in its souvenir corner was beyond me, but questioning it out loud would have felt somehow wrong. The purpose of those wooden swords, and the reason every souvenir stand in Japan seemed to have a selection of them on sale, was an eternal mystery. The question of why anyone would *purchase* something so utterly useless, on the other hand, was easily answered: because boys are just dumb like that.

"Oh, you mean Obsidian Orca?"

Annnd he's already given it a name. Of course. "Obsidian" on account of its black coloration and "Orca" on account of the fact that he bought it at the pool, I presume.

"Mwa ha ha! The Obsidian Orca is a legendary sea beast the likes of which only the white whale itself, Moby Dick, could ever hope to compete with! This blade of mine was forged from one of that mythical beast's fangs!" Andou declared.

"And how, precisely, was a wooden sword forged from a whale's tooth?" I asked.

Andou broke eye contact. I took that as a clear sign that he really didn't want me to dig any deeper into his story's inherent self-contradiction.

"Did you buy a wooden sword when you came here with Chifuyu and her friend, as well?" I asked. If he had genuinely bought two wooden swords from the same gift shop, I would have been forced to seriously question his sanity, but thankfully, Andou shook his head.

"Nah, I didn't. I kinda wanted to, but, like...y'know... Not even *I'm* brave enough to escort a couple elementary schoolers around while carrying a wooden sword, y'know?" he explained despondently. He could have a surprising degree of common sense about that sort of thing, sometimes. Or at least, he was timid enough to make it seem like he did.

"For the record, I'm no more excited to be walking around with a boy holding a sword than they would have been," I said.

"Okay, but, like... I guess I figured you'd let me get away with it? You're

always really understanding about this stuff when push comes to shove, y'know?"

Well, this raises questions. Just what sort of person does he think I am?

I paused for a moment.

No...really. What sort of person does he think I am? I questioned internally as I watched Andou deliver his interminable lecture on the appeal of wooden swords, his face lit by the glow of sunset. *What do you think of me, Andou? It's been just a little over a year since we first met. I had no interest in you at all at first. Over time, I came to think of you as something akin to a cute little brother, and eventually, I came to notice your kindness and see you as the boy you are...and now, I can't look at you in any other light. You drew my heart to you, threw it into turmoil, and finally stole it away from me. You made me want to understand you to such an intense degree that I'd even resort to the most despicable means available to me to make it happen...*

"Oh! Here comes the bus," Andou said, then he started quickly rolling Obsidian Orca back up into the wrapping paper it had come in.

Our fun little outing had come to an end. All that was left was to climb onto the bus and ride it home...but I wasn't quite finished yet.

"Andou?" I still had something left that I had to say. Something that I was *meant* to say.

"What is it?" said Andou. "Oh, wait, don't tell me—you want to hear all about my wooden sword collection?! Well, in *that* case—"

"Kanzaki Tomoyo," I said, going out of my way to use her full name. The full name of this story's main heroine.

"Huh...? What about Tomoyo?" Andou asked, sounding rather bewildered.

I didn't stop. I kept speaking, before my resolve deserted me. "Andou," I said, "are you aware of the novel that Tomoyo has been writing in her spare time?"

"Yeah, of course," said Andou. "I dunno if I'd put it that way, though? Like, she's seriously trying to be an author and submitting her stuff to contests and everything, so saying she's 'writing in her spare time' feels kinda, y'know..."

“No, that wasn’t what I intended at all,” I said. “I wasn’t referring to the works she’s submitted. I meant the novel that she’s been writing in her spare time, purely for herself.”

“For herself...?” Andou repeated as he cocked his head. It seemed he was having a hard time grasping the concept I was alluding to.

If you were to take a sample of ten individuals who identified as novelists, you would likely find that every one of them took a distinctly different approach toward their writing. Some novelists never write a word for any purpose other than their work, while others write in a nonoccupational capacity as well, purely for their own enjoyment. To my understanding, even some professional authors had started uploading works that they’d written for themselves online recently. Some of them were surely aware that doing so could benefit them in the long run, of course, and the line between stories written for work and stories written for fun could be a rather blurry one, but the distinction remained.

“Some time ago, Tomoyo happened to mention to me that she was writing a story entirely for her own self-satisfaction, unrelated to the stories that she tries to write with a professional mindset for the purpose of publication,” I said.

“Oh, huh,” said Andou.

“You should ask her what it’s about, when you have the opportunity. She gave me a quick summary of the plot...and it was a remarkably entertaining story.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. When I get a chance, I mean. But wait, why’re you bringing Tomoyo’s novel up *now*?”

“No particular reason. It just sprang to mind.”

With that, we climbed onto the bus and departed for home.

A short while after I alighted from the bus and said my goodbyes to Andou, as I was walking home, I pulled out my phone and dialed Sagami’s number.

“What do you think you’re playing at?” he asked immediately, before I had said so much as a word. His voice was low in pitch, and I felt like I could hear a distinct trace of anger in his words. I’d never heard Sagami speak in a tone like that before.

“Whatever might you mean?” I asked.

“Please don’t play dumb with me, Takanashi. I’m talking about what you said to Andou at the bus stop,” he said. That confirmed my suspicion: Sagami had, in fact, been observing us long after he’d claimed that he was going home. “So, Kanzaki Tomoyo’s been writing a novel for fun... That was news to me, but considering the timing with which you chose to bring it up, I have a pretty good idea what it is you were trying to do.” Sagami spoke quickly—a little impatiently, even.

I could understand why, to be fair. After all...I, his coconspirator, had just stabbed him in the back. I had just ruined his entire master plan. I imagined he’d had all sorts of scenarios laid out for the cultural festival, Christmas, and plenty more events to come, but I’d just torn down the foundation that *all* of them rested upon, leaving his palace of lies to crumble to dust beneath him.

“I *specifically* told you *not* to do that, so why?” he asked.

“Oh, my, so that *wasn’t* reverse psychology? I was so certain that you were only being that emphatic because you *wanted* me to tell him. I suppose my comedian’s spirit has led me astray.”

“...”

“I’m kidding.”

“Are you trying to redeem yourself? Paying the price for your misdeeds?” Sagami asked, brushing aside my teasing and going right back to his usual style of theorycrafting. “Do you regret having gone along with my plan to take advantage of Andou’s good nature and drag the story of his darkest moments out of him?”

“I do not,” I replied. Repentance, regret, shame, remorse...I’d certainly felt all of them, at one point or another, but they weren’t what had driven my act of betrayal. “I simply couldn’t live with myself. I could not accept the idea that I was the sort of woman who would let herself be used and toyed with by a person like you,” I said. “Sagami. As of this day, I will no longer play the part of your puppet. I thank you for everything you’ve done for me, and I wish you all the best in your future endeavors.”

A period of silence ensued. Eventually, though...

“Heh...ha ha ha!”

...I heard a weak, lifeless laugh.

“Well, you got me, all right! And to think I taught you about Andou’s past specifically because I thought you’d find a way to keep the truth hidden... I never imagined that *you’d* be the one who’d make him figure it out. That’s a bit too ironic for my taste,” Sagami spat. “I think I overestimated you. I thought you were smart and calculating...but I guess when romance is concerned, you turn into an honest idiot.”

“I’ll decide what counts as smart and what counts as idiocy for myself, thank you very much,” I replied. “That being said, at the very least, I’m certain that staying quiet and continuing to do your bidding would *not* have been a smart decision by any means.”

“Are you really sure about this? You know that you stand no chance of ever being the main heroine without my help, right? When an author has their main heroine picked out from the start, it takes one hell of an outcry from the fans to get anyone else paired with the protagonist.”

“That’s more than enough of your meta commentary, Sagami,” I declared, my tone full of undisguised disdain. “I’m sick and tired of enabling your little game of pretend reader.”

I didn’t care about the main heroine, rom-com tropes, or foreshadowing. I was sick to death of hearing him ramble about his incomprehensible values and perspective, and I was putting an end to it.

My name is Takanashi Sayumi. I am not a character in some story, and I am not a heroine in a light novel that stars Andou Jurai as its protagonist. I am a human being of flesh and blood—a perfectly ordinary third-year in high school who has had the misfortune of falling for an underclassman in her club.

“I do have one more thing to thank you for, Sagami. If it weren’t for you, I never would have had the chance to help Andou meet with the mystery girl from his past. Because of your meddling, though, it seems I’ll be able to make the dream he’s been pursuing since he was in the eighth grade come true.”

“And what if he ends up going out with her? What then?” Sagami asked.

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

“Is this your idea of sportsmanship? Ha ha ha! You know, you’re exactly the sort of person who’ll never win at the game of love. If you don’t learn to be more egoistic, you’ll be a loser for the rest of your life. You’re standing at the top of a slippery slope, but it’s not too late to turn back, you know?”

“Even if that were true, I would still choose the same path. I’d never be able to look my adorable little underclassmen in the eye if I were to disgrace myself in the way you’re suggesting, and that’s something I’d rather avoid at all costs.”

“I just...don’t get it. Why? What drives you to sacrifice so much for the sake of your friends?”

My answer was obvious. I held my head up high, posture perfect, and felt a sense of bright, shining optimism as I answered him without hesitation.

“Because I’m their president.”



“Well...drat.”

I plopped onto the bench by the water park’s bus stop and stared up at the sky. Before I knew it, the sunset had faded and the sky above me had been filled with stars.

To sum up my situation: I’d tailed Andou and Takanashi for the entire day, and I’d missed the last bus home as a result. The shuttle buses that ran to the park, it turned out, stopped running surprisingly early.

I’m sure screwed now, aren’t I? I wonder how I’ll get home? How many hours would it take to walk back from here? But, well, we can worry about that later. For now...

“This just goes to show that broadening your horizons isn’t worth the effort.”

The Make Takanashi Sayumi the Main Heroine Project had ground to a spectacular standstill. Things had failed to go my way so thoroughly it was actually almost refreshing.

Sheesh. I always knew I wasn't meant to be a creator, and this just proves it. It wasn't at all uncommon for readers to start writing a novel or a manga on a whim, and it also wasn't uncommon for those works to peter out in a pathetic anticlimax, just like mine had. Of course, some of the countless readers out there managed to overcome those setbacks, rally their spirits, and put in months or even years of hard work and effort...and *those* readers, presumably, were the ones who managed to work their way over to the creators' side of the equation.

Every writer was once a reader. Every writer started from that same point. I, however, wasn't that sort of person.

I was the sort of person who'd say "Man, this manga's art looks like garbage" despite never having even touched a dip pen; the sort of person who'd say "Even I could write a light novel that's better than this" then give up after two or three lines; and the sort of person who'd say "Wow, this game is some hot trash" even though I couldn't program to save my life. *That's* the sort of reader I was.

It felt like Takanashi had gotten the better of me, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little frustrated and indignant about that, but when all was said and done...

"Yeah... Trying to get out of my comfort zone and do something I'm not used to really was a bad idea."

If something looked interesting, I'd experience it by watching someone *else* do it from the sidelines. I'd let someone *else* make my entertainment for me. I wouldn't be able to have a hand in any of the stories I experienced that way, sure...but in a sense, one might say that was how stories were *meant to be*.

Oh, I get it now. Well played, Takanashi. You've returned your story to the way it was meant to be without even using Route of Origin. I'm impressed, really. I might just go and fall for you.

"Oh... But actually, I dunno about falling for a senior. Not super into how she's taller than me either..."

But those questions could wait. For now, I pulled out my phone and called up an acquaintance of mine.

“Ah, hello? Is that you, Kiryuu? It’s me, Shizumu of the Sagamis... I mean, sure, you can call me *Innocent Onlooker* if that makes you happy. Anyway, you know the local water park? I’m there right now, and I missed the last bus out. Think you could come give me a ride? ...What? Who said anything about your Dame Dolor? Absolutely *not*! You wouldn’t catch me dead biking tandem with a guy. Can’t that hag— I mean, can’t Saitou Hitomi drive the two of you out here? She’s your chauffeur, right? I’m actually in really serious trouble here, so seriously, please come get me!”

That’s when a thought struck me.

“Oh, and while we’re at it, why not catch me up on things? How goes the battle between Hearts and *Fallen Black*?”

I’d grown tired of the slice of life rom-com I’d been reading...so I decided to jump ship and start reading a supernatural battle story instead. After all, reading all sorts of stories, jumping indiscriminately from one to the next, isn’t unfaithful or insincere in the least. No, it’s just how readers are.

Chapter 4 ★ July and a Girl Who Lights Up the World Go To...

The promised day arrived before I knew it—that is to say, the day that Andou and I had planned to go to the local pool together.

It felt like the span of time since we'd made that promise had simultaneously been as long as could be and over in an instant, but one way or another, I'd spent all of it in a state of agitated unrest. One minute, I'd be shouting "I-if you're gonna get here, then do it already!" at my calendar, and the next I'd be shouting "Wait, I only have so-and-so days left?! Crap! I haven't even bought a swimsuit yet!" and flying into a panic. I'd been through all sorts of ridiculous internal drama and conflict, but at long last, the day finally arrived.

I'd done everything I could think of to prepare myself. I'd spent *ages* agonizing over what swimsuit to buy, and I had what I'd say when he complimented me for it memorized by rote. I wasn't going to act bashful in the slightest. I was just going to give him a look, say, "Oh, you think so? Hee hee—thanks!" and put on a show of how composed and mature I was. And if he *didn't* compliment me...I mean, I figured I'd smack him upside the head or something, probably.

I knew I couldn't let myself be late, so I went to bed at nine the evening before. I'd come pretty close to going full nocturnal ever since summer vacation started, so I hadn't been able to sleep at all at first...but eventually, I somehow managed to force my way into a slumber through sheer willpower.

I was all ready. Finally, the long-awaited promised day arrived...

...and then a record-breaking downpour rolled into town.

It was raining so hard, it felt like someone had overturned an enormous bucket high up in the sky. It'd started in the early morning and just wouldn't

stop, pounding away at the ground with such relentless persistence you'd think the ground had murdered the rain's parents and sent it on a lifelong quest for revenge. According to a news bulletin, it was a localized freak storm that totally defied all weather forecasts.

The roaring of the rain was incredibly loud, even from inside my room. Thanks to that, I'd woken up around four in the morning. Hours passed, nine o'clock rolled around, and the rain wasn't showing the slightest sign of letting up. According to the news, the storm was supposed to carry on for the rest of the day.

Finally, an hour before our meeting time, I called Andou.

"So, the plan's off, huh...? Yeah, I guess it would be."

"Yeah," I replied. "Considering the weather and all..."

I'd been the one to propose our outing, so it felt like it was my responsibility to call it off. The fact that it had turned out this way felt just, well...like, of all the things, you know? Yesterday and the day before—and last week and the week before that, for that matter—we'd had day after day of clear, cloudless skies. Why did *today* have to be the one specific day that got singled out for a massive downpour?

"Hey, Tomoyo," said Andou. "How about tomorrow, or the day after? Can't we put a rain check on it instead of canceling it altogether? I heard the weather's supposed to clear up tomorrow."

"Sorry," I sighed. "No can do. My ticket expires today." I'd wanted as much time as I could get to prepare, so I had scheduled our outing at the last possible second to facilitate that. Who knew that choice would come around to bite me in the rear?

"Ahh, gotcha. Hadn't considered it could expire," said Andou.

"Yeah. So, umm... Wh-Whatever, okay?! I just thought I might as well go since I got the ticket for free and all! It's not like I was *that* hung up on going to the pool, really!"

"..."

“Okay, bye!”

Andou still seemed like he had something to say, but I said a quick goodbye and hung up on him before he had the chance to spit it out. Then I let out a deep sigh and flopped over onto the bed I’d been sitting on. Maybe it was just because I didn’t have the phone call to distract me anymore, but it felt like the rain was louder than ever now.

I’d never minded the rain. It gave our town a whole different look than it had on clear days—there was a certain charm to it, I guess—and I loved reading in my room with the sound of the rain as my background music. Oh, and I also liked that our gym classes got canceled on rainy days. I was bad at pretty much everything that fell into the broad category of athletics, so I always wound up spending the day before our field days and marathon runs desperately carrying out rainmaking rituals and making rain-warding charms, which I then hung upside down to bring *in* the rain instead of driving it away. Also, I’ll admit...I didn’t mind the rain because I kinda liked being the sort of person who didn’t mind the rain.

And so, this was a first for me. It was the first time I’d ever looked out at a rainstorm and found it to be utterly loathsome.

Between my distaste for the weather’s whims and my distaste for my own miserable luck, I ended up deciding to just go back to bed and nap the irritation away. It took my mom calling me on the phone from downstairs to get me out of bed again. As it turned out, she’d just wanted to say that lunch was ready. She’d signed us up for a family plan that let us call each other for free, and we’d taken that as an excuse to use our phones whenever we needed to get in touch, even if it was just from one end of our own house to the other.

“Man... It’s lunchtime already?” I groaned. I’d gone and napped the entire morning away, it seemed, and I mildly bemoaned my own laziness as I plodded out of my room and downstairs.

My mom was setting the table for lunch when I got to the living room. She was serving sunny-side up eggs, toast, salad, some yogurt, and some seafood paella that was left over from last night’s dinner. Lunch in the Kanzaki

household pretty much always ended up having that “This feels more like a breakfast, actually” sort of feel, mostly on account of me not bothering to eat breakfast more often than not.

“Morning, Tomo,” said my mom. “Just getting up, Little Miss Sleepyhead?” she added with a chuckle. Apparently, the fact that I’d just crawled out of bed was written all over my face. She was well into her forties, by the way, but you’d never know it from how she looked and acted. Even her choice of apron was cutesy in a way that didn’t exactly suit her age.

“I’m jealous, you know? I wish I got a summer vacation too,” my full-time housewife of a mom jabbed. She was busy with her housework, just like always, while I’d been using the long summer break as an excuse to live a life of slothful indulgence. I felt a little bad about that, honestly...but on the other hand, that’s just how it goes sometimes. Summer vacation’s just like that, y’know?

“Oh, right,” my mom continued. “Weren’t you going to meet a friend at the pool today? Seems like a bad day to be sleeping in this late.”

“We canceled,” I said as I sat down at the table and spread a layer of jam over my toast. I’d tried to sound indifferent, but I felt like my words had ended up coming out with a certain air of dejection instead.

“Oh... Well, I guess that stands to reason in this weather,” my mom said with a sympathetic nod, then she sat down across from me. “That’s a shame, though. You were so excited for today.”

“N-No, I wasn’t!” I snapped.

“Oh, *please*,” said my mom. “Do you realize how long we spent picking out your swimsuit when we went shopping the other day? It took *hours*!”

“Th-That was just, um...y-you know, I barely ever buy that sort of stuff, so I wanted to make sure I got a good one.”

“You also started doing a bunch of crunches and push-ups out of nowhere.”

“I-I just realized I haven’t been getting enough exercise lately, that’s all.”

“Then there’s the little fashion show you put on in your room last night. Trying on your swimsuit, picking an outfit...”

“H-How do you even know about that?!” I shrieked. *I’m positive I locked my door! I closed the curtains too, and I spent the whole time tiptoeing around so she wouldn’t hear me! I took every possible precaution to keep it secret! A-And, wait! W-W-Wait, j-just how much of it did she see?! Not that pose?! Or...oh god, not that one?!* “Y-You’ve got it all wrong, mom! I-I just saw someone posing like that on the cover of a book somewhere! There’s no way I was actually planning on doing it in public, or—” I shouted, my mind going blank from the shame of it all as I babbled desperate excuses...until I noticed the big, broad smirk on my mom’s face.

“Oh? So that really *is* what you were doing,” she said. It was at that moment that I realized I’d screwed up. “Hee hee! Oh, Tomoyo, you’re just the *cutest!*”

“You set me up, didn’t you?” I grumbled.

“Well, *now* I’m just plain curious! What sort of pose was it?”

“Agggh! J-Just drop it!” I shouted. I could tell that carrying the conversation on any longer was just going to make the shame worse, so I slammed the door shut on that topic, scooted an egg onto my toast, and took a bite...then remembered that I’d just finished slathering said toast with jam. “Blech! Ugh, gross...”

“Ha ha ha! Come on, Tomo, pull yourself together! Here, have some water.”

My mom handed me a glass, then she grinned as I washed the taste of jammy egg toast out of my mouth. She kept using my plans for the day and the way I’d been acting lately to poke fun at me for the rest of my meal, but eventually, our lively little lunch came to an end.

“Oh, come to think of it,” my mom said as I helped her clean up the dishes, “have you heard from Hajime lately?”

For a moment, I was silent. Kiryuu Hajime was four years older than me and didn’t share my family name, but he was my brother nonetheless. He was brilliant, athletic, and attractive to boot, though when it came to his fashion sense, and sense of aesthetics in general...I’ll just say no comment. He was in college, though he was currently taking a break from school—and from living with the rest of us at home.

One year earlier, on April Fool's Day—the day Hajime had turned twenty years old—he took his leave from the Kanzaki household. Since our academic calendar started and ended in April, being born on the first made Hajime one of the youngest students in his grade level, and turning twenty had felt like it was a long time coming for him. That was the age at which society acknowledged his adulthood...and the age at which he just packed up and went away, leaving behind a single phrase: "There's something wrong with this world."

I'd tried to stop him—to tell him to quit with the cryptic playacting—but nothing I said got through to him. He hadn't completely broken off contact with me or anything, but I never had the foggiest idea where he was or what he was doing at any given moment.

"Nope," I said. "Haven't heard a peep from him since I bumped into him at that restaurant the other day. No calls, no texts, nothing."

"Oh," said my mom.

"Why? Did something happen?" I asked.

"Hmm. Well, it's not a huge deal or anything," my mom said a little hesitantly. "I was transferring his living expenses for this month into his account the other day, and I noticed he's been making more withdrawals than usual lately. I was a little worried he'd run into some sort of trouble."

I didn't know what to say to that. My mom was a worrywart, and Hajime was totally reliant on my parents' money. They'd been sending that moron a monthly allowance via bank transfer, even though he'd run away and still hadn't bothered coming home even once. To make matters even more embarrassing, he had the debit card for his account, but my mom kept a hold of his bankbook for him. It was a setup you saw pretty often with college kids, since it let her transfer money into his account with ease, but it also meant that my parents had access to a detailed record of exactly when and for how much he made his withdrawals.

Hajime, please...try to be just a little independent, okay? Nothing good comes from a bum like you leeching off our household finances.

"I've been thinking of giving him a call, but, well...nobody likes a helicopter parent, right?" said my mom. "I thought that you might've heard something

from him, though.”

“...Nope. He hasn’t told me squat.”

“Well, okay. Hmm... I hope he’s doing all right. Maybe I should send him a little extra this month?”

“You’re spoiling him way too much, mom,” I sighed. I really didn’t want her to let my idiot brother take advantage of her even more than he already was. “Just let him figure it out on his own. Hajime’s a grown-ass adult. If he really needs money that desperately, he’ll probably just come home on his own.”

“You’re always so harsh with Hajime, aren’t you?” my mom commented.

“*You* just let him get away with too much,” I countered.

“You’re so distant these days too! The two of you used to be so close before you started high school. I remember how you used to love playing with his old toys when you were a middle schooler...”

“Can you *not* bring up middle school, thanks?!” I yelped. Just the thought of what I’d done in my middle school days with the things my mom viewed as “old toys” was...was...

Agggh, I don’t even wanna think about it!

It felt like my old, forbidden memories were about to rise up to the surface for a second, but I shook them away and immersed myself in washing the dishes. My mom, meanwhile, chuckled and shook her head as she dried the dishes I’d finished cleaning.

“You really should try to get along with him more! The two of you’ve got the same blood flowing through your veins, you know?”

For just a moment I came to a dead halt, a dish still clasped in my hand. I knew my mom probably hadn’t meant to imply anything major when she’d said “the same blood flowing through your veins,” but I found myself reflexively reading into the wording anyway. Hajime and I were only partially related, biologically speaking. We shared a father, Kanzaki Tadashi, but we were born to different mothers. In other words, we were half-siblings.

Hajime’s mother was named Kiryuu Rei. She and my dad had gotten divorced

right after Hajime was born, apparently, and she'd taken Hajime with her. A few years later, my dad and my mom met, got married, and had me. And then, a few years after that...Hajime arrived at our home.

I'd never gotten the full story about how it'd happened. I could only imagine what sort of circumstances my parents, Rei, and Hajime had been going through to make things turn out that way. I was still just a kid at the time. It wouldn't have made sense to bring me into the loop back then, and even though I was a high schooler now, I'd sorta just never asked.

Regardless of how it'd happened, from that day onward, our family had gained a new member. I think that transition went perfectly smoothly too. The three of us accepted Hajime as if he'd been part of our family from the very start, and Hajime opened up to us before we knew it as well...yet no matter how close we grew, how much of a family we became, Hajime never stopped using his birth mother's family name. He was obstinately, pathologically attached to the Kiryuu surname.

"I wonder why...?" I muttered before I knew it. "Why did dad and Rei get divorced?" I didn't really understand what I was saying. The question had just sprung to mind and slipped out of me unprompted.

"Where's this coming from?" asked my mom.

"Nowhere, really... I'm just sorta curious," I said. Why had I been born into this slightly strange shared-father half-sibling relationship? It stood to reason that the answer to that question would be the same reason Kiryuu Rei and Kanzaki Tadashi had gotten a divorce.

A moment later, though, I realized my mistake and kicked myself. Considering how I'd phrased my question, it'd probably sounded like I was dissatisfied with my parents' current relationship. That wasn't how I'd meant it at all, and I frantically searched for the right thing to say to make that clear...

"Hmm. Let me think."

...but then I realized that my mom didn't seem to have taken it personally at all.

"I think only your father and Rei know the answer to that question," she said.

“After all, they were already divorced when I met him.”

“Yeah...makes sense. Sorry. That was a weird question to ask,” I said.

“It’s fine! I don’t mind at all. But, well...” my mom said, then trailed off for a moment as a faraway look passed across her face. “If I had to guess, I’d say there was no real reason.”

I felt my eyes widen. “There...was no reason? How does that work? That doesn’t make any sense!”

Marrying someone meant making a vow to spend the rest of your life with them, and getting a divorce meant crumpling up that promise like a piece of wastepaper and walking separate paths once more. In my mind, that wasn’t something you did casually. It meant that something was out of the ordinary. There was just no *way* you’d do it for no reason at all.

“Oh, sorry,” said my mom. “You’re right—of course there was a reason. But, well...I guess a better way of putting it is that I don’t think there was any single, specific reason that they’d be able to pick out as the *one*. I don’t think any reason they could come up with would explain things for anyone other than the two of them.”

I gave my mom a blank stare, and she carried on. “You see reports on gossip shows about celebrities getting divorced all the time, right? And they always try to pin some sort of reason or story to it—one of them cheated, or their personalities clashed, or they couldn’t reconcile their values, or what have you. Personally, though, I think that reasons like that are just one part of a bigger picture.”

“A bigger picture...?”

“The way I see it, divorce happens when all sorts of things build up over time, little by little, until it all becomes too much to bear and you decide that you’d be better off apart,” she said, her eyes narrowed and a gentle smile on her face. It wasn’t a totally happy smile, though—there was a trace of sadness to it, an inkling of sorrow for how cold people could be and for how fleeting and ephemeral the relationships we have with each other are.

“Mom...? Have you, umm...ever thought about divorcing dad?” I asked.

“I have,” she replied immediately. So immediately, I sort of *wished* she’d hesitated a little. “More times than you could count.”

“More than I could count...?”

“More than you’d believe.”

“More than I’d *believe*...?”

“And you’d jump if you saw how hopping mad I got those times.”

“I’d rather we keep our feet on the ground...”

I’d inadvertently touched on a dark, unknown side of my parents’ relationship, and I was feeling an *awfully* complicated set of mixed feelings about it when my mom added in one last word.

“But,” she said, “even when I’ve wanted to divorce him, I’ve also wanted to stay with him even more. That’s why we’re still together to this day,” she concluded with unhesitant confidence.

It felt like her words had overwhelmed me—like they’d caught me off guard and gotten the better of me, in a weird sort of way. I don’t really know how to say this, but, well...I suppose they made me realize that my mom really was a mom after all.

After lunch, I went back up to my room. I’d offered to help my mom out with her chores, but she told me that she had those covered and I should go do my homework instead. I hadn’t had a good argument for that one, so I headed back upstairs to shut myself in my room like a good little student.

Yeah, okay. She has a point. I should probably get to work on my homework one of these days. When summer break started, I’d been so preoccupied by the contest I’d submitted my story to that I couldn’t focus on anything else, and I had ended up spending all my time working on the novel I’d been writing for fun in an effort to keep myself at least vaguely mentally stable. As for the past few days, I’d, well...been super busy getting ready for today’s pool trip. I’d bought a swimsuit, worked out to get my figure in shape, and taken great pains to make sure I’d be mentally prepared for the trip. It had been a pretty rough few days, honestly!

In short: as of yet, I hadn't so much as touched my homework.

This is bad. Yup. I'm preeetty screwed, actually. I should put together a list of everything I have to do, I thought, resolving myself to get *that* done at the absolute least as I threw open the door to my room, walked over to my desk, and opened up my bag...then, because I was a modern girl living in modern times, paused to check my phone, which had been charging on my desk. That's when I noticed that Andou had sent me a text.

I'd made first contact with Andou during the spring of my first year in high school.

Ah. Wait. *Technically*, that's not exactly right...I guess? I'd *actually* met with him once before, back when we were in middle school. That meeting was, well...let's just say I don't want to think about it and set it aside. The point is that we *had* met once already, so it'd probably be more appropriate to call our first encounter in high school our second contact.

About a year had passed since that first chance meeting, which had ended without either of us actually introducing ourselves. I don't know whether it was a coincidence, or fate, or what, but one way or another, we'd ended up reuniting in our high school club.

"An *admission test*?"

"Yes, that's correct. An admission test."

It was springtime, shortly after I'd joined the literary club. I was in our club room after school, and Sayumi had just told me an incredibly strange story.

"Does this club *have* an admission test, Takanashi?" I asked. Yes, I was still calling her "Takanashi" back then. Takes me back just thinking about it. "I definitely didn't take one of those..."

"Ordinarily, we do not," said Sayumi. "However, I've chosen to make a special exception in Andou Jurai's case."

"Why?"

"Well, because...he irritated me, I suppose."

All I could think was, *Wow, this girl sure doesn't mince words.*

“Frankly, I’d prefer to spare myself his idiocy—ahem. Frankly, I believe that admitting an individual who lacks the ability and character to excel in our club would not be to the benefit of anyone involved in the equation. I intend to have a thorough discussion with him and ascertain whether or not he has the right disposition to join us,” she continued.

She called him an idiot. She totally called him an idiot just now. I could only imagine how rude this “Andou Jurai” must have been when he met her to prompt this sort of reaction. *What can you even do that’d make someone hate you this much, this quickly?* I wondered, and although part of me was starting to conclude that Takanashi might be just a little scary at the time, when I heard the whole story, I ended up coming down a hundred percent on her side.

Yup. Definitely Andou’s fault for speaking to a senior like that during his first meeting with her. That was all on him.

The next day, Sayumi administered Andou’s admission test. She wanted to have a one-on-one conversation with him, so I ended up stepping out of the room and wandering around the school, exploring the hallways I hadn’t had the time to get used to yet and generally killing time.

I’d asked Sayumi for a little more of an explanation and found that she wasn’t *really* planning on staking his admission on the results of the test. It was “an interview in name only,” in her words. As such, I ended up wandering back toward the club room about five minutes before their interview was technically scheduled to end...just in time to witness Sayumi burst through the door, clutching a hand to her mouth. She looked like she’d barely made it out of there alive.

“Wh-Whoa! Are you okay, Takanashi?!” I asked as I dashed over to her.

“I-I’m sorry... I can’t take it any longer,” Sayumi replied with great effort. She had *both* of her hands clasped over her mouth now, and her whole body was trembling. “He got me. Oh, did he ever get me...”

He “got her”...? D-Don’t tell me he attacked her?! Is this Andou guy the sort of person who’d get violent with a woman?! What a scumbag!

My rage was rapidly moving from a simmer to a rolling boil, but Sayumi...

“Pff... He he, he he he...”

...had an incredibly crooked, half-suppressed smile on her face. Her cheeks were spasming too. Best as I could tell, she was desperately trying to hold back an intense fit of the giggles.

H-Huh? Is it just me, or is she enjoying herself? Like, a lot?

“He got me...well and truly,” Sayumi gasped.

Back then, I’d found myself at a loss for a reaction. Just recently, though, when we were cleaning out our club room, we found the résumé Andou had submitted to her, and suddenly, it had all made sense.

Andou had put everything he had into writing that résumé. He’d opened by identifying one of his hobbies or skills as “people watching,” combo’d that straight into claiming that an area he excelled in was his “disinterest in other people,” then dealt the coup de grâce by claiming he fell short in regard to his “lack of emotions.” It was a spectacularly executed full combo that dealt devastating damage to Sayumi’s usually resilient abs, leaving her laughing so hard she wound up gasping for breath.

“I’m sorry,” said Sayumi, “I need to step out for a moment...and go laugh myself to death somewhere nobody can see me...he he he!”

And just like that, she staggered off to who knows where, leaving me confused and bewildered. I would’ve felt weird about just going home, so for lack of a better option, I decided to step into the club room. Just when I was about to open the door, though...

“Huuuh? Hey, what’s going on, Takanashi? And wait, what about the rest of my interview?”

...somebody opened it from inside a second before I had the chance.

“*Huh?!*” I gasped with astonishment as I saw the boy before me. I didn’t exactly keep my chill, but can you blame me? After all, I’d met him before. Back in middle school, when I was still in the darkest depths of my chuuni phase, during one of the monthly bike rides I took to the park near my house to,

well...“conduct a ritual,” as I would’ve claimed. Basically, I’d been going full-*cringe*, and *he* was the guy that I’d met on that ritual/self-satisfaction ceremony’s final day! *Our club’s new member—Andou Jurai—is him?!*

“Hmm...?” Andou grunted as he finally noticed me. “Ah. Wait, are you...?”

I gasped once more. The moment he looked at me, a violent tremor welled up from somewhere deep within me, and then a second later, I stiffened up. *O-Oh, god, what should I do? What should I do, what should I do, what should I do?!*

I’m screwed! He knows the old me! He witnessed the lethally cringey antics I got up to at the height of my chuunibyou! Aggh, this is the worst! I got over all that crap! I worked so hard to turn my life around and get a fresh start in high school! How was I supposed to know that he’d end up in the same school as me? And the same club, at that!

My high school life was supposed to be gilded with flowers and sunshine, and I could *not* have my sordid past cast a pall over it, no matter what happened. *I’ll have to shut him up before he has the chance to spill the beans... Actually, I’ll have to silence him permanently!*

While I was busy trembling with furious terror and working out the early stages of an appallingly violent plot, Andou finished his thought. “Are you here to take the literary club’s admission exam too?”

“...Huh?” I grunted.

“Man, that’s a relief, seriously! I was starting to think I was the only one who had to test into the club, y’know? Kinda hurt my feelings for a minute there!”

“...”

“Anyway, have you seen Takanashi? She ran out halfway through the interview and never came back. She looked like she was in pretty bad shape when she left too—think she’s okay?”

“...”

“Huh? Hey, why aren’t you saying... Ah! W-Waaait—I thought you were in my grade, but...don’t tell me you’re an upperclassman?! Gah, crap! S-S-Sorry, was I being rude?! You just look so young, I sorta assumed... Ah, no, I mean, like, in a

vibrant, youthful sorta way!”

“...”

Huh?

Has he...not realized who I am? He's sure acting like this is our first time meeting each other... And now that I think about it, the last time we met I was wearing a pretty wild outfit. Specifically, I'd been wearing Hajime's sunglasses, Hajime's silver wig, Hajime's black trench coat, and Hajime's fingerless gloves, while riding Hajime's bicycle...oh, and I'd had my own scarf on too.

Looking back on it *also* had the side effect of hitting me with a nearly lethal dose of self-loathing. *Seriously, how did I go out in public looking like that? I'm surprised nobody called the cops on me!* In this one particular moment, however, my creeper-tier fashion sense had actually worked out in my favor. My outfit had kept the majority of my face covered up, and if I was reading the situation correctly, there was a chance he hadn't put the pieces together.

“I'm not an upperclassman, no,” I said. “I'm a first-year too. First year, class 1, and my name's Kanzaki Tomoyo.”

“O-Oh, okay. Man, you had me freaked out for a second there,” Andou sighed.

I hesitated for just a moment. “Hey...do you recognize me?” I finally asked, just to be on the safe side.

Andou gave me a blank stare. “Uh...no? Why, are you famous or something?”

“Nah, nothing like that,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Oh, then are you going for, like, a stuck-up snob sorta image? Trying to be one of those ‘Every last person on this planet should know my name!’ sorta girls?”

“*Hell* no!”

“Okay, then you must be one of those people all the boys start passing around rumors about right after the opening ceremony and making a fanclub for and stuff, 'cause you're just *that* hot... Okay, no, scratch that. Probably not that one.”

Wow! What a dick! Sure, I wasn't *just that hot* or anything, and sure, there were plenty of girls out there who were cuter than me...but that didn't make it any less indescribably frustrating to have him give me a long, appraising look and then say *that* as if it were the only rational conclusion.

"Well, if you don't know me, then that's fine," I said. One way or another, the fact that he hadn't recognized me was a blessing. I didn't have to worry about concealing my identity or going around walking on eggshells anymore, so I finally faced him and gave him a proper look in the eye. "And, by the way, no, I *didn't* have to take an admission test. You're the only one who got one of those."

"Ugh!" Andou grunted. "Crap, I had a feeling! Damnations! Why only me...? Actually, wait. Maybe it's the opposite of what I'm thinking? Like, when only one person out of the whole club gets singled out and hazed, isn't that, like...kinda awesome, actually?! Like how the two leads in *Haikyuu!!* ended up fighting right after they joined the volleyball club!"

"Nah, you just pissed Takanashi off, that's all. This *definitely* isn't her giving you a hard time because she has high hopes for you, I promise," I calmly jabbed before his little ego trip could spiral out of control. "Speaking of, if either of us is famous, it's probably you. Well, notorious, anyway, and only with me and Takanashi. What the hell did you even *do*, uh...Andou Jurai, right?" I asked, casually using his name.

"Mwa ha ha," the boy before me laughed. It was an odd, idiosyncratic laugh, and he took great care to clearly enunciate every syllable. It had me flashing back to the "kye ki ki" laugh I'd gone out of my way to use back in middle school. "'Andou Jurai,' is it...? Yes, I see now. Indeed, I suppose that *is* the moniker I'm known by in this realm."

I took in a sharp breath as a terrible chill raced down my spine. A sense of awkward discomfort rushed through me, and a sense of pathological revulsion bubbled up from deep down within my core like a seething lake of magma, overwhelming my heart. I knew where all that discomfort and distaste was coming from: I saw myself in him. The fact that I'd known what he was going for in a split second—that looking at him was like looking at myself in a mirror—filled me with burning, overpowering shame. I sympathized with him so keenly,

it was like our hearts were as one. I could feel it in all of my senses, like some strange sort of synesthesia.

There's no doubt about it. The old me is right here in front of me. This guy—this boy, Andou Jurai...

“Mwa ha ha! Hear this, woman: you’ve caught me in a good mood today. Weep with joy, for I shall grant you the ineffable honor of hearing my *true* name!” He proudly declared as I stood there, gaping in stupefied silence. “My name—”

That was my second meeting with Andou Jurai. That was our second contact. He thought that it was our first meeting, I’m sure, and even now, well into the summer of our second year in high school, he still showed no signs of remembering the moment of our *first* contact. He didn’t even seem to have considered that there might be more to the story.

Given how long he’d gone without coming even close to figuring it out, I’d more or less assumed that he’d never realize the truth. I sure as hell wasn’t planning on cluing him in. That was a period of my life I wanted to stay forgotten, after all. It was a dark stain on my past, and I was content to let it stay enshrouded in shadow for all eternity.

The weather on the day of the summer festival wasn’t quite perfectly clear and cloudless, but it wasn’t *bad* by any means. The sky was about half full of clouds, which was actually pretty nice, considering the incessant period of brutally intense heat we’d just been through. There was no sign of rain either, even as the evening began to set in.

Oh, good. Like, seriously, what a relief. If *another* freak rainstorm had blown in today, I honestly didn’t think I would’ve ever recovered from the emotional shock.

I sighed with relief as I loitered around the shrine’s main archway. Dusk had arrived, and as I glanced around at the sunset-lit shrine grounds, all I could think was, *Yeah, I guess it would be this crowded.*

Our local shrine’s summer festival was a big enough affair that everyone who lived in the vicinity knew about it. Pretty much the whole town got together to

turn it into the biggest event of the summer. I knew a bunch of people in my class who were participating—some of them would be joining in on the Bon dance, some would be playing drums, and our school orchestra and light music clubs had performances scheduled. Apparently, participating in something along these lines was standard practice for the sort of kids who took a proactive approach toward their high school lives. For introverted high schoolers with borderline shut-in energy like myself, however...honestly, the event just didn't have all that much going for it.

I'd never liked crowds, the food stalls were run by people who weren't exactly professionals and didn't exactly keep their workspaces up to a health code level of cleanliness (but charged an arm and a leg anyway), the stalls that sold trading cards were staffed by people who didn't know the first thing about their merchandise, and even if you managed to scoop up a goldfish, the ones you got from festivals always seemed to die right away, no matter how you tried to take care of them. There's pretty much no way you'd have caught me going to one of these festivals on my own initiative. Not unless someone had invited me.

"Heeey, Tomoyo!"

I heard someone shout my name, and I looked up to find Andou jogging toward me, dressed in guys' staple summer festival outfit, a jinbei.

"Hey! Been a while, huh?" said Andou.

"Yeah, guess it has," I replied.

"Anyway, what're you doing here so early? I thought I was way ahead of schedule. I mean, we've still got thirty minutes before we were supposed to meet up! Err... We *were* meeting at six, right?"

"Yeah, that was the plan. Don't worry—I just got here too," I claimed, though the truth was that I'd been waiting for a half hour already. Something about meetings like this just compelled me to show up early. "S-So... Hey, Andou, umm," I stammered.

Say it! For crying out loud, just say it!

"Th-Thanks. Thanks for inviting me today," I finally spat out, then pumped an internal fist. *All right!* I'd promised myself that I'd thank him the moment we

met up, and I'd actually managed to see it through!

Andou was the one who'd proposed our visit to the festival today. I guess he couldn't stand how depressed I'd been about our trip to the pool getting rained out, so he'd suggested we go to a different event to make up for it. I'd never liked summer festivals much, in all honesty, but I'd also never been to one of them with a boy before, and in the end, I found myself more nervous and excited for the excursion than I would've believed was possible.

"Oh, no problem! Thanks for taking me up on it," Andou said casually, then paused to take a very long look at me, inspecting me from head to foot.

"H-Hey, think you could try not to stare so much? I'm not used to wearing this sorta stuff, okay...?" I grumbled as I folded my arms in front of my chest out of sheer embarrassment—not that I really thought there was any point to covering it up.

"Oh, my bad," said Andou. "I was just thinking, like, 'Huh! Guess even Tomoyo puts on a yukata when she goes to these things,' that's all."

That's right. I wore a yukata to the festival. That was a big part of why I'd ended up arriving an hour early, as a matter of fact. I wasn't used to wearing the yukata itself or the wooden sandals I'd put on with it, so I set out nice and early just in case, only to arrive with a ton of time to spare after it'd turned out to not be an issue after all.

"I-I don't look weird, do I...?" I asked. "My mom helped me put it on, but, like, I dunno..."

"Nah, no need to worry about that. You, umm, well... I mean, y'know, it looks good on you...I guess?" Andou said, scratching his cheek awkwardly as he glanced away from me.

Come on, if you're gonna get all weird about it, then don't compliment me in the first place! If you wanna say I look good, then just say it! Doing it like that just... I-I mean, now I'm really embarrassed too!

"Really? You're sure?" I pressed. "I don't smell like mothballs, do I?"

"Wow. You're seriously worried about *that*?"

“W-Well, I mean, I bought this thing a couple years ago... And it doesn’t line up with this year’s trends at all either...” I’d *wanted* to buy a new one, really, but since I’d just gone and bought a new swimsuit, I was bordering on bankruptcy already.

“Ahh, right, guess girls care about all that stuff,” said Andou. “Hatoko went and got a new swimsuit this year too, when you put it that way. Then there’s me—I’ve had this outfit since I was in middle school, and I’m *still* wearing it on the regular! My sister adjusts it for me whenever I’m about to grow out of it, so I’ll probably be wearing it for years to come.”

That struck me less as a difference between guys and girls and more as a matter of personal priorities, if I had to judge. Some people value fashion enough that they’re willing to pour their money into it, and some people value making the most of what they already have. *But wait, though...did he say Hatoko? Hatoko bought a swimsuit?*

“Andou...? Did you go to the pool with Hatoko?” I asked.

“Yeah. Well, kinda? The ocean, technically,” said Andou. “Our families take a trip to the beach together every summer.”

“O-Oh?” I grunted. *Well, they’re old friends, so of course they would. Totally normal for their families to do stuff together. Normal. Yup. Normal.* Just when I was ready to brush it off and move along, though...

“I *did* go to the actual pool with Chifuyu though. Then I went again with Sayumi,” Andou added.

That I couldn’t brush off. “You seriously went to the pool more than once?! Wh-Why?!”

“I mean, y’know,” Andou said with a shrug. “‘Cause they invited me?”

“I spent the first half of summer shut in at home! I didn’t go *anywhere*!”

“Sounds like a you problem.”

“You didn’t go with *me*!”

“We got rained out, remember?”

Ugh. Yeah, he’s got me there. The downpour had been a freak incident. It had

been out of his control, and really, it wasn't any of my business whom he went to the pool with in the first place...

But still, ugh... I just... Gaaah!

I just couldn't *swallow* it, somehow! I don't know whether or not Andou could tell that I was having a moment of internal conflict, but one way or another...

"So we'd better have a blast today to make up for that canceled pool trip, right?" he said.

I paused for just a moment. "Yeah," I finally replied with a quick nod.

With that, we set off into the crowd.

Neither of us had eaten dinner yet, so we decided to kick things off by finding something to eat.

"Feel like anything in particular, Tomoyo? This was my idea, so I'll buy you something," said Andou.

It felt like the offer had come out of nowhere, and it sort of put me on the spot. "N-Nah, you don't have to do that! I don't wanna mooch off you, and, like... I mean, you treated me last time, right? You know, after I got past the first round," I said.

It was only then that I finally remembered what the point of all this was—why I'd invited Andou to the pool in the first place. My primary goal had been to tell him that I'd been eliminated in the competition's second round. The pool trip had theoretically been an excuse for me to get that done as well, but at some point along the way, my priorities had gotten flipped around. *I have to tell him this time, for sure...*

"It's cool, honestly," said Andou. "Well, as long as you don't pick something super expensive."

"But, I mean..." I mumbled. *What should I do? I'm glad he's offering, sure, but I'd feel bad about saying yes... Though, then again, I'd probably seem really standoffish if I kept saying no, right? Aren't girls supposed to be all "Aww, for me? You shouldn't have!" or whatever at times like these?*

I ended up glancing around the area as I waffled, and by pure chance, my eyes landed on just the answer I needed.

“O-Okay then, how about we make it a challenge?!” I said as I pointed toward a nearby shooting gallery. “We’ll each take a turn, and whoever does worse has to treat the other to something!”

“Oh? I like the sound of that,” said Andou.

“It’s on, then! No hard feelings, okay?”

Andou seemed to be into the idea, so I went right up to the guy running the stall, got his attention with a “Hey, excuse me!” as I handed over two hundred yen, and received an air rifle and five corks to take my shots with in exchange.

“Hmm... A toy gun and corks for bullets, is it?” said Andou as he received his rifle. “I’ve fought my way across a thousand battlefields! Wielding *this* little peashooter’s nothing more than child’s play in my war-weary eyes.”

“I mean, it’s a toy. Like, this is *literally* child’s play,” I sighed. “I guess that means you’re pretty confident, huh?”

“You have to ask? I’ll have you know they used to call me Spellshot Sagittarius! It’s a rare privilege to see my sniping firsthand, so you’d better savor it while you can.”

“Wait, what? I thought your sign was Cancer. Like, don’t you get the crab no matter what system you use?”

“Don’t call it the crab!”

“...”

“Damnations... Why must every one of you keep going on about that stupid crab, anyway...?”

To be fair, I could understand why he had a whole *thing* about his star sign. I, incidentally, was an *actual* Sagittarius. I got a star sign that played a major role in *Saint Seiya* and *Gransazer*. Heh heh heh.



“Seriously, this sucks,” Andou grumbled. “And wait, why do you even *know* my sign?”

“Wh-What, I need a reason?! I just happen to know, that’s all!” *I definitely never checked to see how compatible our signs are or anything! And I definitely didn’t check the thirteen-sign system after I learned that the twelve-star system said we’re a bad match!*

I took a second to collect myself, and then we turned our attention to the shooting gallery. We played rock paper scissors to see who’d go first, and Andou ended up taking the lead.

“Hiyah! Quickdra...ugh, dra—dra...draw!”

Andou let out a weird, stilted shout as he took his first shot. I figured he was *trying* to shout “quickdraw,” given the way he held his gun at his side in an imaginary holster and everything. His *goal* was probably to draw it at a speed too fast for the eye to follow and nail his target in one swift movement, but the actual motion ended up being pretty slow and clunky. He had to give it a couple tries, and he totally missed the trigger at least once.

The one thing his little act *did* accomplish was denying him the time to actually, you know, aim. His shot ended up flying nowhere even remotely close to the toys and figures set up at the back of the stall, instead bouncing off the ceiling and plopping to the floor.

Oof... That was just pathetic. Even the stall guy’s snickering at him.

I gave Andou a look, and he immediately started making excuses. “N-Nah, I didn’t miss as badly as it looked! I was trying to bounce the bullet, y’know?! Going for a ricochet shot!” he babbled, then loaded up his second cork.

This time, he actually took a moment to hold out his rifle in a one-handed grip, then turned it sideways to take aim. It was a stance that always *looked* cool in fiction, but I knew for a fact it was super impractical in reality, and I was proven right when his next shot wildly missed the mark as well.

“That...would’ve totally worked in a real firefight, for the record! I, like, you know... I have this thing where I can shoot in any direction and my bullets home in on my enemy automatically! Y’know, like how Judgment works in *D.gray-*

man,” Andou muttered as he loaded his third shot, which missed too. “Y-Y’know, it’s because I’m not pulling the trigger with my little finger! I just can’t shoot right any other way. Yup. That’s how I always shoot... Plus, not using two guns totally ruins the symmetry. No way I can aim right like this...”

This time, he flipped his gun all the way around and pulled the trigger with his pinkie. Needless to say, he missed. He’d taken four out of five shots so far, zero of which had landed. Apparently, that finally drove in the fact that he was in a bad spot, since he didn’t say a word and took up a perfectly normal shooting stance for his final attempt, leaning forward as far as he could to get as close to the targets as possible. It was *just* on the verge of foul play, but the point was sorta moot because in the end, he missed anyway. His cork sailed right past the figure I assumed he’d been aiming at.

Andou Jurai: 0/5 hits.

“Wow...you *suck*,” I commented as Andou collapsed to his knees, overwhelmed by the shock of his perfect failure streak. “Like, how is it even possible for your aim to be *that* bad? How many battlefields were you supposed to have been through, again?”

“Look...this wasn’t my field, okay? My specialty’s point-blank gunplay, that’s all...”

His “specialty” is shooting at point-blank? That’s so short of a range that it’s just plain pathetic. What sort of military would even take in a sniper like that?

“By the way, Andou, did you know that shooting at ‘point-blank range’ doesn’t actually mean shooting at someone who’s right next to you?” I said.

“Huh? Wait, really?” said Andou.

“Yeah. When you’re actually close enough to press your gun up against someone, it’s called a contact shot. ‘Point-blank’ was actually an artillery term at first, and it means the range at which your shot will hit the mark without you having to adjust its elevation—so, basically, the range at which you can count on it flying in a straight line. Most of the time, bullets fly in an arc because of gravity’s influence, so you have to take that into account and aim higher than your target, but when you get close enough, gravity’s impact is effectively zero, so you can aim directly at whatever you’re trying to shoot.”

That was what point-blank range meant, initially. After so many years of the term being misused in so many works of fiction, though, I wasn't necessarily sure I could say that the popular usage even counted as wrong anymore. Language is fluid, and the definitions of words are ever-changing, after all.

"Oh, huh! You really know your stuff," said Andou.

"Heh heh—I guess I know a thing or two, yeah! I'm pretty picky when it comes to gun trivia."

"Right...and I bet you learned all that trivia from Wikipedia, didn't you?"

"Sh-Shut up! No I didn't! I learned about it from my dad on a trip to Hawaii!"

"Yeah, and I bet your real name's Kudou Shinichi, huh?"

That was enough trivia for the moment. Now it was my turn to take a shot.

"You'd better watch closely, Andou. I'll show you what *real* shooting form looks like," I said as I stepped up to the booth, jammed a cork into my rifle's barrel, pulled back its lever to load it with air, and took up a pretty darn authentic stance.

"To start with, you're supposed to hold your gun in both hands. Stuff like firing one-handed and dual-wielding only happens in fiction, really. If you have a stand to rest the gun on, use it. It'll be way better for stabilizing your aim than your arms would be on their own. Keep the stock pressed up against your shoulder to help compensate for recoil, then line the sights up with your target to aim. See those little bits of metal at the tip of the barrel and by its base? Those are called iron sights, and you're supposed to line the bump in the front portion up with the indentation in the back one. Using them to aim is as basic as it gets."

I paused for a moment, breathing as shallowly as I could while I lined up my shot.

"Some people close one eye, some don't—either works. Closing an eye tenses up your facial muscles and can make your open eye's pupil dilate to match the closed one, but having both of them open means more visual noise to distract you, so both styles have their drawbacks. The best way to deal with it is by using those sniper goggles that let you block off just one eye...but, I mean, it's

not like I'm carrying a pair of *those* around. What else...? Oh, there's also the wind to think about. Wind is a sniper's worst enemy. We're in luck, though—it's a windless night. Perfect shooting weather," I said. A voice in the back of my mind wanted to know what the *hell* I was talking about, considering my target was *maybe* a bit over a meter away, but I just couldn't stop myself.

I blocked everything out, immersing myself in a world in which only I, my gun, and my target existed. As I sank into intense concentration, it felt like the din of the festival faded into the background. Eventually, it almost seemed like my gun and I were one and the same, leaving only me and my target remaining. I'd reached the fabled state: the sniper's high. I felt like I could nail an ant right between its eyes if I had to.

"*There!*" I shouted, and before my internal voice could even ask *Where?* I'd pulled the trigger. The cork erupted from its barrel with a dry *pap!* that shook my eardrums, and I felt the vibration of the stock race through my arms. The cork shot out, propelled by a stream of pressurized air...

...and sailed a solid half meter off to the side of the figure I'd been aiming at.

My cork thudded into the back wall of the stall and pattered to the ground. It was, in a word, a miss. A pathetic miss, if you wanted to spring for two words.

Andou and I stared at the cork in silence. Even the stall guy clammed up this time. The handful of passersby who'd stopped to listen in on my extended lecture were silent as the grave too.

I stood up, gently set my rifle down on the table, and spun around on the spot.

"...Bye!"

"Wait, no! Stop! Don't leave! I understand what you're going through *excruciatingly* well, but don't go!"

Screw this! God, this sucks so much! Just let me go hoooooome!

I'd experienced such a lethal dose of humiliation that I genuinely almost

walked right on home then and there, but Andou just barely managed to talk me out of it in the end. I *did* go back and take my last four shots, and I managed to land just one of them, knocking some little toy off its shelf. That made our final score one to zero in my favor. I *really* wasn't happy with how things had turned out, but a win was still a win.

"Welp, tough break! Guess I really will have to treat you to something," Andou said, making it sound like he felt incredibly put upon. Of course, this whole contest had started with him saying he'd treat me out of nowhere, so when all was said and done, nothing had actually changed at all. "All right, Tomoyo, what're you having?"

"I'm good with pretty much anything," I replied.

"You know that's the least helpful answer possible, right?"

"Okay, then... I want something from a stall that isn't being run by a lady with weirdly long fingernails nor a guy who won't put down his newspaper to talk to his customers, that doesn't have a dog leashed up to it, and that actually bothers clearing out its trash can often enough to keep it from overflowing."

"I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess that you don't get asked out much, do you?"

"O-Oh, screw you! That sorta stuff bothers me, okay?!"

"You sure are picky for a type B, seriously."

"Wha— My blood type has *nothing* to do with this! Put a sock in it, crab!"

"My star sign has even *less* to do with this than your blood type!"

"Hah! You think a puny little crab has the right to talk back to a mighty Sagittarius?"

"Ugh! Grr... D-Damnations, she's right... The crab's doomed in that matchup, no matter how hard it struggles!"

And so, Andou gave in. The star sign caste system didn't work on *everyone*, but for the people it *did* work on, it was almighty.

So, back on topic! Ultimately, I went with the most innocuous option available and had him get us some takoyaki. We also picked up some yakisoba, baked

potatoes, crepes, and a couple other things, then found a spot under a nearby canopy where we said our thanks and got to eating.

I started with the takoyaki that Andou had paid for. It was...fine. Fine in the most generically nondescript way possible. Fine in the way where you just *knew* that you could make a way better version at home without even having to try particularly hard. The fact that I found myself thinking, “Man, we paid a few hundred yen for *this*?” probably just proved that I wasn’t cut out for these festivals.

I ended up in a sort of weirdly subdued mood, but just then, I noticed that Andou, who was sitting right next to me, had started staring at me. *Ah, crap! He bought this for me, and I don’t think I was making it look like I was enjoying it at all!*

“Ah. No, it’s not like that! They’re not *bad* or anything! It’s just, umm,” I frantically stammered, but Andou shook his head.

“Oh, it’s fine! Like, who even cares how the food tastes, right? Festival stall food’s great ’cause of the atmosphere, not the quality,” he said. “But, well, I was also thinking, ‘Huh, she’s eating that takoyaki like it’s nothing.’”

“I’m... Huh?”

“I told you that I went to the beach with Hatoko, right? Well, she really loves the yakisoba at this place by the beach we always go to. She eats it every year, but this time, she decided not to. I asked why, and apparently, she didn’t want the seaweed to get stuck in her teeth.”

I just stared at Andou as he carried on. “So, yeah—I got kinda curious about whether that stuff bothered you too, and nope! That takoyaki had a ton of seaweed flakes on it, and you ate ’em like it was nothing. It was kind of a relief, honestly? Like, ‘Oh, guess I don’t have to worry about that after all.’”

At that point, I gasped and slapped a hand across my mouth. *Are you kidding me?! Wait, wait, wait! This is the first I’m hearing about any of this! Are girls supposed to worry about getting seaweed in their teeth?! How was I supposed to know that?! And, like, who eats takoyaki without seaweed flakes on it?! It doesn’t work without them—yakisoba and okonomiyaki too! I wasn’t thinking about this stuff at all when I picked them out, but... D-Don’t tell me that casually*

eating takoyaki in front of a boy is one of those things that gets your girl card revoked? Did I just blow all my girl points at once?!

“H-Hold on a second!” I yelped, then I spun around, fished around in my pouch for a hand mirror I was carrying, and checked my teeth. *All right! We’re okay—no seaweed after all. Jeez, that had me freaking out for a second!*

I slowly shifted back to my former position and started eating again, this time taking care to display as much girly grace in my table manners as I could manage. As for the takoyaki...I just tried to chew it with my back teeth whenever possible.

“Ugggh,” I sighed.

“What’re you getting all depressed for? I don’t think a little seaweed’s that big of a deal,” said Andou.

“It *is* a big deal, but it’s not about the seaweed. I’m disappointed with *myself*. I mean...Hatoko’s been paying attention to all that stuff, right? She doesn’t make it *look* like she cares, but in the end, she still—” I said, then cut myself off with a start.

In my mind, Hatoko was the sort of girl who’d chow down on food with seaweed flakes on it without hesitation. The thought that she might *actually* take care with stuff like that made me feel like a slob for never sparing it a thought...but then it hit me. I realized why my image of Hatoko hadn’t lined up with reality. Andou had said that she’d only started caring about the seaweed on her yakisoba this year, which meant the explanation was as simple as could be.

Hatoko cared because she was eating in front of the guy she likes.

She’d come to see Andou as a boy, and she had decided to start acting a little more girly in front of him in turn. That’s why she’d taken a hard look at behaviors she’d never actively thought about before, and she was trying to correct them where necessary...something that *I’d* never even considered doing.

“Oh, right! Speaking of Hatoko,” Andou said, then hesitated and awkwardly mumbled. “Did you two, like, get in a fight or something?”

Suddenly, my heart felt like it was beating so loudly I could just about hear it. “...Huh?” I grunted.

“It’s just, well... I didn’t get any details or anything, but Hatoko seemed like she felt bad about it, whatever it is. Like, she said something about how she did something mean to you...”

I hesitated for a moment. “It’s fine,” I finally said. “Yeah. Nothing to worry about. It wasn’t really a fight or anything like that.”

“Hmm. Well, I guess that’s good,” said Andou, but I couldn’t agree. It would’ve been so much easier if it had just been a fight. When you get in a fight, all you have to do is make up, and that’s the end of it. If only this could’ve been that simple.

The things Hatoko had told me back then—the expressions she’d made, the feelings she’d unveiled...they couldn’t be summed up by calling it a fight or saying she’d been being mean. The look in her eyes had been so pointed, so full of resolve...but behind that resolve was a profound frailty that’d just barely slipped in and out of view. She’d been so overwhelmed with anguish and internal conflict, but she’d faced all of it head-on, treating it with the importance it’d deserved as she’d asked me her question.

“Hey, Tomoyo—do you have a crush on anyone?”

I hadn’t been able to give her an answer in the end. I hadn’t said anything at all. I just ran away. I was scared. Scared of her. Scared of the seriousness in her gaze, so unlike how she usually looked. I hadn’t been able to stand another second of it, and in my fear of facing her, I ran away.

What should I have done back then? How had I really felt within the deepest reaches of my heart?

After we finished stuffing our faces, we spent a while wandering around aimlessly and simply enjoying the festival. We fished for water balloons and cut elaborate shapes out of thin sheets of candy (I did better than him at both activities, by the way—it turned out Andou was pretty clumsy with his hands), got worked up when we spotted a local news crew filming a story about the festival (and chickened out of trying to make it in frame), and went to see

acquaintances from school performing with their bands and taiko drum groups (“acquaintances” in the sense that I knew their names, anyway).

At some point over the course of our evening, a sort of sad expression came across Andou’s face. “We went to this festival with Sagami and Tamaki once, back when they were together,” he muttered, seemingly more to himself than to me.

“Tamaki’s the girl we met outside the bookshop the other day, right? Slender build, crazy-thick Fukushima accent?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s her,” said Andou. “Hatoko and I went to this festival with the two of them.”

Tamaki was Sagami’s ex-girlfriend. She had a taste for long, billowy clothing, claimed to have been Andou’s friend when he was in the eighth grade, and spoke in an almost impenetrable dialect.

“Yeah... We really had a blast,” said Andou. He was smiling, but something about his expression felt unnatural to me. It was like he was forcing it, and it was so painful to look at that I almost asked what was wrong, but then hesitated, not wanting to come across as nosy.

Meanwhile, the festival was moving toward its close. As the Bon dance—the festival’s main event, for a lot of attendees—drew closer, people started to gather around the area with the stage in it.

“Gah, yikes,” I grumbled as the crowd grew denser. I wasn’t used to walking around in the wooden sandals I was wearing, and the tide of people almost swept me up, but at the last second, Andou grabbed me by the wrist.

“Whoa! You okay?” he asked.

“Y-Yeah. Sorry, and thanks,” I replied.

“Better be careful. If we get separated in this crowd, we can kiss seeing each other again tonight goodbye,” Andou said as he let me go, paused to think for a moment, and then added, “So, uh, should we hold hands?”

I was so shocked I couldn’t say anything at all, and Andou frantically tried to explain himself as he held his hand out. “I-I mean, it’d be a huge pain if we got

separated, right?! I'm not trying to imply anything weird over here!"

"I-I know, okay?!" I shouted as I felt my face ignite. *W-Well, what should I do? I mean, actually holding hands would be stupid embarrassing...and, like, how would we even do it in the first place? Overhand? Underhand? Fingers interlaced like we're a cute little couple?*

There had been moments when we'd held hands or touched each other as a natural consequence of our club activities, but doing it *here* felt like it would carry a whole different sort of meaning. I could barely even handle the embarrassment brought on by just *thinking* about it. A limitless wellspring of shame emerged within me, refusing to allow me to take his hand. And on another level...I felt that as things stood—having not been able to answer Hatoko's question—I didn't have the right to hold his hand, even if I'd had the guts.

"O-Okay, then, how about this?!" I said as I held out the pouch I was carrying to Andou, offering him one of its drawstrings. If he took hold of that, it would link us together indirectly. "No getting lost this way, right?! Yeah! Great idea, me!"

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense. Guess this'll work too," said Andou as he grabbed on.

My pouch's strings were pretty short, but they were barely able to keep us together in the crowd...although I soon realized that the arrangement I'd thought up was pretty embarrassing in its own right.

"So, what do you wanna do next, Tomoyo? Join in on the Bon dance? Or dance to the beat of your own drum by not dancing at all?" Andou asked. He turned back to look at me...and I stopped in my tracks.

I'd been putting this off for more than long enough. If I didn't tell him now, the evening would end before I got around to it.

"Hey, Andou? Follow me for a second."

While all the other festival attendees gathered up for the dance, we set off in the opposite direction, pushing against the flow of the crowd. It was surprisingly

tough going, and the trip wasn't without its close calls, but thanks to the strings of my pouch keeping us chained together, we made it through without getting separated. Eventually, the crowd thinned, and we arrived at a paved road that led into the woods.

"Hey, Tomoyo," said Andou, "how far are we going, anyway?"

"Just keep quiet and follow me," I gruffly replied.

We walked through the gloomy woods for some time before finally emerging into a more well lit clearing, where we found ourselves behind the shrine. There wasn't a soul in sight, and it was remarkably quiet. The tumult of the festival had been almost dizzying while we were in the thick of it, but here, it sounded far away enough we could hear the rustling of the trees in the wind.

"Oh, huh," said Andou. "I had no idea this is where that path went! I'm surprised you knew."

"I found this place when I came here with my family one time," I explained. Though, really, Hajime had been the one who'd actually discovered it.

"Oh, and I can probably let go now, huh?"

"Ah, right! I forgot."

"Right?" Andou said as he let go of my pouch's string. "So? What's the deal? Why bring me all the way out to a place with no one else around?"

For a moment, I found myself at a loss for words. Andou, meanwhile, wrapped his arms around himself in an exaggerated, theatrical attempt to hide himself from view.

"Don't tell me...you brought me here to take advantage of me?!"

"G-Get *real*, dumbass!" I yelped.

"J-Jeez, I was kidding! You don't have to shout at me..."

"There are some things you just can't joke about!"

"I mean, I know *that*."

"This wasn't one of them, by the way."

"It wasn't?! Then why all the shouting?!"

Our moment of nonsensical banter had helped me calm down a little, and I finally resolved to get to the point. “I got dropped in the second round of the contest,” I said.

Maybe dragging Andou all the way out to an abandoned corner of the shrine was a waste of effort, but I didn’t want anyone to hear this—not even random people I didn’t know. I didn’t want anyone *other* than Andou to hear it, really.

“Huh? You got dropped? From a contest?” Andou repeated in obvious confusion. I’d sprung the topic on him apropos of nothing, so I suppose I couldn’t blame him for not getting it right away.

“The light novel contest. I didn’t make it through the second round of judging. Honestly, I’m so frustrated I can barely stand it,” I explained.

“Ah...” said Andou. “Oh, *that* contest. The one you were all excited about passing the first round of...”

“Yup, that’s the one. You went out of your way to celebrate with me, so I figured I had to tell you how it turned out. That’s why I invited you to the pool, actually.”

“Oh, huh,” said Andou.

“Sorry,” I said. “It really took me an age to spit it out.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Nothing to apologize about.”

“You got me cake and everything, remember? Just, y’know...sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize for that either.”

With that, our conversation stalled out. An awkward silence fell over us, and the atmosphere took a heavy turn. I quickly started to realize that going somewhere abandoned for this might’ve been an awful idea.

Maybe I shouldn’t have told him after all. I’d thought that I had a responsibility to keep him in the loop, but if I’d been him in this scenario, I wouldn’t have known how to react. He might’ve forgotten all about the whole contest thing to begin with.

Eventually, Andou broke the silence with a few words. “So, y’know...I was actually pretty curious. I wanted to know how your submission was doing. I

thought that it'd be obnoxious if I kept harping on you about it, though, so I was trying not to bring it up on my own... But, man. You didn't get past the second round, huh...?" he said, then turned to look at me. "Thanks for telling me. I know it couldn't have been easy to bring up."

I was stunned. I'd never expected him to *thank* me, so I found myself at a loss for how to react. "Wh-What do you mean, thanks...? There's gotta be something else you should've said first, right? L-Like, come on, I'm depressed, aren't I? Cheer me up, or whatever! I know—how about we throw a whole pity party and you treat me to cake again?" I said, impulsively turning the whole thing into a joke...but Andou didn't bite.

"Nah. I'm not gonna try to cheer you up," he said with a totally serious look on his face. "I mean, no matter what I say, it'd just piss you off, right?"

Andou looked me in the eye. His gaze was purely earnest, and incredibly straightforward.

"I know you tried your hardest on that story. All the labor you put into it and all the frustration you're feeling right now's *yours*. I don't wanna pretend that I understand, or get all condescending and pity you, or anything like that. If there's one thing I *never* want to do, it's try to identify with your feelings when I know I can't go all the way with it. Telling you to cheer up would be easy, but I don't wanna take the easy way out."

"..."

"You didn't tell me about this hoping that I'd cheer you up or comfort you, right? That's not you—you're not into the idea of people viewing you as a creator, so you wouldn't want that kind of treatment. You only told me because you thought you had a responsibility to. So, yeah. Thanks."

"..."

Seriously. Just... Just seriously. What is this guy's deal? How does he always find the perfect way to make a mess of my heart? He knows exactly what I want him to say, and exactly what I don't want him to say on top of it. He just proved exactly how much attention he's been paying to me this whole time. He hasn't been making assumptions or seeing me through his own distorted biases. He's been seeing me for the person I am and nothing else.

That thought—the thought that I had someone who saw me for who I was—soothed my disappointment more than any amount of consolation ever could've, and it stirred my emotions into an excited turmoil. *Okay, yeah. This might be a problem. I'm so happy, I don't even know what to do with myself.*

"U-Umm... Oh! Right, speaking of novels," Andou said. He seemed a little panicked by my extended moment of silence, and he hurriedly tried to change the subject. "You're writing a novel for fun too, right? What's it like?"

"...Huh?"

"Oh, umm, see, Sayumi told me about it. She said that you were writing something that you weren't planning on submitting anywhere."

I had, in fact, told Sayumi about that story. We'd talked about it right after I joined the club. She'd asked me whether I'd ever tried writing a novel before—just the sort of question you'd expect to be asked in a literary club—and at that point, I was still so nervous about talking with an upperclassman like her that I hadn't had it in me to make up a lie. I'd told her everything about my hobby novel without holding anything back.

But, wait...she told Andou about it? I hadn't asked her *not* to mention it to anyone, but I also knew that Sayumi wasn't the sort of person who'd spread people's private information around for no good reason. *So then, why would she...?*

"Oh, I mean, you don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to!" said Andou. "I'm not gonna try to pry it out of you, or anything."

Normally, there was no way in hell I would've opened up to him about this. I'd written that story purely for my own self-satisfaction. It was *not* the sort of work that anyone else was supposed to read. Plus, the fact that *Andou* in particular was asking about it dramatically changed things. *I mean, we're talking about that novel...*

"...All right. I'll tell you," I said. I never, *ever* would've opened up about this under ordinary circumstances...but after everything that had just happened, I was in high enough spirits to convince myself to throw caution to the wind and just go for it. My shyness had been beaten out by my curiosity about what would happen if I let him know.

I took a quick breath, held it, and let it out again. Then I looked him in the eye and began to speak, telling him the tale of the self-indulgent, downright masturbatory novel I'd been writing in my free time.

"Genrewise, it's more or less a battle adventure sorta deal. The setting jumps around a lot too—it goes back and forth between the real world and a fantasy one. The main character's a middle school girl...and yeah, I know, light novels with girls as their protagonists aren't in style these days, but I'm just writing it for fun, so who cares, right?" I explained, barely even stopping to breathe.

"So," I continued, "the main character, right? She's...well, she's pretty over the top. Cute, strong, and super popular to boot—a real Mary Sue, basically. Anyway, it turns out that she's not actually a human: she's descended from a family line that traces back to the ancient era of the gods, and she has divine blood flowing through her veins. Thanks to that, she gets to use magic that most humans can't, but she also pays a price in the form of her body ceasing to develop past a certain point."

"Oh...? That's one hell of a setup you have going," said Andou.

Wait, he's actually into it? No, stop! Don't make me enjoy this!

"The main character's basically great at everything she does, but there's one thing she's good at above all else: mounted combat. She doesn't ride a horse though. She rides a Technosant Beast, which is a divine creature that's been turned into a cyborg using a special sort of magitech. Her personal Beast is modeled after a divine wolf. The sight of its jet-black visage as it races across the battlefield, its rider's silver hair whipping about in the wind as she strikes down her foes, is feared by ally and enemy alike."

"Hmm."

"She also has an older brother from whom she was separated at birth. They end up meeting, and he becomes her mentor in magic and a role model whom she aspires to be like. Stuff happens, though, and her brother ends up succumbing to his dark side and turning into the final boss...but that doesn't happen until, like, the second to last volume, so whatever, doesn't matter right now. The important part's that the main character inherited her wolf-type Beast from her esteemed elder brother."

“Hmm, hmm!”

“Her Beast cuts a mighty, imposing figure that strikes fear into the hearts of all who see it, but the truth is, it’s actually a girl. Oh, yeah, Technosant Beasts have genders—it’s a whole thing. Anyway, her Beast’s name is the Plaintive Dame Dolor.”

“Hmm, hmm... Hmm?”

Andou’s expression began to shift, but I ignored him.

“The main character has a name too, of course, but she hates telling people who she is. They tend to treat her like a hero if she does, and that bothers her, more or less. All her accomplishments keep building up, though, and she gets so famous that everyone ends up talking about her whether she likes it or not. Before she knows it, the people give her a name and title of their own that expresses the inherent contradiction between her way of life and her way of battle. That name is the Witch of Antinomy Who Smirks in the Face of Twilight: Endless Paradox.”

“Huh? I... Wha? W-Wait a sec. Wait, wait, wait...”

No, I won’t wait.

“She also has a special move—a forbidden technique that consumes her very life force. It’s her ultimate trump card that she only busts out when she *really* loses it. It removes the threefold seal that was placed upon Dame Dolor, allowing her to surpass her artificial limits and return to her original form, while also enhancing her with an additional incantation. Maintaining two spells at the same time like that is a feat only those with the blood of the gods can achieve, and when the protagonist does it, Dame Dolor transforms into her final, ultimate form: the Sainted Princess Honor.”

By that point, Andou had fallen totally silent. He was just standing there, stock-still, but I wasn’t finished yet.

“That final form can only use a single attack. That’s right—just one. The protagonist stakes everything on it, pouring every ounce of her being into a forbidden, superlatively powerful deathblow.”

Then I shouted the attack’s name out loud—just like I’d done three years

before.

“Superterminal Climax: Winged Blades of Brightest White!”

Another voice rang out in time with mine. As I began to shout, Andou started shouting too, yelling out the exact same words I was reciting. I guess attacks are pretty memorable when they send you flying across a park.

“No way... Seriously?” said Andou, his jaw agape and his eyes wide.

“...Kye ki ki!” I cackled. Andou still seemed unable to believe what he was hearing, and that, I hoped, would settle the matter. That was how I always used to laugh in middle school, though these days, I thought it came across as pretty darn cringey. I still pulled it off well, though, in spite of how long it’d been since my last attempt.

As I’d hoped, that laugh dealt the finishing blow to Andou’s disbelief. His eyes widened even further, and he looked downright thunderstruck. “Huh? *Huuuuuuuh*?! No, no, time out! Wait, seriously, I don’t get it! I can’t keep up with this at *all*!” he shouted as he clutched his head, eyes still glued to me all the while. It was like he was inspecting every inch of me, from top to bottom, and it was making me feel *really* awkward.

Come on, this isn’t the time to snap at him... J-Just deal with it...

“Tomoyo,” Andou finally said. “Don’t tell me...that was *you*?”

It was about as vague as a question could get, but nevertheless, I nodded. “Took you long enough, moron,” I quipped, crossing my arms and looking away with a harumph.

“R-Really?” said Andou. “You were really the person from back then, who did all that stuff in that one place...?”

“That wasn’t nearly specific enough, but yeah, probably.”

“The one I fixed a bike chain for?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“The one who did all that *super* painfully cringey crap?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right.”

“The one who ran me down with a bicycle?”

“That, uh... Th-That doesn’t count! It hurt me as much as it did you, so it zeroes out!”

“Really, Tomoyo...? Are you *really* the God of Chuunibyou?!”

“Now *that’s* a new one for me! What the hell sort of god is *that*?!”

“Ah, right... Sorry, I need a second to work through this...”

Andou pressed his hands to his head and leaned backward, staring up at the sky. This was definitely hitting him pretty hard on a psychological level. To be fair, I was in the exact same boat. I thought that chapter of my past had been closed shut for good, but now everything was starting to match up and come unveiled, like we were making a clean sweep of a memory game.

“So, the full-blown, chuuni-to-the-max girl I met way back then was you...? You went out to LARP as the self-insert main character of the ultra self-indulgent novel you were writing, wearing an outfit that really should’ve gotten the cops called on you, and riding a bike you called by name, all for the sake of carrying out some nonsensical ritual every month...?”

“Y-Yeah. Yeah, that’s right.”

“So, the full-blown, chuuni-to-the-max girl I met way back then was you...? You went out to LARP as the self-insert main character of the ultra self-indulgent novel you were writing, wearing an outfit that really should’ve gotten the cops called on you and riding a bike you called by name, all for the sake of carrying out some nonsensical ritual every month...?”

“Oh my god, stop *repeating* it! I *get it*, okay?!”

Gaaaaaaaaaah, the shame! Somebody, anybody, please, kill me now and spare me the agony!

“S-So then, Tomoyo...did *you* know it was me? I was dressed normally back then, so...”

I hesitated for just a moment. “Yeah,” I eventually said. “I knew right away. I figured it out the very first time we met in the club room.”

“Then why didn’t you say something?”

“As if I could! I’m *done* with that chuunibyou crap! I was trying to get a fresh start in high school—you think I’d drag it all up again?!”

“O-Oh, right, yeah...that makes sense. Ah, wait—you asked me if I recognized you back then, didn’t you? So that’s why... And when you were going on about your kinsman, you must’ve been talking about Kiryuu,” Andou muttered. It seemed the pieces were all starting to click into place, but it was taking some time for him to sort out all his memories, and as he stood there, nodding to himself...

Boom!

...a noise rang out from above, so deep and loud I could feel it in my eardrums. I looked up reflexively just in time to see a flower of light bloom in the sky.

“No way—the fireworks are already starting?!” I gasped.

The thunderous explosions continued, and one burst of light after another filled the sky. We could only see a small portion of it from behind the shrine, but eh, it wasn’t the *worst* view I could’ve asked for. I gave it a passing grade, just barely.

“They’re so pretty...” I muttered.

“Hey, Tomoyo! Wait up a second!” Andou snapped. “Why’re you going into firework show mode?! We’re still talking here! I’m nowhere near finished—”

“Oh, put a sock in it. It’s the fireworks’ turn right now.”

“Ugh, you little... Sure, get what you want and unilaterally declare the conversation over, why don’t you...?”

I hadn’t gotten what I’d wanted, really. I was just, well...sort of overwhelmed, just like he was. If I hadn’t put our conversation on pause for a minute to watch the fireworks and let myself reset, I probably would’ve passed out or something.

Andou spent a minute clenching his fists with frustration, but eventually, he sighed and let all that tension drain away. “Okay, you win. You’re right—it’d be pretty crappy to ruin the fireworks by pitching a fit. I have so many questions I

wanna ask, but I'll hold off for now. *But,*" he added, "there's just one thing I wanna say first. *Then* I promise I'll shut up."

Then, for some reason, Andou took a few steps away from me. For a moment, I wondered what he was playing at...but then he started posing it up. He held his right arm aloft, lifted up a leg to balance on one foot, and tried on all sorts of expressions, working blindly through trial and error toward the coolest pose—by his standards—he could manage. Eventually, he seemed to settle on a pose that satisfied him, and fixed that stance in place, facing me with a confident grin.

"Mwa ha ha! Weep with joy, woman, for I shall grant you the ineffable honor of hearing my *true* name!"

In the blink of an eye, I flashed back to that moment in my first year of high school—to that chance encounter at the door of the literary club. To our second meeting. Our second contact.

"My name...is Guiltia Sin Jurai!"

And just like during our second contact, he gave me that name. It was a name I'd heard over and over and over again over the course of my time in high school.

Andou Jurai's true name: Guiltia Sin Jurai. The *actual* truth was that it wasn't his true name, or even truly a name at all. I was certain he'd poured hours on end into coming up with it himself. He'd probably invented all sorts of his own vocabulary and tried to spin his real name into it, as well. I knew that very well because I'd done exactly the same thing, once.

His "true name" was nothing more than your typical chuuni excess. It was a perfectly meaningless fabrication. And yet...when he said it, here and now, I knew that it carried a definite significance.

"As of yet, I have no name."

"And so...I'll have to think one up."

"When next we meet, I'll declare my name to you with pride!"

He'd made a promise to me on that day, and now, at long last, he had seen it through.

"It's been a while, Eternal Paradox," said Andou. We'd been together this whole time, but he was acting as if we were long-lost comrades in arms, reuniting for the first time in ages.

"Yes... It has indeed, Guiltia Sin Jurai," I replied, matching the tone he'd set. Speaking as someone who'd already cleared their chuuni phase, talking like that was *lethally* humiliating, but even clearer than the humiliation was the sense of fulfillment it granted me.

"Mwa ha ha..."

"...Kye ki ki!"

And then we laughed. What started out as sneering, cackling affects soon transitioned into genuine, open-mouthed *laughs*. We completely lost it, and for a moment, we just had to stand there, clutching at our sides until the giggles subsided and we looked up toward the sky. There the fireworks were still blooming, sparking and flaring with glorious, maddening brilliance.



“Hey, Tomoyo?” Andou said, his eyes still turned upward. “Thanks. This is the best summer festival I’ve ever been to.”

That’s my line, stupid, I said, but not out loud. I murmured it internally, shutting it away in my heart—but my heart was already so close to full, the words came dangerously close to spilling back out and escaping into the world.

When I turned to look at Andou’s face, my chest grew so tight I felt like I was suffocating. It wasn’t an uncomfortable sort of sensation though. It carried pain, and frustration, and bitterness, but within all those discomforts, there was a sweetness so potent I found myself spellbound.

It finally hit me. Just like Andou had finally realized my true identity, I, too, was having a realization. Just as he had met with me countless times without ever linking my face to that of the girl he’d encountered three years ago, so too had I failed to put the pieces together and comprehend my own feelings. My feelings had been there all this time, but it was only now that I could truly *see* them. They’d always seemed hazy, distant, so lacking in presence that a gentle breeze could carry them away, but now, they came together into a clear and definite shape. It felt like, if I wanted to, I could reach out and touch them.

I was in love with Andou.

I was frustratingly, maddeningly, excruciatingly in love with him, but I’d never let myself see it before. I’d turned a blind eye to my feelings and refused to face them. I’d never felt this way about anyone before, and those feelings had frightened me. They’d been like a hideous monster that had left me trembling and terrified, my eyes clamped shut. I’d been *scared* to realize how I felt about him.

Plus, I didn’t think it was right for me to fall in love so easily, and *admitting* that I was in love after all this time was just so embarrassing! And, I mean...I wanted my love to be *foreshadowed*, to happen after going through all sorts of events with him and stuff! Basically, I had a whole pile of nonsensical feelings that’d been driving me away from the truth and clouding my perspective.

But now, none of that mattered anymore. It was just like my mom had told

me.

“I don’t think there was any single, specific reason that they’d be able to pick out as the one. I don’t think any reason they could come up with would explain things for anyone other than the two of them.”

“The way I see it, divorce happens when all sorts of things build up over time, little by little, until it all becomes too much to bear and you decide that you’d be better off apart.”

I still didn’t get divorce just yet. I had a feeling, though, that love was the same way. Sometimes people just want to break up, and on the flip side, sometimes people just want to be together, never having a clear reason behind their desires at all. There’s no way they *could* ever have the sort of single, specific reason that would tie it all up in a pretty bow for someone else to appreciate.

I couldn’t explain why I’d fallen in love or when it had started. Just like I couldn’t remember when I’d stopped believing in Santa Claus, I couldn’t give a precise answer as to when I’d fallen for him. Maybe it was when he’d accepted my dream for the future without laughing at me. Maybe it was when Hatoko had disappeared and he’d gotten so frantic trying to find her. Maybe it was when he let his name get dragged through the mud for Chifuyu. Maybe it was when our powers awakened and he did everything he could to help us through it, even going so far as to fight with Sayumi. Maybe it was when I realized how much he reminded me of Hajime, or maybe it was the very first time I’d ever met him.

Or...maybe it was all of those moments combined. Maybe all sorts of things had come together to drive me hopelessly, undeniably in love with Andou.

I thought back to what Hajime had told me once.

“Your talent, your effort—and for that matter, your environment, the era you live in, and your genes as well—none of them mean anything except in retrospect.”

“The present does not exist by virtue of the past—the past is born by virtue of us, here in the present, seeking answers that lie there.”

“Just as we only rationalize our dreams to be dreams at the moment we awaken from them, so too do we begin with the result then seek out an explanation—a process—that can convince us and others why said result turned out that way.”

I didn't know if that was really the way of the world or not...but I was pretty confident that it was the way of love. Everything begins with a result—with love itself. First come your feelings of affection, and only afterward do you turn around and seek the reason *why* you felt them, thus bringing said reason into being. Everything about the person you pine for just looks so lovable to you that your feelings quickly seem to be too complex to sum up in a single phrase. You start frantically looking for an excuse or a rationalization for your feelings...but all the while, the result alone remains present, clear, and undeniable.

I'm in love with him.

The festival's fireworks show was approaching its climax. Countless blossoms of light, a whole field's worth, bloomed and faded in the night sky.

“I love this,” I said, still gazing up into the stars.

“The fireworks?” asked Andou, not looking over at me either. “Yeah, same. Summer's just not the same without them.”

“Yeah... I really love it.”

Before much longer, the fireworks would end and the festival would come to a close. That knowledge made me feel so overpoweringly wistful that, in spite of myself, I reached out for Andou's hand and ever so gently took it in mine, just barely interlacing my fingertips with his. Andou looked over at me in shock, but I ignored him and kept my eyes glued to the sky. All I could do was pray that the glow of the fireworks would be enough to hide how much I was blushing.

Andou didn't say anything. He just silently returned my grasp. I could feel his warmth through his hand, and while part of me was embarrassed, it was also nice and comforting—enough so that I found myself wishing the moment would last forever. There wasn't any need to worry about getting separated by the crowd now, and even with that pretext I'd hesitated before, but *this* time, it felt like I had the right to hold his...

Ahh, nope. There I go again with the pointless, obnoxious rationalizations. Let's go with something a little more simple and straightforward this time.

In short: I was with the boy I loved, and I wanted to hold his hand. That's all there was to it.

Epilogue ★ Yes, I Am a Lady in Love!

“Oh. I see, Tomoyo...”

Hatoko took my explanation in stride, replying with a calm, yet somehow fragile, smile.

Our summer vacation had felt long, yet short; like it had lasted an eternity, but was over in an instant; as still as *Closed Clock*, but as fiery as *Dark and Dark*. One way or another, though, it had come to an end, and we’d arrived at the first day of our second semester.

After the opening ceremony had wrapped up, I’d asked Hatoko to have a chat with me in the literary club’s room. We’d ended up alone, just like we’d been when we’d met here before summer break, and this time, I gave Hatoko an answer to the question she’d asked me a month ago. I couldn’t answer it back then, and I’d dragged it out for far too long, but this time, I told her the truth, straight up, unambiguously, without any vagueness or apologies and without trying to brush it off. I told her how I *really* felt, holding nothing back. I looked her in the eye and poured my heart out to her.

“So, you really do... I had a feeling,” said Hatoko.

“Yeah,” I replied.

There was a very particular sort of feeling in the air between us. It was like things were strained, yet at the same time, like they’d relaxed to a state of stability. It was still a fragile state, though, that seemed like it could be shattered by the slightest of impacts. That was just how I saw it, of course, and maybe it was all just in my head.

The one thing I could say for sure was that the desperation I’d felt coming from Hatoko before had vanished. The pointed but fragile attitude she’d shown me before summer break, as unstable as a block of ice, had disappeared entirely, leaving the usual Hatoko in its place. Well, maybe not quite—there was something about her now that felt a little different. A little more adultlike, or

womanly. She'd gone to the beach with Andou, apparently, and I figured something must have happened then. She'd had the sort of summer experience that could change a girl into a woman, just like I had.

...Wait, no, not like that! Not in a weird way!

"Hey, Tomoyo," Hatoko eventually said. "You...know about ruby text, right?"

"Huh? Uh, I mean, yeah."

Ruby text was, to put it simply, a quirk of written Japanese used to resolve ambiguities when text could be pronounced in more than one way. In those cases, you'd often see small phonetic text written above the main text to clarify its pronunciation. Those phonetic guides were called ruby text. I think pretty much everyone in this day and age had seen it in some form or another, but a surprising number of people didn't know what it was actually called.

"Then you know how sometimes ruby text can be a little, well...*weird*, right? They'll write readings up there that aren't how the text is usually read at all, or even put in random English words that have nothing to do with the accompanying text whatsoever."

"Yeah, true," I said.

In newspapers, textbooks, and the like—formal writing, basically—ruby text was almost always used for clarity. Manga and light novels, however, had a tendency to use it in a rather more unique, and some might say stylish, sort of way. The names that Andou had given our powers are a great example, actually. He'd come up with ways to write them in standard Japanese characters, but the actual names we used for them—*Closed Clock*, for instance—were all written in English as ruby text.

"Juu's told me about all that stuff before. He's told me about it a bunch of times, really...but it's never really clicked with me. I can't help but think, why would you tell people to read characters in such weird, *wrong* ways? What on earth makes that cool?"

I had to imagine that most average people would feel the same way. The inherent appeal of creative ruby text was one of those things that couldn't be described in words. Either you got it, or you didn't.

“So, I asked Juu, and he told me that the easiest example to understand would be writing ‘friends’ as normal text and ‘rivals’ as its ruby text.”

Friends, but rivals. It was...well, honestly, it was about as basic and played-out as creative ruby text could get. It’s a bit of wordplay that’s been so well used over the years, you could practically imagine the layers of fingerprinty grime that had built up on it. Of course, when something *was* that basic and played-out, you could safely assume it was because it was, fundamentally, really good. It was the sort of wordplay that maintained the grammar of the original sentence while at the same time adding on a nuance that ran the meaning of the sentence in the exact opposite direction, the ruby text and the standard text working together in perfect synergy.

A friend, yet at the same time, a rival. Could there be a more fascinating and appealing sort of relationship than that?

“In the end...even that basic example didn’t make much sense to me,” said Hatoko. “But, you know what? I think I might be starting to understand it now. I’m starting to realize what a friend-rival is.”

“...”

“I’m not going to lose, Tomoyo,” Hatoko said with a grin. It was a straightforward, uncomplicated, perfectly satisfied smile.

Up to that point, I’d never *really* competed or fought with anyone over something specific. I’d never gotten worked up over my club activities, and I’d always been satisfied with getting average scores in my classes. I was *trying* to pour my everything into my writing, yes, but it wasn’t like I knew the people I was competing with for the new writer awards I was submitting my stuff for, so it’d never really felt like I was competing with them. And so...

“Yeah. I won’t either.”

...this was the first time in my life I’d ever felt this way.

Friend-rivals. Yeah, I get it. That’s some good ruby text for sure.



At that point, the door slid open, and Sayumi stepped into the club room. We didn't have any actual activities scheduled, but it seemed she'd decided to drop in anyway. Yokoi Elementary had had its opening ceremony today too, so I had a feeling that Chifuyu might be showing up before long. And of course...*he* might arrive soon as well.

There was no telling what might happen from here on out. No one could say whether he'd end up with one of us, or whether some totally new character would show up out of nowhere and snatch him away. Absolutely nothing whatsoever was guaranteed...but I'd already taken my first step, and there was no taking it back. I couldn't just turn a blind eye to it all and go with the flow anymore. The beginning...had come to an end. Now all we could do was set off into the dark and dense woodland before us, with neither rails nor rules to guide us, our ultimate goal obscured by foliage, our friends—our rivals—at our sides.

Now—let us begin. Begin the end of the beginning. Our battle—our romance—starts here.

Afterword

I believe that people's reasons for falling for each other are, generally speaking, ambiguous and entirely unclear, making it all but impossible for an outside observer to truly understand them. Sometimes, not even the person who fell in love themselves can understand their reasons. This isn't just confined to romantic relationships—I don't think anyone would be able to provide a clear and definite timing for when they began to grow fond of their family or friends either.

You could ask them *what* they like about the person in question, and they'd probably be able to pull out some sort of answer, of course...but I've always felt that those reasons are invariably defined in retrospect. It's never a matter of thinking "I like this and that about this person, so I want to be with them"; it's a matter of thinking "Why am I with this person?" and *then* catching on to the reasoning behind it—or, perhaps, it's less about catching on to the reason and more about *deciding* what your reason was.

Fiction's full of foreshadowing for future romances and friendships, but needless to say, foreshadowing isn't a thing in reality. Sure, you can look back, pick out some random something-or-other and think, "Oh, that was totally a sign that this was going to happen," but in my book, that's just us imposing our perspective on reality.

So, anyway, this is Kota Nozomi! This volume was a series of pool-themed short stories. I really enjoyed the chance to let each of the series' heroines express her feelings and beliefs at her leisure. It, umm, *also* serves to finally tie off an especially important plot thread that's been dangling since the end of volume four. That sure took a while, didn't it? I really went off the rails for volume five's and volume six's plots, after all!

Also, man...nobody used their powers at all in this volume, *again*. It sort of feels like this series' initial concept went completely out the window somewhere along the way. Next volume will be the cultural festival arc

(probably), and I'm set on having some powers get used somewhere in there!

With that, it's time for the acknowledgments.

To my editor, Nakamizo: thank you once again for your help on this volume. I get the sense that your schedule's been sort of insane recently, so good luck with that! Next, to 029: thank you, now and forever, for always drawing such wonderful illustrations. When I first saw the cover of this volume, something about it struck me as vaguely incongruous, but I just couldn't figure out why until I realized that this was the first volume in the series to feature one of the heroines wearing something other than a school uniform on its cover. Finally, I'd like to offer my greatest of thanks to all the readers who've stuck with this series through its seventh volume.

That's all for now! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi





Bonus Translation Notes: On ~~Anime~~ the Author

My initial premise for this pre-TL note essay was to point out that this was the final volume to be published as of the anime adaptation of *Supernatural Battles'* release, discuss the differences between the anime and the novels, and summarize the anime-original content for any readers who've either never watched the show or have forgotten it in the (oh god) decade-plus since it aired. Upon sitting down to actually *write* that section, however, I came to two important revelations: first, ninety-five percent of our readers *have* seen the anime already and would find a section like that hideously tedious whether they remembered it well or not, and second, I just don't really have that much to say about the anime adaptation that I haven't already touched on in previous essays. It's very good! It trims many of the pop culture references in favor of classic Trigger-style visual humor! The voice actors do a great job! ...Aaand, that's pretty much all I've got.

As such, I've decided to take a new approach for this volume's essay: I'll be doing a quick digest-version of my original concept, then spend the rest of the section digging into another relatively small secondary topic: the man, the myth, Kota Nozomi himself. While deep-diving into the author's personal life for an entire section would be something of a breach of privacy (especially given how private many light novel authors tend to be), I imagine that many of our readers would be interested in at least hearing what's publicly known about the author, and that's precisely what I'll endeavor to report! Be forewarned: it's not much.

First off, my original plan: the anime! The animated adaptation of *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* aired for twelve episodes from October to December of 2014. It was the second work of Studio Trigger, a studio founded by former Studio Gainax employees, and as of the writing of this section, it remains their only light novel adaptation to date. The anime adapts a piecemeal mishmash of elements from all of the first seven volumes in the series, picking, choosing, and rearranging plot elements to bring the story

together into a cohesive whole in spite of the fact that large chunks of it were cut out.

Particularly notable omissions include the better part of volume five, with Fallen Black's various adventures only being touched upon in a single episode, and Tamaki, who gets a single-frame cameo in the show's final credits sequence but is otherwise cut entirely. Sagami's screen time is drastically reduced as well, with his backstory with Andou being almost entirely unaddressed (and with all of the truly horrifying innuendos he spouts at all times *significantly* toned down, because you just can't get away with most of that nonsense on TV). In fact, the only scene from the entirety of volume six that made it into the show was the one where Andou and Tomoyo meet in the park.

The anime *also* introduced a few plot elements, and covered one major revelation that the novels had not yet gotten around to addressing! Whether those plot elements and the nature of that revelation are canon as far as the novels are concerned was, of course, unclear at the time, and it remains to be seen for those of you following along with the English releases. Nevertheless, if you'd rather not get maybe-spoiled on a plot point that was set up *way* back in volume one and has yet to be resolved, I recommend skipping past the following paragraph!

In short: the anime adds on a climactic final plot arc to serve as the series's conclusion! Said arc takes place mostly in the final episode, and involves a Player—specifically, a member of *F* who escaped Fallen Black's purge—using her power to take control of Kudou Mirei's body, then attempting to steal the powers of the literary club's members. She comes quite close to succeeding, but is thwarted in the end by Andou's use of *Dark and Dark of the End*, the second stage of Andou's power that hasn't been referenced in any capacity since way back in volume two! Per the anime's continuity, *of the End* has the effect of making Andou's dark flame actually burn...and rendering him unable to put it out. He tricks not-Kudou into stealing the power, Kudou's arm ends up on fire with not-Kudou still inside, not-Kudou returns to her own body and returns Kudou to normal, not-Kudou gets crushed by Kiryuu once she wakes up in her own body, and Andou and Kudou are saved by Chifuyu chopping off their arms and Sayumi bringing said arms back again. Then everyone lives happily ever

after—aside from all the trauma!

...And with that summary out of the way, there's not all that much left to be said about the anime! Oh, aside from one conspiracy theory of mine that's been driving me insane since way back in volume one: I am *absolutely* convinced that Leatia was *not*, in fact, originally intended to be fairy-sized, as she's portrayed in the anime. The first seven novels make no specific reference to her size at all, and she only ever appears on her own without anything to lend a sense of scale in illustrations, but a few sequences—most appallingly the one in which Sagami mimes groping her chest near the end of volume five—certainly *seem* to imply that she's meant to be regular human sized. One has to assume the choice to make her pocket-sized was made with Kota Nozomi's approval, of course, so I'll be very interested to see whether or not her size *is* specifically addressed at any time in the remaining six volumes.

That seems as good of a segue as any to move into the second topic of the day: the author! Kota Nozomi is a rather prolific light novel writer whose first series, *Boku wa Yappari Kizukanai*, began in 2011. *Supernatural Battles* was his third series, beginning in 2012, and since then, he's published over a dozen different novels. *Supernatural Battles* isn't the only work of his that's been translated into English either—*You like me, don't you? So, wanna go out with me?* was licensed by Tentai Books in 2022, *Are You Okay With a Slightly Older Girlfriend?* is licensed by J-Novel Club and has been fully translated, and *You Like Me, Not My Daughter?!*'s license (by JNC as well) was announced the very same day I'm writing this section!

(Which is a shame, since I *was* planning on mentioning its license here *before* it was officially announced, just to see if I could get away with playing chicken with the announcement date vs. the date of this volume's publication. That's one perfect opportunity to mess with my editor—who also edited *Slightly Older Girlfriend* and is now editing the mom one as well—down the drain.) [Editor's note— >:(]

Lest you assume that Kota Nozomi just has a *thing* for series involving age-gap relationships—which, to be clear, I'm also not ruling out—his novels cover a pretty wild range of topics! His first series, *Boku wa Yappari Kizukanai*, is a rom-com revolving around a protagonist who fails, or perhaps refuses, to notice the

intensely supernatural characters and events around him. His second series, *Happy Death Day*, stars a suicidal protagonist who hires someone to engineer his ideal death. Then, in *Isekai Tennis Musou*, he writes about a protagonist who's summoned to another world to be a hero...and he carries out his heroic duties by playing tennis well enough to slay dragons and obliterate armies with the might of his racket. So, yeah—while the English-language Kota Nozomi library might lead you to believe he likes to stay in a certain thematic comfort zone, the truth is that he really varies things up quite a lot!

So, what do we know about Kota Nozomi himself? Frankly, not all that much, which isn't actually all that much of a surprise! It's very common for authors in the light novel scene to write under pen names and keep their personal lives under wraps. Kota Nozomi is, in fact, almost certainly a pen name itself, and to the best of my knowledge, he's never revealed his actual name (which, again, is quite common in the light novel industry). Japanese Wikipedia claims that his pen name is derived from a kanji spelling of one of the names for Jiang Ziya, a Chinese nobleman from the eleventh century (Kota Nozomi is written as 望公太 and one of Jiang Ziya's names is 太公望—so, the same characters, but backwards), but that factoid *also* has a “citation needed” label, so I assume it's an inference rather than something that Kota Nozomi has stated.

His pen name aside, Wikipedia also notes that he was born in 1989 in Fukushima Prefecture, went to college at Yokohama National University, and...that's really about it. He's apparently associated with Straight Edge Inc., an entertainment company founded by a former Dengeki Bunko editor, but his page on their website is just his name and the words “NO IMAGE” on a plain white background. Given the lack of any other real information about him, I feel safe in assuming that his relative anonymity is intentional, and at this point in my research I decided not to go scraping around the internet for any personal details that may have slipped out over the years, out of respect for his privacy.

There is, however, one remaining source of information about the author: his Twitter account! Kota Nozomi is an active Twitter user, and glancing through his feed reveals a few fun little tidbits. First off is the fact that he shares one trait with Andou: a love of tokusatsu shows that has carried on well into his adulthood! The bulk of his posts are about his work, posting preview images

and art from his various books, and when he does post something personal, it's almost invariably about his family or a tokusatsu show (or, on occasion, his children posing with Tokusatsu merch). Given that his currently running novel series are, err, rather racy, this makes for an extremely amusing juxtaposition of very cute family photos and drawings of anime girls with...well, I'll let your imagination finish that sentence for me.

So, to sum up: Kota Nozomi is something of an enigma, but since he works in one of the rare industries that actually makes a fairly consistent point of respecting creators' privacy when it's desired, that doesn't really make him a particularly exceptional case! The one big takeaway from this that feels relevant to you readers is that he's written many, *many* more books in a much wider variety of genres than one might assume from looking at the relatively few available in English. I can only hope that some of those earlier works of his will get to see the light of day outside of Japan eventually!

Now then, I think it's time to get to the notes part of this TL notes section! This volume was a little more restrained than volume six's unending torrent of pop-culture shoutouts, but there's still a lot for us to go over, so let's get right to it!

Prologue

△ ...and battering my old body pillow like a sandbag as I unleashed a full Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four Palms taijutsu on it.

This is a special move from *Naruto* that involves sixty-four open palm strikes! You may recall it from volume 3, in which Andou mentions spraining his finger during an attempt to pull the technique off.

△ I made it all the way to the Eight Trigrams Three-Hundred Sixty-One Style—a game-original move...

The game in question is *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja 3*, a PS2 exclusive that came out in 2005! In other words, this was a pretty deep cut even at the time this novel was originally published.

△ ...in two years, at the Sabaody Archipelago.

Andou's referencing an iconic moment from *One Piece* in this line! In its original context, the line refers to a promise that the main cast of the series makes to reunite after they go their separate ways to train.

Chapter 1

△ *That said, I was a little confused by how he kept shouting stuff like “Devil Laser Bullet!” and “Ultimate Dragon Pitch!” and “Ignite Pass: Kai!”*

All three of these are special moves from various sports manga! The Devil Laser Bullet is from *Eyeshield 21*, an American football manga written by Inagaki Riichiro and illustrated by Murata Yusuke (who would go on to illustrate the mega-popular series *One Punch Man*, incidentally). The Ultimate Dragon Pitch, meanwhile, is from *Mr. Fullswing*, a baseball manga by Suzuki Shinya, and Ignite Pass: Kai is from *Kuroko’s Basketball*, a manga by Fujimaki Tadatoshi about...well, you can probably guess. All three of these manga, by the way, were serialized in *Weekly Shonen Jump*.

△ *Y’know, there’s that one game show where they do the chant? ‘Pajero, Pajero!’*

The game show in question is *Tokyo Friend Park 2*! It was on the air from 1994 to 2011, and it involved participants playing games, many of them quite silly, for a variety of prizes. The final game in each episode had players throwing darts they’d earned in previous games at a spinning dart board, and if they happened to land a dart in one very small wedge of the board, they would win a Pajero—hence why the audience would chant the name of the car as the participants threw their darts. One sort of has to assume there was a sponsorship deal between the show and the car’s manufacturer.

△ *Was the zookeeper Hayami Mocomichi? Is this just Moco’s Kitchen?!*

Moco’s Kitchen is a TV show that features Hayami Mocomichi, a prominent actor, teaching the audience how to cook. Apparently, one of the distinguishing characteristics of his cooking style is an appreciation—and, perhaps, overuse—of olive oil. It seems that Mocomichi and olive oil was something of a meme, especially around 2011 when his show had just started, and you can find videos of Mocomichi impersonators cooking dishes using comically gratuitous amounts of olive oil that date back to right around when this volume was published. As

such, it seems likely that Andou's shouting out the meme as much as he is the actual person in this line.

△ She's like the TV version of Detective Galileo, seriously...

Detective Galileo is the titular main character of the *Detective Galileo* series of mystery novels, written by Higashino Keigo. The novels received a TV adaptation in 2007, simply titled *Galileo*, which is the one that Andou's referring to here. In the series, Detective Galileo is the nickname of Yukawa Manabu, a physicist who helps the police solve particularly difficult mysteries.

△ That's not living on hard mode, it's living on Sunfish Must Die mode!

This line's a pretty direct shoutout to the Dante Must Die mode in the *Devil May Cry* series of video games—typically the hardest difficulty in each of the series' games.

△ ...and he's also got this really great skill that fills up a bar of the Musou Gauge!

It's only at this point in Andou's explanation that it becomes clear that he hasn't been describing Honda Tadakatsu, the historical general, but has rather been describing Honda Tadakatsu, a playable character in the *Samurai Warriors* series of video games. *Samurai Warriors* is a spinoff of the *Dynasty Warriors* series, which centers around Chinese rather than Japanese history, and both series feature a Musou Gauge, which allows you to use powerful special moves when it's sufficiently filled up.

Chapter 2

△ *Some famous lines like that that actually made it into print include “I’ll wrap this up in a two-page spread!” “I win! Part Three is over!” and “Wow, Nobita, you never sound that cool in our normal-length chapters!”*

These lines come from *YuYu Hakusho*, *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure*, and *Doraemon*, respectively! The *YuYu* line is said by the main character of the series, Urameshi Yusuke, shortly before he beats the snot out of another character in a fight (that does, in fact, get wrapped up in a two-page spread). The *JoJo* line occurs when an enemy stand user seems to have bested *Part 3*’s JoJo, though it turns out his celebration was premature in the end, and the *Doraemon* line was said during a special extra-long chapter (which was eventually adapted into the film *Doraemon: Nobita and the Galaxy Super-express*), immediately after Nobita delivers a speech that’s unusually heroic for his character.

△ *I’d been planning on cleansing the grudge that had built up within me by shouting “Sand Burial!” while I piled sand on top of her...*

Sand Burial is a rather brutal technique used by Gaara in *Naruto* that involves encasing his foes in sand and subsequently crushing them. That’s not the only reference in this line, though—the “cleansing the grudge that had built up within me” part also fairly directly apes the catchphrase of Urami Matarou, the central character of Fujiko Fujio (A)’s *Matarou ga Kuru*, a comedic horror manga about a middle schooler who gets even with those who harass him (usually bullies) by way of spooky magic, curses, and the like.

△ *Iggy’s a dog, so he’s out, and Sandman didn’t actually have anything to do with sand at all in the end!*

Iggy the dog is a character who appears in *JoJo Part 3*, and he uses a Stand called The Fool (back during the era of the manga when stands were named after tarot cards rather than whatever band Araki Hirohiko happened to be into at the time) which allowed him to manipulate sand in a variety of helpful ways.

Sandman, meanwhile, is a minor character in *Part 7* whose Stand lets him do weird stuff with sound that's esoteric in a lethal way, as most late-series *JoJo* powers tend to be.

△ *I guess Kite Eishirou threw sand in someone's face that one time, but he's still just a tennis player, even if they did call him The Hitman.*

Kite Eishirou is a character from *Prince of Tennis* who gets nicknamed The Hitman due to his aggressive playstyle.

△ *If she was trying to do Pinoko's oh-my-goodness pose, she was nailing it.*

Pinoko is a character from Tezuka Osamu's *Black Jack*! The oh-my-goodness pose, meanwhile, is a pose that she makes whenever she says her catchphrase, which is famous enough that the original text of this scene simply referred to it as "the oh-my-goodness pose" without specifying a source. This was an instance of a reference that was obscure enough for most non-Japanese audiences that it felt like extra clarity was necessary, especially considering that there are a number of different ways in which her catchphrase has been translated over the years.

△ *Have you lost all emotions other than your sense of inner peace, or something?*

Andou's quoting *Rurouni Kenshin* in this line! Specifically, he's quoting the manner in which Seta Soujirou, an assassin who smiles at all times, is described.

△ *I thought you were trying to hit me with a tetsuzanko for a hot second.*

The tetsuzanko is a special move that features in a remarkably wide variety of media, especially fighting games—prominent users include Yuuki Akira from *Virtua Fighter* and Yun from *Street Fighter*. The move itself is essentially an elaborate shoulder check.

△ *Or, what, is that supposed to be Nishikawa Akihiro's signature pose?!*

Nishikawa Akihiro is a member of a comedy duo called Regular, performing alongside Matsumoto Kouta! The reference here calls back to one of the duo's most well-known routines, which involves Nishikawa raising an arm over his head and rolling his eyes back in much the same way Hatoko ends up doing here.

Chapter 3

△ I suppose you could say that I'd clung to the proverbial spider's thread, or chased the bluebird of happiness...

The Spider's Thread is a short story by Akutagawa Ryunosuke in which a criminal, doomed to eternal torture in a Buddhist rendition of hell, is given a single chance to climb up to paradise on a spider's thread. He gets a good ways up, but the thread snaps and sends him falling back into hell after he proves his own selfishness by trying to ward away other sinners who try to climb up after him. The bluebird of happiness, meanwhile, is in reference to the play *The Blue Bird* by Maurice Maeterlinck, which largely centers itself around a theme of seeking happiness in all the wrong places.

△ Sagami held its stock pressed to his shoulder, posing like a world-famous assassin as illustrated by someone who had heard of proper shooting technique, at best. Truly, it was a stance worthy of the phrase "I'll blow a hole through that pretty face of yours!"

This one's another deep cut reference to a Japanese internet meme! Specifically, it refers to a series of panels from Shinjo Mayu's *Haou Airen*, a shoujo manga about mobsters in love. At one point in the series a bit character—supposedly the most dangerous assassin in the world—is introduced, and he attempts to snipe the main character's primary love interest.

As a side note, if mocking an artist's earnest attempt/failure to draw a serious assassination scene leaves a bad taste in your mouth, it bears mentioning that the artist herself seems to have embraced the meme (albeit in a humorously self-deprecating manner) in recent years, having promoted a T-shirt featuring the infamous panel on her Twitter as recently as 2022.

△ You're making a face like Golgo 13 and Jigen Daisuke both have you in their sights at the same time.

Golgo 13 is the name of the main character of, well, *Golgo 13*, a long-running

manga by Saito Takao. Golgo is an assassin, and is particularly known for his skill as a sniper. Jigen Daisuke, meanwhile, is a gunman from Monkey Punch's *Lupin III* who is also an accomplished sniper.

△ *Water Style: Water Dragon Missile!*

This one's another *Naruto* jutsu! It creates a dragon-shaped burst of water that crushes the user's foes.

△ *It could hardly be considered an attack at all, assuming the person using it wasn't named Arlong...*

Arlong is a *One Piece* character! Specifically, he's an incredibly strong fish-man who sometimes fights by throwing water at lethal speeds.

△ *It felt like I'd left sound behind me in my wake.*

This phrase is used in *Hunter x Hunter* to describe the sheer speed that a character named Isaac Netero attains after training by going into the mountains and doing ten thousand punches a day for four years straight.

△ *Shunpo? Sonído? Or was it Hirenkyaku? Did you use Fullbring to pull that off, or what?!*

These are all techniques from *Bleach*! Shunpo, Sonído, and Hirenkyaku are all movement techniques that allow the user to travel at speeds faster than the eye can follow, used by the Shinigami, the Hollows, and the Arrancar, respectively. Fullbring, meanwhile, is a power that allows its users to manipulate the souls of physical objects, enabling a whole host of powers including rapid movement.

△ *I had truly attained the Selfless State.*

The Selfless State is a concept in *Prince of Tennis*! Essentially, it's a state of being in which a tennis player exceeds their limits.

△ If I'd known I was gonna go 'gouf' when I got hit, I would've tried to be ready to go 'z'gok' when I landed...

The Gouf and the Z'Gok are both models of mobile suit from the original *Mobile Suit Gundam*! The Gouf bears a distinct resemblance to the iconic Zaku II, only blue and spikier, while the Z'Gok has distinctively stubby arms with sets of three claws at their ends.

Chapter 4

△ I got a star sign that played a major role in Saint Seiya and Gransazer.

Saint Seiya is a manga by Kurumada Masami. It ran in *Shonen Jump* from 1986 to 1990 and has inspired a number of adaptations, including a live-action film called *Knights of the Zodiac* that came out just a week prior to the writing of this section! As that film's title implies, the story involves characters with powers based on constellations and Greek mythology. *Chouseishin Gransazer*, on the other hand, is a tokusatsu series with a very similar premise, revolving around constellation-themed superheroes.

△ Y'know, like how Judgment works in D.gray-man.

Judgment is one of Cross Marian's powers in Hoshino Katsura's *D.gray-Man*. It takes the form of a gun, and more or less works as Andou describes it.

△ ...it's because I'm not pulling the trigger with my little finger!

This is in reference to Death the Kid, a character from Ohkubo Atsushi's *Soul Eater*. Death the Kid is obsessed with symmetry and wields two pistols, held upside-down, the triggers of which he pulls with his little fingers.

△ Yeah, and I bet your real name's Kudou Shinichi, huh?

Kudou Shinichi is the main character of Aoyama Gosho's *Detective Conan*. Shinichi is a genius detective, and his backstory involves his father taking him to firing ranges, giving him a familiarity with firearms.

And, that's it for the notes this time around! See you again in volume eight!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 7

I mentioned this back in the first volume, but I was in the tennis club during middle school. Whenever I had a match back then, I'd wear a cap in an effort to hype myself up for the game. Then, if it looked like I was going to lose, I'd suddenly mutter, "Guess it's time for me to start taking this seriously," smile the madness-laced grin of a crazed warrior who'd finally met a worthy opponent, and spin the cap around so its brim was pointed backward.

And then I'd lose like a chump.

Illustrator: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part-Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works), *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan), and *The 8th Cafeteria Girl* (Published by Shueisha).

Hands up if you really want to go to the pool every year, but never actually end up doing it because you don't wanna wear a swimsuit in public! (Raises hand...)

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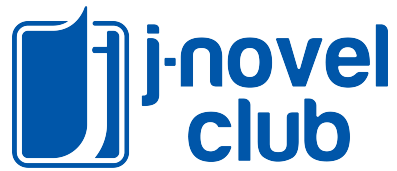
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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 7

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