

Author
**Kota
Nozomi**

Illustrator
029

Satoshi Yamaguchi
(TRIGGER)

Rie Ishige
(TRIGGER)

**When
supernatural
Battles 12
Became
Commonplace**



Author
**Kota
Nozomi**

Illustrator

029

Satoshi Yamaguchi
(TRIGGER)

Rie Ishige
(TRIGGER)



**When
supernatural
Battles 12
Became
Commonplace**



Chapter 1 ★ The Path of Closed Clock

Chapter 2 ★ The Path of World Create

Chapter 3 ★ The Path of Route of Origin

Chapter 4 ★ The Path of Over Element

Chapter 5 ★ The Path of Lucifer's Strik

Chapter 6 ★ The Path of Dark and Dark

Side Story ★ Umeko's Fate



CHARACTERS

ILLUSTRATOR: 029
Ishige Rie (TRIGGER)
Hasegawa Tetsuya (TRIGGER)





**Kushikawa
Hatoko**

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

**OVER
ELEMENT**

**Takanashi
Sayumi**

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



**ROUTE OF
ORIGIN**

**DARK
AND DARK**



**Andou
Jurai**

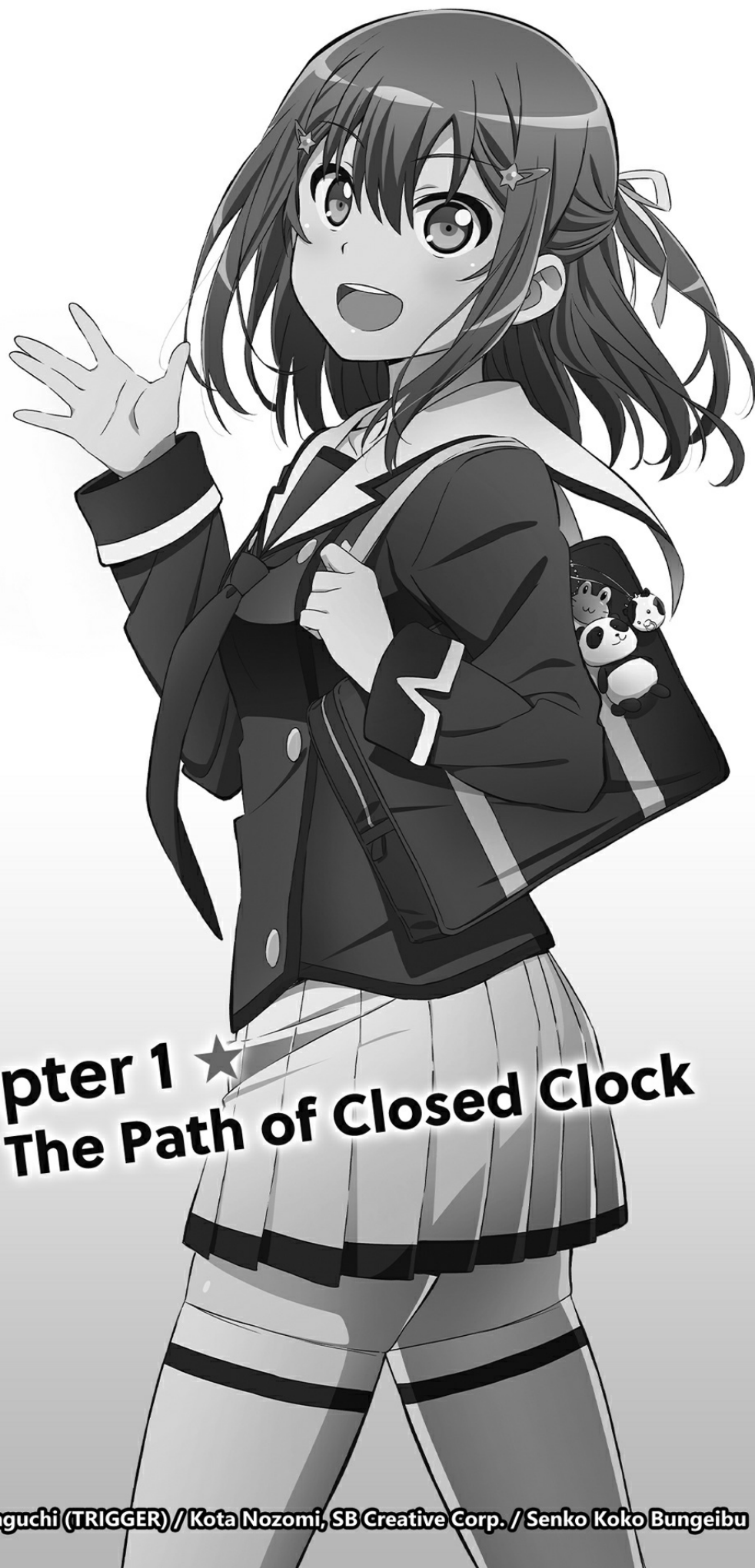
A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.

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

**WORLD
CREATE**



**Himeki
Chifuyu**



Chapter 1 ★ The Path of Closed Clock

Chapter 1: The Path of Closed Clock

The sovereign of eternity, *Closed Clock*—this was the title that had been bestowed upon Kanzaki Tomoyo and, by extension, the name of the power she'd awakened to, which granted her domain over time itself. The one who had bestowed it, needless to say, was none other than me. Between “the sovereign of eternity” serving as its introductory appellation and the English words “*Closed Clock*” providing a foreign flair, it was a truly dramatic and terrific name for a power to have, if I do say so myself.

Now, you might be thinking “Wait, where’s this ‘sovereign of eternity’ part coming from?” and that would be fair enough, considering how little-known that aspect of the name is. In fact, it seemed likely that *I* was the only one who knew it, period. *Closed Clock* was a thoroughly serviceable name on its own, and when you have a name like that, nobody *really* cares that much about the preamble, but it was still very much established *Closed Clock* canon to me.

Why? Simple: because it was cooler that way. If there was a way to make a name more unique and elaborate, it was my personal policy to *always* go for it.

Why say “a storm” when you can say “a tempest”? Why say “one hundred” when you can say “fivescore”? Why say “forever” when you can say “perpetuity”? “Perpetuity” was actually a solid candidate for *Closed Clock*’s preamble, at one point, but ultimately “eternity” won out on the basis that even if it was a slightly more common word, it was nonetheless still a fancier one.

Tomoyo wasn’t the only one whose power I’d named, by the way. No, I had come up with the names of every member of the literary club’s abilities, including mine. Five members, to whom I’d bequeathed five names and titles...but among those titles, *Closed Clock* was perhaps the one I was most deeply attached to. Not only did it perfectly depict the power’s capabilities without being *too* on the nose about it, it also just had a certain linguistic *something* to it that made the urge to say it out loud almost irresistible.

That was not, however, the biggest reason I was especially fond of *Closed Clock*. That reason was actually quite simple: it was because out of all five of our powers' names, *Closed Clock* was the one I'd come up with first.

"...And with that said, let's get this one-on-one interview underway!"

"With *what* said?! I have *no* idea what the point of this is! How about you try actually explaining yourself, Andou? What do you *mean* you want to do 'one-on-one interviews' with all of us?!"

School was out for the day, and Tomoyo and I were staying late in the club room. We were seated on opposite sides of the long table in the center of the room and facing each other.

"Everyone else already left, so what're we doing here...?" asked Tomoyo. "What could you possibly want the two of us on our own for?"

"Isn't that obvious?" I said. "Starting now...the two of us will speak of *love*."

"*Bwahuh?!* " Tomoyo wildly shrieked before leaning forward over the table. "Wh-What are you *saying*?! A-And wh-wh-what're you getting at, here...?"

"Well, we're finally alone, aren't we? It's the perfect chance for us to convey the depths of affection within our hearts!" I replied.

"Right, but...I'm saying that's, like... W-Wait a second, I need a moment to prepare myself, like, emotionally— I mean, *no*! Forget that! We're not even *at* the being-emotionally-ready stage! You can't just go skipping steps with th-this sort of stuff..."

"Yes, indeed: today, we shall reveal to one another the depths of our love for our powers!"

A very long pause ensued.

"We'll...*what*?" Tomoyo finally said.

"Huh? Come on, Tomoyo, keep up! What's with the blank stare?"

"You meant our love...for our *powers*?"

"Yeah. Why, what else would I have meant?"

“You know what...? Nothing. Forget it. *Whatever*,” said Tomoyo with an exasperated shake of her head that I, for one, couldn’t make any sense of.

Roughly one week earlier, all five members of our literary club had suddenly been engulfed in a mysterious light. When we’d awoken some time later, we’d found that we had awoken in another sense as well: all of us had obtained supernatural powers.

It’d been a sudden awakening—an unexpected manifestation of paranormal phenomena and a momentarily, absurdly abnormal situation that’d sent tidal waves crashing through the commonplace lives we’d led up to that point. We were bewildered, panicked, and confused as could be...but we couldn’t stay passive forever. If we kept quaking in fear without actually *doing* anything to resolve the situation, then no resolution would ever come. We had to accept the powers we’d awakened to for what they were and decide how we would go about dealing with them from now on. And for that sake, the first thing we needed to do...

“...is give our powers names!”

“Is it? Is it really?!”

“Of *course* it is!” I said with a confident nod. Power Naming 101 was a required course in the supernatural battle curriculum, after all. “Technique names that you scream at the top of your lungs, even though it means alerting your foe that you’re about to attack them! Titles so stylish they make you want to scream ‘Who the hell decided to call you *that*’! The drive to describe your power and its name in granular detail, smirking all the while! These are the *true* charms that draw all and sundry to the supernatural battle genre!”

“Why did all of those descriptions sound so backhanded?!”

“And so, starting here and now, I’ll be conducting individual interviews with each of you, one by one, and using the information I attain through them to grant all of your powers names!”

“Hence the one-on-one interviews... Okay, so I get the basic reasoning, but do we even really *need* to talk this through one-on-one in the first place? Couldn’t you just whip up some names on your own and call it a day?” asked Tomoyo.

“Absolutely not,” I replied. “My pride would never allow me to grant a power a name through that sloppy of a process!”

“Just how significant do you think these names are, anyway...?”

“*Extremely!* If one fails to take both a supernatural power *and* its owner into consideration over the course of the naming process, probing painstakingly into their deepest nature, then there’s no point to giving that power a name in the first place! Mwa ha ha! Oh, and just so you know, you do *not* have the right to veto my choice! I’ve been appointed the Grand Overseer of Naming by President Sayumi herself, meaning that I hold *all* authority when it comes to the naming rights of our powers, and none can stand against me!”

“Okay...but when you say she ‘appointed’ you, what you really mean is that you wouldn’t shut up about how you wanted to do it and she said sure because nobody else really cared, right?” Tomoyo noted with a contemptuous stare.

To be fair: that’s more or less exactly what’d happened. Sayumi’s exact words had been “Ugh. Well...if you’re that dedicated to going through with this, then do as you will,” and she’d sounded *really* fed up when she said it.

But nevertheless! The fact that I had been granted total and unilateral authority over our powers’ names was indisputable! Thus, I had no choice but to pour every fiber of my being into seeing the task through!

“And so, our momentous first naming session will be dedicated to your power, Tomoyo!” I declared.

Kanzaki Tomoyo had awoken to the power to manipulate the flow of time as she pleased. Not only could she stop time, she was also capable of slowing it, essentially putting the whole world into slow motion and causing herself to move at superspeed by comparison. Strictly speaking, I figured it gave her the power to shift the flow of her own personal timeline as she pleased.

We’d conducted an investigation of our powers after we’d awakened to them, and for the time being, that was our full understanding of Tomoyo’s capabilities. We’d only been at this for a very short time, of course, and the tests we were capable of were quite limited, so it was entirely possible that there were still hidden depths of potential to her power that we just hadn’t discovered yet—hers, and the rest of ours as well.

Speaking of which...I really, really hope that my power has a ton of hidden potential, because I'm gonna be in a major fix if it doesn't! I'm counting on you, O power of mine!

“Prepare yourself, Tomoyo. It has fallen upon your shoulders to be our top batter!” I declared, looking her straight in the eye once more. “That means that it’s no exaggeration to say that your power’s name will set the standard for all the powers that will come after it!”

“W-Would you stop making such a big deal out of this?! I don’t need this sort of pressure in my life!”

However much Tomoyo objected, it was a clear and undeniable fact that the first power name was *incredibly* important. The first name to come up in a series would tell readers all about the aesthetics of its story and setting, not to mention the tastes of its author. First impressions were always important, and this was by no means an exception to that rule.

“I definitely wanna have all of our power names be stylistically unified, after all,” I explained. “You should go into this assuming that the overall style of your power’s name will be used for all of ours too. In other words, Tomoyo, your power’s name is going to become the basic format for everything that comes after it!”

“I *just* told you to stop pressuring me like this!” shouted Tomoyo. “Ugh... Why are you like this? Now I *can’t* just brush this off and get it over with as quickly as possible...”

“Mwa ha ha! It seems you’ve finally reached an understanding of our task’s monumental import!”

“Right...but actually, why am I the top batter in the first place? This whole thing was your idea, so shouldn’t you pick one for yourself first? Just name your black fire power and use *that* as the format. Haven’t you been thinking up names for that sort of crap since way before all of this even started?”

“...”

“Huh...? Wh-What? Why’re you grimacing like that? What’s going—”

“Oh, *can* it, would you?! I’d have come up with a name *ages* ago if it were

that easy!”

“Why’re you snapping at me?!”

Believe me, I would’ve made my power the template-setter in a heartbeat if I could’ve. I’d *wanted* to be the one who chose which napkin to take and set the standard for the rest of the world. And yet...

“And yet... *And yet...* Ugh...”

“First you snap at me, and now you’re *crying*?! S-Seriously, Andou, are you, like...okay? You’re acting really emotionally unstable right now...”

“The thing is... The thing is, Tomoyo...you’re right. I can usually think up *tons* of power names! I’ve always really, really wished I could awaken to a power of my own, and I’ve always thought super-*duper* hard about what name I could give one if I got it...”

“The way you’re describing this is making you sound like a little kid, and it’s seriously grossing me out. Stop. Please.”

“But the thing is, when the time came for me to *really* give my power a name...I just lost my touch. I didn’t know what to do anymore,” I said as I slumped over the table and broke down in tears. I was so utterly dismayed at my own impotence that I couldn’t hold back my grief.

“So, uh, if I’m understanding this right...you can come up with names for *fictional* powers at the drop of a hat, but when you had to name your actual, real power, you ended up caving under the pressure and couldn’t do it?” asked Tomoyo.

“Yeah,” I confirmed with a nod. “It’s like...all the knowledge and aesthetic sense I’ve spent my whole life building up’s actually dragging me down, now that push has come to shove. It feels like I *have* to make it something really special, but when I try to actually sit down and do it, everything I come up with turns out super overwrought. It ends up making me look like I’m being a total tryhard, and I just can’t stand that thought.”

“You’ve really mastered the art of self-destruction here, haven’t you...? Just what’re you trying to prove, and who’re you trying to prove it to?”

“So anyway,” I said, moving right along, “I figured I’d start by thinking up everyone else’s powers’ names, nail down the format and style to an extent, *then* come up with a name for my own power.”

“So you’re using our powers’ names as warm-ups for yours, huh? Well, that’s fine, I guess. Not like any of us care about this crap to begin with.”

“All *right*! Let’s get started!”

With the preamble all out of the way, I pulled the *Bloody Bible* out from my bag, pausing for a moment to revel in the sinful allure of its jet-black cover. It was a tome within which the fundamental truth of this world’s principles was inscribed...and also the notebook in which I jotted down all the cool, stylish words that I encountered in my day-to-day life, among other things. As such, it served as both a notebook—packed to the brim with content that could inspire me on my quest to think up our powers’ names—as well as a shockingly ordinary memo pad that I could brainstorm in: a true multiuse item if I’d ever seen one.

“First things first, we have to settle on a style,” I said. That was a factor that we had to pay particular attention to, since Tomoyo’s power’s name would be the first in the series. All the other members’ powers, mine included, would have to conform to the format hers established. “As far as fundamental naming conventions go for this sort of thing, we can break the usual styles up into three broad categories.”

As I spoke, I jotted down three bullet points:

- **Direct style.** Ex: the English word “Fire,” transliterated to Japanese.
- **Indirect style.** Ex: the word “Fire,” written in literary Japanese characters with a semiambiguous reading.
- **Amalgam style.** Ex: the word “Fire” written in literary Japanese characters, with the English word “Fire” transliterated to Japanese as pronunciation guide text above it, explicitly defining the reading.

“There are tons of exceptions, of course, but I’d call those the three basic categories if I had to nail them down. ‘Course, I probably didn’t need to bother explaining all of this to you, did I?”

“Nah, not really. And yeah, I guess the sort of names and titles you see in manga and light novels do mostly fit into those three.”

“To put it in even simpler terms: shinigami powers have indirect-style names, Arrancar powers use amalgam style, and Fullbring powers use direct style.”

“...*BLEACH* really covers all the bases for this explanation on its own, huh?”

“And if I wanted to come up with exceptions to those categories...I guess powers with Japanese names that are written phonetically as well as powers with literary Japanese *in* their guide text would break the pattern. You see those sometimes.”

“Don’t forget powers with names that are in actual, full-on English, and ones that are Japanese transliterated to English.”

“Right, exactly. You get the picture.”

There might very well have been other exceptions that we just didn’t know about, but if we wanted to keep things as basic as possible, then the three categories I’d listed did the job nicely for most cases.

“Of course, you could subcategorize *within* those three types forever, if you felt like it. Take the amalgam style, for instance—you could break it down like this,” I continued, once again scribbling down examples into my notebook.

Ex: Literary Japanese characters that mean “black fire” with an ambiguous reading, with “Flame of Darkness” in English as the pronunciation guide text.

Ex: Normal Japanese that means “fire of darkness,” with “Flame of Darkness” in English as the pronunciation guide text.

“You can further divide them by whether or not they maintain or elide normal Japanese,” I explained.

Take, for instance, a hypothetical series that gave all of its powers literary Japanese names comprising four characters. By eliding the normal Japanese you’d use with those characters in everyday writing, you could give them all a sense of thematic unity that I was a fan of. If just one of those names had normal Japanese inserted into it, it would stand out like a sore thumb and spoil the theming, or something like that.

Then again, there are plenty of series that have no sense of unity at all and just do whatever on a case-by-case, power-by-power basis. No small number of fictional works used direct, indirect, *and* amalgam-style names for their powers and titles in a seemingly random mishmash.

And, like, when you think about it from a realism standpoint, if the characters in the series were actually making up their powers' names in isolation, it made more sense for them *not* to all fit a common style...but *I* still liked it better when there was a sense of unity! *My* favorite works were the ones that really pinned down their naming theory and rules. As such, I intended to give our powers' names as much of a sense of unity as I could possibly manage.

"Hey, Andou," Tomoyo said while I was reaffirming my determination. It seemed like she'd just realized something.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Your power lets you make black fire, so couldn't you just use this one for it? *Flame of Darkness?*"

"*Never!*"

"Why not? It suits it perfectly."

"Maybe it does, but I don't wanna give my power the sort of name I could think up in a split second!"

I mean, come on—Flame of Darkness? That's just...it's just wrong, right?! Shouldn't my power's name have more...more...something to it?!

"Surely *you* of all people must get it, right, Tomoyo? You've gotta understand how *Flame of Darkness* lacks that certain *je ne sais quoi?*" I moaned.

"You think? Personally, I'd say it's so simple it actually wraps around and ends up working pretty well in the end," said Tomoyo.

"Even if it does, that means I have to wrap it around a time further than that!"

"Plus, characters whose powers have simple names like this tend to end up actually being the most powerful, right? Seems that way to me, anyway."

"U-Uhh... I-I guess they might, maybe...?"

I was starting to feel more and more sold on Tomoyo's logic, and my will to resist was breaking down.

Hmm. When she puts it that way, I guess Flame of Darkness may not be so bad after all...? The fact that it's not overwrought may actually earn it some major points. When all the other characters in a series have powers with names that are super elaborate and clever—like, that reflect the conditions that have to be fulfilled to use them, or have some deep causal link to their history—a power with a simple name feels like it'd blow everything else away with pure, concentrated firepower. I'm usually into complex power names with tons of hidden meaning, but that doesn't mean I don't like simple but dynamic powers for their own merits.

"Yeah...you really might have a point... But wait! Maybe I'm looking at this from totally the wrong perspective...? Though if I look at it from the total *opposite* direction, then maybe it's pretty great after all...? What if I turn it upside down, though... No, inside out... Or maybe it all just wraps around to— Wait, how many times have we already wrapped it at this point?"

"Don't ask *me!*" shouted Tomoyo.

"Curses...this isn't working! My train of thought's stuck in a dead end—no, an unsolvable, spiraling labyrinth! The moment I started thinking 'But maybe that makes it good after all?' the brakes were off and I couldn't reengage them anymore!"

"Well, there's one thing for sure: I know *exactly* why you couldn't manage to name your own power in the end."

"A-Anyway, this isn't about *my* power to begin with! We're here to think about *yours!*" I said, forcing my thought process to shift gears and get back on track. "First off, the styles! I'm guessing that we're both in favor of making it an amalgam, right?"

"Well, yeah," Tomoyo agreed without hesitation.

The fact that we were on the same page about this really sped things along. *Yup, for sure. Out of those three styles, amalgam's the clear winner!*

"An interweaving symphony of the literary and explicit! Gaah, it's just the

best! That's something you can only pull off when you're writing in Japanese—in other words, it's the very sacred spirit of the Far East! I can declare this with absolute confidence: Japanese's multilayered writing style with its plurality of orthographies—the quality that makes it such a massive pain in the butt to learn compared to all the other languages from all around the world—was designed for the sole and specific purpose of allowing us to put super awesome guide text above names to make them cooler!”

“It was *not!* No way in *hell!*”

“Okay, but you've gotta admit: creative guide text *is* an aesthetic touch that you only ever see in Japanese, right?”

“Well, I mean...”

“I, for one, firmly believe that stylish and idiosyncratic guide text is a cornerstone of Japanese culture that we as a nation can be proud of!”

You'd think we'd formally declare it to be part of our cultural heritage or something. My secret dream was that someday, the notoriety of Japanese titles would spread to all corners of the world in much the same way the notoriety of the Japanese writing system had. If we could sell T-shirts with Japanese characters written on them, then why not try selling T-shirts with fancy guide text on them too? I had a feeling they'd be a major commercial hit!

“Okay, so we've settled that your power—and, by extension, all of our powers—will have an amalgam-style name. Next up...”

“Is the hard part, right?”

“Sure is, yup.”

The two of us sank into thought.

“I guess this probably goes without saying, but amalgam-style names are the hardest to actually come up with,” I said.

“Since you have to come up with an explicit reading *and* meaningful literary characters, they're twice the work,” said Tomoyo.

That was, indeed, the rub. Obviously, you couldn't *just* translate the literary characters directly into English and transliterate it back as the guide text. No,

you had to come up with guide text that had a true *affinity* with the nonphonetic text, bringing forth a sense of synergy between the two. The effort that took was, most likely, even *more* than twice the work of thinking up a simple, singular name...though on the other hand, that was also what made amalgam-style names so much fun to come up with.

“So, we want an amalgam-style name...but the more I think about it, the more I think that’s just too broad of a starting point,” I said.

“It’s hard to know where to start if we don’t narrow it down a bit first, yeah,” Tomoyo agreed.

Once we had that first power name set in stone, we’d be able to follow its format for the remaining members...but establishing said format really was quite the task.

“Well, seeing as I’ve gone through the trouble of setting up this whole one-on-one interview, you should feel free to bring up any ideas or opinions you have, Tomoyo,” I said.

“Opinions on *what*, even?”

“Well, like, do you like really long, drawn-out names that flow super nicely? Or are you a short and sweet sort of person?”

“Would you please try to look a *little* less excited about this? I don’t have a preference like that at all—either way is whatever for me.”

“C’mon, don’t be such a killjoy! And anyway, I already know the answer. You like long names, don’t you? Like, that title you came up with in middle school—the Witch of Antinomy Who Smirks in the Face of Twilight: Endless Paradox, right? That’s on the longer side for sure.”

“I told you that bringing up that title was taboo, didn’t I?!”

“Oh! Come to think of it, Kiryuu said something about liking his names to be practically a sentence long. ‘The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, powerful enough to crush even the heavens and the fools who rule them: *Lucifer’s Strike*’ has one hell of a preamble for a power name...but *man*, is it ever hella cool too! It would’ve been super easy for the fallen angel imagery to come across as played out, but he used it with an artisan’s touch, seriously! The superlong

preamble would be a pain to read out over and over, but then the actual power name in the guide text is nice and simple, bringing it all together in a perfectly functional, harmonious whole!”

“Don’t talk about my deadbeat brother’s naming aesthetics like you’re some sort of critic, please... I know you’re complimenting him, but it’s *still* humiliating to listen to,” Tomoyo said, hanging her head in shame...

“Hm...? Wait. H-Huh?”

...only for her to bolt upright and let out a confused grunt just a moment later.

“W-Wait a second, Andou,” said Tomoyo.

“What?” I replied.

Tomoyo took a second to compose herself, suppressing the agitation in her voice. “What month is it, again?” she finally said.

“October.”

“Right. Yeah. It’s October right now. And what’s our grade level?”

“Where’s this coming from? We’re first-years, duh.”

Andou Jurai: a first-year high schooler. Kanzaki Tomoyo: also a first-year high schooler. In other words, this was our first fall at our current school. The cultural festival, for which our sole contribution had been a literary magazine, had come to a close just recently. A week after that, we’d awakened to our powers, and another week past that brought us up to the present moment.

“R-Right, exactly. This really is the fall of our first year in high school, isn’t it?” said Tomoyo. “So then...why do you know about Endless Paradox, or about Hajime? Isn’t that weird, continuity-wise?”

“Oooh... Yeah, about that.”

Tomoyo seemed seriously freaked out by all this, but I had a perfectly calm and collected explanation to offer.

“Basically, we’re just not worrying about all that stuff this time around.”

“We’re *not* worrying about it?!”

“Yeah. ‘Cause, like, honestly? Nailing down the timeline for this sort of thing’s a huge pain. What does anyone even get out of being super careful about all that stuff? So we’re just gonna prioritize going with the flow and brush off any weird little inconsistencies we might cause in the process.”

“And you think that’s okay *why*?!”

Because it is. Letting yourself get preoccupied with petty continuity nitpicks and losing out on what should’ve made the story interesting in the first place would be putting the cart before the horse, right? Plus, it felt like there was a real trend lately of people acting like whoever could pick out the most petty contradictions in a story was somehow *better* than everyone else, and frankly, I wasn’t into that at all.

Like, is getting up on a high horse and explaining all the continuity errors and inconsistencies in a story with a super obnoxious smirk on your face *really* something to be proud of? Sure, plenty of developments in plenty of stories strain logic and credulity, but if that makes the story more interesting, then what’s the big deal? It’s not like obsessive faultfinding ever makes anyone happy, right?

Though, of course...I have to admit that the reason I had all of those opinions was because I, too, bore the impulse to be exactly that sort of obnoxious reader as well. When you find a continuity error in a story, it’s *so* hard to suppress the urge to spread the news to anyone who’ll listen. Even if it’s a work you love—or really, *especially* if it’s a work you love—you end up wanting to quibble over the smallest of errors. You kinda *have* to be into a story to quibble that specifically in the first place, and that sort of obsessive attention to detail can be intoxicating.

I figure it’s probably a little like how some kids end up teasing the kid they have a crush on. It’s not an act driven by any sort of malicious intent. They say that love and hate are two sides of the same coin, and the same principle applies here.

But, all that being said, if that behavior ends up making someone *else* have a bad day, then personally, I think it’s better to hold off. I don’t want to become the sort of cowardly excuse for a geek who’d bash other people’s favorite

stories relentlessly while never saying so much as a peep about the stories they *do* like, nor the kind who criticizes freely but never praises anything.

I want you to cast your memory back to a time long ago—to a stage of life that, at some point, everyone goes through. An era when you didn't give the slightest hint of a crap about online reviews, continuity nitpicking, hilariously inaccurate historical details, or how a story was selling relative to its contemporaries. An era when you could just *enjoy* stories with an open mind, a peaceful heart, and a childlike innocence. Cast your mind back to that time...and do your best to approach stories with that mindset once more.

“So, yup! As far as the timeline goes, it's currently the fall of our first year in high school—so, half a year before the original story starts—but also, I know that you're a former chuuni and an aspiring light novel author, and also about Kiryuu. Let's just run with that, 'kay?”

“Could you *get* any more meta about this...?”

“Eh, it's fine. This is just a bonus story that's gonna get packed in with the Blu-rays, after all.”

Actually, wait. I'm definitely not saying that it's okay for bonus stories to be sloppy and off the cuff, for the record! I just mean that bonus stories are a great opportunity to do things that you couldn't get away with in the main series. In short: I wanna cut loose, dangit! This is the perfect chance to pull out the stops and turn the meta up to eleven, so let's go for it!

“Just because it's a bonus story that comes with the anime doesn't mean we can do whatever we want in it, you know?” said Tomoyo. “And besides, Andou, you know how these things go, right? It's super common for bonus stories like this to get compiled together and released as an actual volume, isn't it? Have you thought about how all of this is gonna look if that happens? Don't you think you're being pretty inconsiderate toward all the readers who haven't even seen the anime?”

“As far as they go, all I have to say...is that I'm deeply, deeply sorry.”

“Admitting fault doesn't make everything suddenly okay again, you know?”

“Oh, and by the way, you know how you've been going all tsundere about not

caring about your power's name? I know that's what your initial character was like—specifically, your before-the-events-of-volume-one character—but I also know perfectly well that you're actually super invested in all this deep down, so no worries there.”

“How's that supposed to make me *not* worry?! And what do you *mean*, my 'initial character'?!”

Tomoyo's initial character was, in short, “the girl who stands back and shakes her head at everyone else's crap.” She was skeptical and cynical as a matter of policy, and she kept her cool no matter what was thrown at her. She didn't hide the fact that she was into geeky stuff, but she was *very* harsh toward anything chuuni-adjacent, and she was constantly exasperated by my day-to-day antics...but then pretty much all of that broke down spectacularly the instant the fact that she was a former chuuni herself got revealed. Tomoyo's coolheaded persona was toast by volume two of the novels and halfway through the anime's first episode. It had broken down so quickly that it felt less like her initial character and more like the foundation her *actual* initial character was built on.

“For crying out loud, Andou! Give me some specifics already! What volume are you even from?! How many volumes' worth of memories does the Andou Jurai I'm talking to have?!”

“Let's just go ahead and handwave all those details, okay?”

“*Seriously?*!”

“Yeah. We'll play it by ear and see what happens. Like, in the main story's continuity, we're supposed to have spent the period after we awakened to god-tier powers scared to death of what might happen next, right? The whole atmosphere was supposed to have been all dark and apprehensive and stuff...but we're just gonna ignore that whole setup and pretend it wasn't a thing. Doing these interviews with *that* sort of mood as the backdrop would be a total drag, after all.”

“You can't just...say crap like that out loud!”

“And that, Tomoyo, is why you don't have to force yourself to act like you did back in the start of the story. I already know that you're a former chuuni, so

why bother hiding it? The truth is that you're super invested in your power's name, right? You really want to help think it up yourself, don't you?"

"Ugh... I... I..."

"Mwa ha ha! And who could blame you? It's *your* power's name, after all! You talk a big game about not caring, but the truth is that you're *burning* with desire to think up a name yourself, right? Come on, admit it! No sense lying to yourself!" I said, doubling down on the pressure like I was the protagonist of one of those games where you play as a huge creep who exploits women.

"U-Uggh," Tomoyo groaned, squirming with a tortured expression on her face.

"You have the power to stop time...and you're really okay with giving up the chance to name it? You'd let someone *else* make off with the naming rights to a power among powers?"

"Grr... Ahh, graaaaaah!"

"Come on, hurry up! If you don't say something soon, I'm gonna hog all the fun for myself! I'll make a *mess* of your power's name, and you'll just have to sit back and watch!"

"N-No..."

"Hmmm? I can't heear you!"

"I said *noooooo*!"

"*That's* more like it! Good job admitting it, you dirty little girl!"

"..."

"Mwa ha ha! Your mouth may lie, but the chuuni power within you will forever tell a tale of the truth!"

"Ugh... O-Okay, yes, you're right. I can't take this anymore... Please, Andou, let me brainstorm a name for my power with— Wait, what the *hell* even is this bit?!" Tomoyo shouted, pivoting on a dime at the last possible second. Like, really, the *absolute* last second. She'd dragged that one out so far that I wasn't really sure how I would've replied if she'd kept it going. We'd been in serious danger of letting the situation spiral out of control for a minute there.

“Okay, look...to start, let me just say that I *basically* get what you’re trying to tell me here,” said Tomoyo. “*But*, don’t you think you’re getting into, like, serious time paradox territory with all this? Like, you figured out that I was a former chuuni in part *because* of my power to stop time, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah. That’s how it happened, all right. I caught you posing in front of the mirror in the club room, reciting the catchphrase I’d come up with for you, and everything came to light from there.”

“You don’t have to recap the whole stupid thing! Anyway...the point I’m getting at is that if my power and its name were part of what made me screw up and let my former chuuni secret slip, but now you and I *think up* that power’s name together, knowing the whole time that all of that’s going to happen... Well, doesn’t that all add up to a stupidly high-level time paradox? We’re *destroying* all sense of consistency here!”

Tomoyo was being completely candid with her analysis, and I, in turn, looked her straight in the eye as I gave her my response.

“Tomoyo...you need to embrace the inconsistency,” I said. “‘Consistency’? *That’s* not a real thing! I can assure you that as you live your life, you’ll encounter a countless number of irrational, inconsistent absurdities. Events that make no sense will occur, and misfortunes that you can’t accept will assail you. But tell me, Tomoyo—when life comes knocking, do you think that complaining about *consistency* will be of any help to you?”

I...kinda lost track of what my point with all of this was at some point, but my only option now’s to double down. Just gotta keep saying things that sound like they make sense, more or less!

“Life is a ceaseless series of inconsistencies! Indeed...inconsistency itself is the driving law of this world! And, thusly—we’ve no choice but to enjoy those inconsistencies for all their worth!” I declared dauntlessly with a sneering grin. I was forging ahead at a breakneck pace, pulling out all the stops to make sure nobody noticed I was making it all up as I went!

A few seconds of silence passed until, finally, Tomoyo spoke up.

“Yeah...I guess I was wrong,” she said.

She hadn't been wrong at all, but she still admitted fault. It seemed that my full-steam-ahead approach had overwhelmed her. Part of me thought *Man, she's kind of a pushover, huh?* but I didn't let it show on my face.

"This is a bonus side story that comes with the anime—one set in the past relative to the main series—and when I think about taking the time to make sure there aren't any continuity errors, acting out the role of myself from about half a year before the main story started, and rewinding our relationship to the one we had in that time frame...honestly, all I can say is it all sounds like a huge pain in the ass!"

"*Exactly!* Like, why friggin' bother, right?!"

"Nobody even *wants* that crap!"

"Right?! Who the hell would?!"

Our exchange had ascended to extraordinary new heights of meta. Tomoyo, it seemed, had finally broken out of her shell.

"Heh, heh heh heh! Yeah, that's right... Screw paying deference to continuity! What's the fun in holding back when you could say whatever you want whenever you want?!" said Tomoyo.

"Exactly! Better to lay it out on the table for all to see!" I agreed.

"Then, if I'm gonna be honest...the truth is, I really did want to help name my power! I thought I had to keep the fact that I used to be a chuuni secret no matter what, but really, I wanted to help make up a name with you!"

"Mwa ha ha! Well said, Tomoyo. You've done well to not let the shackles of continuity bind you! Here and now, in this moment, our combined chuuni potential will transcend the timeline altogether!"

Tomoyo and I exchanged a resolute fist bump. In that moment, the stance regarding our side story's approach to storytelling had been determined.

The timeline? Ignore it! Continuity errors? Ignore them! Comedic momentum and manic energy were the name of the game, and any inconsistencies would be handwaved without mercy!

Anyway, it was high time we stopped dragging out all that meta nonsense and got down to brass tacks with our discussion of Tomoyo's power's name. To start things off, Tomoyo and I took a moment to jot down any random ideas that came into our heads. Our thinking was that finding a name we could both agree on would be a lot more efficient if we had a stock of ideas built up beforehand to work with.

We spent some time thinking up anything and everything that could serve as a name for a time manipulation power, chatting all the while...and when we had plenty of proposals written and ready, it was time to present our results.

"Hey, Tomoyo?" I said before we began. "Don't you think that just reading all our ideas out would be kinda boring?"

I went on to propose an alternate method for sharing our concepts. At first, Tomoyo acted like I'd completely lost my marbles, but as I eloquently and skillfully elaborated on my suggestion, she started getting more and more on board—before long, she was smiling and completely all in on what I was thinking.

I'd figured something out about Tomoyo: it wasn't that she caved to pressure easily or that she was a sucker. No, the truth of the matter was that she was just a *total* tsundere when it came to chuuni stuff specifically. She *wanted* to unleash her true self, deep down, but she just couldn't bring herself to go ahead with that sort of thing without putting up a fight first.

In any case, the two of us took a moment to prepare ourselves...and then it was time. I'd put my all into this idea, and now we'd finally make it a reality. Yes—our card game-style idea presentation was a *go*!

"My turn first. I draw!"

"Ah! That's not fair, Andou! We should decide who goes first by playing rock paper scissors or flipping a coin or something!"

"Ha! How very naive of you, Tomoyo! When *true* duelists duel, the turn order is determined by who says they're going first quickest!"

That's right: we were playing by manga and anime card game rules, and that meant that I could unilaterally declare that I got the first turn! I drew a card

from my deck—which is to say, the deck of power name concepts that I’d written out for myself.

“I play one card from my hand to summon a theme word: Hourglass!”

With a deep, resonant *boom*—that I made with my mouth—I laid my homemade card down on the homemade playing field in front of me. The Solid Vision system then caused the card to materialize in physical form...in the fantasy that flashed through my mind’s eye, anyway.

“‘Hourglass’...? Hmm. That’s a pretty subdued name by your standards, huh?” Tomoyo said with a derisive chuckle—but I was about to throw that laugh right back in her face.

“My turn’s not over just yet!”



© Tetsuya Hasegawa (TRIGGER)

I pulled a second card from my hand and played it next to the Hourglass card.

“I equip the guide text card, *End of the World*, to Hourglass!”

“You what?!”

“That prompts a Synergy Effect, which increases the Hourglass card’s chuuni points by a factor of ten!”

“Ugh!” Tomoyo grunted, reeling with frustrated chagrin. “*End of the World*... You really came out swinging with that one, didn’t you? I can’t believe you threw down a trump card like that on the very first turn...”

“I’m not pulling any punches here. I’m going on the attack from turn one!”

I stacked the *End of the World* card atop the Hourglass card...and from that union, a new power name was born. The hourglass of fateful finality: *End of the World*!

“Not bad, Andou... I have to admit, I didn’t think you had the guts to bring out *End of the World* this early in the game. Now I understand why you went with a simple base card like Hourglass. It’s lacking on its own, but when you pair it up with *End of the World*, it evokes a fragile sense of profound transience...”

“Mwa ha ha! Let me guess—you’re already thinking of throwing in the towel?”

“Hmph! This duel’s just getting started! My turn now—I draw!” Tomoyo said, snatching a card from the top of her deck. “And now I summon a name: The Hands of a Ticking Clock Spin Inexorably!”

“Oh? So you’re coming at me with one of your beloved sentence-style names, are you? And evoking an image of a clock’s hands to represent a time-based power... You really gave that name a certain womanly touch, didn’t you?”

“Next, I equip the guide text card *Timeless* to it, prompting a Synergy Effect! That multiplies The Hands of a Ticking Clock Spin Inexorably’s chuuni points by *thirty*!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” I yelped, my eyes wide with shock.

Tomoyo’s completed power name: the hands of a ticking clock spin

inexorably: *Timeless*.

“Dammit! That’s one hell of a combo...” I muttered. “*Timeless*... It’s simple, sure, but as far as guide text goes, it’s beyond reproach. Coupled with the clock imagery of the preamble, it evokes an image of someone who’s detached from the laws of time that bind the world at large!”

We’d each played our chosen cards. The hourglass of fateful finality: *End of the World* would face off against the hands of a ticking clock spin inexorably: *Timeless*. Now, it was finally time for the Battle Phase to begin.

How, then, would we go about determining which of our completed power names would be crowned victorious and which would be consigned to ignoble defeat?

“So, Tomoyo. This is my win, right?”

“What, are you kidding me? I totally got this one.”

By talking, that’s how. This duel would play out in the form of a conversation, and that conversation would continue until we’d reached a conclusion that both of us could agree on. In other words, all that stuff about chuuni points being multiplied by whatever...had basically nothing to do with who would win at all.

“Nah, I totally won this round! I know you, Tomoyo, and I know you *get* why a short, to-the-point name accompanied by a ruby text powerhouse like the one I played is basically the coolest thing ever. Right?”

“I mean, I get it, yeah...but my name represents what my power actually *does*, right? Yours is all style, no substance.”

“But, Tomoyo: *End of the World*.”

“Ugh!”

“Are you really saying that you can imagine someone playing *End of the World*...and *losing*?”

Tomoyo hesitated...then gave in. “All right, I’ll admit it. The hands of a ticking clock spin inexorably could never win against *End of the World*.”

And so it was settled. The winner was the hourglass of fateful finality: *End of the World*, with its guide text card propelling it to a decisive victory. Tomoyo’s

cards were sent to her graveyard.

“My turn. I draw! And I end my turn.”

I didn’t actually have anything to do on my turn other than draw this time. I sort of wanted to attack Tomoyo’s life points directly since she didn’t have any power names on the field, but we were making this game up as we went, so it didn’t actually have any rules that would cause that to make sense; we hadn’t put any thought into what would happen if our opponent didn’t have any cards out on our turn. I guess it was a little like how in the early stages of the manga, the game— Actually, y’know what? Forget I said anything.

“My turn. I draw! Then I play two cards from my hand,” Tomoyo said as she laid a pair of cards on the field. “First, I summon the name card, Play on the End of Time!”

“Hmm?” I grunted as I furrowed my brow. *Play on the End of Time... It just looks like a normal phrase at a glance, but something about that wording feels so specific...* “Wait a minute. Tomoyo... Could that name...be a *reference*?!”

“Heh! I’m impressed you noticed,” Tomoyo said with a confident smirk. “That’s right. ‘Play on the End of Time’ is the name of an oratorio written by German composer Carl Orff! It was the very last work he composed, a masterpiece centering on philosophical musings into the nature of the end of the world!”

“C-Curses! I can’t believe you went there...you used one of the highest-level techniques in our field: invoking the title of a masterpiece!”

Invoking the title of a masterpiece: a powerful, difficult-to-master technique used extensively by the likes of *JoJo’s* and *Hunter x Hunter*. Works of artistic significance from all eras and all corners of the world have been appropriated to serve as the names of powers or as the titles of their bearers, lending characters truly inimitable aesthetic appeal. It, like, makes them seem all *intellectual* and awesome and stuff, basically.

The method works particularly well when you use the title of a foreign masterpiece. As a general rule, the titles of foreign movies and music end up sounding ludicrously cool when rendered in Japanese more often than not. I don’t just mean the original titles—their official translations tend to be cool as

hell too. Take, for instance, the song “Another One Bites the Dust,” the official Japanese title of which is “Dragged Down to Hell.” Whoever came up with that translation had some seriously impressive taste.

“Next up, I summon the guide text card: *Doomsday*!”

“What?! *Doomsday*?! I-Impossible!” I shouted, reeling as I trembled with horror. Doomsday: a word signifying the day of ultimate judgment, on which the world itself would come to an end—a word that really couldn’t have possibly been any cooler.

She’s pulling out a card like that, is she...? No doubt about it—Tomoyo’s moving in for the kill!

“That means my finished power name is Play on the End of Time: *Doomsday*! That gives me a Synergy Effect bonus of fifty million chuuni points!”

“Fifty *million*?! Ugh! You’ve steered us into the realm of numbers so big, just saying them makes you sound like an idiot!”

“Sh-Shut up, you!”

“That’s not good enough to beat my Hourglass, though! When faced with a formidable enemy like this, it gains one *billion* points!”

“Why would you counter my stupid number with an even stupider one?!”

The hourglass of fateful finality: *End of the World* vs. Play on the End of Time: *Doomsday*. Our cards were on the table, and it was time for our battle to begin—in other words, we were ready for our discussion to start!

“This...is a pretty close match, huh?”

“Yeah. Close match, all right.”

Tomoyo and I sank into thought. “A close match” was the only phrase that came to mind. If you’d asked me to explain *why* it was a close match, I would’ve found myself at a complete loss for an answer, but it certainly was that thing.

“It kinda feels like we’ve both played our trump cards, doesn’t it?” I finally said. “I really didn’t think this match would get quite this heated just two turns out of the gate.”

“Well, you’re the one who played *End of the World* on turn friggin’ one. Not my fault. How was I supposed to hold back against guide text like that?” said Tomoyo.

“Ugggh, this is tough! How’re we supposed to pick a winner between names like these...?”

“It’s easy to imagine either of them winning, yeah. Actually, the fact that we have to declare one of them the *loser* is frustrating in its own right.”

This was a battle of words, and we were perfectly free to sing our own name’s praises. We could make whatever egotistical, questionably rational arguments we pleased, but Tomoyo and I were being almost terrifyingly fair with our judgment. We just couldn’t lie when it came to a name’s chuuni potential.

“I think we’re gonna have to call this a draw, huh?” I finally said.

“Yeah,” Tomoyo agreed. “This round’s a tie.”

And so, our debate concluded. Both of our card sets were banished to our graveyards—but that’s when I made my move.

“Mwa ha ha! Reveal face-down card!” I declared as I flipped a card I’d set down on my playing field. *Ha ha ha ha! I’ve been waiting for this moment!* “I activate the Creative Card, Rehash!”

Allow me to explain! Creative Cards were a type of card meant to make our naming card game more interesting. As for their nature...well, basically, as long as they were kinda sorta thematically related to creative work, they got the green light.

“Rehash allows me to choose a card that’s been sent to the graveyard and return it to the playing field! In other words...it lets me reuse an old idea!”

“Wha— Wait, you wouldn’t—”

“But I would! Needless to say, the card I choose to reuse is none other than the guide text card, *End of the World!*”

And just like that, *End of the World* returned to my side of the field.

“No way... You can’t seriously mean you want that whole tragedy to play out all over again...?!” said Tomoyo, her shoulders slumping as despair washed over

her.

“Mwa ha ha! What a shame, Tomoyo. You thought you’d used up your ultimate card to put mine to rest, but now it’s back from the dead, and you have nothing to show for it!”

“Ugh...!”

“*End of the World* is an all but unbeatable piece of guide text! No matter what text you equip it to, it will amplify its chuuni points tremendously! Mwa ha ha, mwaaa ha ha ha ha ha! Bow down and grovel, for the nightmare that is *End of the World* shall never end!”

I cackled from on high, certain that I’d already won. However...

“Heh... Heh heh heh! Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

...suddenly, Tomoyo matched my laugh with one of her own, and one no less confident. I *thought* she’d been covering her face out of sheer despair, but as it turned out, the truth was that she’d been quivering with barely suppressed laughter.

“Wh-What...? What’s so funny?!”

“What’s funny, Andou, is that you fell for it hook, line, and sinker! Reveal face-down card!” Tomoyo said as she flipped over a card of her own. “I activate the Creative Card: Works Cited!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

“Works Cited allows me to choose any card on my opponent’s playing field and create an exact copy of it on my own side! That means that I have a copy of *End of the World* in play now too!”

“Th-That’s not fair, Tomoyo! You ripped my name off!”

“It’s not a rip-off if I cite my source, now is it?! That makes it a perfectly respectable reference!”

“That’s so friggin’ cheating! Rip-off! Thief! Plagiarist!”

“Oh? So then, I guess *End of the World* must have been a completely original idea on your part, right? You came up with it totally independently, and you

don't have any sources of inspiration that you should've cited? You were the very first person in the world who thought to use those words?"

"Agh! I...ugh. Grr..."

"Yup, thought so. Mine now!"

Tomoyo had conclusively out-argued me, and she quickly wrote down "*End of the World*" on one of our spare cards.

Damnations! I can't believe she ripped off my precious End of the World!

"Hmph... Well, fine," I said. "That just means we're on an even playing field now."

No need to panic just yet, I thought...but that composure wouldn't last.

"Heh heh—oh, does it? Too bad, because my turn's not over yet!"

"Wha—?!"

"Reveal face-down card!" Tomoyo said in a downright elated tone as she flipped over another card. "I activate the Creative Card: German!"

"The...*what?*" I gasped. I felt myself break out in goose bumps. The extraordinary power that emanated from that card seemed like it might consume me then and there.

German. I knew instantly—better than anyone else ever could—what significance the use of *that* language in this battle would have.

"German allows me to translate the text of any card on my field...into *German!* And—as if you even have to ask—I choose to apply that effect to *your* trump card!"

Tomoyo drew a line through *End of the World* and wrote a new series of words beside it.

Ende der Welt

"A-A-Aaauuuggghhhhhhhhh!"

I reeled backward, sending my chair clattering to the floor as I fell to my

hands and knees. The vast, overwhelming surge of chuuni energy that had just slammed into me had rendered me unable to stand. If I'd been even *slightly* less prepared for it, I probably would've passed out on the spot.

H-Holy crap! Holy crap, German's incredible! How could a simple translation make a phrase that much more amazing? Not only is it slick and stylish, it's also practically oozing a boldness so intense it could never be concealed! It unifies the strong and the sublime into a single superlative tongue! German: hella cool!

"Haaa ha ha ha ha! Looks like it's my win, Andou! My *Ende der Welt*'s chuuni points leave your *End of the World* in the dust! It's a straight-up upgrade—no, it's your card's final form!" declared Tomoyo. She was *really* reveling in her success this time, cackling away like nobody's business. I couldn't stop her, though. The pure chuuni power of her card was so potent that I couldn't bring myself to even try.

Ende der Welt. I had to admit it: there was a real chance I couldn't beat the chuuni power that card wielded. I quickly thought through all sorts of other languages—Spanish, Italian, Chinese, and others still—but nothing was able to come even close to German's chuuni might...or, well, nothing that I could come up with on the fly, since I didn't have my electronic dictionary handy and could only manage so much translation on my own.

What can I do? What's my next move...? A-Ah, of course!

"I'm not going down without a fight! I'll use my own Creative Card!" I said, quickly scrawling a few words onto a blank card. At this point, we were ignoring the turn order—and, for that matter, all the other rules—entirely. "I activate a Creative Card: The Alphabet!"

"The alphabet...? So, like, English?"

"No, not English! The alphabet!"

"What's that supposed to mean? Where're you going with this?"

Tomoyo was befuddled...and I was about to show her what I could *really* do. I was going to violate a truly terrible taboo—to tread closer to the ultimate line than anyone else dared to go. I was going to risk prompting the ire of many, *many* people, some much more dangerous than others.

What do you get when you translate the English phrase End of the World into Japanese and write it out using the alphabet?

“SEKAI NO OW—”

“Wha— No! Stop, stop! Seriously, *bad* idea!”

“Haaa ha ha ha ha! How do you like *that*, Tomoyo?! Wanna talk smack about my new power name? Go right ahead! Just know that the moment you do, you’ll turn tens of thousands of music fans all across this country into your mortal enemies! Your Twitter’s gonna go up in *flames*!”

“That’s fighting dirty!”

“Heh! Sounds to me like you don’t have a counter for this one. How very tragic... No matter the era, no hero or villain could ever be mighty enough to overcome the sheer power of the general public...”

“Stop trying to sound like a world-weary warrior! You’re just plain cheating!”

“Yeah right! If that’s cheating, then *Ende der Welt*’s cheating too!”

“*Why*?!”

“Cause it’s banned for being too powerful! It’s one of those cards that comes packed in with a video game or whatever that’s never actually legal to play in any format!”

“You’re saying it’s a God Card?!”

After much debate, it was eventually determined that *End of the World* and *Ende der Welt* would both be put on the banlist. Watching those lists gradually fill up with more and more banned cards was one of the joys of being a trading card game player...or if not a joy, then at least an inevitability.

Anyway, it was time for us to get back on track and jump right back into our naming card battle!

“My turn! I attack with the power name den of darkness: *Chronos*!”

“Ugh! Not bad, Andou—it’s a simple name, but it’s got a real ominous note to it... That’s a name with chuuni power that sorta creeps up on you the more you think about it. I can do better, though! I defend with the power name time’s

eternal guardian: *Yggdrashield!*”

“Oh? A portmanteau of ‘Yggdrasil’ and ‘shield’...? That’s quite the play on words you have going there.”

“That’s a successful block, then. You take half a million psychological damage.”

“What? No, wait a second, I never said the block worked! My Den of Darkness totally pierced your defenses!”

“Not a chance. Maybe it would’ve had the penetrating power to break through if you’d gone with Den of the Void, but Den of Darkness? Not happening.”

“Ahh, yeah, I went back and forth on that one. I was thinking about Den of the Void at first, but I decided that the alliteration would make losing ‘void’ worthwhile. Maybe sticking with the more impactful word would’ve been better after all?”

“Well, one way or another, it means the defense works out. Your Den of Darkness is going straight to the graveyard.”

“Hah—I don’t think so! My turn’s not over just yet—reveal face-down card! I activate the Creative Card: German!”

“Wha— You had a German too?!”

“And by the way, I’m limiting its effects to the ‘Darkness’ portion of Den of Darkness! Darkness is black, and ‘black’ translated into German...is *schwarz!*”

“Schwarz?! D-Dang, that’s cool...”

“Haaah hah hah hah! That’s right! Bask in that word, in all its foul, fiendish glory! It’s downright irresistible even on its own, isn’t it?! But it’s not on its own—my German card transforms Den of Darkness...into Den of *Schwarz!*”

“Um...”

“Ah...”

“Yeah, uh... That’s kinda lame, isn’t it?”

“Yeah... Extremely lame,” I admitted. “Into the graveyard it goes.”

“Okay, so my turn. I—”

“Not so fast! My turn’s not over yet!”

“*Still?! Quit my-turn-never-ends-ing me! The turn order’s a thing for a reason!*”

“Shaddup! I’m playing an instant Creative Card from my hand: Rehash! It allows me to return one card from my graveyard to the field, and needless to say, I’m picking *End of the—*”

“We *banned* that card, remember?! Ugh, whatever—I’m playing a Creative Card Counter from my hand: Writer’s Block! It nullifies the effects of any Creative Card!”

“I don’t think so! I counter your counter with a counter! My Writer’s Block nullifies *your* Writer’s Block!”

“That’s so cheap! Nobody likes a counter-counter player! Cut that crap out!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha! All’s fair in cards and war!”

“Oh, is that so...? Well then, I guess it’s time for me to take the kid gloves off! I activate a Creative Card: I’ll Try Harder Tomorrow! It skips your turn and jumps directly to mine!”

“What?! Well, I use the Creative Card: Total Rejection! It sends all of your cards directly to the graveyard!”

“Not so fast! I play the Creative Card: Deadline—and you die.”

“*I die?! Me, the player?! Now *that’s* one hell of a card!*”

“Hey...Andou?”

“Yeah?”

“All this Creative Card cross-counter’s taking us way off topic. We should stop.”

“...Yeaaah.”

“Okay, so my turn. I—”

“My turn’s not over yet!”

“Oh, give it a goddamn *rest!*”

And so our battle raged on.

Our card game dragged on for quite a long time, but at the end of the day, we still hadn’t managed to settle on a name for Tomoyo’s power.

“Well, it’s getting late,” said Tomoyo. “We should probably head home...but what do you think, Andou? Are you gonna be able to get a name worked out?”

“Am I ever! I’ve got this in the bag! I’m brimming with inspiration right now!” I said with a confident nod.

I’d gotten plenty of info from my one-on-one interview with Tomoyo, and we’d both freely displayed our ideas and stylistic views over the course of our card battle. I couldn’t let that wealth of material go to waste. No—I wouldn’t *allow* it to go to waste!

“I’ll spend tonight thinking it over, and if I haven’t settled on anything by tomorrow, it’s card game time again!” I said.

“Nah...” Tomoyo said with a sigh. “I’ll pass on doing this again. I don’t think I can keep that energy level up for days on end.”

Whaaat? But it was so much fun!

Anyway, we both made our way home. The night came and went—and the next day, I called Tomoyo to the club room first thing in the morning, before anyone else arrived.

“Mwa ha ha! Feast your eyes and bear witness!” I said, flipping open my *Bloody Bible* and showing her the name I’d written within.

The sovereign of eternity: *Closed Clock*

“So...that’s my power’s name?”

“That’s right. What do you think? It’s, y’know...pretty nice, right?”

“Y-Yeah... I-I mean, it’s fine, I guess. I’ll throw you a bone and live with it,” said

Tomoyo.

Her curt tone, however, couldn't conceal the smile that she was failing to keep from showing through on her face. She *did* like it, and I was relieved to see it.

"But wait, Andou—how'd you actually pick that name? I don't remember anything like *Closed Clock* coming up during yesterday's card battle."

"Mwa ha ha! Curious, are you? Very well, then! I shall reveal all!"

Thus, I began to explain. I told Tomoyo the *true* origins of *Closed Clock*...

It all started early one morning—or, well, early that very same morning.

"Come on, Machi, wake up! Friggin' wake up already!"

"Mmngh... Shut it, Jurai. I was up late last night..."

"I know, but you're the one who asked me to wake you up anyway, aren't you?"

"...Zzz."

"Oh, for the— Don't fall back asleep! I said wake *up*, O stupid sister of mine!"

"Shaddup. I'mma sleep for eternity."

"Come on... How unreasonable can you even get? And what happened to your alarm clock? Doesn't that have a snooze function you could be using instead of making me do this?"

"Oh, that...? It was obnoxious, so I hid it over there..."

"Over *where*...? Oh. You buried it under your covers so you couldn't hear it? What's the point of even having an alarm clock if you're just gonna disable it? You know that sealing away your clock doesn't *actually* stop time from—"

In that instant—that split second—a flash of lightning rushed through my mind.

"Sealing...your clock..."

A clock. Sealing. Shutting. Blockading? Closing—putting that in a form that

indicates the action is being done to the clock, Closed Clock. The guide text would be that in English, making it the power's proper name. Then to lead into it...wait. What did Machi say a second ago? I know it was something good... Remember! What was it?! Machi said...

"Shaddup. I'mma sleep for eternity."

Eternal slumber. Time, frozen for eternity by its ruler. Its sovereign...the sovereign of eternity?!

"...So, yeah. It came to me in a flash of inspiration this morning."

"..."

"Like, honestly, it just *hit* me all at once! That's gotta be how mystery protagonists feel when they finally crack the case at the end of a story."

"..."

I'd finished my tale, but for some reason, Tomoyo was just standing there, staring at me, stunned, not saying a word. Finally, very slowly, she opened her mouth.

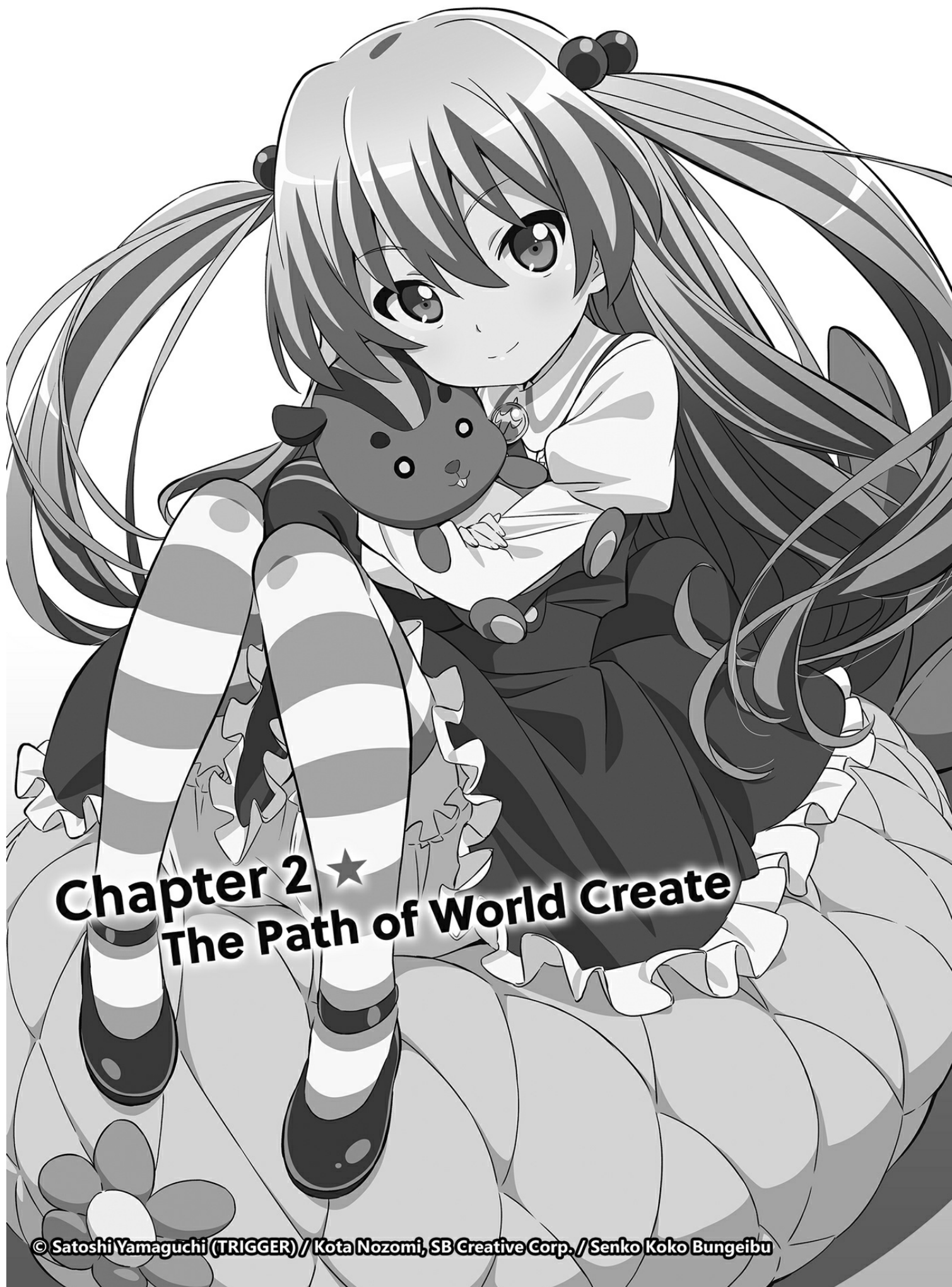
"Andou... You said it came to you this morning? In a flash?"

"Yeah. Though I guess it's still 'this morning' right now, technically. Must've been about an hour ago or so?"

"In that case...what was the point of that incredibly long interview we spent all of yesterday afternoon on?"

"That's...a very good question."

What else could I say? Our endless conversation and interminable process of trial and error had been overridden by a single flash of inspiration. That's just how it goes when you're making up names sometimes.



Chapter 2: The Path of World Create

The empress of genesis, *World Create*—this was the title that had been bestowed upon Himeki Chifuyu and, by extension, the name of the power she'd awakened to, which granted her ultimate authority over creation. The one who had bestowed it, needless to say, was none other than me. Between “the empress of genesis” serving as its introductory appellation and the English words “*World Create*” providing a foreign flair, it was a truly minimalistic and specific name for a power to have, if I do say so myself.

World Create. The power to create worlds. Genesis. It was, well... I mean, it's kind of just what it says on the tin, isn't it? I prided myself on having a nature as focused and aggressive as that of Andy, the right pectoral muscle, yet I have to admit that by my standards, it was a pretty subdued name, with no real twists or tricks worked into it. It expressed the nature of Chifuyu's abilities pretty effectively, I'd say, but something about it just, I dunno... Like, is clearly expressing what an ability does in its name even a good thing? Hmm.

Last time, during my interview with Tomoyo, I'm pretty sure I said something along the lines of “a power name's pronunciation guide text can't just be its Japanese characters translated directly into English” and went on a whole rant about how it has to be more elaborate than that...but, to be blunt, *World Create* was exactly what I'd been arguing against. Heck, it was more or less just a direct rephrasing of the concept of “genesis” into more basic terms. In terms of pure simplicity, it was barely any different from *Flame of Darkness*. It was simple, direct, and easy to understand, for better or for worse.

Now, I'm not saying that a complicated name with a bunch of elaborate double meanings is necessarily *always* going to be a good one. It'd be putting the cart before the horse to come up with a cool and deep name that has nothing to do with the actual power just because you think straightforward names are boring. If you want to produce a name with actual *soul* behind it, you won't succeed by stringing together a bunch of unrelated proper nouns—instead, you'll just make it feel like it came straight out of one of those “Enter

your name to create your own superpower!” generators you can find online.

I want to reiterate that last point one more time, just for clarity’s sake. Maybe it’s something I shouldn’t be saying at all, but still, I’ll say it again: a name comprising words selected at random—words that could’ve been spat out of a random name generator—can never have any sort of soul behind it. You can’t just throw fancy terms at the wall and hope that they stick. Names for powers and titles for those powers’ wielders have value specifically *because* of the drama and backstory behind their creation. The thought and care that goes into a power’s name are what grant it its soul.

And besides, those random generators are totally inconsistent from the get-go. The results you get change depending on whether or not you capitalize your name, for crying out loud! Sometimes their systems are set up so poorly that you can put in the exact same name and get different outputs on the second, third, *and* fourth try! A power’s name has to feel like it was chosen by fate, and when you use one of those generators, that absolutely essential element of the equation is *completely* lacking, so—

...What? No, I’m not obsessed. Heck, I’ve never even touched those things myself. I’m just basing this on rumors. Other people have told me about those generators, and I’m relaying what they said, that’s all. I’ve absolutely never gotten salty because one of them didn’t give me an output that I liked, for your information. I’ve never tried dozens of different spellings and formats of my name in the vain hope that I’d eventually get something that would satisfy me. I did *not* get hooked on online name generators. I’ve never thought “A random name—in other words, a name granted by the will of the heavens themselves? Yes, perhaps that would be acceptable,” then ended up getting super depressed after my chosen generator gave me an unambiguously feminine name! Didn’t happen!

Hmm. We’re getting pretty off-topic, so let’s steer things back toward the original point.

In short: a power’s name can’t just be a super basic description of its effects, but at the same time, it can’t be a meaningless string of unrelated words cobbled together in an arbitrary mishmash. The connection between name and power has to be subtle but present, balancing concepts both related and

unrelated to the power's effect in a precarious tightrope walk where your actual life might as well be on the line! Then you must embody that life-and-death struggle in the very nature of your...uh...

Okay, not even *I'm* totally sure what I'm saying at this point. What's important, though, is the idea that there are a bunch of potential naming patterns you can follow, and that *World Create* followed a relatively simple one. I was usually fond of names so elaborate they teetered on the brink of overwrought, so how had I ended up giving Chifuyu's power a name so downright innocuous?

The answer...is a tale so profoundly tragic, I'm quite certain it will bring all who read it to tears.

"All right! Let's get this one-on-one interview underway, Chifuyu!"

"Yeaaah."

School was out for the day, we were in the club room, and Chifuyu, who had once again stopped by to hang out with us, gave an enthusiastic cheer as I kicked off the day's task. That task: performing an interview to help me think up a name for her power. This was the second interview of the set, and the power I had to bequeath a title upon was none other than the ultimate dominion over creation itself.

"..."

Hmm. How to put this into words...? Hmm.

"So. You're up second, huh, Chifuyu?"

"Yeah. I'm second."

"Right... Not Hatoko, huh?"

"Yeah. Not Hatoko."

Indeed. Hatoko would not be going second. I'd sort of gotten it into my head that Hatoko would be second for sure, for some reason, but then the next thing I knew, bam! There I was, conducting a one-on-one interview with Chifuyu instead, unable to explain how it had turned out that way. I'd been completely

ready to do Hatoko's interview, and Hatoko had seemed enthusiastic as well...but it was almost as if the invisible hand of fate had reached down and mucked up the works, compelling Chifuyu to take her place for an inscrutable purpose. This, I figured, must have been how Yugi-boy felt when he realized that Pegasus was controlling him through subliminal messages.

Hmm. Why do I have this strange sensation that we've skipped ahead an interview? It's the weirdest thing.

"Andou, hurry up and think. Let's pick a name for my power."

"Ah, right! Let's do this!"

Chifuyu was surprisingly enthusiastic, and I couldn't have been happier to see it. The power she had awakened to was the power of ultimate creation—the power of genesis. To put it more bluntly, it was the power to create anything she wanted to...and I do mean anything. Literally anything.

"You know...when I really think about it, your power's just straight-up outrageous, Chifuyu."

"Yeah. I'm outrageous," Chifuyu replied with a proud little nod. Even Squirrely, whom she had clasped to her chest, looked sort of pleased with himself.

"It's not just limited to weapons and buildings and stuff—you can even make alternate dimensions and warp gates! It's over the top!"

"Yeah. I'm over the top."

"Just for reference, is there anything you *can't* make?"

"Hmm... Time, maybe?"

"Oh, time, huh? Ha ha ha, yeah, figures," I said with a chuckle. Of course she wouldn't be able to make *time*. If Chifuyu could create the concept of time anew, and by extension gain the ability to *control* time, then she'd be *lucky* to have people calling her power an outright cheat.

"Ah," Chifuyu grunted. She held out a hand, opening and clenching it a few times in front of her. "I think I could do it, maybe."

"Huh?"

“I think I could make time.”

“You...*whaaaaaaaaaat*?! Y-You *can*?! You can seriously make *time*?!”

“Yeah. If I try a little hard.”

“All it takes to make time is *trying a little hard*?!”

Making time?! Seriously?! How could it possibly be okay for a creation-style power’s capabilities to extend that far?! I know I said “anything,” but isn’t there an unspoken rule that time’s off the table?! Take a page out of Shenron’s book, Chifuyu!

“If I just...”

“No, don’t! Stop! You can’t!” I bellowed. Chifuyu had taken Squirrely by the hand and started trying out poses, attempting to make time through trial and error in her own eccentric sort of way, but I shut it down the moment I realized what was happening.

“Why?” asked Chifuyu.

“Why...? *Because*, that’s why!”

Creation and materialization-style abilities just couldn’t be used to make time. Doing so would overturn generations’ worth of supernatural battle precedent, passed down in an unbroken chain by our forefathers! Chifuyu being able to make alternate dimensions and warp gates was already pushing reason to its limit, and if she could make time on top of that, all sense of balance would be destroyed.

And, most importantly of all...if she can make time, then where does that leave Tomoyo?! That would make Closed Clock into nothing more than an unambiguous World Create downgrade!

“A-Anyway, that’s off the table! Making time is banned!” I insisted.

“Hmmmph,” Chifuyu huffed. “Andou, you ban too many things.”

“Ugh!”

“You banned making fire and water too.”

“Well, I mean...”

Just think about it, Chifuyu... If you start making elements like that, then you'd be stealing Hatoko's thunder!

In all honesty: Chifuyu was absolutely capable of creating the fundamental elements. She couldn't Aspect Splice them like Hatoko, to be fair, so it didn't make her power an objective upgrade of Hatoko's, but it was still a problem.

And that's not to mention that Hatoko's power already kiiinda feels like an upgrade of my black flame ability. If Chifuyu starts dabbling in elemental territory too...I'll seriously have nothing left anymore...

"I wanted to try making black fire like you," Chifuyu pouted.

"No! Not that! Anything but that! Don't steal the one thing that makes me unique! Just say that you can't make black fire, I'm begging you! Let me be the only one who can pull that off, *please!*"

"I think I could do what your power does, easy."

"Easy?!" I choked out in horror. "H-Hey...Chifuyu? You... You didn't mean that, did you? It wouldn't be easy, right? I-It'd actually be super hard, surely? I mean...black flames like my power makes don't exist naturally, so you'd probably have to apply all sorts of limitations and restrictions to them, or they'd take you a ton of time to prepare, or something, right...?"

"No. Your power's simple and boring, so I could do it right away."

"...Aaaaaauuggghhh!" I wailed, crumpling to the floor and bursting into tears. "Damnations... *Damnations*... Why am I the only one who got a useless power...? Everyone else's powers are so amazing that they're *secret* boss tier—not even just final boss tier—so why am I the only one with a power like *this*...?"

I mean, it's a cool power, don't get me wrong. Like, it's really cool, and I love it so much that I bid it good morning and good night on a daily basis as part of my routine. And yet... And yet...

I just couldn't help but wonder, deep down in my heart of hearts, if the world couldn't have tried a *little* harder to make my power more practical. I loved my power—I adored it—but couldn't it have had just...just a *little* something more?

"Do you hate your power, Andou?" asked Chifuyu.

“It’s not that I hate it,” I groaned. “I love it, actually... It’s just... I also wish it could’ve been a bit more amazing, somehow... I can’t stop myself from wishing that I could’ve had a ridiculous, outrageous power like all of yours...”

I was trapped in a terrible conflict between my desire for a truly mighty supernatural power and my attachment to the black flames I already had...but the words that the girl before me spoke an instant later were so unthinkable they blew that conflict out of the water.

“Okay. Then should I make you a new one?”

“...Pardon?”

“I’ll make you a new power, Andou.”

I’ll make you a new power. She said it with an air of perfect, unflappable indifference. I, on the other hand, was so stunned I very nearly collapsed on the spot.

“A-Are you telling me...you can even make *supernatural powers*?!”

Hooly crap. Actually, no, “holy crap” doesn’t do this justice anymore. She can make powers...? We’re not even working in the same dimension as final-boss tier—this is god-level stuff. Like, straight out of the actual Book of Genesis. We’re talking let-there-be-light level. Can we really be totally sure that Chifuyu did not, in fact, create this whole world?

“A-A-Are you serious, Chifuyu...? You could actually create a whole new power...?”

“Probably.”

“*Probably...*?”

Oh god, it feels like she might actually be able to do this if she tried. What now? This is an incredible new piece of info that just slammed into me out of left field!

How could I have possibly predicted that something *that* important would get unveiled in a piece of bonus material set before the main series even started? If Chifuyu’s power of genesis had the ability to make whatever new power she pleased...well, that would make so many things fall apart in an instant. The

balance between the literary club girls' powers would be thrown totally out of whack, and Chifuyu would emerge as the indisputable strongest.

Man... How do I even put this feeling into words? It's like I just told the genie of the lamp that I wanted to wish for a hundred wishes, and I got an immediate "Sure thing, boss" in response. I mean, yes, her power lets her make anything, but...you just can't go making new powers, right? Not being able to do that's a given, right? It's not like anyone would be pedantic enough to be all "Ah ha—I guess she can't make literally anything after all, now, can she?" because of a restriction like that, would they?

In the end, all I could say was that this was classic Chifuyu, through and through. Unspoken rules and standard practices were nothing in the face of her almighty indifference.

"Andou," said Chifuyu, who didn't seem even slightly aware of the conflict and turmoil I was going through. "What do you want your new power to be?"

"U-Umm," I stammered.

"Or are you happy with your boring black fire?"

"Ugh!"

Is... Is this a trial? Is my love for my power being tested? Have the gods imposed this ordeal upon me to see how deep my love truly runs?!

"Ugh... I... Graaah..."

The power to summon lightning. An evil eye. Hardening blood to use as a weapon. Refining equipment to make it stronger. Manipulating probability. Controlling the laws of cause and effect. A guaranteed one-shot instant kill attack. A power to automatically defeat anyone stronger than me...

In an instant, my imagination ran wild, and my suppressed wish for a new power spilled forth, burying my heart in a mountain of desire.

Curses! Silence! Be silent, O imagination of mine! I refuse to betray my power! I will never forsake the black flames that I awakened to!

"Grrr...graaaaaah! Hah, hah, hraaaauuggghhhhhh!"

I knelt on the ground, agonizing like Bank Director Ohwada trying to force

himself to bow down to Hanzawa Naoki. Then, finally...

“I-I don’t...want one...”

...I said it. I pushed through overwhelming, heartbroken grief and said it.

“I don’t want...a new power... I’ll keep...my old one!”

With gasping, heaving breaths, I turned my back on the devil’s temptation within me, expelling its power over my mind. My love for my black flames...had prevailed!

“Oh? Okay.” Chifuyu accepted my choice without batting an eyelash.

What? Oh, come on, you could at least praise me a little! I just went through an inner battle of mythological proportions!

But...whatever. I had fulfilled my duty to my own power. The black flame that dwelled within my right arm had surely come to see me in a new light, recognizing me anew as its one and only master. I believe in you, O power of mine! I believe that someday you will awaken and evolve to your next stage! And I believe that the details of said awakening will not be left unstated for ages and have their reveal dragged out until the last few volumes of the series!

We had gotten very sidetracked, and it was time for us to actually give some serious thought to a name for Chifuyu’s power.

“...So, that’s how Tomoyo’s power ended up getting named *Closed Clock*. My plan’s to give your power of creation a name using that same general system.”

“Okay. Got it.”

I’d given Chifuyu an explanation of the foundational format for the names, and from what I could tell, she’d understood me. I wanted all of our powers’ names to be as stylistically unified as humanly possible, so my goal was to make sure that the rest of them fit the precedent that *Closed Clock* had set.

Man, though...Closed Clock. What a name, right? It had turned out so seemingly meaningful and stylish, you’d never think that it had been inspired by my older sister oversleeping. *I really do like names that are nice and snappy. That makes coming up with just the right words with which to express the*

concept so much more satisfying!

A power name made up of two English words. That was the format I'd settled on, and the format I'd be carrying forward for the remaining four powers.

And, if I can somehow manage it...

"So, what do you think, Chifuyu? Any requests?" I asked.

"Hmm. I have one idea."

"Oh, really? What is it?"

"Sweet and Sour—"

"Noooooope!" I shouted, stopping her with all my might. I *had* to stop her, no matter what. "Chifuyu...why? Why would you bring up that bit *now*? It makes no sense, timeline-wise... That gag hasn't even started running yet..."

"It felt obly-gatory."

"Obligatory, huh...?"

Never did I imagine that the curse of *Sweet and Sour Pineapple* would transcend the timeline to assault me here. I know I said before that we weren't going to worry about continuity or tie down the timeline too clearly in these bonus stories, but since this was Chifuyu's turn, I'd sort of assumed that we wouldn't get too meta. That assumption had just been blown out of the water in a totally unexpected sneak attack.

"By the way, Andou," said Chifuyu, "Why do you call it my 'power of creation'? Why not 'the power to make things'?"

"Oh? That's a good question indeed. And the answer...is that it kinda just sounds better that way!"

It wasn't just a matter of making things—it was a matter of *creating* them. Saying it that way made it sound so much more, well, *creative* in a way that I, for one, appreciated. It was sort of like the difference between saying "red" and "crimson," or "blue" versus "azure," "eat" versus "devour," and "laugh" versus "cachinnate." It was, in other words, a matter of *feeling* that it was pretty hard to explain to someone who didn't get it already. You either had the chuuni power to feel it naturally, or you didn't, no two ways about it.

“The difference between ‘make’ and ‘create’... I mean, it’s not exactly a heaven-and-earth sort of gap in terms of coolness, but since they mean basically the same thing anyway, you may as well pick the better one, right? ‘Create’ has that association with ‘creation’ too, in, like, the biblical sense, or when you’re talking about the world at large. It comes up in a lot of big contexts.”

That was a bit of trivia that I’d specifically prepared for the sake of today’s conversation. I’d done all sorts of research and laid the groundwork that I knew I’d need in order to think up a name for Chifuyu’s power. If there was a word that had any chance of coming up during the discussion, I’d almost definitely already looked it up in my electronic dictionary.

“I’d like to use *some* fancy form of ‘creation’ as one of the words in your power’s name, personally. Maybe in the preamble?” I said. “It really feels like it expresses what your power does perfectly, right? As for the actual name proper, I was definitely thinking that one of the two words should be ‘world.’”

In the naming card battle that had unfolded between me and Tomoyo the other day, a certain card had been banned on the basis that it was too powerful: *End of the World*. From the moment I’d first played that card, I’d been bewitched by the magic of the word “world.” The burning desire to use that word *somewhere* had welled up inside me with unspeakable ferocity.

The thing is, though, that I *couldn’t* use the word “world” as part of Tomoyo’s power’s name. After all...there was a pioneer in her power’s category who had left too much of an impact in his wake. You just can’t use “world” in the name of a power that lets you stop time anymore. Taking care to respect your forebears is a very important element of this sort of naming process.

“A form of ‘creation’ and the word ‘world.’ That’s two elements down, and they both feel like perfect fits for your power. Not bad choices, I’ve gotta say! I figure if we start there, we should be able to narrow down the rest of—”

“Andou,” said Chifuyu. In contrast to my rapidly growing enthusiasm, her words and expression felt oddly cold as she cut me off. “I’m bored.”

“You’re... Huh?”

“I’m tired of thinking about names. It’s boring,” Chifuyu said with a pouty little

huff. “You’re having all the fun on your own. You’re being self-centered.”

I took in a sharp gasp as Chifuyu’s words slammed into me like a full-force body blow, and I fell to my knees a moment later. The scornful, disinterested glare of an elementary schooler had shaken my heart on a foundational level.

How...? How did it come to this? How did I lose sight of something so very important?

I was the one who’d said that we should think up a name together, and yet there I was, muscling Chifuyu out of the process by badgering her with idea after idea unilaterally. I was just *acting* like I wanted her input, when really, all I wanted was for her to endorse the conclusions I’d already made. Just how selfish could I possibly be?

“I’m sorry, Chifuyu...”

“No. Apology not accepted.”

“B-But, why...? Let me make it up to you somehow!”

“Okay, then you get a punishment. You have to think up a name for my power in ten seconds.”

“T-Ten *seconds*?!”

“Yeah. Go. Ooone. Twoooo.”

“What, no, wait! That’s impossible! Wait, please! Chifuyu!”

“No. Threee. Fooour.”

“Agh!”

At this point...I have no choice. I have to calm down, focus my thoughts, and blaze through this process at record pace! I’m a guy who’s fantasized on a daily basis about undergoing a series of magical operations that allow me to accelerate my thought process to several dozen times the speed of an ordinary person—I can do this!

...Actually, wait. This isn’t a situation where I should be accelerating my thoughts to go through the whole process—it’s a situation where I should be ignoring the process entirely, instead leaping straight to the correct conclusion

by reverse engineering the mechanisms of cause and effect! Yeah, a power that lets me do that would be perfect for... Wait, no! This isn't the time to be thinking about this crap! I only have five seconds left!

Umm, umm, okay... I know I want to play off "creation" somehow, and I know I want to use "world." The preamble should express her command over the powers of creation, too, so I guess it should be "the empress of"...just plain creation? Or genesis? Origins? Formation? Hmm...out of those options, I think I've gotta go with "genesis." It's the coolest for sure.

But what about the actual name itself? I know I have to use "world" as one of the words...and, umm, she uses her power to create worlds, so...I could go with, uhh, Creator of Worlds? No, that feels a little off... World Builder? Nah, that's not quite it either. What else could I—

"Twoooo, ooone, ze—"

"The empress of genesis: World Create!"

I did it. As the very last moments of my time limit slipped away, I shouted the power name I'd come up with at the top of my lungs.

"World Create... What do you think of that, Chifuyu?"

"I like it. It's good. That settles it," Chifuyu agreed. She seemed satisfied...or, well, she kind of seemed like she was just done, really. It was pretty clear that she didn't care at all. I was glad that she hadn't objected to my idea, yeah...but I actually felt a certain reluctance to let a slipshod name that I'd come up with on the spur of the moment be adopted for formal use.

"Hey, Chifuyu...? Don't you think it might be a little early to say it's totally settled?" I said hopefully. *"I know I'm the one who thought it up and all, but World Create feels maybe just a little too direct...? Like, I think it might be a good idea to take some time and iron out the details, you know...? Like, it's a creation-type power, so maybe it would be cool to go in the exact opposite direction and do something destruction-themed instead? Maybe 'World Annihilation,' or 'Worldly Crisis'...?"*

"No. We're done," said Chifuyu. My complaints had fallen on deaf ears. *"I'm bored of all this."*

“Oh, come on! Don’t be like that...”

“We did plenty of it already in the anime’s second episode.”

“The logic behind your boredom just devastated the timeline, here!”

*We’re supposed to be half a year before the main story even starts right now!
In anime terms, we’re right around the bit before the OP in episode one!*

“Chifuyu, please... I’m begging you, just give it a little more thought!”

“No.”

“Okay, look... I’m actually fine with going with *World Create*. That’s not a problem, but...well, to be brutally honest...we need to tack a few more pages on here to meet quota. About twenty or so, to be specific,” I said, launching into a profoundly meta explanation. “See, the thing is... Basically, bonus stories like this one are kind of a pain in a bunch of ways. They can’t be too long, but they can’t be too short either, for some reason. The last one with Tomoyo in it was actually supposed to be a bit longer, but it ended up running over the limit and a few bits had to get cut out. It was really painful to do, supposedly... So anyway, the *World Create* story’s supposed to be somewhere around forty pages long too, so we need to fine-tune this a bit to make sure we—”

“I don’t care about all that,” Chifuyu snapped. “If I say we’re done, then we’re done.”

Her arrogant, uncompromising attitude was like that of a battle-hardened empress. She shone with the powerful glow of a girl who would stick to the choices she’d made, asserting her will through her own strength even if it meant making enemies of the anime’s entire production committee. She couldn’t have been more different from me, a guy who crumpled in the face of that sort of authority like wet tissue paper.

“B-But... But, Chifuyu...”

“We’re done. The end,” Chifuyu said...and then a slight smile spread across her face.

“We’re playing a different game next.”

Who could have possibly seen this coming? Who would've guessed that our power name brainstorming session would end halfway through the story and the remaining half would be spent on something *completely* unrelated?

The whole premise here was that we'd conduct one-on-one interviews to help me think up power names for everyone, yet here we were in just the second session and that concept had already fallen to pieces. Chifuyu was as uncontrollably free-spirited as ever, and my puny little mind was too bound by common sense to grasp the unfathomable depths of her nature. Nothing made me understand how petty of a person I really was quite as effectively as hanging out with her.

But, well, of course it'd turn out like this. I'm game, Chifuyu. If this is what you want, I'll come along for the ride...and if we get in trouble for it, I'll definitely be the one who ends up taking all the heat.

"...Three, two, one! All hidden, Chifuyu?" I called out. I'd counted down from a hundred, as promised, and since she didn't reply to ask for more time, I figured she was probably good to go. "Okay, then! Ready or not, here I come!"

The game that Chifuyu had chosen for us to play was, indeed, hide-and-seek. And, honestly...part of me was just a *little* scandalized by the idea that she'd shut down our naming session early for *that*, of all the games she could've picked. That was her choice to make, though, so I decided to keep my opinions to myself and just play along.

"Not that there's anywhere for you to hide in a room like— *Huh?!'*"

I'd been facing the club room's door with my eyes closed, and when I turned around and opened them, I was greeted by a sight that made my jaw drop. It was *not* the perfectly normal club room I'd been expecting. The table, whiteboard, and all the anime DVDs, light novels, and *Jump* back issues that had populated the shelves of the Used Bookstore of the Divine: *God Off* had all vanished.

"Wh-What the heck is *this...*?"

The door I'd been leaning against was the only part of the club room left. Everything else had been transformed into a completely different space—a space that, at a glance, I could only describe as a cave. A single path led off into

the distance, enclosed by earthen walls and lit only by the occasional candlestick here and there.

Wait, no. This isn't a cave...

"I-It's a dungeon... This is totally a dungeon!"

The shock and fear that I'd felt at first gradually faded away as a surge of joyous curiosity welled up within me.

"Hooooly crap! Oh, man, this is straight out of an RPG!" I gushed. It was *exactly* the sort of cavern that made you want to set out on an adventure, and it could only have been brought into being by Chifuyu's power. "Okay, Chifuyu...you've won this round. I never thought you'd wield the power of genesis to make it as hard as possible for me to find you."

When she'd suggested that we play hide-and-seek in the club room, my first thought had been "Really?" It hadn't seemed like the sort of thing a mostly grown high school boy would want to get up to, so I hadn't exactly been enthusiastic...but dungeon crawling was another matter entirely. I was *brimming* with motivation! I'm talking *maxed-out* endorphins! My adventurer's blood—or rather, my video gamer's blood—was *boiling*!

"Mwa ha ha! Interesting indeed! Very well, then—I, Guiltia Sin Jurai, shall be the first one to explore this labyrinth from top to bottom!"

With that noble declaration, I strode forth toward heroic conquest, making my way down the dim, candlelit hallway.

"Ahhh, holy crap, holy crap! I can't believe she seriously made a whole friggin' dungeon while I had my eyes closed! She didn't even make a sound!"

The power of genesis: capable of creating anything, from physical objects to space itself. It was very easy to let yourself get preoccupied by its capacity in terms of scale...but what made it *truly* threatening, perhaps, was the speed and silence with which it could be invoked.

Yup... Gotta say, that's a pretty astute observation on my part. Nice job, me. It's super awesome when powers have depths and capabilities that only the people who fight side by side with their users can appreciate.

I sincerely hoped that someday a villain would have all sorts of precautions worked out to handle the scale of Chifuyu’s power, only for me to say something like “Sorry...but you’ve failed to understand what Chifuyu’s *truly* capable of” from off on the sidelines. Not that I had any clue when, or if, any villains would actually show up.

“Oh? Time to choose a path, huh?”

The corridor in front of me had finally branched off into three separate hallways. I glanced around, and my gaze soon fell on a piece of paper that was stuck to the rocky wall.

“Let’s see here... ‘Obstacle number one. Decode the secret message to find the right path,’ huh...? Heh heh, I see how it is! So that’s the game we’re playing.”

In short: this is less of a dungeon crawl than it is one of those escape rooms that’ve been all the rage lately! Like, the really big ones that companies will rent out the Tokyo Dome to set up as promotional events. Heh heh, interesting!

The page with the code on it had most certainly been created by Chifuyu’s power, but the code itself had to be something that she’d thought up on her own. There was no way that she, as an elementary schooler, could invent a code that a high schooler like me couldn’t crack—I got treated like a moron on a pretty regular basis, and this was looking like the perfect opportunity for me to show off how I was, in fact, pretty clever when all was said and done!

I took a look at the code.

BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB
BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB
BBBBBBBmiddlepathBBBBBBB
BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB
BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB

“Kinda heavy on the Bs, huh?! ”

It was such a swarm of Bs that part of me wanted to ask if Chifuyu had awakened to some kind of insect-whispering power. Then I gave the “Hint” section on the sheet an apprehensive glance, and I found that it was just a doodle of a door with a big arrow pointing at its knob—“kno B,” I figured. Hard though it was to believe, Chifuyu had apparently attempted to make one of those codes where you had to disregard one letter, causing the remaining letters to spell out a message.

Chifuyu...was unbelievably bad at writing codes. It wasn’t even a code at all. Forget encryption—I’d say she practically highlighted the solution. Not only was the answer staring me in the face, it was shining a spotlight in my eyes. The words that should’ve been scattered throughout the whole block of letters were written in a single straight line. Had Chifuyu thought that the code’s difficulty would be proportional to the number of Bs she wrote?

“Well...anyway, guess I’d better move along.”

I followed the code’s directions and headed down the middle of the three paths. A few steps later, a *ding ding ding ding*—like the chime that plays when you walk into a convenience store—rang out, indicating that I’d gotten it right. This was, clearly, a very user-friendly dungeon.

As I walked along, the scenery around me began to gradually change. The muddy walls of the cave transitioned into blocks of carved stone like you’d see in the underground portions of a castle from the middle ages.

“Oh...? What do we have here?” I said as I stepped out from the narrow corridor into a larger, open chamber.

In the center of the room lay what I could only describe as an *extremely* obvious switch—the sort that looks like a slightly *off* floor panel. Meanwhile, a dragon statue made of stone that *definitely* looked pushable was resting in a corner of the room. Completing the ensemble was a steel door with no knob and no immediately obvious means of opening it on the other end of the chamber.

“Hmm, *hmm*. I see how it is.”

Being the game aficionado I was, I knew what I was looking at in a flash. *Yup, this is one of those puzzles—the ones where the door only stays open as long as*

something's holding down the switch!

It was an elementary-grade puzzle that came up all the time in the early stages of dungeon-crawling RPGs. You could step on the switch to open the door, but the second you stepped off it would close again, so you had to find some sort of object nearby and use it to hold down the switch instead.

“Heh heh heh! Sorry, Chifuyu, but for a gamer at my level, a puzzle like this may as well be solved the moment I lay eyes on it!” I decided to skip right over trying to step on the switch and seeing what happened and jumped straight to pushing the statue onto it. “Hmngggphhh!” The dragon was pretty heavy, but I could *just* move it, and when I finally got it to the center of the room, it fit atop the switch like a glove. However...the door didn't open.

“Wha—?! I-Impossible... Did I misread what sort of puzzle I was dealing with?!”

Could it be that this puzzle had been made to *look* elementary-grade, but it was actually a high-level brain twister that only a seasoned gamer could get past? *Oh, it's on now, Chifuyu! Think you can outsmart me, huh? Well, I'll show you how clever you really are,* I thought as I stepped closer to the door...

Bvrrr.

...only for a mechanical whirring noise to ring out as it slid open before me. The big, solid door that hadn't looked like it could be opened by any conventional means just...smoothly glided off to the side.

“...”

I took a step back, and the door closed with another whir. Then I stepped forward, and it opened right up again.

“It's a friggin' automatic door?!”

There had never been a puzzle in the room to begin with. I was, apparently, supposed to have just passed right on through, and I was starting to feel *very* embarrassed for having gotten so worked up about the puzzle that I'd conjured in my imagination...but I shook off the shame and headed through the door, moving onward.

I passed through a few more rooms after that point, but in spite of the decor that just screamed “this is part of a puzzle,” all the doors I encountered slid open automatically without me having to so much as touch anything.

Why is this dungeon so easy, and why is it so weirdly high-tech?!

“Oh! Time to choose a path again, huh?” I muttered to myself as I stepped up to a set of four big, heavy-looking doors.

Each of the doors had a title written above it. They read, respectively, “Door of Spring,” “Door of Summer,” “Door of Fall,” and “Door of Winter.” Meanwhile, a message on a nearby wall read “Obstacle number two: decode the secret message.”

“So this is the second obstacle, huh...? I guess that means that all those rooms I passed through really were just padding... The statues with swords that looked like you had to move them to get the door to open, the set of statues with one missing that looked like one would *have* to fall into the room through a hole in the ceiling, and all those other exciting puzzle-coded decorations were all pointless after all...”

But anyway, looks like it's time for more cryptography. Considering the difficulty of the first challenge, I think I can assume this'll be a breeze too... But, no, I can't let my guard down. It's standard practice for these challenges to get harder and harder as the dungeon goes on! Plus, I'm up against Chifuyu here. It's totally possible that she'll throw out standard practice altogether and put a max difficulty puzzle on the very second door!

I took a moment to steel myself, then looked at the second coded message.

What's Chifuyu's favorite season?

“Oh come on, that's not even a code!”

It's just a multiple choice question! Please, Chifuyu, try at least a little harder when you're making these up... I don't care if it's another “kno B” level puzzle, at least make it look like a code! Did you already get bored of thinking up questions by the time you had to write the second one?

I briefly considered reading into the question and analyzing it for layers of deep, hidden meaning...but then I decided that it would be a waste of time and gave up without bothering. I was dealing with Chifuyu, and that meant that what I saw was what I got.

“But, actually...this is kinda tough. What *is* her favorite season...?”

We’d known each other for half a year, and we’d chatted about anything and everything on an almost daily basis over the course of that time, but I couldn’t remember the subject of favorite seasons having come up even once.

“Maybe I’m just misremembering and she actually let that info slip at some point in the past...? Or maybe it’s something that I should be able to deduce based on stuff she’s told me before? Gah... I have no clue!”

Chifuyu loves napping more than she loves life itself, so maybe she’d like the nice, warm, perfect-for-napping weather in spring? Summer doesn’t feel super likely, since she seems like the sort of person who wouldn’t like it when it’s too hot out. Fall... Well, fall’s a pretty temperate season like spring, so maybe? I don’t think she’d like the fact that it’s cold in winter...but on the other hand, her given name does mean “thousand winters,” so maybe she’d appreciate it because of that? She said her birthday’s in December too.

“Feels like it’s probably gonna be spring or winter,” I muttered to myself.

Finally, at the end of my deliberations, I chose the Door of Winter on the basis that a season that was part of her name just *had* to be special to her somehow. I opened up the door, stepped inside, and instantly...

Duh-dunnn!

...a noise that sorta just *screamed* “Wrong!” played. It sounded like a clarion call for someone backstage to pie me in the face or open a trap door at my feet or something.

“Wha...? Y-You’re kidding! I got it wrong?!”

I barely had time to start freaking out before the door slammed behind me and locked with a loud *clack*. To make matters worse, the ceiling in front of me slammed downward as well, forming a wall that blocked the path entirely. My routes forward and backward were both sealed. I was trapped.

“H-Huh? What? What’s going on...? This is actually seriously freaking me out here,” I babbled.

Getting suddenly shut up in a fully sealed room was scary enough...but then a moment later, a light began to glow beneath me. Not just any light—a Gate: one of the dimensional portals that Chifuyu could make with her power, which allowed her to travel anywhere she wanted at a moment’s notice. And, of course, a portal forming right beneath my feet could only mean one thing.

“Wait, wha— O-Oh god, I’m falling! Aaaagh! If you were gonna drop me anyway, then what was the point of sealing off the hallwaaaaaaaaay?!”

I plummeted through the Gate...and was dumped right back into the dungeon’s first room.

“Oof, ouch... Uh, okay. So, I guess this means I’m supposed to start over?”

“That’s right,” said a voice that seemingly rang out from nowhere. *“If you get a question wrong, you have to go back to the start.”* It goes without saying, of course, who that disembodied voice belonged to.

“Ch-Chifuyu...? Where are you talking to me from?”

“Right now, I’m all the way at the end of the dungeon.”

“The end of the dungeon, huh...? And I guess you’re watching me from there? How the heck are you pulling that off? I didn’t see any cameras or anything... And wait, how are you even broadcasting your voice like that?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” Chifuyu replied bluntly.

Fair enough. This is just a bonus story, so we may as well just brush that off and move along.

“You messed up on the second question, Andou. That’s pathetic.”

“I guess winter really wasn’t the right answer, huh...? Okay, so what was right? What’s your favorite season, Chifuyu?”

“The right answer...is that I like all the seasons as much as each other.”

“How the heck was I supposed to know *that*?!”

“If I picked one season as my favorite, I’d feel bad for the other three.”

“What a pointless thing to feel bad about! And wait, that totally breaks the whole question, doesn’t it?! What was I supposed to do to get it right?!”

“You should’ve opened all four doors at the same time.”

“How?! Even if I *did* have four hands, that’d be impossible! Forget the Four Witches Technique—this would call for the Multi-Form Attack!”

“Andou, stop making excuses. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Ugh...”

“If you get a question wrong, you have to start over. The first and second questions will be different now too, so be careful. Good luck,” Chifuyu concluded, cutting off her transmission—or whatever I was supposed to call it—with what was probably supposed to be words of encouragement but which sure sounded like a taunt at the same time, somehow.

“Heh... Heh heh heh! You’ve cooked up quite the fun little system here,” I said as I rose to my feet and clenched my fists. *All right, then. Bring it on. The crappier you make this shovelware-tier game, the more motivated it makes me!* “Know this, Himeki Chifuyu: making a fool of Guiltia Sin Jurai is a grievous sin for which you’ll pay a hefty price! A dungeon like this will be over in a flash if I choose to apply myself! Rest your feet on that lofty throne of yours while you can—I’ll reach your inner sanctum and drag you off it before you know it!”

“My feet aren’t on my throne. That’d be bad manners.”

“Um...Chifuyu? Sorry, but could you not chime in out of nowhere like that? This was supposed to be, y’know, more of a monologue-style, talking to myself to get hyped-up for the dungeon sort of deal...”

And so, I took on Himeki Chifuyu’s specially designed and directed dungeon. Sometimes, the questions that awaited me at the checkpoints would be stunningly easy to breeze past in an instant, and sometimes, they’d be so unreasonably hard that I’d be sent straight back to the beginning with no recourse. I took on the trial over and over again, overcoming one barrier after another as I strove to reach the labyrinth’s innermost point.

Moving forward through the dungeon took brains and brawn in equal

measure, but more so than either of them, one skill was absolutely paramount: the ability to stand strong in the face of utter absurdity. In other words, it was vital to be able to remain calm and composed when, for instance, you reached a fork in the road with instructions that said “Take the right path,” you turned right, and you were then informed that “*That’s the left path from my perspective*” before getting sent back to the beginning again.

Indeed, the dungeon was irrational above all else—irrational, and also enormous. Traversing a dungeon with no companions or enemies to meet, alone with only my mind and Chifuyu’s voice, made me realize just how fragile my own psyche really was under this sort of pressure. Nothing weakened the human heart quite like solitude. I wanted to run into someone—anyone. Word was still out on whether it was wrong to pick up girls in a dungeon, but I could say with confidence that a dungeon without *anyone* to talk to was wrong in its own right.

And so, I resorted to the only option available to me: I spoke with the black flames that manifested upon my own right hand. They were cold and curt at first, sure, but with patience and persistence, they started opening up to me, and a true dialogue commenced. My flames couldn’t communicate through words, of course, but that did nothing to dampen my understanding of the meaning they meant to convey to me—they would flicker once for yes and twice for no, as easy as that.

At first, all I wanted out of my flames was someone to talk to. As the journey wore on, however, they became a truly indispensable partner to me—one I never would’ve been able to carry on without. When danger bore down on me, their unparalleled instincts would kick into high gear and warn me of the oncoming crisis in the nick of time, raising the alarm with a spirited flare.

They were meager flames, so frail that the slightest spray of water could extinguish them outright—and on top of that, the fact that they were black meant they couldn’t light up anything in the dungeon’s darkness—but they were nevertheless a partner the likes of which could never be replaced. Without the flames upon my right hand, surmounting the dungeon would have been simply unthinkable.

All the trials we overcame together sowed the seeds of an unbreakable bond

between the flames on my right hand and me. Yes, there were times we came to blows, but it was always only a matter of time before we would mutually apologize and emerge from the crucible of conflict with our spirits aflame and our souls tempered.

Honestly—those flames of mine are too stubborn for their own good sometimes...though of course, that's part of what makes them who they are. It's one of many ways they're ever so charming...and so very, very dear to me.

The feelings I held for my flames had long since transcended mere love. Being together was nothing less than the natural state of being for us—and being apart? Unfathomable. Day and night, we were by each other's side, in the dining room and bathroom alike. We were closer than lovers, closer than family, and we could never, ever be torn asunder. We were one in body and soul.

That wasn't hyperbole, and I wasn't speaking figuratively either—I meant it in a very literal sense. It wasn't my body anymore. It was *our* body. A vessel of flesh over which we held joint ownership, making my flame a part of my very being. We were one and the same. If I had to compare it to something, I'd say that my flames were like... Yes, of course. I'd say I knew them like the back of my—

"...Wait, it's literally my own hand!"

Whoa boy, okay! It's definitely time to reel it in! I was seriously talking to my own hand for a while there!

The sheer absurdity of Chifuyu's puzzles had driven my spirit to its breaking point, and unable to bear her dungeon's isolation, I'd ended up talking to my own body part before I even knew what was happening.

Sheesh, that was a close one. I was dangerously close to sailing into some seriously risky uncharted waters.

Fortunately, I was back in reality now, and I could focus once again on the challenge before me. That challenge: a *stupidly* huge door, right in front of my face, beyond which lay the dungeon's creator and final boss, Chifuyu herself. I knew this for a fact because the guardian I'd beaten to pass through this last gate just came out and told me about it.

The guardian blocking the path to the final gateway, by the way, had been none other than that one giant robot (giant monster? giant god warrior?) that showed up for that one bit in the anime's OP. The final obstacle had had it challenging me to a riddle competition. It'd asked me "What has two legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and two legs at night?" and I'd managed to hold back the urge to shout "Wait, you can *talk*?!" for long enough to give "A person!" as my answer, which had apparently been correct. I'd *really* wanted to question that one, but, like...it wasn't *wrong*, was it? That description sure did apply to people, but, like...seriously?

Anyway, after our very brief riddle-off was over, the Gainax-esque giant robot had said "My master...my creator...lies...just...ahead..." then crumbled to pieces before my eyes. Considering how dramatic it'd made the whole spectacle, you'd have almost thought it had been guarding that gateway for hundreds of years, carrying out its final order to protect its master to the bitter end, but honestly, it really didn't do much for me on an emotional level. It did feel like I should do *something* to acknowledge its sacrifice, though, so I silently wished it well in whatever afterlife it had moved on to.

Thanks, giant robot dude. You were super badass in the OP.

"And now, it's finally time for me to cross paths with the captive princess, I guess."

Or rather, maybe it's time for the final boss battle to begin? I had no clue *what* was about to happen, but one way or another, standing around wasn't going to get me anywhere. *Plus, honestly? I just really wanna go home already...*

With my mind set on the noble goal of making it back to my own house, I pushed open the door.

"Here I am, Chifuyu! Now—let us begin the end of the beginning!"

I opened with my signature catchphrase just for the hell of it, but I didn't get a response. I found myself in a luxurious room—the sort that nobles in fantasy worlds tended to live in—and in the center of that room was a fittingly extravagant bed. Atop that bed, Chifuyu was...

"Oh, come on... She's *asleep*?"

I heaved a sigh as I gazed down at the bed. Chifuyu was lying on its fluffy sheets, slumbering away without a care in the world. She had Squirrely clutched in her arms, and she looked as pure and divine as a literal angel. Apparently, I'd kept her waiting long enough for her to get sleepy. I'd been wondering why the voice of the heavens had clammed up partway through the dungeon crawl—she'd been really chatty up to the seventh gateway or so—and this certainly explained it.

"I'm friggin' exhausted, and after all the times this place nearly broke my spirit, I *really* wanted to give her a piece of my mind...but I can't exactly go through with that now, huh?" I muttered to myself as I sat down on the bed and gave Chifuyu a gentle pat on the head.

Ugh... Give me a break. How'd a one-on-one interview to pick a name for her power turn out like this, anyway? Looks like I've got no choice but to let her power's temporary name, World Create, go through as the final version.

I paused as I ran the name through my mind once more.

Okay, but y'know what? Maybe this was for the best.

World Create. It felt a little too simple, sure, but it certainly wasn't bad by any means. In fact, it was actually sorta fantastic. It fit the format we'd laid out in the first session perfectly, using two English words for the name proper, and the Japanese spelling thereof happened to be nine characters long. By pure coincidence, that was the exact same number of characters that the Japanese spelling for *Closed Clock* required as well. I'd been hoping to make those numbers line up from the start, and as luck would have it, the name I'd sprung for in the heat of the moment had worked out perfectly in that respect.

I hadn't told Tomoyo about that part of my plan—it'd just felt a little too awkward to bring up—but my goal was to make sure that all of our powers' names used the same number of nonfiller English words *and* the same number of Japanese characters. The goal was to give our powers' names a strong sense of unity...and, in doing so, to strengthen the bonds between the five of us as well.

"World Create. Yeah, I like it. Not a bad name at all."

That was two names down and three to go, mine included. I'd be following

the two-word, nine-character structure for all three of them as best as I could. Plenty of works had their powers' names follow a theme in one way or the other, but I'd never seen one that had them all match up in *both* of those respects, which was exactly why I'd decided to go for it. I wanted the ties that bound us to be stronger than those of any other party of main characters in any work of fiction. If any new members joined up with us in the future, I'd give their powers names in the same fashion. I knew that all of this was really just for my own self-satisfaction when all was said and done, but still...

“...That's just what you do for your friends.”

You take care of them. You look them in the eye and face them head-on. And, no matter what...I'll never let what happened back in the eighth grade come to pass ever again.

“Let's keep up the good fight, Chifuyu—nay, *World Create*,” I said, whispering the profoundly sinful name I'd granted her as I patted her head once more. I knew that I might wake her if I kept that up for long, but I kept it up anyway. Or, well, really...I patted her head *because* I wanted to wake her up.



© Tetsuya Hasegawa (TRIGGER)

“Chifuyu? Wakey wakey! It’s time to get up!”

“...”

“W-Wake up, okay...? I, uh, kinda can’t go home until you get up, so please...?”

“...”

Chifuyu was out like a light, and I wasn’t cruel enough to bring myself to rouse her. All I could do was sit there on the bed, spacing out as I waited for the moment of her awakening.



Chapter 3 ★ The Path of Route of Origin

Chapter 3: The Path of Route of Origin

The progenitor of beginnings, *Route of Origin*—this was the title that had been bestowed upon Takanashi Sayumi and, by extension, the name of the power she'd awakened to, which granted her ultimate authority over the force of regression. The one who had bestowed it, needless to say, was none other than me. Between “the progenitor of beginnings” serving as its introductory appellation and the English words “*Route of Origin*” providing a foreign flair, it was a truly idiosyncratic and esoteric name for a power to have, if I do say so myself.

Sayumi's power granted her the ability to return anything she touched to the way it was meant to be. Out of all five of the powers we'd awakened to, hers was the only one that lacked any direct offensive capabilities...and yes, you heard that right: the *only* one. Mine was...y'know. It was still developing, and had limitless potential hidden away within it, so it didn't count.

Anyway, whether living or inanimate, organic or inorganic, *Route of Origin* could return anything to the way it was meant to be. The definition of how something was meant to be, meanwhile, was provided by Sayumi's own subjective viewpoint.

When I really thought about it, *Route of Origin* struck me as a truly ambiguous power. It relied, after all, on a human's perspective to define its capabilities, and you could hardly pick a more ambiguous standard than that. If you spoke with a hundred different people, you'd find that they had a hundred distinctly different perspectives. There could never be any one single, defining answer to any given question of perspective—our values were far too varied and far too personal for that.

All of that, of course, is just common sense. It's not the sort of thing that there's any real need to point out or emphasize...and yet, at the same time, it's something that's very easy to forget, at times. You are yourself, and the people around you are themselves. Everybody knows that intellectually, but everybody

also has moments when it slips their minds and they start operating under the misapprehension that everyone else shares the exact same set of values that they have. That's why it can be so shocking and disheartening to hear someone else say that a book you loved was boring—it's why it can feel so frustrating and mortifying to see society at large love an anime that you thought was a snoozefest.

Actually, I take it back. It's less a matter of misapprehensions and more a matter of expectations. I think everyone has the expectation, on some level, that their sense of values will be validated—and, by association, that they themselves will be validated. Unfortunately, however, there's just no practical way to get total validation from everyone around you. After all, for every book that you consider a masterpiece, there will be someone else out there who thought it was such a drag they couldn't even finish it. It's not at all uncommon for people to believe their perspective on something is universal, only for it to turn out to be anything but. There really are a limitless number of perspectives—an infinite quantity of subjective perceptions of the world—and that is what makes perspective itself such a truly ambiguous thing.

That's not all, though. The most terrifying truth about perspective is that not even one's own personal viewpoint is excepted from this rule. Even as individuals, our perspectives are ambiguous.

Perspectives—in other words, values, interests, preferences, principles, and on and on—are truly unclear and terribly fluid, even on a personal level. They are by no means absolute. Sometimes, you cease to believe in the things you were certain of. Sometimes, you lose all affection for the things you used to love. Anyone can be subject to conversion or a paradigm shift. Sometimes, these happen through seemingly destined meetings or dramatic, life-changing events...but sometimes, it's the opposite of dramatic, and you casually change your mind for no clear reason.

That was how it happened when, in the eighth grade, I got over my chuunibyou for no real reason in particular. That lack of a real reason was, in and of itself, the only reason I had to get over it.

Anyway, the point I'm getting at is that the human perspective is remarkably prone to changing and wavering. With that in mind, it's not hard to see why the

power to return anything to the way it was meant to be was a truly ambiguous and unstable ability to have. One can very easily lose the ability to do things they'd been able to do effortlessly up until the day before, and on the flip side, one could suddenly gain the ability to do something they'd never been able to pull off before, no matter how hard they'd tried—shifts like that were a regular occurrence.

Let's think through a more specific example, for reference. As of this moment, Sayumi was capable of using her power to heal people's injuries. Well, not healing them, strictly speaking—what she was really doing was returning them to their former state—but the point is that she could use her power to patch up the human body.

Imagine, however, if Sayumi were to go through some event or another that led her to believe that sustaining injuries was a perfectly natural consequence of human life, and that as such, being injured is only natural—in other words, the way that people were meant to be. In that scenario, she would likely lose the ability to use *Route of Origin* to heal people's wounds. Depending purely on the way she saw the world, her power's capabilities could all too easily waver.

Now, I'm not trying to say that Sayumi's perspective was especially unstable by any means. I just mean that virtually *no one* has absolute, unshakable confidence in their own sense of values. It's not at all uncommon for people to find themselves arguing the exact opposite of a point that they'd argued a decade ago, and on the flip side, the odds are very high that a decade from now, you'll find yourself arguing the exact opposite of something that you would argue now. Personal values are just that fluid, and I think that, at least to some small extent, everyone's aware of that fact.

The only people who can convince themselves that their current perspective is absolutely correct, and will remain that way in perpetuity, are either idiots or seriously dangerous. They're the sort of people who lead revolutions or plot insurrections—the sort of people who end up as the final bosses of manga and video games, you might say.

Everyone is occupied by a constant search for answers, stumbling their way through life in a directionless cycle, and that's how it's always been. We all ask the world—and ourselves—who we are, time after time. We all know, deep

down, that our perspectives are unstable and unreliable...and said instability is especially inescapable for adolescents like us.

Adolescents don't have the relatively stable sense of self and beliefs that adults generally do by the time they go out into society, and we also lack the blind, innocent faith that children have in those adults and the society they work in. We despise being treated as children and do whatever we can to put on a show of maturity, but the moment our lives pose difficulties we can't easily breeze past, we disavow all responsibility, letting the adults and their society take care of it for us.

You might say that we're in something of a moratorium—a grace period of our developmental cycle. We aren't adults, but we aren't kids either. It's an ambiguous stage of growth in every respect. Our hopes for the future, our plans for our lives, and even our senses of self and perspective are all poorly defined. Though, of course, you could also make a case that this is the one period of our lives in which society at large *permits* us that ambiguity. And, taking that argument to a logical extreme, you might even say that that ambiguity is *forced* onto us by society at large.

We are forced—coerced—into a state of ambiguity. Of obscurity. Of uncertainty. Of instability. Of unreliability. Of immaturity. Of imperfection.

The words “manly” and “girly” have taken on pretty sexist connotations in recent times, and in my experience they get used a lot less openly than they used to...but the same can't be said for “mature” and “childish.” *They* still get used all over the place. Adults are supposed to be mature, and children are supposed to be childish. Acting your age is the societal ideal.

Society wants children to be childish. In other words, it wants them to be innocent, inexperienced, and—crucially—foolish. People complaining about “the kids these days” is such a played-out cliché that it's downright embarrassing to see someone actually say it, but it also contains an implicit self-contradiction. Is it not, after all, an example of adults disparaging foolishness in children—the exact trait that they also expect of them? Isn't it a sign that those adults, at least on a subconscious level, look down on children for lacking the experience and abilities that adults have? When people talk about how “the kids these days” are no good, or how “compared to *our* generation” they come

up short, I have to wonder if they're just venting their resentment in an effort to soothe some emotional wound within their own hearts.

Well, okay...maybe I'm going a little too far with this line of logic, or at least looking at it from too sharply analytical of a perspective. Still, I firmly believe that adults expect and desire a degree of foolishness from children. If "foolishness" sounds like an overstatement, then "ambiguity" works just as well. They tell us to just go to college and figure things out from there, or to get out there, see the world, and broaden our perspectives. On a basic level, they disapprove of children making an effort to solidify and stabilize their values and perspectives too soon.

Adults act as if children have infinite potential, and they encourage children to see what's out there for them to apply that potential to. There's nothing malicious about that, of course...but the flip side of having infinite potential is lacking a fixed foundation. Unfixed—in other words, immature, and thus unstable. All together: ambiguous.

To sum up: the beings known as children are permitted, and at the same time compelled, to live in a state of ambiguity. I think that's true of any child living in the modern era. It was true of me, and it was true of Sayumi as well. She came across as mature for her age, but the truth of the matter was that she was still a girl—not even twenty years old. Sure, she had the specs to storm into society with guns blazing and make a name for herself before we knew it, but for the time being, she still lived under the support and supervision of her parents, and she couldn't get by on her own.

Sayumi was a praiseworthy child. A child who, by nature of her age, was expected to live in a state of ambiguity. But here's a question: when a child who's expected and compelled to live with an ambiguous perspective uses a power of regression like hers, could you ever reasonably expect its effects to be clear and consistent? Perhaps they only seemed consistent to us, while in fact—

"Enough, Andou. This preamble has dragged on for far too long, even by your standards."

Wham! Sayumi's words slammed right through my narration, brooking no room for argument, and I sat up with a start.

We were, as usual, sitting in the club room. Sayumi and I were the only ones present, on account of today being my third one-on-one power naming interview, in which we'd be coming up with a name to give her ability.

"Whoa, wait a second, Sayumi! I was just getting to the good part! Why would you stop me *there?!?*" I protested.

"The good part? Really, Andou? You were braving new realms of tedium. I shudder to think how long you would have carried on your droning, pointless monologue if I hadn't intervened."

"Please don't act like it's perfectly natural for you to know what I'm saying in my inner monologue," I sighed. *It really feels like we're, I dunno...like we're giving ourselves an awful lot of leeway, here. I guess it shouldn't be surprising that we'd start playing it fast and loose with all sorts of stuff by the time we hit the third round.* "These bonus stories always open with me writing a little mini-column in the narration about whichever power's getting focused on. It's like a sort of introduction, right? That's been pretty well established by now! We start with a prologue-style monologue, then there's a cutaway and we transition to the club room, where we—"

"Yes, I'm well aware. I've already read the manuscripts for the first and second stories, after all."

Wait, seriously? Has Sayumi been inspecting all the stories up till now? That feels like a step too far, even compared to all the other meta stuff we've done up till now!

"Okay, so if you knew, then why'd you cut me off? The template just went out the window thanks to you! What am I supposed to do in Hatoko's story now?"

"Let the record show that I would have much preferred to sit still, behave myself, and wait for a section break to signify that we've gone through a scene change. That was my intention at first, but there was only so much of your seemingly endless, pointless tirade that I was capable of sitting through. I had no choice but to stop you."

"Come on... 'pointless'? Really? It was my philosophical treatise on the human condition!"

“You call that philosophy? And a *treatise*...? Pff!” Sayumi snorted. It was the sort of laugh that indicated she was absolutely making fun of me without trying whatsoever to conceal it. “Your thesis was completely inscrutable, and no matter how long you went on, you showed no sign of reaching any sort of conclusion. It was a tedious, frequently redundant ramble...and now you’re telling me it was supposed to be a philosophical treatise, Andou? *How?*”

I paused, completely silent. There was nothing I could say to that. Honestly, even I’d thought “Huh? What was I talking about, again?” and “Oh, crap, where am I even going with this? What’s the point I’m building toward?” at a few points throughout my preamble. I guess if I had to put it into words...the real point is that talking about perspectives and subjectivity and stuff is super fun, basically. Once you start talking about a topic like that, it can be really hard to stop.

“I-I think you should seriously consider the possibility that shutting someone’s ideas down without even hearing them out is a horrible thing to do! That’s right—it’s horrible! If you have a problem with the theory I just laid out, Sayumi, then you should at least have the decency to be specific about it! You can’t just keep saying I was tedious or long-winded and act like that means you can throw out all my ideas! That’s no different from running away from them! If my ideas are that bad, then try debating me! Bring it on!”

I put my everything into that rebuttal, but Sayumi wasn’t moved in the slightest. In fact, she almost looked like she pitied me as she replied in a soft, all-too-gentle tone.

“Andou. Theories and arguments need a *purpose*. They’re only meaningful if they serve to support a conclusion. The argument you were making, however, you made solely for the sake of argument itself. Isn’t that right? You critiqued common sense and made a few random points that flew in the face of societal expectations, then strung together a series of cheap and largely unrelated arguments...and frankly, all of it looked like nothing more than you stroking your ego. To put it *very* lightly, you were putting the cart before the horse. And so, because your argument had no conclusion to support, it ended up meandering aimlessly until not even you could tell where it’d be suitable to bring it to a conclusion.”

This, surely, was what it meant to be struck dumb. I had been debated into complete and utter submission. I could muster neither an “Objection!” nor a “No! That’s wrong!”—Sayumi was entirely in the right once again, and to make matters worse, the fact that she’d said it in a nice way rather than in a scathing tone made it entirely impossible for me to find the right words to strike back with.

“For that matter, Andou,” Sayumi added, “be honest with me. The truth is that you’d lost sight of how to end your rambling argument so thoroughly, you were actually relieved when I pulled the plug, weren’t you?”

“...”

Yup. She’s got me there.

But, anyway—with that, the matter of the way-too-long prelude was resolved. *Now then, let’s move on to the actual topic at hand, shall we? We’ve dragged this out for a pretty long time, so let’s forgo the usual section break and just jump right on into it!*

“Okay, Sayumi. Let’s get this one-on-one interview to pick a name for your power started! That’s the whole reason we blocked out this time to meet up in the first place, after all!”

“Yes...and on a related note, I have something of a regret I must confess.”

“What’s that?”

“I regret choosing to give you full authority over our powers’ names. I was convinced at the time that you’d think up names by yourself within a day or two, and that would be the end of it. I’d never imagined that you would choose to pull every member of the literary club into this disaster.”

“As if I’d ever put that little effort into giving a power its name! My pride would never allow it,” I replied indignantly.

I’d dreamed over and over again about obtaining a supernatural power, and that dream had finally come to fruition for all of us. It was entirely inevitable that I’d put a *crapton* of effort into giving those powers their names. I’d pour all the wild fantasies that I’d had up to that point into the endeavor, staking my very being on a desperate battle to give the powers of me and my compatriots

the best names I possibly could.

“Of course, in the end, I put in too *much* effort, and I’ve wound up not being able to manage it on my own. And *that* is the purpose of having these interviews with all of you!”

“What exactly are you trying to prove with all this, and to whom?”

“Who am I trying to prove something to...? Well, myself, I guess. I’m battling my own standards—telling myself that, surely, I can do better than *this*.”

“In other words, you have entirely hoisted yourself by your own petard. Your behavior is so self-destructive, you’ve actually self-destructed,” Sayumi said with a tired, bitter sigh.

“Okay, but we *did* clear the first roadblock! Giving *Closed Clock* its name was a major first step. That’s always the hardest part for a creator, y’know? Like, getting through the excruciating process of starting out from absolute zero.”

The single greatest challenge throughout this whole process—pinning down the style and template for our powers’ names—was already over and done with. *Closed Clock* and *World Create* were set in stone: two names consisting of two English words apiece. All we had to do for the rest of the names was to stick to that formula.

“So, yeah—now that the basic style’s hashed out, the rest of ’em should go nice and smoothly.”

“I would certainly hope so.”

“Though, of course, if they really *do* go totally smoothly, that’ll be a problem in its own right. We’re supposed to make sure these bonus stories end up being somewhere in the neighborhood of forty pages each, so we’ll have to make sure to drag them out if it’s looking like we’re gonna come up short.”

“Yes, it would certainly be troublesome if all the remaining stories turned out like Chifuyu’s did.”

“Right?” I said with a nod. One irregular, mold-breaking story like that was enough. If we bucked expectations two or three times in a row, it would get boring in its own right.

But, okay...this is a surprise. I was expecting Sayumi to be more aggressive about calling me out when I say meta stuff like that. I've been saying some pretty line-crossing stuff specifically because I figured she'd call it out, and having her react all nonchalantly like this makes it kinda hard for me to know how to react in turn.

"What is it, Andou? You look almost unwell," Sayumi said calmly. "I suppose I should say this, just for the record: in this story, I intend to be as liberal as humanly possible with my meta commentary."

"Wha—?!"

"I found the way you made a show of toeing the line in the first and second stories to be supremely irritating, so I've decided to take the reins myself. Being your club president, I believe it's my duty to teach you a lesson."

"I-I wasn't really—"

"Calling out other people's nonsense is second nature to Tomoyo, which is perhaps why she ended up engaging with your behavior seriously, but you should know that I have no intention whatsoever to play along. In fact, I fully intend to lead *you* around by the nose, so you'd do well to prepare yourself for that," Sayumi said with a sadistic chuckle that sent a chill down my spine.

O-Okay, I definitely wasn't planning on this... I thought I'd be able to drop a meta reference or two, she'd say "Andou, you should really refrain from saying things like that," and that'd be the end of it. Who could have predicted that Sayumi herself would decide to be the meta instigator?

I was coming to realize that I had, just maybe, stepped into territory from which I could never return. I felt like a hotshot high school delinquent who acted like he was the toughest guy in town even though he'd never been in a fight, who then accidentally got himself wrapped up with the actual, for-real yakuza.

"Now then, Andou, there'll be plenty of time for you to cower in fear later," said Sayumi. "For now, we should hurry up and start this interview. We have to choose a name for my power, don't we?"

"Y-Yeah...you're right. Let's get started."

“Though of course, we know perfectly well that it’s going to be called *Route of Origin*, so we may as well just chat about whatever comes to mind until we find a natural moment to settle on that, don’t you think?”

“You can’t just *say* that! You’re gonna ruin *everything*!”

Aggggh, this isn’t working! I’m completely on the back foot here! She’s forcing me to be the straight man in this bit!

What was I supposed to do about this? Sayumi, a girl who was typically firmly entrenched on the side of common sense, had taken a turn and joined the forces of mischief and chaos. She was using the fact that this was a bonus story as an excuse to cut loose entirely.

“Wh-What’s wrong with you, Sayumi...? It feels like you’re being kinda, I dunno, careless today? Like, you’re being way more aggressive and way less straitlaced than usual... Did something happen?”

“Hmph. Even I lose the ability to care, at times,” Sayumi huffed. She seemed a little upset, and her cheeks were faintly flushed. “How could I not after seeing my chest...*jiggle* like that, on a nationwide broadcast?”

“...”

Oh, god, she’s holding a grudge over the anime’s OP! That’s what she’s upset about—the chasteness characteristic of a prim and proper Japanese lady wouldn’t let that cut slide! And, I mean, okay... I’ll admit, they really did give her boobs one hell of a bounce there. It was wild enough to make me wonder if her uniform’s jacket was made out of rubber or something.

“And besides, considering Tomoyo’s physical capabilities, I think it’s highly implausible that she could ever carry me in her arms like that in the first place. Moreover, the concept in that sequence was that Tomoyo had just deactivated her power and allowed the flow of time to resume, so why did it look like she was landing from a fall? If you’ve stopped time, then why on earth would you not wait until *after* you’d landed to start it again? Everything about our motion in that sequence was unnatural, and one really must ask what purpose it was intended to serve.”

“Hey, Sayumi, how about we talk about *anything* else?! Like, seriously, we

need to stop, now!” *You’re gonna get us chewed out! We’ll get the stink eye from so many people at this rate!*

“And that’s not even starting on *you*, Andou. Why is it that while I was jiggling in the foreground, you were walking past in the background, looking entirely too serious for your own good? It made for an almost impossibly surreal image, altogether.”

“What do you mean, surreal?! That’s the scene that everyone (in my mind) has been saying made me look like a super awesome, hella cool main character, and you’re calling it *surreal*?!”

Also, not only was that scene the climax of the whole OP, it was also the very first cut of the OP that actually featured me in it. Yes, really—shockingly enough, I hadn’t had so much as a frame’s worth of screen time up to that point. I’d seriously started panicking for a minute when I’d seen the OP for the first time and realized that I wasn’t showing up! I was all “Wait, huh? Am I not in the OP? I *am* the protagonist, right?” and stuff! I’m talking *major* anxiety!

“I hope you’re not getting the wrong impression, Andou. My intention here is *not* to harshly critique the OP,” said Sayumi.

“Huh? B-But...”

“After all, the part where I end up jiggling—in other words, the scene that takes place during the chorus, in which all of the literary club’s members put on a show of being involved in supernatural battles—turns out to have all been part of your dream in the end.”

“Right, yeah. Since the whole OP ends with me sleeping in the club room and Tomoyo waking me up.”

“In other words: my jiggling in the OP is entirely *your* responsibility. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Wait... Wh-Whaaat?!”

Why am I in the crosshairs all of a sudden?! Is she seriously trying to make this all my fault?! Did she make it look like she was chewing out the production team as a feint, all to set up a brutal attack on me personally?!

“Tell me, Andou: am I a high school exhibitionist who walks around perpetually braless in your fantasies? I can’t imagine any other explanation for why you’d picture me jiggling like that.”

“Noooope, nope nope nope... Sayumi, please, calm down for just a second, okay?”

“Honestly, you can never overestimate the puerile stupidity of a boy in puberty. You’ve become so engrossed in your obscene delusions that you’ve convinced yourself a woman’s chest could *actually* behave that way. How perfectly loathsome. How utterly filthy.”

“Please... If nothing else, stop looking at me like I’m a piece of human waste. You’re gonna make me cry, honestly... And actually, let’s just drop this subject altogether! Anyone could tell you that you’re barking up the wrong tree by blaming me for this!”

“Oh, really? In that case, allow me to ask you a question. Andou: can you tell me, in complete honesty, that you have never even once wished that my breasts would jiggle in that manner?”

I took in a sharp breath. What could I say to that? The question itself could only be a joke, but Sayumi’s attitude—the look in her eyes—seemed so serious that I just couldn’t bring myself to brush it off with a random excuse.

“W-Well... I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t thought something along those lines even *once*. I’m a guy, so it’s hard to avoid thinking stuff like that every once in a while, I guess... And you have such a good figure that it’s impossible not to notice it, which means that there are times when I just can’t help but look at you in, y’know, that sort of light...”

I suppressed my shame and spoke with total honesty...but partway through, I realized something odd. Somewhere along the way, Sayumi’s look of indignation had vanished. She looked downright bewildered all of a sudden.

“Uh... Sayumi?”

“I didn’t even consider the possibility that you actually *had*...”

“Huh?” I grunted. Sayumi’s expression was making it clear that she was *really* shaken.

“E-Excuse me. I, umm... I was under the distinct impression that you had no particular interest in that sort of thing, so I was anticipating that you would reply to my question with a clear and definite ‘No,’” Sayumi bashfully mumbled. “I-I thought that you regarded coolness as far more important than the feminine form, I suppose, or that if presented with an indecent magazine and a pair of fingerless gloves and told to choose between them, you wouldn’t hesitate to latch on to the latter.”

“That’s a pretty out-there example, all right... But anyway, nah, I’m not *that* much of a late bloomer. I’ve got a libido, just like everyone else.”

“And, again, I never imagined you’d say something like that to my face...”

“A-Agh, sorry!”

“No, no—I didn’t mean for you to apologize! I’m glad to hear it, if anything...”

“Uh... You’re *glad*?”

“Ahh! N-No, not—not in that sense! That came out entirely wrong!”

“I-It’s cool, I get it! You made your point! I’m pretty sure I understand what you were really trying to say, so no worries!”

“D-Do you...?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, in that case, good.”

“Right...”

“Yes...”

“...”

“...”

What is even happening here?!



© Tetsuya Hasegawa (TRIGGER)

Then we added a section break, changing the scene and purging all that awkwardness in one fell swoop! It was time for us to cut the casual chatter and kick off our naming discussion for real.

Yup. Definitely time for us to get started. I really can't believe we let the first half of this story slip by with barely even a mention of Sayumi's power's name. This is pretty much the opposite of how Chifuyu's session went down.

At first, I'd been confident that since this third interview was Sayumi's, it couldn't possibly go wrong. I'd figured that no matter how much I ran wild, I could count on her to pull everything together and wrap it up in a satisfying manner when all was said and done. Evidently, however, that preconception was in desperate need of reevaluation. It seemed that Sayumi herself would be the one screwing around this time. It was up to *me* to buckle down and keep things under control.

"All right, Sayumi. To start, do you have any particular requests in regard to your power's name?" I asked.

"That's a rather difficult question to answer in specific terms. You've already decided upon the general format for our powers' names, haven't you, Andou?"

"Yup. We're going with two English words for each name, plus a title."

"I see. I suppose you'll need to brainstorm words, then? In the case of my power... 'return,' 'reverse,' 'restore,' 'begin,' and 'regress' all come to mind."

"Hmm. I mean, none of those are bad, but they don't quite feel *just* right either. My leading contenders for now are 'karma,' 'eternal,' and 'rebirth,' but..."

"None of them feel just right either."

"Yeah... I did come up with one concept that I really liked: doing something with *avaivartika*..."

Avaivartika: in Buddhism, it refers to the point in one's training at which they reach a state of nonregression, ensuring that when they're reborn, they'll end up in the Pure Land. It was a word that sounded cool in isolation, and it tied nicely into Sayumi's power if you were willing to extrapolate a little: a state of

conviction in one's beliefs so strong that it's undeniable was more or less how her power worked. All the words and concepts surrounding the idea were cool and interesting...but...

"...basically any way you slice it, the English always makes the most sense as one word."

"Meaning that using it would involve departing from the format you've defined, I take it?" Sayumi asked with a shake of her head. "I seem to recall you saying something about how setting the format in stone will make this whole process go much more smoothly, but as I'm sure you've now noticed, it *also* means that our options are much more restricted than they otherwise would be."

She was absolutely right. Having a template laid out in advance could certainly help the decision-making process along in some cases, but there were plenty of other instances in which it would actually just tie you down and limit your options.

"In my power's case, I believe that limiting ourselves to two words could prove to be quite the harsh restriction. The ability to return something to the way it's meant to be is rather idiosyncratic, to say the least, and it requires a fair number of words to be clearly communicated," said Sayumi.

"Okay, but we don't have to force ourselves to say *everything* about your power in its name," I countered. "Just *hinting* at how it works is plenty. Spelling out a power in full detail in its name actually kind of ruins it most of the time, in my book. It's best if the name and the function are separated by at least a bit of a gap."

Sayumi sighed. "Oh, is it now?"

"Some things are better left unsaid, right? It's fine if you don't get it, though. You wouldn't be alone there—trying to cram in as much as possible and explain everything that a power does in its name is one of the most common mistakes for beginners to make."

"How strange... I wonder why that was such a profoundly upsetting statement to hear from you."

“So anyway, Sayumi, sometimes you just have to throw stuff at the wall and see what sticks! Let’s forget all about how your power functions for now. Focusing too hard on one particular aspect of a name can make it easy to run up against a roadblock. You’ve gotta open your mind and broaden your horizons! Sometimes, the best ideas come from angles you’d never even consider until the moment they fall into your lap, and taking a step back’s the best way to make it happen!”

“I see. I’ll admit, there may be some truth to that,” Sayumi said with a nod...but a moment later, a rather doubtful expression came across her face.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, per se... I’ve just suddenly come to my senses, that’s all. It struck me that I was genuinely putting effort into thinking up a name for my power, and I’d honestly thought for a moment that your bizarre, obtuse theories on the subject made sense. From a calm, detached perspective, there’s something terribly comical about that,” she explained with an almost ashamed sigh.

Well, I see someone still hasn’t grinded enough naming EXP yet. The moment you look at yourself from a calm, detached perspective, it’s all over. Knowing that’s the most basic of the basics, and it’s kinda sad she hasn’t figured it out yet.

“Well, anyway, let’s set aside your power for the time being and just chat for a little while!” I suggested. “Like, uhh... Oh, I know—do you have any hobbies?” I was looking for any random topic I could bring up, and I just happened to end up settling on the sort of question you’d ask on a blind date.

“Hobbies? I’d like to say ‘none in particular,’ but I suppose that isn’t really true. I’ve tried my hand at a wide variety of interests, though I’ve never dug especially deeply into any of them. I’ve learned calligraphy, how to play the koto, and the basics of tea ceremonies and flower arrangement, for example.”

“Huh. Feels like you’ve, I dunno...covered all the classical Japanese bases, I guess?” *And knowing Sayumi, even though she said she’s “never dug deeply into them,” I bet that she’s pretty much mastered every one of them.*

“Oh, and for the record, my including flower arrangement among my hobbies was *not* a retcon to account for my flower-arranging scene in the anime’s OP. I

was fond of the practice from the very start.”

“You didn’t have to explain that! Pointing it out just makes it sound like *more* of a retcon!”

“What else...? Ah, well, this is certainly an innocuous choice, but I’m also fond of reading.”

“Ahh. Reading, huh?”

Hmm. Honestly, I’ve never really known how to deal with people who say that reading’s one of their hobbies.

I didn’t mean to bad-mouth Sayumi, of course, and I wasn’t at all trying to criticize self-proclaimed hobbyist readers either...but “reading” just covered such a *huge* spectrum. It was extremely common for two people who read as a hobby to find that they had absolutely nothing in common in terms of interests.

Normally, when you find that you share a hobby with someone, your first reaction is to get excited and strike up a conversation. When that hobby’s reading, though, it tends to go something along the lines of “Oh, you like reading? Me too! What sort of stuff do you read?” “I read a lot of *this*, and some of *that*.” “Oh, so you’re one of *those* people, huh? I don’t really read any of that stuff.” “Ah, that’s fine. What do you read, then?” “Mostly *these*.” “Oh. I don’t read those at all.” or something to that effect. Long story short, the end result was usually awkwardness all around.

Personally speaking, I’d always felt that if you were going to say that reading was your hobby, it was better to identify a clear genre or something that you were into as well—like, “I like reading light novels,” for example...though on the other hand, if you met someone else who liked light novels in specific and *still* found that you had no interests in common with them in terms of the type of light novels you liked, the situation would be totally beyond saving.

“Okay, so you like reading, but can you be a little more specific? What genres do you like?” I asked.

“I’m afraid the only answer I can give is ‘a wide variety.’ I’m something of an indiscriminate reader.”

“Ahh, yeah, I could see that. It *has* always seemed like you read a crazy variety

of books.”

I’d seen her reading books on business, history books, autobiographies of celebrities, manga by Tezuka Osamu...the list went on and on. Sometimes she’d read foreign works in translation, which made her look like a total intellectual, and sometimes she’d be as basic as could be by reading light novels with upcoming anime adaptations.

“All right, but is there a genre you’re particularly fond of, at least?” I pressed.

Sayumi paused to think for a moment. “BL, I suppose,” she finally replied with a peaceful, contented smile.

I...didn’t know what to say to that.

“BL, as in boys’ love: works of fiction depicting homoerotic romance involving men,” she clarified.

“Ah, no, I mean...it’s not that I didn’t hear you, and I already knew what the abbreviation stands for, so you didn’t have to define it or anything.”

Man. BL, huh? I’d actually sort of forgotten that Sayumi identified as a fujoshi...though, then again, it was weird for me to know that at all at this point in the timeline, continuity-wise. No point fussing over details like that in a bonus story, though, so let’s just ignore that little issue.

“Right...you’re a fujoshi, aren’t you, Sayumi?” I said.

“Yes, though frankly, that aspect of my character has been entirely abandoned at this point.”

“You’re not supposed to say that about your own character traits!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

“I-I mean...sure, it hasn’t really come up much lately. It’s not the sort of trait that gets much mention, I guess.”

“In my case, when I say that I’m a fujoshi, I mean it in a rather low-intensity sense, for better or for worse. I don’t create any fanfiction, whether drawn or written, and I’ve never participated in Comiket or any similar events. I simply buy and read BL fiction, and that’s the end of it.”

“Okay...but even just reading BL’s not exactly normal, from my point of view.”

“I have to say, Andou, that I’m unimpressed to see you label a hobby that you don’t understand as ‘abnormal’ just because it doesn’t match your interests,” Sayumi scolded with a frown.

Hmm. Yeah, when she puts it that way, she’s got a point. I really shouldn’t be judging people’s hobbies based on my own values and interests alone. I should work on that.

In my mind, BL was a hyperniche interest that only people in a very specific subculture would enjoy—and yet, I’d heard that the sales numbers for BL books were pretty astonishingly high these days. There was plenty of evidence to suggest that it might actually be a pretty common interest for girls. Its place in society had shifted, in much the same way that anime, manga, and the like had gone from “idle entertainment for children” to “a globally recognized cultural product that Japan can take pride in.” BL had started out as an underground sort of interest, yes, but maybe it too would go through the same progression as society grew more aware of and familiar with it.

“Yeah, fair enough,” I said. “BL *does* feel like it’s getting some pretty widespread acceptance lately, after all.”

“Of course, that isn’t to say that I intend to make a point of declaring my interest in it to everyone I meet. Flaunting interests that aren’t broadly socially acceptable in times and places where it isn’t appropriate is just as shameful as belittling the interests of others,” Sayumi added.

“I guess it’s all about doing things in moderation, huh?” I said, trying to sum the point up.

Sayumi gave me a satisfied nod. “I have a hobbyist’s taste for BL, yes...but I’m also well aware that it’s a hobby that many people will find difficult to understand. Some people are uncomfortable with, or even disgusted by, that sort of content. As such, I make a point of not bringing that particular hobby of mine up in public settings.”

“That seems like a pretty good attitude to have about it, the way I see it.”

“Though it’s also an attitude that has led to my fujoshi nature being neglected

for so long that it's more or less been written out of my character."

"Okay...again, *please* stop talking about your character traits getting written out."

"The other issue is that, in all practicality, the sort of fujoshi who get joked about in media are actually only a very small minority among the larger fujoshi population. The most common variety of fujoshi by far will fantasize about the relationships of two-dimensional men on a regular basis, yet lack any desire to direct their imaginations toward real, 3D men. That applies to me as well—I virtually never fantasize about real individuals in that way. I did so about Sagami and you, at most."

"Okay, so you *did* do it with me and Sagami, then!"

"Oh, excuse me. 'At most' wasn't quite the right phrasing. I meant to say that in the case of Sagami and you, I was compelled by circumstance to fantasize about real-world individuals. I had no choice in the matter."

"That's not the right part to apologize about!" *Also, she's been going out of her way to say Sagami's name before mine, hasn't she? In other words, I'm definitely the bottom in her fantasies...*

"The Sagami/Andou pairing being the one real-world ship that I fantasized about gave me ample ammunition to tease you with, and in that sense, my being a fujoshi allowed for a number of reasonably amusing exchanges. However," Sayumi said before pausing for a moment, seeming to have a hard time finding the right words to express herself with. "To be frank...it became much harder to tease you about that after learning what happened between the two of you during the eighth grade back in volume 6."

"Wow! *Not* my problem!"

"It ruined everything, Andou. How are you going to make it up to me?"

"I'm not, because again, *not* my problem! Don't even try to make this one my responsibility!"

"Of course, on the other hand, learning all about your sordid past and the origin of your peculiar acquaintances-not-friends relationship helped my fantasies flourish to a truly unprecedented degree."

“Look...please...can we just stop, Sayumi? All of this fujoshi talk isn’t getting us anywhere at all. Let’s call it a day and move on.”

“Let’s call you gay and move on?”

“Call! It! A! Day!”

Going pretty heavy on the stupid little quips today, aren’t we, Sayumi?!

Anyway, with that, fujoshi talk time came to an abrupt conclusion. I’d decided to bring up a totally unrelated topic in an effort to break through the dead end we’d hit in our naming conversation, but in the end, that side topic had taken over the whole discussion. Our priorities were *completely* backward.

That’s it. No more digressions. We’re going full steam ahead on the topic at hand. In other words, we’re taking the shortest possible path to a name for her power...because if we don’t, we’re gonna run out of pages before we finish!

“All right, Sayumi. It’s time for us to pick up the pace! We’re doing the rest of this interview at turbo speed!”

“Yes, that would be for the best. Given our remaining page count, we’ll be in serious trouble if we don’t at least start dropping hints that lead us toward choosing *Route of Origin* as my power’s name.”

“Would you *please* stop saying stuff like that?!”

“By the way, Andou, what about your black flame power? Have you made any progress choosing a name for it? If you’ve already picked one, it’d be nice to know what you chose for the sake of reference.”

“Oh... My power, huh? The thing is, blah blah blah, now you’re up to speed.”

Sayumi cocked her head. “Pardon? What do you mean, ‘blah blah blah’? That tells me nothing.”

“Don’t call out the narrative shortcuts, please! That’s supposed to mean ‘and then I told you all the info that the readers have already gotten from the previous stories’! It comes up all the time!” I shouted. Then I took a moment to explain the circumstances surrounding my difficulties picking a name for my power to Sayumi, which I’d already discussed with Tomoyo in the story before last.

Sayumi cocked her head. “Pardon? Andou, saying ‘then I took a moment to explain the circumstances’ in the narration also tells me nothing. Please actually *explain* it to me, through dialogue.”

“You’re calling out narrative shortcuts in the actual *narration* too?! Seriously?!” *If you start picking at seams that deeply, we’re not gonna have a novel at all by the time you’re through!*

Having a character say a few random nonsense words to represent them summarizing a situation was a well-established trope, and going after that was bad enough, but questioning summaries delivered through *narration* was just going way too far! If the narration says it happened, it happened, no ifs, ands, or buts!

“He he he! I was kidding, of course. I’m perfectly aware of your reasons to put off naming your black flame,” said Sayumi.

“Oh, so you *did* get the summary after all?” I sighed.

“I didn’t have to. I already informed you that I’d read the first two bonus stories, didn’t I?”

“Wait...that wasn’t a bit? You *actually* did that?” *Is that even allowed? Hmm. Well, whatever, I guess.*

“I appreciate that it will be some time longer before your power will have its name...so in the meantime, perhaps we should use some of the other names you’ve thought up as reference?” Sayumi suggested.

“What other names?” I asked.

“Like, for instance, the ‘true name’ you—”

“You mean Guiltia Sin Jurai?! What about it?!”

“Well, that topic certainly grabbed your attention quickly.”

“Yes, indeed—the name Andou Jurai is nothing more than an alias, appropriated to allow me to walk this world without raising suspicion. My *true* name—the accursed, profane epithet carved into the very depths of my soul—was lost over the countless reincarnations that I’ve been subjected to. It has been consigned to the annals of oblivion, and in the modern era, not one

individual remembers it...save *me*! I alone know that my true name...is *Guiltia Sin Jurai*!”

“If your true name is ‘accursed’ and ‘profane,’ then I’d request that you refrain from shouting it at the top of your lungs. I could say much the same thing regarding it being ‘consigned to the annals of oblivion,’ as well. Nothing in the preamble you delivered justified saying your name out loud in any aspect.”

I winced. Sayumi had hit me right where it hurt, but I just turned away from her and pretended not to let it get to me. Having a true name that was sealed away or lost was *super* friggin’ cool, but on the other hand, the urge to proclaim my true name to all and sundry was impossible to resist. It was a real dilemma.

“So then, that rather cringey name of yours—Guiltia Sin Jurai. What are *its* origins? Considering how you adore drama and backstories, I’m certain you had some sort of intent or concept in mind when you came up with it, didn’t you?”

I didn’t reply.

“Andou?”

“I, umm... Sorry, but would you mind not digging too deeply into my true name’s origins?”

“Hm? Why not? And for that matter...why do you suddenly look so ashamed?”

“I don’t— I mean, umm, well... I guess you could say I’m sorta ashamed, or maybe embarrassed, and that’s kinda why I don’t wanna talk about it, more or less...”

Sayumi’s eyes widened with shock. She looked downright astonished, in fact.

“S-Surely I must be misunderstanding you... You’re *embarrassed*? Your entire existence is fundamentally embarrassing, and yet now, after all this time, you’ve found something that makes you feel ashamed?” Sayumi said in a tone that couldn’t have been more openly skeptical. “You mean to say that telling me about your true name’s origins would be embarrassing? But you’ve spoken at incredible length about so many of the other names you’ve come up with, haven’t you? And that in spite of the fact that no one has ever asked you to!”

“I wish you hadn’t said that last part... And no, look, I’ll totally talk about the origins of my power names and titles and stuff all day long, for sure! Getting to talk about the origins of the names you come up with is one of the things that makes coming up with them so rewarding! But the thing is, Guiltia Sin Jurai isn’t a title, or an alias, or anything like that. It’s my *true name*.”

“Please don’t earnestly assert things that you know perfectly well aren’t true. It is *not*.”

“The thing about true names is that you don’t make them up for yourself, right? Somebody has to *give* your true name to you, so part of me can’t help but think that talking about my true name’s origins myself would just be sorta wrong.”

“You...are picky in an exceedingly obnoxious sort of way,” Sayumi said with a look on her face that told me she really meant it. I couldn’t blame her for that. Not even I completely understood what I was trying to articulate to her.

It was an intuitive sort of problem. A matter of instincts—of *feeling*. Talking about your own true name’s origins was *wrong*. It *felt* that way, somehow, for some reason that I couldn’t explain. It just *was*.

“Well... I must admit that I do ever so slightly, to the faintest and most infinitesimal degree, understand what you’re trying to say,” Sayumi continued. “You’ll find many fictional characters who are proud to describe the origins of their titles or their powers’ names, but characters who do the same for their *own* name are certainly few and far between.”

“*Right!* Exactly! *That’s* the feeling I’m talking about! I knew you’d get it, Sayumi!”

“I’m sure you intended that as a compliment, but it was very much not flattering.”

“So, yeah. Sorry, but that’s why I can’t explain the origins of my true name to you. I wish I could, honestly! It’s such a shame to pass up the chance when you’re clearly so interested. Yup. A real shame. Wish I could make it up to you somehow. I’m sure you’re itching to know all the hidden meaning that my true name contains...but this is one thing that I just can’t compromise on, no matter how painfully curious it makes you.”

“*Ugh. Just stop,*” Sayumi said in a tone of purest irritation. She was so annoyed, she barely even sounded like herself for a moment. “I do *not* appreciate the implication that I’m burning with curiosity to know the details of your true name. I do *not* care. I’m not interested in the slightest. Hmph—besides, knowing you, I’m sure you barely put any thought into it other than making it sound superficially cool. It doesn’t even *have* any real origins, does it?”

“Wh-What?! Oh, you *did not* just say that!”

“Take ‘Jurai,’ for instance. That’s just your actual given name, written with a different set of characters that can be read the same way, isn’t it? It’s very conspicuous that you spared no effort to come up with a ‘cooler’ way of writing your name, and the secondhand embarrassment that realization brings is quite the force to be reckoned with.”

“Ugh...”

“And then there’s ‘Guiltia’... I have to assume that’s a word of your own invention, isn’t it? It’s so easy to imagine the expression you made when you came up with it, and that expression screams ‘Look how cool the nonsense word I just made up is! How do you like *that*?!’”

“Gah! Agh...”

“And then there’s the ‘Sin.’ You put that in exclusively because middle names aren’t common in our culture, thus making them cool by your standards, didn’t you?”

“U-Uggh... Eeep...”

Sayumi had verbally bludgeoned me within an inch of my life, seeing through my name from top to bottom and picking out the *exact* parts that would hurt the most for her to call out with terrifying accuracy. She’d torn me to shreds, and her relentless assault on the most fragile portions of my psyche had me on the verge of tears...that is, until she went just a step too far.

“Of course, I’m sure you only chose ‘Sin’ in particular because of its English meaning, didn’t you?”

“N-No! *Wrong!*” I yelped.

Sayumi had made one ever so slight misreading this time. Seeing the faintest glimmer of hope, I rose from the depths of despair to fight back with everything I had.

“The ‘Sin’ isn’t *just* the English word! It’s also supposed to evoke the Japanese ‘shin,’ denoting divinity! It has *two* meanings, giving it *twice* the malevolent depth you’re giving it credit for!” I declared, forgetting my “no talking about my true name’s origins” policy in an instant. “Plus, it’s not even *just* the English word ‘sin’—it’s an *abbreviation* of ‘Original Sin’! Within that name dwells the very roots of sin itself—the origins of sin from which no human can ever escape!”

I was getting carried away by the surge of excitement within me, rattling off my explanation without even pausing for breath.

“Heh, heh heh heh... Haaa ha ha ha ha ha! Too bad, Sayumi! It seems not even *you* could see through the full meaning of my true name!” I boasted as I sprang to my feet, gazing down on her with a haughty, triumphant air.

Sayumi let out a long, deep sigh. “Oh, is that so?” she listlessly replied, nonchalantly wrapping her hair around a finger as she fiddled with her smartphone with her other hand. She’d shifted tactics to the mortal enemy of any argument: ignoring me until I stopped trying.

I silently picked up my chair, returned it to the table, and sat back down. *Ugh. What can I even say about this anymore? Just...ugh.*

“Hey, Sayumi? Let’s just drop the true name topic for now, okay...? The only thing we’re accomplishing here is finding new ways to fray my psyche.”

“We’re finding new ways to gay your psyche?”

“‘Fray’! I said ‘fray’! You already did that joke, dang it!” I shouted, dipping into a much harsher tone than I’d usually use with Sayumi. She’d driven me into just that much of a corner. “Sayumi, *please*. We have to stop going on these tangents. It’s time for us to take a straightforward, one-way route toward coming up with a name for your power.”

“I was under the impression that we’d been taking detours precisely because the direct approach didn’t work?”

“I know, but that was a mistake. We can’t *just* keep chatting in the hopes that a flash of inspiration will hit us somewhere along the way... We have to face your power head-on and think about its name directly. I’d forgotten how important that was. I’m confident now that if we take the most direct route toward your power, we’ll hit upon the roots of a solid name before we know it.”

Sayumi blinked. “Excuse me?”

“H-Huh? You didn’t get that?” I said, then frantically tried to clarify, “I was doing a play on words! You know, ‘route’ with an ‘ou’ and ‘root’ with two ‘o’s?”

“Oh, I see now. So that’s what you meant—I didn’t notice at all,” said Sayumi.

Come on, give me a break! You forced me to turn into one of those people who explains their own jokes for a minute there! “I really thought you’d get it, considering how good your grades are,” I muttered.

“In my defense, your choice of framing made that rather difficult. More to the point, your usage was a little unnatural. In this sort of context, you would typically refer to the ‘root,’ singular, rather than ‘roots,’ plural. Your pronunciation was slightly off, as well.”

Leave it to Sayumi to master that distinction. And she pronounced it perfectly, even though it’s a really hard word for Japanese people to enunciate!

Anyway, it sort of figured I’d get chided for my pronunciation. I liked studying English a lot, and I considered it one of my better subjects, but pronunciation and intonation—oral communication in general, really—wasn’t my strong suit. I’d only come to like studying English in the first place because it seemed like it would come in handy for thinking up cool names, so it wasn’t particularly surprising that my pronunciation had fallen by the wayside. After all, when it came to names, it didn’t matter if your English came out with a thick Japanese accent. Actually, scratch that—names with English in them were *better* with a thick Japanese accent! That’s what *made* them good!

Take the word “god,” for instance. When spoken by Japanese people, it tended to come out sounding more like “goddo.” That wasn’t *accurate* pronunciation, by all rights, but that didn’t change the fact that to my Japanese sensibilities, “goddo” just *felt* better. And then, of course, there’s “chaos.” The typical Japanese pronunciation for it sounds more like “ka-osu,” and to me, that

pronunciation felt far more natural and familiar than the natural English version.

No doubt about it: when it comes to English power names and titles, going with a Japanese accent is the right call—even if it means your pronunciation’s technically terrible! Plus, using the Japanese pronunciation opens up all sorts of double meaning potential that a native speaker might not—

“Ah?!”

In a split second, I shot to my feet. The chair that I’d taken the time to pick up just moments before clattered to the ground all over again.

“A-Andou...? What is it?” asked Sayumi.

“I got it...”

“Huh?”

“I got it... No, not quite! I *almost* have it, I think... The point is, it’s *right* there! It’s on the brink of coming to me in a flash!”

My true name, Guiltia Sin Jurai. Double meanings. I had the distinct feeling that those two elements were *exactly* what I needed to finally lead the way to a name for Sayumi’s power.

“Double meanings... Route and root, which sound identical but mean different things... That’s it. I can work with this! The power to return something to the way it was meant to be—in other words, the power to open up a route that returns anything and everything to its roots!”

“I suppose you could put it in those terms, yes.”

“Root... It’s all starting to come together now! That word may be the key to unlocking your power’s name!”

“In other words, you think that ‘root’ should be one of the two English words that make up my power’s name?”

“Ah, nah, I dunno about that. Hmm...”

“*Root*,” *huh*...? It wasn’t bad, but it also didn’t quite do it for me. I just couldn’t help but think of root vegetables and stuff like that when I heard the

word, which was the opposite of cool.

“Do you have any ideas, Sayumi? Like, about synonyms for ‘root’ that sound a little bit better?” I asked.

“I’m not so sure what you’d think would ‘sound better’ to begin with...but as far as loose synonyms for ‘root’ that might suit your aesthetics go, there’s ‘foundation,’ ‘source,’ ‘primordial,’ ‘progenitor,’ ‘inception,’ ‘center,’ or ‘core,’ perhaps.”

“Oooh, dang! Those all sound awesome! Just on a gut level, ‘center’ seems the most promising...but no, we can’t! *Hikaru no Go* already has dibs on ‘center of heaven’!”

“I can’t say I understand your standards.”

“The runner-ups would be ‘primordial’ and ‘progenitor’...and between those two, ‘progenitor’ definitely wins out for me. ‘Primordial’ just feels kinda primitive, somehow? Like, it makes me think of the Jurassic era, for some reason.”

“I understand your standards even less than I did a moment ago.”

“All right! That settles it—we’ll do something with ‘progenitor!’ It’s a bit long, so maybe in the preamble?”

That was one major piece of vocabulary out of the way, but we still needed to settle on the actual name itself. I was still stuck on the idea of working in the route/root double meaning, and with a semisynonym for “root” in the preamble, it just made sense to me to use “route” as one of the two English words...but that association on its own didn’t feel like it was *quite* enough. I still needed that one last step.

Come on, think. Think! A route...roots...I have a feeling that a word’s already come up in this conversation that could tie it all together perfectly...

“Wait, of course... Original Sin! *Original*! The answer was hiding away in the full form of my true middle name all along!”

Original—or, wait. Considering how we’re using it, it’d make more sense to use it as a noun rather than as an adjective, right? And in that case, it’d be

‘origin’! ‘Original’ gets used as an actual loanword in Japanese way too frequently, anyway, so it’s played out. Let’s just ignore the fact that there’s a pretty famous takeout chain called Origin Bento and call it good.

“‘Origin’—it works as a synonym for ‘root’ as well, even if it’s a little more mundane than the other options...and that means that it pairs perfectly with ‘route’ for the sake of the double meaning! A route to a root—a route to an origin... And with a preamble involving ‘progenitor,’ we end up with...”

I muttered to myself as I put it all together, meticulously assembling the name piece by piece in my mind’s eye.

“The progenitor of beginnings, *Origin Route*... No, that doesn’t work. Not quite enough...”

Come on, calm down. You’re almost there, and that means that you can’t let yourself lose your cool now. If you let yourself screw up here, right at the finish line...well, I guess it wouldn’t be that big of a deal since I can always take another stab at it, but the point is I can’t screw up!

I sharpened my thoughts, considering every possible detail from every possible angle, until finally...

“The progenitor of beginnings, *Route of Origin*.”

...I got there. A single, split-second flash of inspiration took form in a name that would last for an eternity.

“Route of Origin... H-How about that, Sayumi? What do you think?!”

“I have no objections. I believe that will do nicely,” Sayumi said with a kind, gentle smile. I could tell she was happy, for what it’s worth, but compared to how I was very literally trembling with delight, her reaction came across as a little lukewarm.

“This is the big moment—we just gave your power its name! Shouldn’t you be a little more excited about that?” I asked.

“Well... Although the way you walked through your solution made you sound like a genius tactician putting together a master plan to turn around a life-or-death crisis and pulling victory from the jaws of defeat, when all’s said and

done, all you did was come up with a name for a superpower.”

Ugh! I mean, she’s not wrong, and this whole thing probably did just look like me doing a bunch of thinking from her perspective, but there was a lot going on behind the scenes that she couldn’t see! Like, all the strokes of fortune and flashes of inspiration—y’know, all that fated stuff! That’s what makes coming up with a name that you’re genuinely content with so profoundly satisfying!

“Well then, now that a name’s been settled upon, shall we head home?” Sayumi asked.

“W-Wait a second! We only just picked your name out—let’s bask in it for a little while longer!”

Sayumi ignored my shouting entirely and kept packing up her things. As she did so, however, a thought seemed to strike her and she spoke up once more.

“By the way, Andou. A moment ago, when you were thinking through your options, you said that *Origin Route* ‘wasn’t quite enough.’ What exactly did you mean by that?”

“Huh?”

“What I mean is, not quite enough what?”

“Oh, not enough characters— Ah. I mean, umm...”

O-Oh god, I don’t wanna say it. I really don’t want it to get out that I’m trying to make the character counts of our powers’ names written in Japanese match up too!

That would’ve been...well, just kind of embarrassing, really. I was pretty self-conscious about the possibility that my whole thing about wanting to make our powers’ names match up to deepen our bonds with each other would come across as, I dunno, too effeminate, or too sentimental, or something.

“I-I meant it wasn’t elaborate enough, of course! *Origin Route*’s just lacking that element of complexity, y’know?!” I babbled.

“Not enough characters? In other words, you’re concerned with the number thereof... *Route of Origin*... And Tomoyo’s and Chifuyu’s powers are named *Closed Clock* and *World Create*...” Sayumi said to herself, sinking into thought as

she once again totally ignored me. “Ah, I see,” she finally said with a nod. “He he he! How very like you, Andou.”

“Huh...? D-Did you figure it out?” I asked.

“Who can say?” Sayumi said with an amused smile. She’d dodged the question, but I knew how smart she was, and I had a feeling that she’d seen through what I was thinking with ease. “Come on, now—you should get ready too, Andou. I’ll be locking up after I leave.”

I definitely didn’t want to get locked in the club room overnight, so I quickly packed my things and followed her out of the room. The sun was already setting at that point, and the school’s hallways were dyed orange as we strolled toward the entryway.

As we walked, I silently thought to myself about the power that, as of today, was named *Route of Origin*. At the present moment, its effects were stable. Ambiguous and unreliable though it might have been in theory, for the time being, it was quite steady. Considering how many times she’d used it, you’d think that it would have displayed different effects under the same broad circumstances at least once, but to date, we’d had yet to observe that phenomenon.

The way I saw it, Sayumi’s personality accounted for that. Her grades were impeccable, her conduct unimpeachable, and she was as earnest and honest as could be. She had the self-confidence that came with holding herself to the same strict standards to which she held others—and that, I assumed, is exactly why she could use *Route of Origin* with such consistency. We had her personality to thank for it...or perhaps I should say that we had her personality to blame for it.

There was nothing wrong with stability, of course, but for some reason, I just couldn’t help but think that in this case, it wasn’t necessarily a good thing either. I had a feeling that in the long run, Sayumi’s unwillingness to bow to ambiguity—the disposition that drove her to maintain her own standard of perfection—would come back to bite her.

I hoped I was worrying about nothing, but if I was right, and if my concerns ever became a reality, I knew that I’d want to do my part to protect her...even if

that meant coming into conflict with her in the process.



Chapter 4 ★ The Path of Over Element

Chapter 4: The Path of Over Element

The lord of five aspects, *Over Element*—this was the title that had been bestowed upon Kushikawa Hatoko and, by extension, the name of the power she'd awakened to, which granted her command of nature's essences. The one who had bestowed it, needless to say, was none other than me. Between "the lord of five aspects" serving as its introductory appellation and the English words "*Over Element*" providing a foreign flair, it was a truly eccentric and fantastic name for a power to have, if I do say so myself.

Hatoko's power gave her the ability to control five elements as she saw fit. Nay—not *control*. That word was far too half-hearted to do her power justice. From fractured earth to roiling rapids, from crimson hellfire to savage gales, all the way up to and including the most purifying luminescences, Hatoko held the elements in the palm of her hand, reigning over them with the incontestable authority of a goddess. Her power over the elements was absolute, and she wielded it with the greatest of ease. As if that weren't enough, she was also capable of fusing opposing elements into amalgamations that were greater than the sum of their parts, elevating them to unthinkable heights and making her power truly daunting to contend with.

Allow me to rephrase my earlier statement—Hatoko didn't control or manipulate the elements. She *ruled* them. No other word could do her capabilities justice. All the powers of nature were hers to bend as she saw fit, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that she dwelled within a realm of her own, untouchable by the mere mortals beneath her.

Well, I mean...yes, I did say that Chifuyu's power could be considered an objective upgrade of Hatoko's in the bonus story before last, but let's just not worry about that detail, okay? Hatoko could Aspect Splice, for one thing, and if she and Chifuyu both tried facing off in a match of literal, fire-based firepower, I was pretty positive that Hatoko would win.

Indeed, Hatoko had the power to rule over five separate elements, and the

first time she displayed her abilities to us, I'd been struck by an immediate thought: *That's just downright cheating!* Surely *five* elements was overdoing it? It was way too all-purpose—like the sort of ultimate ability an elementary schooler would dream up. By my personal standards—or, well, my preferences—it just made sense to limit yourself to an absolute maximum of two elements, in the unlikely event you went for more than one. Like, it worked for Flazzard and Todoroki Shoto because they were all about having the opposing elements of fire and ice packed into one person. *Five*, though? No way.

To be totally frank, it really did come across as cheating. Of course, all of the literary club's members except me had powers that could potentially be seen as cheating, but personally speaking—and this really is *just* my opinion—Hatoko's was the most cheat-tastic of all of them. If I had to explain why, I guess the best way to put it would be that hers felt the most *off*.

It's gotten more and more common lately for the word “cheat” to be used as a way to say something is so powerful as to seem unfair, specifically in the context of media. The moment a character with an even vaguely strong ability shows up in a manga or an anime, people start shouting about that power being cheating before you know it.

That struck me as odd, in the sense that it didn't quite match up with the literal meaning of “cheating.” The word traced back to game jargon, in theory—like, when players in an online game managed to abuse the game's systems in ways that the developers didn't intend. In other words, per its original usage, it referred to acts that were unfair and dishonest. In my book, that didn't quite apply when the only problem was that your opponent's power was so strong you didn't stand a chance against them.

Now, the meaning of words is a fluid thing, of course. Language is constantly evolving, and it was totally possible that the meaning of “cheating” had simply started to shift a little, just like “awesome” and “nonplussed” had in the past. Still, the popular modern usage of cheating just felt *wrong* to me more often than not...and yet, in the case of Hatoko's power, even *I* found myself thinking that it kinda felt like cheating.

I'm not just saying that. If you want proof, take a look at the first episode of the anime, right after the eyecatch, where—thanks to the timeline getting

shuffled around a little in production—we jumped straight into our monthly superpower checkup, which didn't happen until volume two in the novels. I explained the names and effects of all the literary club girls' powers in that scene, and out of all four of them, the *only* one that I described as a cheat...was Hatoko's power. I kept my cool with the other three, describing their capabilities without making a huge deal out of it, but in *Over Element's* case and *Over Element's* alone, I had a little freak-out and ended up shouting about how it was cheating.

In retrospect, that was kind of weird. Why would I only scream about cheating in the case of Hatoko's power? It'd be easy enough to say "Oh, that's just because the original author wasn't the one who wrote that line" and call it a day, but I'm of the opinion that the best way to enjoy fiction is to read meaning into those little details, regardless of the circumstances of how they might've ended up in the story. And, when I tried calmly and carefully analyzing my own reasoning behind that tirade, I realized that it might've been a sign that I'd unconsciously felt something was slightly amiss about her power.

Something about it was out of whack with our world. It didn't mesh with my world view. It was *off*—ever so slightly askew with the tropes and conventions of the supernatural battle genre. *That's* why it felt like it was breaking the rules to me. There were no clear and concrete rules binding our powers in the first place, of course, but it did fly in the face of an unspoken rule of supernatural battle stories that had applied across all corners of the genre since time immemorial: one person, one power.

This is another of those intuitive things that's hard to put into words, so the best way I can describe it is through example: it was why any one given person could only eat a single Devil Fruit or have a single Stand. There would always be exceptions to that rule, of course, and the style and world-building of a series could seriously shake it up as well, but I still think it's reasonable to say that "each character gets one power" was a very common stance for works in the genre to take.

From *that* perspective in particular, *Over Element* was off. It was understandable when magic-wielding characters could use every element, but Hatoko had the power to *rule* over all of them. That just wasn't the same thing.

I couldn't explain why, but it *wasn't*. It felt like...like if someone had *somehow* gotten hold of all three of the starter Pokémon in the first generation games, even though they'd never done any trading at all. It existed in a dimension of its own in the power scale. It felt like cheating in the true, original meaning of the word.

Alternatively, maybe what I was feeling was anxiety. After all, the fact that a character who could use all five elements was present in our story meant that we couldn't ever introduce characters who only had one element each. I couldn't help but worry that the range of potential powers had been narrowed dramatically...

...Oh. No, I mean— It's *not* what you think, for the record! I'm not griping because I think that Hatoko's power was an unambiguous upgrade of mine at all! I'm not *that* petty, honestly. The day I learned the nature of the powers the two of us had been given, I went home, bawled my eyes out, and that was the end of it—no more resentment from then on out. It didn't bother me at all anymore. Sure, I might've made like the mothers of the protagonists in a certain basketball manga and a certain other sumo manga, apologizing to my flame for not having been able to make it hotter, but that didn't mean it'd *bothered* me at all!

Anyway, moving along! This probably goes without saying, but just in case, I should clarify that I didn't mean any of this as criticism of Hatoko or *Over Element* itself. All I'm saying is that the power *kinda* felt like cheating. It felt off—like it was slightly askew of the usual standards—and try as I might, I couldn't rid myself of that odd sense of wrongness. Her power existed ever so slightly outside of the usual supernatural battle framework, like it or not.

It was like something was slightly wrong. Like there'd been a slight but fundamental mistake. I could never quite describe the anxiety I felt in a satisfactory way, but *Over Element* certainly made me feel it.

"All right! Sorry for the wait, Hatoko. It's finally your turn now!"

"Great! I'll do my best, Juu!"

School was out for the day, and I found myself in the club room with Hatoko.

We'd reached the fourth of our one-on-one interviews in what felt like no time at all. Tomoyo's *Closed Clock*, Chifuyu's *World Create*, and Sayumi's *Route of Origin* had all received their names, and now it was Hatoko's turn. I'd figured that she'd be going second at one point in time, but then we skipped right past her to do Chifuyu's instead, for some weird reason. Now, at long last, Hatoko would finally have her turn in the spotlight.

"Hey, Juu. You already thought up names for Tomoyo's, Chifuyu's, and Sayumi's powers, right?" asked Hatoko.

"That's right," I replied. "The two of us are the only ones left now."

"I thought so! I guess you must be used to this by now, then. It sounds like we might wrap this up pretty quickly!"

"You...utter *imbecile*!" I bellowed.

I was just joking around, of course—I wasn't *actually* angry with her. Hatoko was the one person who I could make this sort of joke with and know it wouldn't be taken the wrong way.

"Listen up, Hatoko: the path of naming is never-ending! The moment you tell yourself that you've gotten *used* to it is the moment your skills start to atrophy! The moment you grow complacent and let yourself believe you've perfected your craft is the moment you start to decay! You must always strive to greater and greater heights, or your sense for names will inevitably abandon you! And also...what do you *mean*, 'We might wrap this up pretty quickly'?!"

"U-Umm... Is making up names really that intense...?"

"Yes, it is. It's *incredibly* intense, and *you*, Hatoko, lack the resolve to take it on!"

"Th-The resolve?"

"Indeed. The resolve! The resolve to strive for the ultimate name for your power, no matter how long you have to spend thinking and no matter how much effort you must expend in the process!"

Hatoko gave me a look.

"I found *my* resolve long ago. It's as firm and unshakable as could be. I, for

one, will *never* waver, never compromise on completing a name that satisfies me, even if it takes an eternity! After all,” I added, “this, well...it’s *your* power’s name, Hatoko.”

This time, Hatoko let out a gasp. “J-Juu... You really care that much...?”

“Heh! That’s a given. It’s what anyone would do for their comrade in arms.”

Hatoko hesitated for just a moment longer, then nodded. “Okay, then. You were right, Juu,” she said, her expression full of emotion. “I...really wasn’t resolved enough, it looks like. But I’m okay now, though! I’m just as resolved as you are, even! We’ll think up a name for my power, no matter how long it takes!”

“All right! Now that’s the spirit, Hatoko!”

“Okay! First things first, I’ll go back home to grab some bedding and a change of clothes. I’ll be back soon! Oh, and I’ll get something for us to have for dinner too!”

“Hooold up! Wait, wait, wait!” I shouted, leaping up to frantically hold Hatoko back before she dashed out of the club room in a fit of enthusiasm. “Just how many nights are you planning on staying here?!”

“Umm... About a week’s worth or so?”

“As friggin’ if! And even if we could, I don’t wanna!”

“Huuuh? But you’re the one who just said that we’d keep trying no matter how long it took, weren’t you?”

“W-Well, yeah, but...that’s different, you know? Like, we’ll take as much time as we have to, but we still have to go home before the school locks up for the night.”

“Really...? But you said you’d never, *ever* waver...”

“Yeah, well...it’s important to know how to waver unwaveringly, sometimes. Right, yeah—in short, I’m not wavering on wavering!”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Hatoko wailed.

Oh, don’t worry, Hatoko. It doesn’t make any sense to me either.

“So was your resolve *not* unwavering after all, Juu?”

“I mean, y’know...it’s one of those things. Like, you know how making buildings out of hard, stiff materials actually makes it easier for them to collapse? You need to include a certain amount of softer, more flexible materials to make them sturdy enough to withstand natural disasters. Toughness and flexibility are two sides of the same coin, so it’s fine for your resolve to be a little flexible from time to time too.”

“The one thing that’s flexible here is your explanation for all this,” Hatoko said with an exasperated sigh. “Aww. And here I thought we’d get to have a sleepover.”

“Why do you sound disappointed about that...? That gets a big no thank you from me. No way I’d ever want to sleep over at school,” I replied.

“Why not? Isn’t there something exciting about the thought of being in school at nighttime?”

“Not for me, there isn’t. Not even a little...”

“Huh? Why do you look so gloomy, Juu?”

“No reason.”

“You wouldn’t be scared of being at school at night, right...? You’ve always seemed just fine with ghost stories and places that are supposed to be haunted, so— *Oh*. Are you thinking about that one time?”

“Ugh!”

My words caught in my throat. I *was* thinking about that one time—a time I could never forget, from back in my first year of middle school. I’d decided to sneak into our middle school at nighttime, all on my own. My only reasoning for pulling that stunt? “Because the school at night was there.”

Midnight. A deserted school. At the time, that image was all it took to hype me the heck up. I was convinced that I’d run into *something*, like a warrior who fought the otherworldly forces of evil in secret, or evidence of a large-scale magical ritual being carried out in the building, or something.

Driven by curiosity and elevated expectations, I’d surreptitiously unlocked

one of the schoolhouse's windows before going home for the day. Then, in the dead of night, I'd sneaked out of my house and into the abandoned school. And there, lying in wait for me...had been a painful initiation in the ways of the world, courtesy of Japan's cutting-edge security technology.

An alarm blared. I panicked. A bunch of big, muscle-bound adults came running. I *really* panicked. The teachers arrived. I desperately apologized. My parents were called in. I started bawling. It was a thoroughly traumatizing experience all around, and ever since then, I'd hated the idea of being in school after dark. It took ages before I stopped wincing at all the battle scenes set in schools at nighttime that you see in manga and anime.

"Boy, that kind of takes me back! You were depressed for a whole week after all that happened, Juu!"

"Don't remind me... And look, the point is that sleepovers at school are out of the question. That's just common sense. We have to work out a name for your power before they lock this place up for the night."

"That would be in...about two hours, I think? Is that gonna be long enough?"

"Yeah, it'll be fine. Spending a ton of time on a name doesn't necessarily make it better, anyway," I said. I *really* wanted to ask which moron it was who'd given that speech a moment ago about how we'd keep going no matter how long it took, even though I *knew* that would mean roasting myself, but I held back the urge and just kept things moving along. "Sometimes having restrictions or a deadline or something can actually make these things turn out better than if you let yourself take forever on them."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. I mean, probably."

I wasn't a creator myself, so this was all speculation on my part, but I got the impression that all the manga authors, writers, illustrators, composers, songwriters, and on and on—all the creatives of this world, basically—were constantly hounded and harried by the specter of looming deadlines. To them, a deadline was probably something like a terrible monster that constantly stalked you, doing its best to drive you into a corner, and thus, to your doom.

That said, I had to wonder: would a world without deadlines really be all that much better? If someone told those creatives “take all the time you want—just let us know when it’s done,” would they be able to work at the same level of performance they usually displayed? There’s a certain well-known anime quote turned internet meme that goes “Even an idiot can write a masterpiece novel if they spend twenty years working on it,” but was that *really* true?

Imagine if someone told you that you had twenty years to write a novel. I think the majority of people, given that task, would spend the first fifteen years or so goofing off and not writing at all. The idiots, meanwhile, would goof off for closer to nineteen and a half years before finally buckling down. You see novels and movies advertising themselves with phrases like “a masterpiece a decade in the making!” all the time, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that their creator *actually* spent that decade hard at work on their piece of fiction. They probably had tons of other stories and other work to worry about for a huge chunk of that time.

What I’m trying to say here is this: there’s no guarantee that spending a bunch of time on something will result in that something turning out as a masterpiece. Maybe it’s the restrictions imposed by deadlines—the limited amount of time to finish a piece of fiction driving its author to work their hardest on it—that causes masterpieces to be born. People always say that making something good takes time, sure, and there was certainly an element of truth to that, but on the flip side, I figured that some things could *only* be created because there was a limited amount of time within which they could be worked on.

“No point dragging this out, right? Let’s make our goal to have a name for your power ready by the time we have to leave and do our best to make it happen,” I said.

“Sure. Sounds good,” said Hatoko. “I guess it’s the same as studying. Spending a whole day not paying much attention and studying bit by bit has always felt a lot less effective to me than picking out a specific, shorter amount of time to really focus in.”

“Yeah. And I mean, honestly, I’m pretty used to this whole interview-based naming process by this point. I think we might wrap this up pretty quickly.”

“I sure hope so— *Wait!* That’s the exact same thing you chewed me out for saying just a minute ago, isn’t it?!”

Looks like I’m speaking with Delayed Comeback Hatoko, then.

We had a goal now: to finish naming Hatoko’s power by the time we had to leave for the evening! With that objective established, it was time to kick off the interview proper.

“All right, Hatoko. To start, do you have any particular requests for your power’s name?”

“Hmm. Not really, no! To be honest, I don’t understand any of this.”

“Ahh, yeah. Figures,” I said. I don’t mean this as criticism at all, but coming up with power names just wasn’t a thing people did in the reality that Hatoko lived in.

“But, I mean, it’d be boring if I just said I don’t get it and let that be the end of it! I wanna try thinking it through, but...” She sank into gloom partway through her explanation. “No matter how hard I think about it, I still don’t know where to start. My power’s really complicated, after all. It can do so many things, so I have no idea what I could even pick...”

“No need to feel bad about it. I think your power’s a tough one too.”

Frankly, Hatoko’s power really was tricky. She’d hit the nail on the head: it could do so many things that narrowing our options down to come up with a single name was rough. I’d complained in the last story about how *Route of Origin* was such a formless, ambiguous power that it was hard to put a name on it, and this time I found myself facing rather similar circumstances.

Five distinct elements. Five individual powers. When I tried to think up a name that would express all five of them as an all-encompassing whole, I found myself at a loss. I didn’t know where to start.

“It’s basically five powers in one, after all... And having to pack all of that into two words makes it even harder,” I sighed.

Two English words that had to be nine characters long when written in

Japanese. Such was the pattern that I'd settled on for our powers' names (though I hadn't actually told anyone about the second requirement).

"You're right about that, Juu. Only having two words to work with is really hard. How are you supposed to express all five things I can do with only two words? We have less than half the space we need!"

"I'm...not sure the math works out quite that cleanly, but yeah, that's the basic issue. Two words is a nasty limit."

"If it weren't for the word limit, I would've said that *Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Light* would be a good name for it."

"Absolutely not!"

"Huh? Why?"

"Because it's way too direct! That's just listing off everything your power can do!"

"Oh, and that's bad? I thought it'd be easy to understand. And easy to remember too!"

"Being easy to understand isn't always a good thing, for your information."

A power's name couldn't be too straightforward...but at the same time, it also couldn't be *totally* unrelated to its function either. The space between a name that was too direct and a name that wasn't direct enough was tightrope-thin, and you had to walk that tightrope with the greatest of care, striking an exquisite balance between the two.

"Do you really think so? Wouldn't it be better for powers to have names that let you understand what they do the moment you hear them?" asked Hatoko.

"Absolutely not. If you can understand what a power does the second you hear its name, that means you've failed," I replied. "Just think about it—that would mean that the moment your enemies found out your power's name, they'd know everything that it can do, right? You can't afford to give a power a name that's that simple, from a security perspective alone."

"Huh? But wait—if that's the problem, then wouldn't it make more sense to not give your power a name at all?"

I froze. That...was an *exceptionally* difficult question for me to answer.

I mean, sure, that's technically true. All that thinking up names for your power and attacks accomplishes is putting yourself at risk. Shouting them out mid-battle telegraphs your next attack like nothing else, and it's not unheard-of for characters to deduce how someone's power works by seeing through the hints left in its name, or in the names of the attacks that use it.

There were any number of meta justifications you could make for the practice of power naming, sure, but when you tried to look at the issue from the perspective of the characters themselves, you'd inevitably hit a dead end. I had to wonder: just what did all the characters I loved so much think about the names of their own powers and attacks?

"Anyway, Hatoko, we've already decided that we're giving all of our powers names. This isn't the time to be raising that fundamental of an objection!" I said, forcing the conversation back onto its rails.

"Oh, that's right!" Hatoko exclaimed with a clap of her hands. It seemed she'd remembered something. "Speaking of giving things names, you gave me one back in the day, didn't you? Why don't we use that as inspiration?"

"Wait, what? I did? Really?"

"Yeah! Back in elementary school, remember? It was a nickname—*Flaming Phoenix!*"

"Oooh, *that.*"

Those words took me on a trip straight down memory lane. I'm pretty sure it happened during the first few years of elementary school. Since Hatoko's last name, Kushikawa, sounded like the word for chicken skin yakitori, and her first name included the word "hato," meaning pigeon—another bird—the kids in our class had started calling her "Yakitori" as a nickname.

It wasn't nearly bad enough to be classified as bullying, in my opinion. The kids who called her that weren't trying to be mean or make her feel bad at all—they just wanted to be closer friends with her, so they'd decided to call her by a nickname to make that happen. Hatoko, however, had hated it. She'd taken great care to never let it show, perhaps out of concern for how it would make

her friends feel if they found out...but I could tell right away.

And so, I'd decided to give Hatoko a new nickname. I'd thought that if I bequeathed her an original, malevolent title, her old, loathsome one would be purified in the process. And the title I'd thought up to play the central role in that scheme...was *Flaming Phoenix*.

As for how it turned out...well, let's just say that I did, at the very least, accomplish my objective. Everyone stopped calling Hatoko Yakitori, though the fact that their reasoning was "If we have to call you a stupid name like *Flaming Phoenix*, we'd rather call you Hatoko like normal" made it kinda hard to feel like I'd really *won*. Still, Hatoko was happy, and that's what really mattered in the end.

"I can't believe you still remember that," I said.

"Of course I do!" said Hatoko. "You worked so hard to think that name up for me, after all. Actually, you know what? Why don't we just use *that* for my power's name?"

"What, you mean *Flaming Phoenix*?"

"Yeah!"

"Nah, that wouldn't work. It's too unrelated to your actual power," I explained. Honestly, even if she did have a purely fire-based power, I would've been opposed to her using that name.

Man. Flaming Phoenix, really...?

All I can say is yup, I sure was young back then. It was a simple, uncreative name that lacked the slightest hint of chuuni edge. It felt less like the product of eighth-grade syndrome and more like the product of *second*-grade syndrome. It was a relic of an era in which I didn't know the first thing about thematic complexity. Having it repeated back to me after all this time was actually making me feel a little embarrassed. Like, the fact that I'd used "flaming" *and* "phoenix" despite the fact that being on fire was phoenixes' *whole* thing was almost perfectly mortifying...

"Okay, then how about we use one of the other versions of *Flaming Phoenix*?" Hatoko suggested.

“What do you mean, one of the other versions?” I asked.

“You don’t remember? When *Flaming Phoenix* didn’t stick with my friends, you came up with a bunch of different versions of the name to try to convince them to use it.”

“Oh...okay, yeah, I might remember that just a little. Only vaguely, though.” The only part that I remembered clearly was the tragic conclusion of the story, that being that the name had never stuck in any form. The process by which we got there was more or less a blur. “Why, what’d I come up with?”

“Umm, well, first, you tried writing it in the English alphabet instead of Japanese. You said that ‘The alphabet’s hella cool, so they’ll use it for sure this way!’”

I winced. *Ayup, that’s a grade schooler for you. At that age, the alphabet might as well be the coolest thing humanity’s ever invented.*

“Then you tried abbreviating it to *FF*, next.”

“Oh?”

Actually, that does sort of ring a bell. FF, huh? Not bad at all.

The best thing about words written in the English alphabet is that they can end up looking *super* friggin’ cool when you turn them into acronyms. Take D4C, for instance, or IWGP. Of course, nowadays I’d know better than to go with an acronym like *FF* that calls an already famous franchise to mind.

There’s just one thing—one tiny little nitpick that I’d like to communicate to my past self. Listen up, elementary-school me. Flaming is fine. No issues there at all. The thing is, though...Phoenix...starts with a P. As in, not an F. The acronym you were looking for was FP. Way to make the actual oldest mistake in the book, past me...

“But in the end, *FF* didn’t catch on either, so you decided to add another F and see what would happen. You renamed it *Phantom Flaming Phoenix*...so, *FFF*.”

Oh, did I? The idea of taking a name that didn’t work and slapping another letter onto it was so simpleminded, it was almost cute. There was a real sense

of childish innocence there, and even though we were talking about things that I myself had done, I couldn't help but feel a little charmed by my old antics.

That said: there's one bit of that that's not charming at all. It's Phantom, past me. Phantom, with a P. It's the tragedy of P all over again. I know exactly how this happened—you saw the Dragoon Phantom in Beyblade's F Series and assumed they got it right, didn't you? That was a Beyblade-original spelling, not real English.

"Then after FFF, you said 'It looks like I'll have to bring out my ultimate weapon' and gave it another new name."

"D-Did I actually say it in those words...?"

O-Oh, no. I have a terrible feeling about this. I can see the punch line coming a mile away.

"You came up with *Ultimate Phantom Flaming Phoenix*, or AFFF."

Yup! A mile away! It's Ultimate, past me! Not "alltimate"! I understand exactly how you feel, but it's a U, I swear!

"Then, when your ultimate weapon didn't work out, you said 'In that case, I'll just have to surpass my limits' and came up with yet another name: *Unlimited Ultimate Phantom Flaming Phoenix*...or OAFFF."

Unlimited! Not "onlimited"! It's the tragedy of U all over again! Yes, "unlimited" is a ridiculously cool piece of vocabulary, but if you screw up writing it, it looks ridiculously lame instead! Imagine if they'd abbreviated Unlimited Blade Works as OBW! That'd be career-endingly humiliating!

"Then, when surpassing your limits didn't work, you decided to supersize the name, making it *Giant Unlimited Ultimate Phantom Flaming Phoenix*. ZOAFFF, for short."

Z?! Seriously, Z?! You could've at least gone with J! Nobody would've blamed you for making that mistake! Who would ever think that giant was spelled with a friggin' Z?!

For crying out loud...what was wrong with me back in elementary school?! Had I just memorized the alphabet earlier that week or something?! Was I at

that age when you want to use the alphabet for everything, even though you don't actually understand it at all?! God, was I one of those elementary schoolers who gets cocky and writes their name in English on tests?! If I was, I'd bet that I was bad enough at it that I ended up writing "ONDO ZURI" or something and looked like a total loser in the end!

"Then when going supersized didn't help, you finally decided to—"

"Enough! Please, just stop, Hatoko! Let my humiliating history stay buried where it belongs!"

My capacity for shame was nearing its limit. Tomoyo and Sayumi made fun of me by calling me "the living embodiment of cringe" and "a man who actively wallows in edgy fantasies" and stuff like that all the time, and while I certainly did bask in the sinful, profoundly immoral allure of the behaviors they were talking about...the stuff that Hatoko was bringing up now brought on a sort of shame that I just couldn't deal with. *This* was the cringe that I abhorred. My elementary school self was a *dumbass*.

"Are you sure, Juu? There's still so much of the nickname story that I haven't told yet!" said Hatoko.

"It's not even close to over yet? Seriously...?" I groaned. Apparently, past me had been convinced that the longer a name got, the cooler it would be. It was like he was telling a stupid joke. Next thing you know, Hatoko would be telling me I nicknamed her Jugemu Jugemu. "Anyway, Hatoko...I can't believe you actually remembered that whole ridiculous nickname in the first place," I noted.

"Ha ha ha! I didn't, actually," Hatoko admitted. "Here, look at this."

Hatoko revealed a sheet of paper that she'd apparently been holding just under the table this whole time. It had a frayed edge which hinted that it had been torn out of a notebook.

"I found this in my room just yesterday. You wrote out the whole Flaming Phoenix nickname on here and told me to memorize it."

I let out a strangled gasp. The burst of shame that welled up from deep within me was so powerful, it felt like my head was actually boiling. Hatoko was holding physical proof of the coolest nickname that elementary-school me

could come up with: in other words, a very real sheet taken directly from my very literal cringe compilation. It was proof of youthful mistakes that I could *never* allow myself to fess up to!

“G-Give it here!” I yelped.

“Huuuh? Nuh-uh!” Hatoko replied.

I reached out to snatch the paper from her, but Hatoko dodged away before I made contact. I stood up right away to try again, but she stood up as well, and before I knew it, Hatoko was smiling gleefully as I chased her in circles around the club room.

“I said hand it over!”

“Don’t wanna! This is mine, and I’m keeping it! It’s a priceless treasure that you gave to me!”

“C-Come on! I’ll give you a way better nickname than that one... I mean, mwa ha ha! Why satisfy yourself with a shallow name from my bumbling past self when you could have one that only the grown and experienced me of the present day could ever hope to create?”

“Nooope, don’t want it! I like this one!”

“Ugh... I-If you don’t hand that over right now, I’m through with you!”

“Huh?! No way! You don’t mean it, do you, Juu?!”

Hatoko had driven me into a corner, and I’d lashed out in a profoundly elementary-schooler-like fashion, which, unexpectedly, she took totally seriously. She pumped the brakes and spun around to face me, but I was still sprinting at full tilt to catch her, and, well, the inevitable happened.

“Augh!”

“Eek!”

By that, I mean I ran straight into her and the two of us tumbled to the floor. I tried to cushion her fall reflexively, but it all happened so quickly that my attempt didn’t work out super well. It ended up more or less looking like I’d pushed her to the floor.

“A-Are you okay, Hatoko?!” I yelped.

“Y-Yeah... I’m fi—” Hatoko began, only to cut off with a gasp. Around the time her face flushed scarlet, I realized what position we’d landed in as well.

I’d wrapped my left arm around the back of her head in an effort to make sure she didn’t concuss herself against the floor. My right arm, meanwhile—the accursed arm in which a dark, loathsome power was sealed—had landed somewhere else entirely, and I could feel something *very* soft in the palm of my right hand. So soft, in fact, that its texture came through very distinctly, even through her uniform and the cardigan she wore over it...

“...Gaaaaaahhh?!” I shouted, hurling myself backward on pure reflex. “S-Sorry, Hatoko! Seriously, I’m so sorry!”



© Tetsuya Hasegawa (TRIGGER)

“I-It’s fine, Juu! That was my fault for stopping so suddenly... Plus, if you hadn’t grabbed me, I would’ve hit my head against the floor,” Hatoko babbled at a breakneck pace.

Hatoko’s face was still pretty flushed. I, meanwhile, was still in a state of panic, and since her reassurance didn’t make me feel any less guilty, I kept apologizing over and over.

“I’m really sorry, Hatoko!”

“I-It’s fine, honestly! Don’t worry about it, okay?”

“I’m sorry... Like, I’m so sorry to cause an accidental groping like this, even though we’re in a bonus story that won’t get any illustrations! What a waste, right?”

“*That’s* what you’re apologizing about?!”

“But don’t worry! I’ll talk to the illustrator and make sure that when these stories get compiled into a volume, this scene gets one of the drawings!”

“Why would that make me worry *less*?!”

Okay...so I was in a *major* state of panic, actually.

We picked up our fallen chairs, sat back down, and resumed our interview. Things still felt pretty awkward, if I’m being totally honest, but we didn’t have the luxury of letting that get to us. The clock, after all, was ticking.

“This is bad... We’re in big trouble, Hatoko,” I said.

“I know,” Hatoko agreed. “There’s barely any time left before we have to pack up and go home...”

The school’s gates would indeed be closed soon, but that was not, in fact, what I was worried about. We’d talked about finishing this up before we had to leave, but if the naming discussion ended up dragging into tomorrow, that wouldn’t be a disaster or anything. No, the *real* problem was...

“We’re running *seriously* low on pages here...”

We were down to about a quarter of our allotted page count, and we’d barely

even *mentioned* Hatoko's power so far. We were moving even slower than we had back in the *Route of Origin* story. Plus, my banter with Sayumi had at least included discussion of her power and its name, to some extent, whereas this time we'd basically just been chatting like a couple of totally normal childhood friends. We'd reminisced about the old days, dredged up memories about my shameful past that were better left forgotten, and said basically nothing about power names whatsoever.

"All right, Hatoko—we're picking up the pace! We have to take this seriously, or there's a very real chance we actually won't finish in time," I said.

"Okay, Juu, but the thing is...I don't know what taking this seriously would even mean," said Hatoko.

"To start, let's try a tactic I used on Sayumi: why don't you tell me about the things you like? Like, what are your hobbies?"

"Watching comedy shows, I guess."

"Yup. Figures."

I don't even know why I asked, in retrospect. Hatoko loved comedy, to the point that she could be kind of obnoxiously picky about it. Like, she was a fan of this one show that had comedians try to make a particular member of a live audience laugh, and she got *super* upset whenever the audience member who got picked stubbornly refused to do so, even when the joke was funny.

"It's not like I'm a comedy expert, though," Hatoko continued. "I like watching comedians on TV and online, but it's not like I go to live shows all that often. If someone like me said that they were a comedy fan, then all the *real* comedy fans would probably laugh at them."

"I mean, sure, but who cares? If you like comedy, then it's fine to say so."

"Yeah, I know, but still," Hatoko half-heartedly replied.

I could actually really understand where she was coming from. "Yeah, it's just one of those things, right? Sometimes it's hard to say you like something when you don't know the subject from top to bottom, or whatever."

"Right! That's exactly it," said Hatoko. "There was this one time in middle

school when I heard a song in a commercial that I really liked, so I rented the CD it was on to listen to it. Then I ended up talking about it with a classmate...and she turned out to be such a big fan of that band, she owned *all* their singles and albums. When I said that I really liked that one song, she was all ‘Don’t even talk to me about it until you’ve listened to this one, this one, and this one too’...”

“God, right? People always end up going on about how you’re not a *real* fan if you didn’t buy the CD, or how you’re not a *real* fan if you’re not in the fan club.”

I’d always thought that sort of thing was stupid. I sure as heck didn’t want to live in a world where you had to know something from top to bottom if you wanted to say that you liked it.

Who even cares, seriously? Say you’ve only ever seen a particular musician’s stuff on YouTube and haven’t bought even a single one of their CDs. That doesn’t mean that you can’t call yourself their fan! So what if you only start watching an anime because it’s super popular and then get hooked on its source material? What difference does it make?

The way I saw it, the sort of people who would gatekeep like that, calling people “fake fans” or whatever, were really just trying to make *themselves* feel like they were somehow special. Of course, that being said, if I were in their position, I’d probably end up saying the exact same sort of stuff. Hearing someone talk with an air of authority about a work in a genre they *clearly* don’t know the first thing about could be really frustrating, and the impulse to brand them a fake fan would be tough to resist. Perhaps, I reflected, the true fans vs. fake fans conflict was simply unresolvable.

“Anyway, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with saying that you like the things you like,” I said, trying to convince myself as much as I was trying to convince Hatoko.

I wanted to make my stance on that issue as unambiguous as possible. I was doing my best to fulfill a promise that I’d made to myself back in the eighth grade—that is, in the year I’d abandoned my chuunibyou. I’d sworn back then to learn from the terrible example set by a certain young man who’d never hesitated to bash the things he hated. I’d be his opposite: a person who would always extol the virtues of the things he loved.

“Sure, some people might make fun of you for it, but even if they do, life’s still way more fun when you’re open about the things you like. If you’re into comedy, then you should stand tall and proud and tell it to the world!” I declared.

“Yeah... You’re right,” said Hatoko.

“Right...? Actually, wait. We wrapped that tangent up on a really nice note, but we’re super off topic again! We’ve *gotta* focus on that name, or we’ll—”

“Hey, Juu?” Hatoko said, totally ignoring my appeal for focus. “I don’t really know that much about comedy...but do you really think it’s still okay for me to say that I’m a fan of it?”

“Y-Yeah, I do.”

“So then, would it also be okay for an amateur like me to play at being a comedian?”

“Uh...huh?”

“To tell the truth,” Hatoko said as she gingerly laid a notebook on the table in front of me, “when I found that piece of paper with the whole *Flaming Phoenix* name on it, I found this too.”

The notebook that Hatoko seemed so apprehensive about had a single-line title written upon it: “Hatoko’s Super-Duper Funny Comedy Scripts!!!”

“Wait...isn’t this that old notebook you used to write all your comedy sketch ideas down in?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah...” Hatoko muttered.

“Or, well, you *said* they were your ideas, but most of them were just total ripoffs of comedians who were popular at the time.”

“Y-You didn’t have to say that part!” Hatoko wailed, tears already pooling in the corners of her eyes.

“So, what about it? I mean, I get that you found it in your room, but why’d you bring it here with you?” I asked. I would’ve thought that to Hatoko, that notebook would be a compilation of her past misdeeds that was best left sealed away forever.

“Well, umm... When I found it yesterday, I decided to give it a read again and got really nostalgic about it. A lot of the jokes and sketches were really awful...but there was one two-person sketch that I thought might actually be pretty funny after all.”

“Oh?”

“So I...umm...” Hatoko began, only to pause and hesitate for several seconds. Finally, she seemed to resolve herself and spoke up once more. “I was thinking it’d be fun to try doing a readthrough of the sketch with you, Juu...”

“You... *Huh?* W-With *me?*”

“Yeah.”

“So... You want to try doing a comedy sketch with me?”

“Yeah,” Hatoko said again with a bashful nod.

Now *that* suggestion was out of left field. I was completely taken aback.

“I-It’s fine if you don’t want to!” Hatoko shouted. “I don’t want you to force yourself or anything.”

“I mean, I’m not that against it... But we’re the only ones here, right? Isn’t the whole point of comedy to perform to an audience?”

“Th-Th-There’s no way I could do it if anyone else was here! That’d be so embarrassing!”

“Hmm. Fair enough, I guess.”

“I’m not planning on making this into an actual show or anything like that! It’s just that I happened to find it at exactly the right time, so I thought it’d be fun to do a run-through of it with you to mark the occasion, that’s all...” Hatoko explained, her voice growing quieter and quieter with every passing word.

There was no way I could turn her down after she’d made such an obvious effort to work up the courage to ask me. “All right, sure. I’m in,” I replied.

“Really?!” Suddenly, Hatoko was beaming like the sun itself. That look on her face alone made me feel like giving her the okay was worth it...that is, until her ebullient next suggestion completely destroyed the heartwarming atmosphere.

“Okay, then I’ll be the straight man, and you can be the silly one!”

“...”

I had a *terrible* feeling about where this was going.

It’s-a-go-go-go-go-go-go-go-go-go!

Whoa-whoa! Whoa-whoa!

“Hello, hello, everyone!”

“Hey, there!”

“Boy, just look at us, Juu! We’re finally here!”

“We sure are, Hatoko!”

“We’ve always dreamed of performing in the M-1 Grand Prix finals, and we finally made it!”

“...Y-Yeah. Yup. We sure did.”

“...”

“...Wait, is it my line? O-Okay, Hatoko! I think it’s time for us to show off our super-duper funny comedy act, just like usual!”

“You know it! Our super-duper funny... Wait, stop raising the bar for us!”
Thwap. “Come on, Juu! The higher you set their expectations, the harder it’ll be to live up to them!”

“Yeah...seriously. Anyway, wow! This sure is the finals, all right—just look at that crowd! A whole hall packed full of people, and a bunch of them are real beauties too! Look, there’s one beauty, and another beauty to her right...and another to *her* left, and—”

“Whaddya mean, her left?!” *Thwap.* “Come on, Juu, you can’t just turn partway through the row! If you’ve got one beauty sitting to the right of another beauty, then of course the second beauty’s gonna have another to her left!”

“Yeah. Yeah, she...she sure is.”

“By the way, Juu, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you about!”

“Oh? What is it, Hatoko?”

“So, I went to a restaurant the other day, and they brought me the wrong food! I would’ve felt bad about pointing out their mistake, though, so I didn’t say anything and just ate the dish they gave me instead.”

“Ahh, yeah, I know that feeling. You really should tell them when stuff like that happens, though.”

“I know! But it’s so hard sometimes!”

“Okay, then I’ll show you how it’s done! I’ll get that order sorted out lickety-split!”

“You don’t mind?”

“It’s all ju-right, because I’m Ju-rai!”

“Hmm. You’re in really good form today, huh? Okay, then, I’ll be the waitress, and you can be the customer... Wait, Juu, what’s wrong? I don’t think I’ve seen you scowl *and* blush at the same time like that before!”

“Yeah, it’s...it’s fine. I’m fine. Just a couple new emotional wounds I’ll have to work through someday...”

“Huh? Well, if you say so. Okay, let’s get started! So, umm... Did you need something, sir?”

“Yeah, sorry—this isn’t my order. I wanted the ‘mystery chef’s mystery omelet rice, topped with mystery demi-glace.’”

“That’s too many mysteries!” *Thwap.* “*Way* too many mysteries, Juu! How could you even tell if they served you the right dish at that point? It’s a mystery why anyone would even eat there! One more time, from the top! Did you need something, sir?”

“Yeah, sorry—this isn’t my order. I wanted the ‘stewed substances we found lying by the road.’”

“Oh, don’t you *dare* eat that!” *Thwap.* “You’re way too open to new culinary experiences, Juu! Why would you order something that nasty?! Is someone

blackmailing you into it? Take three! Did you need something, sir?”

“Yeah, this isn’t my order. I wanted the ‘European-Japanese-American-Korean-Chinese-fusion curry.’”

“Now *that’s* a global dish!” *Thwap*. “You can’t fuse *that* many countries, Juu! It’d feel like a trip around the world in a single meal! And the fact that you *didn’t* have India on the list really says something about how the chef feels about curry!”

“...”

“Come on, Juu, take this seriously! No more weird orders—I need a *real* example. Did you need something, sir?”

“Ah, no, umm... Th-This isn’t...”

“And now you’re all shy?!” *Thwap*. “You have to be more decisive, Juu! Get it done lickety-split! Did you need something, sir?”

“I’d like to speak with the chef!”

“Not what I’m looking for!” *Thwap*. “That was decisive, but in the wrong direction! You call the chef out to *compliment* their food, not to complain! You’re doing even worse than I did now!”

“Oh, whatever, it’s fine! I can do whatever I want, and no one gets to complain!”

“And now you’re acting super high and mighty?!”

“Well, I *am* high and mighty. Don’t you know what they say? The customer...is always right!”

“Oh, give it a rest!”

“Thanks for watching, everyone!”

“...”

I was dead. My body was still functioning fine, but my spirit was firmly deceased. The instant our performance ended, I’d lost the will to stand and crumpled on the spot, coming to rest on the floor of the club room. My face

was so burning hot, I could hardly believe it. It was *way* hotter than the black fire my power let me create.

That performance was rough. It was *really* rough. I'd never felt so disgraced and humiliated throughout all sixteen years of my life up to that point, and I was confident that as long as I lived, I'd never go through a more soul-shattering event. Even in my previous lives—even in whatever was to come after this life ended—I was confident that no trauma would ever gouge its way into my psyche more violently than that sketch had.

What was rough about it? Everything. Hatoko's comedy sketch...just hadn't been very funny at all. To be blunt: it was just plain boring. The fact that it had nailed the *format* of a two-person comedy sketch perfectly in spite of being boring as sin just made it worse. At least if it had been a complete failure across the board, there might've been some ironic entertainment to be found in it. Being forced to take part in a bottom-tier average comedy skit—and worse still, being forced to play the comedian who says all the stupid stuff in it—was more excruciating than I ever could've believed before experiencing it for myself. I felt like I might literally gag on the shame of it all.

I hadn't been playing the straight man, and yet the urge to call out the stupidity in every single line had been almost overwhelming. Like, why did it have to be set in the finals of the M-1 Grand Prix, Japan's single biggest comedy contest? The skit had made a joke of itself before the jokes even started! Oh, and the M-1's entrance music—that is, the go-go-go, whoa-whoa bit? She'd had me more or less sing that a capella...

There was enough terrible stuff in that skit for me to keep complaining for days, but that would take, well, days, so I'll go ahead and hold off on it. There's just one last thing that I absolutely have to call out, though: "It's all ju-right, because I'm Ju-rai"? Are you friggin' *kidding* me?! Was that supposed to be my catchphrase?! It was *awful*!

"W-Well, what did you think, Juu? Was the sketch I thought up...you know, funny?" Hatoko nervously asked as I lay there on the floor like some sort of giant caterpillar carcass.

I wiped the tears that had started streaming down my cheeks before I'd even

realized it and glanced up, only to find Hatoko gazing down at me with a look of nervous anticipation in her eyes. All I could say in the face of *that* expression was...was...

“...I-I mean, it was pretty good.”

“R-Really?!”

“Y-Yeah. B-But I don’t think it’s the sort of sketch that a mainstream audience would be able to appreciate, y’know...? I mean, *I* liked it, but who knows, right? I *did* like it, though.”

“Okay! I’m just glad you thought it was good.”

“Hey, Hatoko...? Just for the record, we’re *not* doing this skit in front of other people, okay? Not because it’s bad or anything, but, uh...I’d just get too nervous. Stage fright, y’know?”

“Yeah, that’s fine! Don’t worry—this was just a special occasion. I’m totally satisfied now. Thanks, Juu!” Hatoko said, flashing me the smile of an angel.

I guess if it made her that happy, then having my heart shattered into a million pieces was worth it...

“*Wait* a minute! This is so not the time for this!” I bellowed out of the blue. I’d played along with that gag for *way* too long before finally calling it out.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Juu?” asked Hatoko.

“What’s wrong?! *Everything’s* wrong! We still haven’t even *started* figuring out what to name your power!”

“Oooh. Now that you mention it!”

“Oh, crap... We’re seriously in it deep this time. It’s this late in the process, and we haven’t even nailed down a single word? This is *really* bad!”

“Ah, you’re right! It’s almost time for the school to lock up. We’d better start getting ready to leave.”

She wasn’t wrong about that—we were in a bad situation in terms of the time of day too—but the *real* problem was our page count. We’d spent all that space without even *alluding* to Hatoko’s power, and now we were paying the price!

This was the worst possible moment to waste a bunch of pages on a comedy sequence!

“Okay, Juu! Let’s walk home together!”

“No, no, wait a second, Hatoko. We can’t just leave! Or, well, we can’t just end the story like that! We have a system for these things, and we have to actually depict the moment we decide on your power’s name, or else—”

“It’s fine,” said Hatoko with a brilliant, kindly smile. “After all...the truth is, you’ve already thought up a name, haven’t you?”

“Huh...?”

“A name for my power. You’ve already thought one up, right?”

I was taken aback, and for a moment, I didn’t say a word. The shock had left me completely petrified, but eventually, I was able to open my mouth and choke out the words “H-How...How’d you know?”

Hatoko was right. I really did already have an idea for a name. Not even just an idea, in fact—in my mind, it might as well have already been set in stone.

The night before, while I’d been busy doing a bunch of research to prepare for our interview, the idea had come to me in a flash. Sometimes, you can think and think without ever having any good ideas, but sometimes, the opposite happens, and the perfect concept just *appears* in your mind after barely any thought at all.

The name I’d come up with for Hatoko’s power: The lord of five aspects, *Over Element*. The “five aspects,” of course, referred to the five elements she controlled, and since her power all but transcended the concept of elements itself, “over” seemed like the perfect word to describe her relation to them. I know I’m singing my own praises here, but it really felt like the title perfectly set up the name in a really cool sort of way, and it satisfied the two words and nine Japanese characters requirements exactly.

It just felt *right* to me—so much so that I would’ve had a hard time accepting anything else. That said, I couldn’t call off the interview this late in the game, so I’d plotted to act like I was discussing the name with Hatoko for just long enough to plant the seeds for me to act like I’d come up with *Over Element* on

the spot. That plan had failed spectacularly, but now...

“What gave it away, Hatoko?” I asked.

“Hmm. There wasn’t one big thing, really,” Hatoko replied. “I could sort of just tell by the look on your face, that’s all.”

I gaped at her.

“I’m sure you know that I can’t tell what you’re thinking a lot of the time...but what I *can* tell is what sort of faces you make at times like these. I’ve known you for ages, after all,” Hatoko said, looking a little proud of herself.

I almost had to laugh. I was frustrated, but happy in equal measure. I’d thought that I’d put on a pretty darn good show, but apparently, it hadn’t been enough to pull the wool over my childhood friend’s eyes.

“So c’mon, Juu, tell me! What did you pick for my power’s name?”

“*Over Element*. The lord of five aspects, *Over Element*.”

“Hmm. Okay, then!”

“Are you sure you’re okay with that? This was one hundred percent my idea—we didn’t even talk about it!”

“Yeah, that’s fine. If that’s what you picked, then it’s fine with me.”

“Okay, then... Mwa ha ha! I, the man who was granted free rein over the name for your power, have bequeathed it with the title it’s due! Take care not to forget it!”

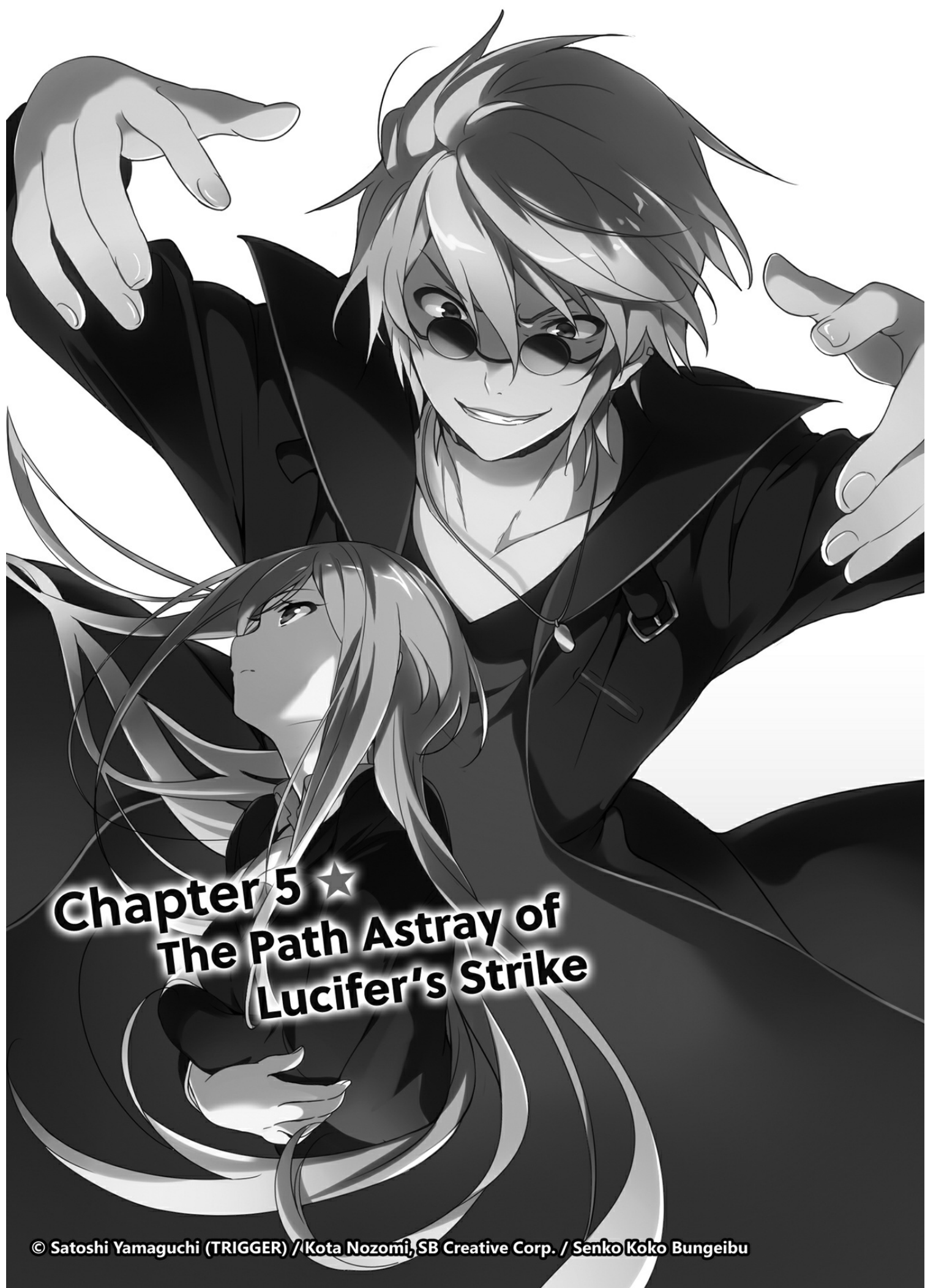
“Don’t worry, I remember! It’s *Oven Element*, right?”

“No, it’s *not*! *Over Element*! *Over*!”

And so, Hatoko’s power got its name. The core concept of these stories was to depict the process by which we’d come up with each of our powers’ names, and it felt like we’d strayed pretty far from that this time around...but eh, sometimes it’s fine to decide these things in a slightly off sort of way. Hatoko’s power was a little off in and of itself, after all.

The lord of five aspects, *Over Element*—a power that seemed to diverge from the foundational rules of the supernatural battle genre and thus seemed kind of

cheaty to me as a result. At that point, I hadn't really analyzed why I felt that way at all yet. It was just a slight, offhanded thought that I didn't make much of. It wouldn't be until much later on—until after I'd come to understand the misbuttoned shirt that was our relationship—that I'd finally realize what it was that had been bothering me that whole time.



Chapter 5 ★
The Path Astray of
Lucifer's Strike

Chapter 5: The Path Astray of Lucifer's Strike

The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, *Lucifer's Strike*—this was the title that had been bestowed upon Kiryuu Hajime and, by extension, the name of the power he'd awakened to, which granted him the ability to desecrate the force of gravity itself. The one who had bestowed it, needless to say, was none other than Hajime himself. Between “the ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them” serving as its tediously long-winded intro and the English words “*Lucifer's Strike*” providing a foreign flair, it was a truly elegant and awesome name for a power to have...according to Hajime and no one else.

If you want *my* impression of the name, then honestly, all I can say is “Man, that sure is long.” The intro on its own was *eighteen* words long, and it came out to a stunning *twenty* when you put it all together. The maximum line length for a GA Bunko light novel was standardized, and as it so happened, Hajime's power's name was just a couple letters shy of taking up a half line all on its own. From a cost performance perspective—or rather, a word performance perspective—it was just way too inefficient.

Now, I'll admit, the first time you hear the name, it comes across as kind of cool...though it also might come across as something of a joke, depending on perspective. Regardless, the more and more you heard it, the thinner and thinner it would wear in no time at all. Like, imagine a battle scene that went...

“I-Impossible! Hajime's ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, Lucifer's Strike, didn't work?!”

The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, Lucifer's Strike, had had no effect—or so I thought, but no. It wasn't that simple. The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, Lucifer's Strike, had come into effect, and it had even scored a direct hit on its target. The ironclad hammer of a fallen

angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, Lucifer's Strike's ability to freely manipulate gravity was working just as it always did, and it was perfectly capable of banishing Hajime's foe into a realm of unending darkness...at least, in theory.

In truth, however, the moment the ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, Lucifer's Strike, had made contact with Hajime's foe's body, the power had ceased to be. It hadn't just been blocked, clearly...but the alternative was too terrifying to consider.

Could it really be...that the ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, Lucifer's Strike, had been undone?! The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, Lucifer's Strike, hadn't just been blocked or had its effects reduced. It had been completely nullified. In other words, the enemy's power had to be—

...it would be *seriously* freaking irritating, right?! No way anyone would be able to visualize a battle with a description like that! Your eyes would start glazing over before you knew it! And that's not even starting on the fact that when a name that's so long it has its own comma gets dropped into the middle of a sentence, the punctuation turns into a huge mess!

Now, I have to admit, there are plenty of stories out there that have managed to put in an ultra-long power name and still keep the plot moving forward without making it into a big, stressful pain for their readers. A cumbersome name like that can serve as an opportunity for the story's author to show their stuff and prove they have the storytelling chops to pull it off. In this case, the storyteller would be...well, me, I guess. Looks like I've got my work cut out for me.

Working with a name like that is honestly a lot harder than you'd think. There was a period when I seriously considered abbreviating it to "LS," but it just never quite felt right. Just think about how ridiculous I'd look shouting stuff like "He did it! Hajime's LS did the trick!" I may not get any of this chuuni crap, but even *I* could tell how lame that would come across.

The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, *Lucifer's Strike*...yeah. Much as I hate to admit it, it really was cooler that way than LS could ever be. In the end, it was probably better to just skip the preamble, not bother tweaking the name, and live with it.

Sheesh. Guess it's all up to me to make this work, then. No way around it, much as I wish there was. From now on, I'll just have to make sure that any of Hajime's battles that get seen from my perspective—not that I know how many spin-off novels that follow our crew there'll even be—get depicted in a way that doesn't bludgeon the readers with Hajime's power's full name over and over again.

Oh. Right. So, umm, this is a little late, but my name is Saitou Hitomi. I imagine that most of you already know about me, but for those who don't, I should give a quick self introduction. You can think of me as the partner of that absolute dumbass who pops into the main story every once in a while—which is to say, the partner of Kiryuu Hajime. His partner, and, at the moment, also his roommate.

To make a long story short, I'm a perfectly ordinary person who got dragged into the Fifth Spirit War—an over-the-top supernatural battle royale—thanks to Kiryuu's capricious whims. I'd known Hajime since high school, but I'd never imagined that our acquaintance would see me getting wrapped up in such an absurd story.

I guess rather than calling us partners, it'd be more accurate to say that I was stuck with him? Or that I was his...I-I-love interest, maybe...? *Ahem, ahem!*

Anyway, to put it simply: you know that part of the anime's OP when the chorus is in full swing and it cuts to a group of shadowy figures posing on a pile of rubble? I'm one of them. I think that pretty much sums it up, so let's just move along, thanks!

...I'm not even sure if that whole self-intro was useful for anyone at all, now that it's over, but it *did* feel necessary to make that sort of accommodation, one way or the other. It was probably pointless for everyone who's read all the prior volumes of the original series, of course, but for all I know, some people might've skipped volumes 5 and 9 on the basis that they never read light novel

spin-off volumes.

Apparently, a surprisingly large number of people don't bother with that sort of spin-off as a matter of principle. People talk about how volumes numbered whatever-point-five don't tend to sell as well as the full-number volumes all the time, at least. You know, at one point, the spin-off about me and Hajime was actually going to be published as the first volume of a completely different series called *The Commonplace Exists for the Sake of Supernatural Battles*, but ultimately, a bunch of boring business circumstances led to it getting released as a normal volume instead, slotting right into the normal numbering scheme and... Oh, whoops! Looks like someone's coming over to tell me to stop. Time to get back on topic!

In any event, I, Saitou Hitomi, will endeavor to serve the role of narrator to the best of my ability. To all the readers who were hoping for lighthearted banter between Andou Jurai and his associated heroines, I can only offer my sincerest apologies. Instead, this fifth bonus story will feature me, Hajime, and our merry band of companions, serving as something of a side story, if you will.

This was the plan from the outset, for the record...but, honestly, getting here was still kind of a process. Thanks to the anime's second episode, a girl named Kudou ended up becoming *way* more popular than anyone ever expected she'd be. That popularity is how Kudou suddenly ended up getting put on the cover of the fifth Blu-ray case, and there was talk about making this bonus story into *The Path to Grateful Robber* as well to match. And, I mean, when you really sit down and think about it, it *is* pretty weird for us side story characters to take the spotlight for the fifth Blu-ray collection, considering we don't even show up in any of the episodes it—

...Am I giving away too much behind-the-scenes info, here? Maybe I am, but seriously, can you blame me?! I'm not used to doing all this meta junk! And this is the *fifth* of these things, for crying out loud! The *fifth*! They've been getting more and more meta with each passing story, so number five feels like it *has* to be just inches away from crossing the line! Or at least that's the sense I get, for some weird reason... Anyway, the point is that I really don't want it to end up looking like the meta level dropped off the second I took over as narrator. It's like I *have* to push the boundaries, or else all the readers won't be satisfied...

Ugh. This must be how sports manga end up slowly shifting into battle manga the longer they run, isn't it? Anyway, back on topic: round two! It's *high* time we closed the book on this intro and got to the main plot!

Long story short: I, Saitou Hitomi, will be your narrator this time, and the story will center around Kiryuu Hajime and his power, the ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, *Lucifer's Strike*. No, I won't be writing out the whole name in full every single time—you and I both saw how that last sentence turned out. I'm sorry, but you're just going to have to live without.

I'll be taking this chance to depict a small slice of *Fallen Black's* daily lives. The whole premise of our spin-off is to be a battle-focused tale that contrasts with the slice-of-life focus of the main story, but *we* have our own day-to-day lives as well. We're not *always* fighting someone. We go through plenty of commonplace events that are barely even worth talking about, and today, I want to talk about one of them.

It all began on one summer's day, when I came across a certain notebook...

Some time had passed since either the events of the anime's eighth episode or the events of the original series's fifth volume, depending on how you're counting. Umeko had joined our little team, and she, Hajime, and I had wound up sharing my apartment in a pretty peculiar sort of three-person roommate situation.

On that day in particular, Umeko and I woke up to find that Hajime had vanished. That was most likely...okay, make that *definitely* on account of the fact that the evening before, I'd forced him to promise that he'd help clean the apartment today. The jerk had up and run away on me.

I thought about chasing him down, but I had a feeling that even if I searched as hard as I possibly could, I wouldn't find any trace of him, so in the end, Umeko and I just brushed it off and got to work cleaning on our own. My apartment wasn't super big in the first place, and having all three of us clean it probably would've been overkill...but I still wanted to make Hajime clean up anyway. Most of the clutter was *his* fault anyway! Why did I have to literally

pick up his messes?!

“Friggin’ Hajime... I swear, when he gets home tonight, I’m ignoring his stupid ass! I *really* mean it this time! In fact, I might not let him in at all! He can sleep on the doorstep until he decides to apologize!”

“I recall you saying much the same thing barely a month ago, Hitomi.”

“Ugh!”

“And yet, in spite of all the oaths you swore to leave him outside, the moment First arrived home and revealed he’d bought you pudding from the convenience store, you let him in with a smile as bright as the sun itself...”

“C-C-Come on, Umeko, we should be working, not chatting!” I yelped.

The look on Umeko’s face didn’t shift in the slightest, but she *did* let out a little sigh. She wasn’t a very expressive kid, as a general rule, but she had her ways of getting her exasperation across very clearly, at least.

Our cleaning work proceeded apace. We dusted the furniture, then shifted it to clean underneath everything before moving it all back again, and so on and so forth...until eventually, we stopped in our tracks. By pure happenstance, we’d stumbled across something as we cleaned: a single notebook.

“I-Isn’t this...?” I stammered as I laid the jet-black notebook down on my newly cleaned table. The notebook’s cover had an inverted cross drawn upon it, and I knew what that meant. “The Reverse Crux Record...” I muttered, then I instantly felt embarrassed for actually saying those words out loud.

That was, however, indeed the notebook’s name. It was the Reverse Crux Record: a notebook that Hajime had written in habitually since high school, and what most people would call his horrifically humiliating cringe compilation.

“That’s First’s notebook, is it not?” asked Umeko, who was watching from off to the side. “I believe that he makes a point of keeping it constantly by his side, wherever he goes...but it seems he must have forgotten it today.”

“Yeah, looks like it,” I agreed.

I’d discovered it while cleaning out the space behind the TV. My best guess was that it had found its way in there when Hajime had thrown his coat across

the room the day before. In any case, I stared fixedly at the notebook, not saying a word.

That notebook was where all of Hajime's cringiest chuuni fantasies were recorded. He kept it in one of his coat's inside pockets whenever he went out, jumping on any and every excuse he could to show it off but never actually letting anyone see what was written inside. Kiryuu Hajime himself was the only person who knew what it contained.

"Hmm..."

Well, what now? Yes, I'm curious. I mean, I'm really curious. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and if I let it slip past, I may never get another one.

The slumbering serpent of curiosity within me was rearing its head, freshly awakened and all too willing to take a bite out of the prey before it.

"H-Hey, Umeko?" I said, flashing her a smile as I turned to face her. It was a *really* unnatural smile—so much so that even I could tell—but I didn't let it get to me and pressed on. "So...do you wanna take a peek into this notebook with me?"

"Hmm," Umeko grunted with an understanding nod. "Allow me to speculate: you fear the thought of being singly responsible for this trespass and seek to implicate me in your crime. 'Tis always easier to commit an offense when one is but a member of a cohort."

"Augh!"

"Hitomi—this hardly bears saying, but you are aware that what you propose would be a grave violation of First's privacy, correct? Everyone has something or other they would prefer others not be privy to. To deny your fellow this sanctity without sound reasoning is a truly unforgivable deed. You would be no better than a common brigand."

I didn't say a word. I, a twenty-two-year-old woman, had just been argued into complete submission by a little girl. Umeko had acted like a puppet back when we'd first met, but over the course of the time she'd spent living with me and Hajime, she'd somehow developed into what I could only describe as a wise and perceptive young lady who was disconcertingly well-versed in decorum and

social standards.

“B-But Umeko...” I finally said. “Aren’t you curious?”

“Even if I were, it would not serve as just cause for peeking at his private writings.”

“But...”

“Imagine, Hitomi, if someone were to read the plans that *you’ve* secretly written for your dates with First. If you were the one whose fantasies were—”

“O-O-Okay, I get it! I get it! You’ve made your point!” I shouted so loudly, I figured I’d be getting some complaints from my neighbors in the near future. I would *die*. I could say with confidence that if *anyone* read those plans, I would very literally bite off my tongue and end myself.

“So long as you understand,” Umeko replied offhandedly. I didn’t know if she was being stubborn, or conscientious, or what, but one way or another, it didn’t seem like she had any intention of overlooking a misdeed that was transpiring right in front of her.

I had to admit that, in this case, I was one hundred percent in the wrong...but I still wanted to look. I knew it’d be a breach of privacy, but I wanted to do it anyway. That book had a fragment of Hajime’s completely indecipherable patterns of thought transcribed within it, and I *desperately* wanted to read that for myself.

“Hey, Umeko?”

“Cease this, Hitomi. I owe you much for the care and shelter you have provided me, but First is just as much my benefactor. I could never betray him.”

“Want some HI-CHEW?”

“Make haste, Hitomi—we must read what we can before First returns home. How shall we approach this endeavor? Would it be best for me to stand watch outside, perhaps? Or shall I transcribe the notebook word for word, allowing you to read it at your leisure at a later date?”

I think I just witnessed the world’s fastest betrayal! Buying her off was way too easy!

Tanaka Umeko, the girl formerly known as *System*, had once turned her back on her whole organization after Hajime had given her a piece of HI-CHEW. Now, that same candy had tempted her into betraying Hajime himself.

“Okay, I know that this was my plan and all...but are you *really* sure about this, Umeko?” I asked.

“I am powerless to resist. If anything is to blame, it is the irresistible lure of that captivating confection.”

A brief period of negotiations ensued, and ultimately, we decided that the next time I went out, I’d buy her three packs of HI-CHEW as payment for her services. Her loyalty came at a very reasonable price.

“It’s a deal, then,” I said.

“Indeed. However...a question occurs to me, Hitomi. If memory serves, in the anime, the HI-CHEW that I so adore was referred to as ‘soft candy.’ Why is that?”

“Oooh, yeah. It’s complicated. It’s a business thing, basically.”

Sometimes not dropping specific brand names was just the better way to go. When it comes to that sort of thing, novels and anime are, well... The standards are sort of just different, for some reason. Producing an anime involves a ton of people working together, and the resulting product gets broadcast to even more people on public airwaves, so it’s important to be careful about that sort of thing.

Here’s a good example: there’s this one famous manga called *Hell Teacher Nube*, the title of which was actually the result of that exact same sort of consideration. Apparently, it was actually supposed to be called Hell Teacher Nubo initially, and it even ran under that title back when it was just a one-shot. The problem was that a candy company had a product on the market called the “nubo” at the time, and there were worries that if the series ever got an anime and a rival candy company ended up sponsoring the show, things could get messy. As a result, before the manga’s serialization began, its title was changed to “Nube,” which ended up sticking.

When Hajime first told me that story, one thought had immediately sprung to

mind: doesn't "Nube" just sound *better*, all questions of anime and candy companies aside?!

What am I even talking about? Not anything on topic, that's for sure, but the point I'm trying to make is that sometimes when you make anime, things get complicated.

"All right, then," I said. I'd successfully bought off my one obstacle, which meant that now it was finally time to unveil the notebook's contents. I couldn't help but feel nervous, and I hesitated a little as a result, but I also knew that Hajime could come home at any minute—there was no time to waste. "Let's do this, Umeko!"

"Very well."

I steeled my resolve...and opened the notebook up, turning to its first page.

The first feature that caught my eye was a very sinister-looking magic circle. It was made up of several overlapping circles, within which were words tightly written in some language I couldn't identify (most likely the sort of runes you see in Nordic mythology). The image was chaotic, but there was something about its design that struck me as oddly natural as well. I didn't quite know how to put it into words—it was a real mystery. There was also writing beneath it, preceded by an asterisk.

**In the event that this notebook is opened by anyone other than its owner, it will self-destruct for the sake of security.*

"Gah?!"

A trap?! Seriously?!

It seemed that the notebook's owner had prepared countermeasures just in case someone happened to take a peek inside or something happened to him that would prevent him from keeping it hidden. That magic circle, clearly, was an explosive rune, like the sort you'd find in ancient, forbidden grimoires. It was the sort of measure that you'd take when you were so afraid of a book's contents coming to light, you were willing to sacrifice the book itself to keep

your secrets.

“A-Aaaaaaugh!” I yelped as I flung the ticking time bomb in my hands as hard as I could. The notebook flopped against the window and fell to the floor.

Crap! You have to open the window at times like these, or at least throw the bomb hard enough to break through the glass! Otherwise, throwing it's totally pointless!

I didn't have the time or the courage to go pick the notebook up and try again though. Instead I hit the deck, diving headfirst in the opposite direction, slamming right into the flooring, and letting out an undignified “Bwaugh!” as I had the wind knocked out of me. I bore with the pain, though, plugging my ears, shutting my eyes, and bracing for impact.



© Tetsuya Hasegawa (TRIGGER)

I'll admit that I only knew this from movies and police dramas on TV, but I was *pretty* sure that this was the right pose to take when you were in the proximity of an imminent explosion...or, well, kinda sure, anyway? The fact that the explosive had fallen to the floor after I threw it made taking shelter *on* the floor feel sorta silly, on second thought. In fact, I was starting to think that making for the door and getting the hell away from the apartment would've been a much better idea than hitting the deck, period.

Meanwhile, as I was thinking all of that through with my eyes still clamped firmly shut, ten seconds passed by. Then twenty. The room was silent, and there was no sign of any sort of explosion whatsoever.

"Hitomi," Umeko finally said. Her expression was as blank as ever, but something about the look in her eyes still felt deeply belittling. "Surely you did not believe that it would actually explode?"

I didn't reply. I just stood up and walked back over to her.

Gaaaaaaaaah! The shame! I took that completely at face value! I was dodging for my life!

But, yeah, no crap! Of course it wouldn't explode! Magical explosion traps aren't a real thing! This isn't that kind of story!

"This was nothing more than a practical joke on First's part," Umeko continued.

Personally, I didn't see it as a practical joke so much as him being a poser, as usual. He'd probably thought about how cool it would be if he made his notebook *look* like a booby-trapped grimoire, then realized that the magic circle wouldn't get that idea across on its own and added in the note to clarify things.

"Yeah, this definitely does seem like something Hajime would think up," I sighed.

"You make it sound as if you saw through his designs, which is a rather comical attitude for you to take when you were thoroughly deceived."

"O-Oh, stuff it!"

"What I find even more remarkable, however, is that when you were

hoodwinked into bracing yourself for an oncoming detonation, you chose to abandon me to my fate and prioritize your own longevity.”

“Oh. Uh...”

“I take this to mean that should another such situation arise, you will pay no regard to my safety and flee alone. Duly noted. I shall have to account for this as I evaluate our relationship from this point forward.”

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like that, honestly! I just panicked! I wasn’t *trying* to abandon you! I just, umm...well,” I babbled, throwing out excuse after excuse.

“I jest,” said Umeko, her expression as blank as ever.

I wanted to gripe about how she should try to be a little less deadpan with her jokes, but honestly, I really *had* abandoned her. That was an undeniable fact, and I didn’t think I had any real right to complain this time around.

I let out a sigh. “If I’d known it would be *this* physically and mentally exhausting to read starting from the very first page, I wouldn’t have opened it at all,” I grumbled as I picked the notebook up again. Naturally, it didn’t explode. I flipped past the supposed self-destruction sigil, and found...

**If you wish to read further, you must decipher the following code and recite the resulting incantation after placing this tome in the specified location and at the specified angle. Only then will you be spared the unknowable wrath of a fallen angel’s curse.*

“Oh, get *real*!” I shouted.

I didn’t quite know how to put it into words, but...well, this was just one too many gimmicks for the notebook to have, right? He’d put *way* too much effort into making it a distinct and attention-grabbing item. I’d been totally convinced that he was just using it as his personal notepad, but as it turned out, he’d packed in way more stuff to entertain potential readers than I’d ever imagined.

“So, I guess this is the code we’re supposed to decipher...?”

“It certainly seems dense,” Umeko noted.

She wasn’t wrong about that. The code in question filled up an entire page. It turned out not to be just one step long either—deciphering it involved going through a full *thirteen* distinct problems, and I could tell even just skimming them that they were all quite elaborate. They contained allusions to the Bible, the Kojiki, Norse mythology, *and* Greek mythology, all so overwrought that you’d think solving the code would produce an actual, genuine magical incantation.

Man. Dealing with chuunibyou that’s slid this far down the bell curve is such a pain in the ass.

“So...he really devoted the first pages of his notebook to a gimmick like this? This reminds me of those choose-your-own-adventure books that were popular back in the day. Like, the ones that had you turn a particular number of pages forward or backward to progress the story and stuff.”

Part of me thought that taking the time to work through the code might actually be sort of fun, but I didn’t have the time or patience to go through with it. Instead, I decided to abandon the idea of reading through the notebook page by page and opened up to an arbitrary point in the middle instead. As best as I could tell, the gamelike portion of the notebook ended somewhere around there, and past that point, he’d started using it as more of a normal notepad to jot random ideas down in.

I picked a page at random and read its title.

One-Liners to Use Later

“Oof...”

I sure opened to an excruciating page right off the bat, huh? I’d known perfectly well that peeking into Hajime’s archive of cringey horrors would put me at serious risk of stumbling across something like this, but that did nothing to lessen the almost physically painful surge of secondhand shame that crashed into me the moment I actually saw it.

“One-liners... In other words, First has dedicated himself, day in and day out, to penning phrases that would make him look cool should he speak them at a climactic moment?”

“Umeko...no narration, please. This really doesn’t need a commentary track.” *It’s not even my notebook, and I still can’t bear hearing it picked apart like that.* “Oh god, there’s so many of them!” I said as I looked closer. The entire page was packed full of one-liners, from top to bottom. “I have a feeling I’ve heard some of these too... Ah, like this one!”

- *“The only things that’re allowed to control me are the crazed, destructive impulses that run through my head.”*

-Said while pointing my finger at my head like a gun, in a tone that laces each and every word with an unmistakable tinge of madness, with my eyes open as wide as possible and with a slight smile, acting crazy in a way that makes my opponent think “Holy shit, this guy’s nuts...”

Talk about a detailed note... Also, “acting crazy”? You’re really just straight-up saying it’s an act, huh? Not only does that mean you’re not as crazy as you want people to think you are, it’s actually a sign you’re being super calculating about all your “crazy” behavior! This couldn’t look like more of a charade if you’d tried!

I was pretty sure I remembered Hajime having used that exact line on Leatia back when we were arguing about how to deal with F. *Wow, okay... I guess he didn’t come up with that on the spot after all, then.*

That meant that, in the heat of a *really* tense and serious moment, Hajime had almost certainly been thinking “Oh, hey! Isn’t this situation the perfect chance to drop that one-liner I came up with the other day?” I didn’t know how to cope with that newfound knowledge, so I decided to just keep reading the list instead.

“Hmm. I lack a clear standard through which to judge prose of this variety...yet it is my impression that the bulk of these lines are rather clever. Are they not?” Umeko asked.

“Hmm,” I grunted. “I mean, yeah, I guess. I hate to admit it, but Hajime can be

frustratingly good at coming up with these things sometimes. He says stuff that sounds like it came straight out of a Hollywood movie all the time... But now that I know he's been thinking up all those lines in advance, it kinda hurts to—" I began, only to trail off halfway through my sentence as I spotted a new one-liner that grabbed my attention.

- *"Are you listening, Hitomi? I offer up these flames of ruin—this hellish tune of infernal devastation—as my requiem to your memory."*

-Use when I awaken to a new power as a consequence of Hitomi dying, then crush the organization that killed her and end up standing on top of a pile of rubble, looking down over what used to be their base.

"He has one for me *dying*?!"

Why would he plan for a situation like that?! And it's specifically for if I get killed by an enemy organization, of all things?! Also, what was all that crap about him awakening to a power or whatever?!

"You must be pleased, Hitomi. First would awaken to a new power in the event of your demise. That lends credence to the weight of his feelings for you, does it not?"

"Noooope, nope nope nope. I am *not* gonna get happy about this. This is just Hajime using me as fodder for his own stupid power-up, and I know it!"

Awakening to a new power after someone you're close to dies was sort of a trope—or a cliché, maybe? In any case, it was a well-established storytelling pattern that some people tended to critique as being trite and predictable, but which could still be really exciting and impactful when done well, in my opinion.

And yet...the moment it became clear that it was all calculated in advance, the whole thing was completely ruined. It was so easy to imagine that if I actually did die, Hajime would clutch my corpse in utter despair...all the while thinking "All right, now's my chance for an awakening!" internally. *Arrrrgh, I'm getting pissed off just thinking about it!*

"That settles it!" I said. "No matter what happens, I am *not* dying! I *refuse* to

die in front of Hajime, at the very least!”

“Your resolve is truly admirable,” Umeko said with a satisfied nod.

Right? Honestly, I’m a little impressed by myself this time.

“However, Hitomi...from an alternate perspective, would serving as fodder for First’s awakening not be quite a desirable role to play? This is merely my vague impression, but I gather that the girl who dies and prompts the protagonist to awaken to new power is widely considered to be a defining character in a story. It firmly establishes that girl’s position as a love interest, does it not?”

“Ack! I mean... I can see where you’re coming from, but I’m not really trying to set myself up as the sort of heroine who fights by the hero’s side on the front lines. I’m trying to be more of a ‘childhood friend who stays in the village and waits for the hero to come home to her’ sort of heroine.”

“It is my understanding that those heroines almost always either fade into the background or get kidnapped toward the end of the story.”

“Those...aren’t exactly great options, huh?”

All other factors aside, Umeko’s argument did get me thinking. On the one hand, knowing that Hajime had gone straight to me when he had to pick someone to die for the sake of the despair-fueled awakening scene of his wildest fantasies was deeply irritating, but on the other hand, it *was* kinda nice too. I wasn’t okay with the idea of dying, of course...but I found myself thinking that maybe Umeko was right and it really *was* a heroine role, in an appealing sort of way. Being the tragic damsel in Hajime’s fantasies certainly wasn’t the most upsetting thing that I could think of—in fact, it didn’t feel bad at all. Actually, if it meant that I was at least a little special in his mind, I couldn’t see it as anything other than a good—

“Hmm. It would seem that he wrote scenes in which each of our members could prompt an awakening in him.”

And just like that, I slumped over onto the table with a *thud*. I took a moment to peel myself off its surface, then looked at the page Umeko was reading—the page right after the one with the bit about my death—and found that he’d plotted out scenarios for how each and every one of *Fallen Black*’s other

members' deaths could achieve the same effect.

He'd planned for every possibility. I wasn't special at all, and I felt like a complete idiot for feeling pleased by the thought I could be for even a second. My happiness was pathetically short-lived.

"If I were to perish... Hmm? Remarkable. It seems that he would be delivered from perishing to a bullet wound thanks to having fortuitously positioned a package of HI-CHEW in his breast pocket—HI-CHEW which he had procured with the intent to confer it to me. First certainly has a way of coming up with the most fascinating stories."

"That's a *wild* overestimation of how much force a pouch of candy could block..." *And while I'm at it, it's a mystery why Umeko looks so pleased by that scenario. She's a bit too fond of HI-CHEW for her own good.* "There's versions for the others too, right? What are theirs like?"

"Hmm. In Shuugo's case...his knife would survive him as a memento, and the instant First touches it, a blinding effulgence would herald its metamorphosis into a legendary sword known as 'Á Bao A Qu, the tower's blade of certain victory.'"

"Where in the *hell* did that stupid twist come from?! *Nothing's* foreshadowed that knife being special at all! Toki literally *told* us he bought it from a store!"

"Should Yanagi die, we would be astonished to learn his will bequeathed all his video games, his computer, his apartment, his pecuniary interests, and various other personal possessions to First."

"Where's this materialism coming from?!"

"It would suffice to simplify Aki's scenario to a single line of dialogue: 'I have to tell Ryu about this power, no matter what... Blargh, I'm dead!' It seems she would suffer a tragic demise while attempting to inform First of an overarching nemesis's power."

"That's the most cliché way for a character with an analysis power to die! I bet she's supposed to have left a secret message behind that somehow makes its way to him anyway, letting him look super clever for deciphering the clue, right?!"

“Moments before Fantasia’s death, she would succumb to fear and urinate involuntarily. Upon discovering her shamefully soiled corpse, First would have the mercy to cover her with his coat.”

“We’re seriously still dragging out the Fantasia-wetting-herself gag?!”

“As for Hinoemata—”

“Oh! Actually, we should probably just skip over that one,” I said. *That has high odds of spoiling stuff from volume 10, after all. For all we know, some people might end up reading this bonus story before they get their hands on that one.*

In any case, it was clear that Umeko hadn’t been exaggerating. Hajime had seriously written out full scenarios for all of our deaths, as well as how they would impact him.

“What sort of leader fantasizes about what would happen if all of his followers died, anyway...?” I sighed.

“I, for one, would say that it’s very typical of him,” Umeko replied indifferently.

I kept reading further into the notebook. There was a page on which Hajime had written the incantation that would prompt him to shift into the form of a fallen angel (which was *way* too elaborately phrased for its own good), and a section in which he’d drawn a manga starring himself as its main character (which...I decided to just forget about. That one was *really* rough, in so many ways). And then...

“Ah. What’s this...?” I muttered as I stopped at the beginning of one particular section of the notebook. Its first line read “Titles for the Powers of the Twelve Wings of *Fallen Black*.” “It looks like he took a bunch of notes on our powers’ names here.”

“Come to think of it, First *did* create all of them independently, did he not?”

“Yeah. Nobody even asked him to, but he did it anyway.”

“He changed my power’s name, *System*, to one that struck me as rather long and unwieldy in comparison.”

“Yeah, he sure did...”

Seeing as she’d brought her power’s name up, I casually decided to flip to its page—and was struck dumb. My gaze fell upon an overwhelming wall of text, packed from end to end, top to bottom, with barely any gaps. Line after line was filled with brainstorming, and countless notes were written in what little space remained in the margins.

-Taking all the above into consideration, I can set “decatalogue” and “rulebook” in stone as words that definitely have to be used. Using “System” somewhere in the name would be possible, but I’m ruling it out to draw a firm line between her past name and current name.

The immutable decatalogue, the irreconcilable decatalogue, the conglomerate decatalogue, the ruined decatalogue, the devastating decatalogue, the anarchic decatalogue, the chaos-bringing decatalogue

-Alternate possibility: associate the “decatalogue” less with destructive, chaotic words, and more with words that reflect order and structure?

The immaculate decatalogue, the infinite decatalogue, the unbeginning decatalogue, the forever-changing decatalogue

-“Changing” may be a worthy word to use for a power that generates endless, repeated asspull awakenings. Counterpoint: “changing” is artless and inelegant.

Revise? Alter? Amend? Refit? Reform?

-“Revise” and “Alter” are both appealing in their own right. They’re very close to synonymous, but “Revise” can carry connotations of “review” or “study” while “Alter” is focused more specifically on the single intended meaning I’m going for. As such, I’ll be using “Alter.”

The altered decatalogue

-The title’s almost good enough, but it needs just a little something more.

Repeatedly altered? Countlessly altered? Endlessly altered? Eternally altered?

-On a pure wordfeel basis, I’m choosing “endlessly altered.” That just leaves the title proper. “Rulebook” is set in stone, but I’d like whatever comes before or

after it to have a chaotic feel to contrast with its sense of order.

Chaotic Rulebook -No. Too simplistic.

Chaos Rulebook -Same problem

Rulebook Breaker -Again, too simple

Rulebook Maker -A play on “rulebook” and “bookmaker.” Also stupid and trite. No.

Crisis Rulebook -Too simple! Still too damn simple!

-Damn it all! This isn't working! Everything that comes to mind is too damn simplistic! None of this crap's good enough! Umeko's power is mighty enough to tear this whole War up by its roots, breaking it down on a fundamental level! Its name needs to be worthy of that potential!

-I'm better than this! I'm better than this, gods damn it all!

Rulebook Dominator, Dominated Rulebook, Rulebook Rule, Rulebook of Rulebooks, Rulebook of the End, Endless Rulebook, Rewritten Rulebook, Rulebook Rewriter, Black Rulebook, Raven Rulebook, White Rulebook, Abnormal Rulebook, Pandemic Rulebook, Look Rulebook, Restart Rulebook, Repeated Rulebook, Lost Rulebook, Rulebook Destroyer, Rulebook Must Die, Pure Rulebook, Dirty Rulebook—

-It's between Black Rulebook and White Rulebook. Considering the power's abilities alongside Umeko's appearance and character, it seems worth deliberately avoiding any overly complex vocabulary to give the power's name a sense of immaturity and innocence, thus amplifying the lurking terror of its true potential.

-And in that case...White feels right. It has a pure, blank feel to it—like a sheet of white paper—which ties in thematically with/emphasizes the ordered feeling of Rulebook, while at the same time outright contradicting it.

The endlessly altered decalogue: White Rulebook

-That's it. That's the one.

“O-Oh, wow...” I muttered in amazement, entirely unintentionally.

I'd never dreamed that a single power's name could have taken *that* much careful consideration. Apparently, each and every word in the name and title for Umeko's power had depths of layered meaning to it. None of it had been off the cuff—it was a name that had been deliberately constructed and polished from start to finish.

I had to admit that part of me thought that was incredible...but on the other hand, another part of me was starting to feel more than a little exasperated with him. *Just how much time and energy did you put into that one single name, Hajime...? And that's not even starting on how he went into a serious slump partway through! Just how much intense and passionate drama did the process of overcoming that writer's block and finishing the name take?*

"Did First truly approach the task of naming my power this wholeheartedly?" said Umeko, who looked vaguely moved by the thought. I was pretty sure that he'd only been so wholehearted about it because naming stuff was his hobby—or more like his pathological obsession, really—but I wasn't about to dump that cynicism on her when she was so clearly pleased.

In any case, it really was impressive. Hajime never gave me any insight into his naming processes beyond seeing the final, completed names themselves, so I'd had no idea how lengthy and peculiar the way he created them was. I could feel a truly remarkable sort of passion and persistence in the multiple-page-spanning process of trial and error that I was now witnessing secondhand.

Yeah...having someone put that much thought and enthusiasm into making up a name for you would be kind of nice, actually.

"L-Let's take a look at my power's section!" I said as a mixture of jealousy and curiosity drove me to turn the pages back, looking for the one where his efforts to name my power were recorded.

All right, let's see just how much drama he went through while he was working on my—

The Evil Eye under lock and key: Eternal Wink

Came to me in a flash.

“That’s it?!” *The whole origin story only takes up a single line?! ‘In a flash’?! Seriously?!* “R-Really...? He was totally slacking off when he came up with my power’s name! It was a slapdash hack job in comparison! He couldn’t have worried and agonized over it at least a *little*...?”

“Do not let this information bedevil you, Hitomi,” said Umeko. “Such circumstances are surely not unheard-of. The fact that the creation of your power’s name took a thousandth of the time and attention mine did is no cause for concern.”

I knew she was trying to console me, but somehow, Umeko’s words came across as sort of condescending at the same time. Her expression was as blank as ever, but for some reason, it felt like there was a glaze of superiority forming over her usually clear, unclouded eyes.

“H-Hmph! Whatever, it’s fine!” I huffed. “It’s just a matter of perspective—you could also say that the fact he came up with my power’s name without having to spend much time or effort thinking about it at all is a sign of how perfect the name he *did* come up with is!”

“Surely you aren’t proffering that analysis in good faith. It goes without saying that a name derived from copious consideration would be superior to one decided capriciously.”

“No, it doesn’t! The *best* ideas are the ones that come to you on the spur of the moment. All that overthinking these things does is tie your mind into knots and lead you down the wrong track.”

“Hmm. Your words, Hitomi, make it clear to me that you have a common fool’s understanding of the meaning of effort. Do you have any conception of how much energy and anguish those whom society deems geniuses pour into their fields in order to accomplish their revolutionizing feats? Truly spectacular ideas are birthed only from the most infernal depths of despair.”

“Oh, *really*? It sounds to me like you’re making just as many assumptions as I am! You know that saying of Edison’s—‘Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration’? People like to think he meant that hard work is important, but supposedly, what he *actually* meant was that if you don’t have that one percent of inspiration, the ninety-nine percent of perspiration’s all

wasted. When all's said and done, that flash of inspiration's what really matters."

"Is that so? It seems to me you're quite set upon proving this point."

"Look who's talking!"

Umeko and I glared at each other. For a moment sparks flew between us...and then, a few seconds later, we came back to our senses.

"Let's call this here, Umeko. This is really, really stupid."

"Yes...it certainly is."

What on earth were we going to accomplish by arguing over Hajime's names? Of all the idiotic wastes of time! It didn't matter at all whether he'd thought our powers' names through carefully or came up with them in an instant. Oh, and while I'm at it, that thing I said about the Edison quote is just one of many possible interpretations. Only Edison himself knew whether he was trying to emphasize the importance of hard work or of flashes of genius.

Edison talked about how vital hard work is in interviews in his later years, supposedly, which I'd say makes the effort interpretation the more likely answer...but, like, come on. If you get asked about that sort of thing in an interview, of *course* you'd talk about how effort's important. Just imagine how much crap people would give you if you said that talent's all that matters. If you feed them a few empty platitudes, on the other hand—like "there's no such thing as wasted effort" or "it's up to you to make your dreams come true"—people will eat them up. It'd be weird if a genius inventor *didn't* take that fact into consideration and act accordingly...though I appreciate that might just be me being cynical.

"Judging by the number of pages it took him to settle on a name, your power's the one that gave him the most trouble, and mine was the easiest," I muttered as the two of us flipped through the pages together. All the other members' powers' names had taken up about two or three pages of deliberation, on average.

"It would seem he was torn on whether or not the religious connotation of 'sinful' in 'the toothed blade of sinful misalignment: *Zigzag Jigsaw*' was

appropriate right up to the very end,” noted Umeko.

“Ahh, yeah, Hajime’s pretty sensitive about that sort of thing.”

“Why would that be? Surely sinful is a ‘cool’ word, per his standards.”

“Yeah, but it’s so cool, it ends up making you look like you’re trying too hard and becomes lame instead. Talking about sin or gods is a really easy way to look cool, but when you become overreliant on it, you end up... Actually, you know what? Sorry, forget I said all that. I don’t really get it either, honestly. It’s all a matter of Hajime’s weird standards, in the end.”

“It appears the name of Yanagi’s power, the seeker in realms unsought: *Dead Space*, was chosen rather quickly. He considered *Dead Angle* and *Dead Stock* as well, but he settled upon its current name after relatively little deliberation.”

“Yeah, honestly, Akutagawa’s power’s name turned out really nicely. It fits his power really well, and it feels a little childish in a way that matches up with Akutagawa’s looks perfectly.”

Umeko gave me a look.

“Huh? Wh-What? What’s wrong?”

“Hitomi. If you truly find the name inspired, then why not simply say so? First would be elated to hear it.”

“O-Oh, hell no! I can’t praise Hajime’s names in front of him! That’d be... Well, it’d just be super embarrassing! It’d feel like I was admitting defeat to him!”

“Yours is truly a troublesome disposition.”

“Look, just drop it, okay...?”

“Aki’s power—the oath of inevitable decapitation: *Head Hunting*—seems to have been chosen relatively quickly as well, but following its completion, First added a note stating that he ‘might have gone a little overboard on this one.’ It seems the thought troubled him greatly for quite some time.”

“He really is sensitive when it comes to names, isn’t he...?”

“For all of First’s day-to-day arrogance, he has moments of worry, hesitation, and anguish, just the same as everyone else.”

“I can think of a few other things that I’d like him to hesitate a little more about...”

“Fantasia’s power, the lunar goddess who ravishes the solar deities: *Sex Eclipse*, was apparently intended as a play on ‘The Sex Pistols.’”

“Yup, figured as much.”

“‘The Sex Pistols’... I believe they were a foreign band, were they not?”

“Yeah, they are...but in Hajime’s case, I’m pretty sure that he was thinking of the Stand when he picked it.”

“It would appear that his chief desire was to have a power’s name begin with the word ‘sex.’ The majority of the page, in fact, is covered in that word alone.”

“This is one obscene notebook, huh...?”

So, yeah—to make a long story short, Umeko and I kept flipping through the notebook, reading about the origins of the members of *Fallen Black*’s powers’ names and chatting all the while. Until, finally...

“I guess it’s time,” I muttered with a gulp. There was just one page left in the notebook, and that final page would be about Hajime’s own power. In other words, it would detail the origins of the ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, powerful enough to crush even the heavens and the fools who rule them: *Lucifer’s Strike*.

“Why, however, would his be last? Did First not give his power a name long before he chose names for ours?” asked Umeko.

“I bet he wrote his on the last page way before he actually got there naturally, since having it come last makes it look more important.”

“Does it, now?”

“To him, anyway.”

I steeled myself, preparing to turn the page. Maybe I was just imagining it, but it felt like my heartbeat was way louder than usual. I’d found the *Reverse Crux Record* by pure chance, and I had decided to peek into it mostly out of a mixture of curiosity and mischievous impulse...but I’d had one concrete objective in mind as well.

Kiryuu Hajime—Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First—had granted a name to his own power. *Surely* there was a story there. There must have been a sequence of events that’d led him to the name he chose, and considering how he threw himself into every name he thought up, I just had to wonder what those events had been like. What sort of dramatic twists and tribulations had he faced?

I’d love to say I wasn’t curious, but that would have been a filthy lie. Hajime was all too willing to shout his power’s name to the high heavens, but he clammed up instantly when it came to its origins. I *could* always just ask him, sure...but, well, my pride just wouldn’t let me go through with it. I never, *ever* wanted him to figure out that I was curious. And so, now was the moment that I’d finally get the answer to a question that my own stubbornness had kept me from asking for oh so very long...

“Huh?”

...but when I finally worked up the nerve to flip to that final page, what I saw left me speechless.

The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, powerful enough to crush even the heavens and the fools who rule them: Lucifer’s Strike

-Solve all of the codes found within this tome and use them to fill in the blanks below. In doing so, the truth hidden behind my profane power’s name will surely be revealed to you.

○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

“Wh-What, seriously...? We came this far, all for a *coded* message?”

“So it would seem. However...this defies my understanding. First used this book to keep notes in as he came up with the names for our powers, did he not? If that’s truly the case, then what purpose would he have for adding in a bothersome gimmick such as this?”

“I know, right...? Oh, but then again, writing research documents or forbidden texts in code to make sure that the techniques and truths within them don’t get out into society is a whole trope. Like how Edward Elric writes his notes in a way

that makes them sound like a travelogue if you don't know it's a code, and all."

"You mean to say that some hidden truth so terrible it could never be allowed to spread into the world at large is buried within his power's name?"

"Nah... I'm absolutely positive he was just doing it to look cool."

If there was one thing we could always count on, it was Kiryuu Hajime's dedication to form above function and affection for weird gimmicks.

"There are thirteen blank spaces, huh? Wait, does that mean...?"

"Come to think of it, there were thirteen codes at the beginning of the notebook that were theoretically required to reveal its deepest secrets, were there not?"

"Oh, oof... So we have to solve all of them? This feels like it's going to be a really time-consuming, obnoxious pain in the ass..."

"How shall we proceed, Hitomi?"

I let out a long, deep sigh. "Let's do it," I said.

We couldn't just stop now after coming this far. I knew how much pride Hajime took in this sort of thing, which meant that the codes weren't going to be a bunch of fake, indecipherable nonsense. They'd be genuine codes that we could legitimately decipher, if we could figure out how to crack them. Hajime would definitely have made them as hard as possible, hoping that any potential reader would bash their head against them over and over again, all so that he could reveal the trick to decoding them and make that reader feel like an idiot for not figuring it out in the end. That meant that as long as we could outwit him, it'd be totally possible for us to solve them *without* any help.

"Well, they say that once you've eaten the poison, you may as well eat the plate it came on, right?"

"Regarding that expression...would eating a plate not render you horrifically ill, regardless of whether or not you'd ingested poison beforehand?"

"Let's not quibble about aphorisms right now, okay?"

From that point onward, Umeko and I immersed ourselves in solving Hajime's

codes, losing track of time as we tackled one puzzle after another. Every single one of them was a complex and high-level challenge in its own right. My own knowledge reserves could never have been enough to solve them, so I ended up bringing out my smartphone and even my computer to gather the extra information we needed. They really were just that convoluted—though, of course, the fact that they were so tough made the satisfaction of solving them all the greater. I really hate to admit it...but working through them really was a lot of fun.

By the way, I ended up looking into aphorisms over the course of cracking one of the codes, and while I was at it, I happened to coincidentally stumble across an explanation for the poison one. It turns out that originally, the expression went “Once you’ve eaten the poison, you may as well *lick* the plate.” The whole eating the plate thing was a corruption of the original saying, I guess.

“Th-Th-This is it... The last code, cracked,” I said, slumping over onto my table the instant I wrote the final results down. *S-So...tired...*

A truly outlandish wave of fatigue washed over me from head to foot. I wasn’t *physically* tired at all, but I’d worked my mind like never before, and the mental exhaustion I was feeling was something else. Not even my college entrance exams had been a mental workout on this level. I felt like I’d burned through about a kilogram’s worth of calories just from all the thinking I’d done. This, I imagined, must be how professional shogi or competitive karuta players felt after a match was over.

“It’s finally finished, then...?” muttered Umeko. Even she looked visibly fatigued, for once. She, the girl who had annihilated the remnants of *F* without so much as breaking a sweat, was actually *tired*. Hajime’s codes really were a force to be reckoned with.

“I’m beat...but, yeah, that was pretty fun,” I admitted. “It was like one eureka moment after another, basically. I feel like I’ve learned a lifetime’s worth of ancient mythology trivia too. I almost danced a jig back when we solved the third problem, for crying out loud!”

“I, for one, found solving the eighth problem especially invigorating. I had never considered that a code could be solved by folding the page it was written

on... Who knew one could engineer a three-dimensional puzzle into a two-dimensional medium like the written word?”

“Then there was the eleventh problem. That one was wild too, right? It never even crossed my mind that the magic circles scribbled all throughout the notebook were all hints for a larger puzzle! And the way we had to bend the notebook into a circle to make them line up just right and form a diagram together...? That was just crazy.”

All we’d done was win a showdown with a notebook, but Umeko and I felt so accomplished, you’d think we’d just conquered the deepest, most dangerous dungeon imaginable. That said, we weren’t quite finished just yet.

“So, the thirteen codes gave us thirteen groups of three letters to work with: und, tuf, fhi, tsn, qui, ron, tom, ing, iyo, aro, umo, oop, and mys. That doesn’t mean much on its own, but if we follow the instructions that we found in the hidden zeroth code to line them up in the correct order, it should form a complete, coherent sentence...”

I’d worked my brain so hard I was nearing the limits of my endurance, but I pushed through the fatigue and rearranged the letters in their proper order. By doing so, they formed a sentence—a final, hidden truth that all the other codes had been building toward, granted only to those who solved them...

qui tsn oop ing aro und mys tuf fhi tom iyo umo ron

““Quit snooping around my stuff, Hitomi, you moron’...? Huh?”

“Bwa ha ha! Well, there you have it.”

“Gah?!”

A laugh that I was all too familiar with rang out from the blue, and I stiffened up so thoroughly, you’d think I’d just been doused with a bucket of ice water. Before I could even turn around, an arm reached out from behind me and plucked the notebook from my hands.

“You’re a real piece of work, y’know that? Takes some nerve to peek into a guy’s private belongings.”

“H-Hajime?!”

“Wrong. Not Hajime—I’m Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First.”

There he was: our organization’s boss and my apartment’s freeloader, Kiryuu Hajime. Glancing outside, I noticed that the sun was already well on its way to setting. I’d screwed up. I’d been so absorbed in solving the notebook’s codes, I’d completely failed to keep track of time.

“O-O-Oh, Hajime! Welcome home!” I blathered. “I, umm, well... So, umm, i-it’s not what you think! I wasn’t snooping, or anything... I just, err, couldn’t tell whose notebook this was, so I *had* to look inside to figure it out...”

It wasn’t the greatest excuse, even considering how much I’d been put on the spot. Partway through stammering it out, though, I realized that something was strange about all this.

Huh? Wait a second. The code was chewing me out for snooping, even before Hajime started his lecture. It’s almost like he wanted me to decipher the message, and that means...

“Bwa ha ha!” Hajime cackled as, still holding the notebook aloft, he reached into his coat with his other hand and pulled out a certain something to show me.

My jaw dropped. The item Hajime had produced...was none other than a jet-black notebook with an inverted cross drawn on its cover. It was the *Reverse Crux Record*.

“Wha— But... Why are there *two* of them...?”

“*This* is the only real one,” Hajime said as he flapped the notebook he’d just pulled out in the air.

“W-Wait a minute... Does that mean the one I was looking at...?”

“Gevanni duplicated it overnight...not. As friggin’ if. *It is* a fake, though—one that I made.”

“I-It’s...a fake...?”

That notebook...was a forgery? Are you saying that all of its contents—all the ludicrously overwrought tricks and codes—were for the sake of delivering the

message “quit snooping around my stuff, Hitomi, you moron”? This was all exclusively for the sake of making me look like an idiot?

“Just felt like messing with you a bit,” said Hajime. He admitted it so nonchalantly, it was downright infuriating—and that’s not even starting on his shit-eating smirk.

“O-Oh, you little—”

“Whoa there! Do you really think you have any right to get mad at *me*, Little Miss Invasion-of-privacy? You wouldn’t have gotten tricked if you hadn’t gone looking through my crap, y’know?”

When he put it that way...I really couldn’t disagree.

Dammit! I guess he saw all of this coming, huh? Hajime had read me like a book—I’d fallen for his trap hook, line, and sinker.

There was one thing that I still just couldn’t believe, though. Surely not *everything* in that notebook could have been a fabrication...?

“H-Hey, Hajime...you didn’t make up *everything* in there out of nowhere, did you? Like the origins of our powers’ names, or your one-liners...*some* of them have to have been real, right? Heck, maybe this whole ‘that was a fake’ thing is just a bluff, and the notebook I read was actually the real one...?”

I didn’t have any basis for the wild theories I was spouting, of course, and Hajime’s smirk just grew wider. “Who knows?” is all he said. I felt myself go limp. Solving all those codes had already left me exhausted, and those two words felt like they’d dealt the coup de grâce.

“It seems we’ve been had,” Umeko muttered with an air of exasperation.

Yup. Couldn’t have put it better myself.

We’d been had—there was just no other way of looking at it. I’d thought that Hajime’s goal was to get at me with the codes, making them so hard I could never possibly solve them, but much to my surprise, he’d been setting traps on so much higher of a level than that, they might as well have been in another dimension entirely. I thought that I’d gotten the better of him, but it turned out he’d been the one to pull a fast one on me. Now that all was said and done, it

was clear that I'd been dancing in the palm of his hand, as usual.

Actually...wait. He wrote out a whole notebook just for the sake of messing with me? That's...really, really stupid!

As usual, the lengths to which Kiryuu Hajime would go for the sake of his own little games were extreme to an idiotic degree. It was just like how he went all out in enjoying the game that was the Spirit War, really...

"Hey, Hitomi, what'd you make for dinner?" Hajime asked in an insufferably casual tone as he walked into the kitchen.

"Nothing," I grunted. "And I'm not in the mood to cook anything either, so let's just eat out. Are you okay with that, Umeko?"

"Very well. There's one thing I would like to confirm, however. It concerns our deal... I trust you still intend to uphold your side of the bargain? First's notebook being a forgery, after all, is in no way a direct consequence of my—"

"I know, I know... I'll buy them for you on the way home, I promise."

Just like that, the three of us set out from home, going off to enjoy a rare meal out together like a happy little family. I'd never managed to reach the truth behind *Lucifer's Strike* in the end. The innermost workings of Kiryuu Hajime's mind were as hopelessly inscrutable as ever. For better or for worse, its depths were simply unfathomable.

Ugh...sheesh. I really did pick one pain in the ass of a man to fall for, didn't I?



Chapter 6 ★
The Path of Dark and Dark

Chapter 6: The Path of Dark and Dark

The stygian flames of purgatory, *Dark and Dark*—this was the title that had been bestowed upon Andou Jurai—me—and, by extension, the name of the power I’d awakened to, which granted me the ability to call upon the raging inferno of the abyss. The one who had bestowed it, needless to say, was none other than me. Between “the stygian flames of purgatory” serving as its introductory appellation and the English words “*Dark and Dark*” providing a foreign flair, it was a truly veristic and finalitic name for a power to have, if I do say so myself.

...Not that I actually know what “veristic” means. Or, for that matter, whether “finalitic” is even a real word. Look, I’m gonna level with you: coming up with new, fitting adjectives for this bit every single time’s been *really* hard, okay? I decided to call Tomoyo’s power “dramatic and terrific” back in the first story on a whim, and I figured that meant I should pick out two different adjectives with similar feels for everyone else’s powers as well...but to be totally honest, I never meant for any of them to actually *mean* much of anything!

In any case, all those formats and patterns that we established for these Blu-ray bonus stories—which is to say, for the process by which we named our powers—will be coming to an end after this. This will be the final, decisive, ultimate, and conclusive session: the closing ceremony in which my own power, *Dark and Dark*, will be granted its name and end the whole shebang on a triumphant note.

Looking back, these bonus stories felt like they lasted an eternity, but they also passed by in the blink of an eye. There were plenty of good times accompanied by no small amount of hardship. I learned about sides of my friends’ personalities that I’d never noticed before, and I witnessed reveals so seemingly significant that they made me want to shout “Are you *seriously* dropping that info in a Blu-ray bonus story, of all places?!”

Oh, and since I opened the meta content floodgates in the first session, each

story that followed became more and more distressingly meta until we'd gone far past the point of reason. I was all *"Oh, you want me to write a forty-page story each month to pack in as a bonus with the Blu-ray releases? Easy-peasy! I can just make them about power names—that'll give me enough content to keep writing for ages. Actually, I want to do this now! You couldn't stop me if you tried!"* at first, not considering for a moment how friggin' *hard* sticking to a schedule like that would actually—

Whoops! I think I got possessed by some sort of unknown entity for a second there.

So. Uh... Hmm.

Well, I guess this is just one of those things, y'know? The meta gags have been getting wilder and wilder ever since the first story, so part of me thinks that we may as well go all out and finish things off with a "Major plot twist: the series' author steps into the story! It's time for a power naming symposium starring Kota Nozomi and Andou Jurai!" sort of deal...but, nah. That'd be too much, even for me.

The odds of a move like that going terribly, disastrously wrong are *way* too high. Even metafiction has certain lines that you just can't step across, and when an author inserts themselves into their own work of fiction...well, let's just say that the slightest misstep can result in an almost unbelievably chilly reception from readers. "Laughing at you, not with you" is the best-case scenario—it can go from that to goose-bump-raising levels of disgust in no time at all. It's the sort of move that risks getting pieces of your story passed around as bad writing cypastas for the rest of eternity.

Now, look—I'm not saying that stories that feature their author as a character are *always* bad or anything! It was consistently hilarious when *Seikimatsu Leader den Takeshi!* had its author step into the story, and plenty of other manga have pulled off similar stunts. Heck, the author of that one actually placed *first* in a character popularity poll once! It doesn't get much funnier than that! A first-rate meta-user's capable of tailoring things in just the right sort of way to make a gag like that come across as funny rather than excruciating.

Of course, I have a feeling that all that might only apply in the case of manga.

After all, having the author of a gag manga show up in the story has been a trope for ages. Even when the author doesn't show up as an actual character, it's super common for characters to break the fourth wall by referencing them—like, by talking about how a looming deadline impacted the story, or poking fun at their artistic skills. I could keep throwing out examples all day, if I wanted to. When you look at light novels, however, the examples dry up in an instant. There are plenty of light novels that strike a similar tone as gag manga, but even among them, I can't think of a single one that has the author step onto the stage as a character. It's possible that there's a story like that out there somewhere and I just don't know about it, I guess, but I think it's safe to say that at the very least, they're *extremely* rare. It's by no means mainstream, or even a common trope.

You could make the argument that it's just a difference in mediums—that the amount of meta content that's permissible in manga is different from that of light novels—but all it takes is one look at mystery novels to complicate the equation all over again. Meta-mysteries, after all, are a whole subgenre of mystery novel in and of themselves. Mystery is a genre that has played nicely with meta content from the very beginning, and plenty of works have leaned rather heavily on it over the course of time.

That, presumably, is why some works—albeit not very many—have actually gone so far as to have their final twist be that the author themselves was the killer. I'd give examples, but they would be pretty big spoilers in this case, so I'll spare you the specific titles. There are quite a number of works in the mystery genre that feature their author as a character, as well. A famous mystery author named Ellery Queen, for instance, wrote a lengthy series starring a main character who was just straight up named Ellery Queen.

So, yeah—as you can see, it's not *rare* for authors to turn up as characters in manga or novels by any means...but for some reason, it just doesn't seem to happen in light novels specifically. Why is that? I mean...this might be too obvious of an answer, but I have a feeling “because nobody wants it” explains everything pretty handily on its own.

If you actually *tried* putting yourself into a light novel you were writing, the readers would probably reject the development. You'd lose your audience at a

breakneck pace. Just thinking about a story's protagonist or heroine talking with its author... I mean, it feels *wrong*. Same for referencing the author in the narration—like, imagine if a series' ultimate foe unleashes their most stupendously powerful attack, but the narration doesn't *really* seem to be selling how incredible it is, and then all of a sudden it goes “Oh no! Tragically, the author just isn't good enough at writing to depict how powerful the attack was!” That'd be... Well, you get it, right?

I really do think that an author putting themselves into their own light novel is a move that wouldn't make anyone happy. All it would accomplish is grievously wounding the readership *and* the author themselves. Better to just not do it at all. Like, seriously, just don't.

So, yeah. If, by any chance, there are any *extremely* eccentric readers out there who were hoping that this final bonus story would feature the long-awaited debut of the series' author in the story proper—and I'm positive that there weren't, but again, just in case—I offer them this advance warning: Kota Nozomi will not be appearing in this bonus story.

...As if that weren't obvious.

School was out for the day, and I was in the club room. I'd grown thoroughly used to our one-on-one interview structure...but today, I was the only person present.

I was alone. Solitary and isolated. This goes without saying, but when both of the people involved in a one-on-one interview are the *same* person, you're left without any sort of interview at all.

Though, then again...in a certain sense, maybe this really was an interview too. I was, after all, engaged in a deep, heated conversation with myself as my own interlocutor. I was conducting a self-interview, debating furiously with my subconscious in the world of my mind's eye. The one-man battle transpiring in the after-school club room that day was as fierce and ferocious as a conflict could be.

“Argh... *Dammit!* Trash! Trash, every one of them!” I shouted as I dropped my pen, crumpled up the sheet of paper I'd been writing on, and pitched it over my

shoulder. Similarly crumpled wads of paper littered the floor around the table I was sitting at. “Nobody would be satisfied with run-of-the-mill names like these! Nobody at all... And most importantly, / sure as hell never would!”

I grabbed another sheet of paper and started writing anew. I spent a few moments scribbling in silence, but before long, I crumpled the page up once more and discarded it like all the others. I was acting like a desperate author who’d found himself cornered by his deadlines...and honestly, that wasn’t all that far from the truth. I didn’t know the first thing about how it felt to be an author, but as of that moment, I understood how it felt to be the victim of an unbreakable writer’s block *very* well.

The subject I was thinking so frantically about, of course, was the name of my power. Indeed—the name of the jet-black hellfire that dwelled within my right arm. I’d written down countless concepts and candidates so far, but none of them had felt right at all, and the longer I mulled it over, the more it felt like my thought process was getting bogged down.

Initially, the plan had been for all five of our club’s members to come together and think up a name for my power today. We’d attempted it, even, but we hadn’t been able to come to a consensus, and in the end, I’d told the others that I needed some time alone. They’d gone home ahead of me, and I was left to work myself into the overtime situation I was now stuck in.

The others had all agreed to play along with this whole naming process out of sympathy—or, let’s be honest, pity—for me, and I felt pretty bad for driving them away considering that...but it had to be done. I couldn’t let them witness my disgraceful display for even a moment longer. I didn’t want them to see me suffering from my critical, pathetic lack of ideas.

You might be thinking “Okay, so then why didn’t you just think something up in advance?” but for the record: I’d tried. I’d thought about it as hard as I possibly could in advance, right down to the wire. I’d put so much time into thinking about my power’s name, I’d ended up losing out on sleep as a result...but it didn’t work. I was in a total slump. In athletic terms, I had the yips. In *Prince of Tennis* terms, I felt like I’d just gone up against Ibu Shinji and Captain Yukimura, one after the other. When all was said and done, / was done and dusted.

“Gaaah! Damnations! This isn’t working at *all*! First, all my ideas seemed too simplistic, and now they seem too convoluted instead! Being rare and weird doesn’t make a name good, and I know it! There’s no point trotting out words from foreign languages if nobody who hears the name will ever have any clue what they actually mean!”

Just like that, yet another sheet of paper was added to the waste pile. My burning rage, however—the rage I felt toward myself—was not so easily suppressed.

“Graaahhhhhh!”

I shot to my feet, sending my folding chair clattering to the floor as I grabbed onto the table...and sorta just gently lifted it up before setting it back down again. Actually flipping it would’ve risked damaging the floor, so I held back on that.

“Hraaaaaah!”

I set my sights on the nearby trash can and wound up a kick...before realizing what a pain cleaning all that garbage up would be and satisfying myself by giving its revolving lid a really nice slap.

“Fhrraghaaaugh!”

I lifted my toppled folding chair above my head, ready to hurl it straight through the window...but then common sense took over and I just set it back down by the table instead.

“Hah, hah, hah... Phew! Guess I got a little heated there.”

Having gone on my little rampage—the best rampage that I could muster, in fact—I paused to take a breather. I’ll admit that I hadn’t been so crazed that I’d completely lost all sense of reason or anything, but the fact that I was at the end of my rope *was* completely true.

I let out a long, deep sigh, then knelt down on the floor listlessly. I pushed the crumpled-up papers out of my way, clearing a space in front of me, then flopped prone onto the ground, one leg bent while I stared up at the ceiling. Then I pressed the back of my hand to my forehead and spat a single word.

“Dammit!”

That’s right. I’m lying on the ground, so frustrated I can only swear...and that’s hella cool.

I mean it—*hella* cool. Few things are as cool as a protagonist who’s been driven to the brink by the frustration of major setback after major setback. The hand on the forehead in particular was a seriously vital point for capturing the “protagonist lying on the ground after a huge setback” image. There were a few ways of handling it—the palm-facing-upward version that I’d chosen communicated a sense of frustration and aloof solitude, for instance, while going palm-in to cover my eyes would’ve communicated that I was desperately trying to conceal my irrepressible tears, which would’ve been cool in its own right.

“Okay...but seriously, what am I even doing?” I grunted, calling myself out on my own stupidity as I sat up. It was at times like these—which is to say, times when I was both already depressed and alone—that I had to curse my wholehearted dedication to being a poser.

That sort of behavior made it really easy to assume that I was just *saying* I was at my wit’s end and that I really had tons of material in my back pocket that I was just waiting to pull out, but no, really, I had nothing. I was completely, genuinely stumped. The name I was trying to think up just wasn’t working out, and I was in a major fix.

“Man...I really screwed this up from the very beginning, didn’t I?”

It was very, very late for this, but I still had to acknowledge the major error that I committed way back in the beginning of this process. These one-on-one naming interviews? They were a mistake, plain and simple.

Now of course, I’m not saying that agreeing to do these bonus stories was a mistake, nor that it would’ve been a better idea to theme them around something slightly more conventional. The thing is, the whole reason I decided to do these interviews in the first place was because I myself had hit a roadblock in the naming process. I’m pretty sure I already talked about that in the first of these stories, actually.

Specifically, I’d hit a dead end when it came to naming my own black flame

power. My tendency to fantasize about supernatural powers had, counterintuitively, ended up holding me back. I'd worked myself into a mindset where I couldn't accept anything I saw as a half-baked name, piling oodles of completely unnecessary pressure onto myself, and I had ultimately wound up at a total loss.

My best idea to get out of that gridlock: coming up with names for everyone else's powers first. I'd name all the literary club girls' powers, use them to settle on a general format and flow for the process, and *then* come back to thinking about my power's name. That was the origin of the one-on-one interviews and, by extension, the origin of these stories on the whole. We're pretending that story five didn't happen, by the way.

Anyway, I'd named all the girls' powers, just as planned, and I had gotten the style and format for them nailed down nicely. All that was left was my own power's name, but...

"In the end, all I've accomplished is raising the bar *way* higher than it was to begin with!"

What I'd thought was a genius idea had suffered from a serious structural defect—a tragic and fatal flaw. When I actually took the time to think about it, it was obvious. My power would be the last up to bat. It'd be the grand finale, as they say. For better or for worse, that meant that the bar for its name would inevitably be raised. My whole problem was that my expectations for the name were unreasonably high, so why the hell had I gone out of my way to set them even *higher* than they were before?

"God, I screwed this up so badly. Unless it turns out that the five stories up to this point were all building toward some big revelation in this one, I'm totally doomed."

Unfortunately, however, no such twist was to come. All five of the previous names had been wildly off the cuff—ahem, they'd been concepts that I'd poured every bit of effort into that I possibly could. I'd used up all the material that I could come up with, not thinking for a moment about saving ideas for the final round.

"Of course, I'm the one who raised the bar, so I've got no one to blame for

this but myself. It's my problem, and I have to deal with it. Not like the others care about my names to begin with..."

But wait—is that really true? Tomoyo was always taking jabs at me, but deep down, she enjoyed my names as much as I did...or at least, that was the feeling I got. I certainly didn't want to let her down.

Hatoko... *Ah, wait, I should probably do this in Blu-ray bonus story order, so scratch her for now.*

Chifuyu, honestly, didn't seem to care about power names at all. As long as I gave my power *some* sort of name, she probably wouldn't ask for anything more...but speaking as her elder, I didn't want her to end up watching me give up on my aspirations.

As for Sayumi—frankly, I was just terrified that if I slacked off on my name in the slightest, she'd see through it and call me out in an instant. Like, seriously, at this point it felt like she'd be able to tell from just my handwriting or the tone of voice that I said the power's name in. Whether or not the name I came up with was good, if there were *any* signs that I'd decided to call it a day and go with what I had on hand because the deadline was looming, there was no doubt in my mind whatsoever that she would roast me over an open fire for it.

Hatoko, on the other hand, would probably say "Wow, that's amazing!" no matter what sort of slipshod name I presented her with...but then again, maybe she wouldn't. She'd seen through my attempt at deception during her interview, after all, figuring out that I'd finished her power's name before we'd even started based on my attitude alone. I couldn't underestimate the observational powers of a childhood friend. Considering all that, if I showed her a power name that I myself wasn't satisfied with, there was every chance that she'd realize it right away and be disappointed as a result.

"Guess I just have to go for it, huh...?"

I steeled myself, stood back up, and took a seat at the table, facing a blank sheet of paper all over again. If you're curious about why I was going out of my way to write out my ideas on individual sheets of loose-leaf paper, by the way...well, it sorta just helped keep me motivated, I guess. It was absolutely *not* because I thought that crumpling up all my failed attempts made me look like a

hella cool twentieth-century author in a slump, for the record.

“Guess I should start by putting together a list of everything I’ve already settled on,” I muttered.

As hard of a time as I was having coming up with a name, I wasn’t starting from a completely blank slate. To start with, I already had a format for my power’s name that I had to abide by, no matter what. The other four members’ powers had already set that in stone. Whatever my power’s name ended up being, it would consist of two major English words that could be written out using nine Japanese characters, accompanied by a title to precede it.

That format was the one absolute restriction that my power’s name would have to stick with. If I didn’t, after all, it would feel like I was betraying the other members of my club, and it would render the interviews I’d conducted with them meaningless as well. I wasn’t about to throw out all that hard work for no good reason.

There was, however, one other aspect of my power’s name that’d come predetermined. I’d decided a long, long time ago that one of the words in my power’s preceding title would have to be “flame.” Not “fire,” not “flare,” and not anything else—“flame,” for sure. That had been settled for just about as long as I’d been pondering my power’s name.

I’m sure that for some people, the reasons “flame” is better than “fire” will be more or less self-evident. There’s just a certain *something* to it—a slight but significant distinction that gives it the edge in terms of chuuni goodness. Fire is fine, sure, but *flame* is hella cool.

A very fundamental principle of naming theory is that you should use uncommon words in your names as often as humanly possible. It’s the principle that leads us to say “crimson” instead of “red,” “azure” instead of “blue,” “emerald” instead of “green,” and so on and so forth. There are plenty of exceptions, of course, but it’s still a safe rule of thumb to say that if a word has a less-used or archaic equivalent that you can sub in, doing so will probably make your name cooler.

To throw out a random example, take mercury, the element. It’s kind of a cool word on its own, sure, but using the archaic “quicksilver” instantly makes it a

thousand times cooler. I guess swords are also a good example—“blade” is cool, but it doesn’t hold a candle to the archaic “brand.” You have to be kind of careful with that one, though, depending on what part of the sword’s name you want to emphasize. If you’re going with a “Blade of X” sort of structure and you want the X part to stand out, then keeping it as “Blade of X” rather than “X Brand” is the way to go. It’s important to keep in mind the fact that archaic words like that will always stand out, for better or for worse.

Making up a good name isn’t as simple as stringing together a series of individually cool words. The art of naming is an art of balance, and it’s only by achieving *total* balance that a name is perfected. What is it that you want to communicate through the names you make up? How do you want your readers or viewers to perceive them? It’s vitally necessary to consider each and every feeling, each and every piece of information that you pack into the names you invent.

“Of course, I wouldn’t be dealing with such ridiculously high expectations if I didn’t ramble about naming theory day in and day out like this...”

It was the strangest feeling. If I had to compare it to something, I’d say it was like being a language arts teacher who made their students compose poems for an assignment despite not bothering to write even a single poem himself. I could really understand where teachers like that were coming from all of a sudden. The more judgmental about creative works you were on a day-to-day basis, the harder it was to produce one of your own.

Anyway, that was a digression. The point is that since I’d been lucky enough to be granted a fire-based power, I wanted to use the word “flame” *somewhere* in its name or title. That was set in stone, in my mind. Or, really, it *had* to be, because if I didn’t put *something* in stone sometime soon, I was never going to get anywhere.

A two-word English name, and the word “flame.” Those two points were the name’s sole foundation, and they had been for quite a long time now. No matter how much I racked my brain, I just wasn’t able to progress any further than that. My plan was to write down anything and everything I came up with today, prioritizing quantity over quality (okay, that’s not exactly the nuance I was going for, but you get the point). As you’ve seen, it didn’t exactly work out

as I'd hoped it would.

For now, though, I didn't have any other options. Thus, I hardened my resolve and stared down a fresh sheet of paper—no, stared down *myself*—once more.

I didn't have a clear conception of how much time had passed. The world outside the club room was...dark, probably? I wasn't totally sure of that either.

The seemingly endless hours of silent, internal dialogue I'd subjected myself to had worn away at my mental state, leaving me in a somewhat unbalanced situation before I knew it. Granted, the fact that I was capable of assessing my own mental state and saying that I was unbalanced was probably a sign that I *was*, in fact, actually still balanced as could be...but on the other hand, assessing yourself as being unbalanced also seemed like an inherently unbalanced thing to do. This was one of those rabbit holes—like debating whether someone who has good intentions while ignorant is more or less dangerous than someone who's actively malicious—that would go on forever if I let it.

In any case, it was pretty clear that thinking about stuff like *that* for as long as I had was definitely *not* a balanced thing to do.

Okay. Yeah. Something feels wrong here for sure. My mind felt foggy, and my consciousness dim and far away. My footing was uncertain, as well, to so great an extent that I couldn't tell whether I was standing or sitting. I wasn't even totally sure I was in the club room anymore. In focusing so intently on my dialogue with myself, I'd neglected my dialogue with the world around me, and the world had gotten so sick of being ignored that it had apparently given up and gone along on its way.

I saw nothing. I felt nothing. The world was pitch black—or maybe pure white? It was like I was all alone in the world, or like the world itself had vanished, leaving me on my lonesome. It was an inexplicable, weightless sense of solitude.

Man, this sure is something. I guess I should've expected this from myself. Apparently, I've pushed the boundaries of my inner dialogue so far I accidentally destroyed the world. I'm as sinful as ever, it seems. That's right—I'm sinful as hell, and that's hella cool.

“So...I guess this must mean that I was this world’s god all along, or something like that.”

“As friggin’ if!”

Suddenly, a voice rang out from nowhere. It was a familiar voice, shutting me down in a familiar manner.

“You, a god? Get real. There’s nothing more excruciating than a chuuni who’s started taking his delusions of grandeur in *that* stupid direction.”

“Tomoyo...”

There she was: Kanzaki Tomoyo, in the flesh. She was all alone, standing on nothing in the featureless white void I’d found myself in.

“Wh-What’re you doing here...? And actually, where *is* this place?” I asked.

“What, here? It’s your mindscape,” said Tomoyo.

“My mindscape?! Oh, of course! I get it—it all makes sense now!”

“Does it, really?! You picked up on that way too quickly! I was all ready to explain what I was talking about and stuff!”

Hmph! As if I’d need an explanation!

The mindscape: in simple terms, it’s...well, like...it’s one of those things that shows up all the time in battle manga, basically. When a protagonist or major character ends up in a space like this, it’s a surefire sign that they’re about to go through some sort of major awakening. It’s where they shed the binding chains of their past traumas, reflect upon their bonds with their companions, and obtain a brand new superpower!

“Oh man, holy crap! I finally made it into my mindscape! I *knew* it was only a matter of time!”

“Do you really have to be *this* hyped-up about it...?”

“And man, it really is as featureless as they always make it look! It’s just all white, all the way! We’re basically standing in a blank canvas! It’s like we’re in *BLEACH*!”

“You mean, like, liquid bleach, right?! You’re just talking about how it makes

stuff white, right?! Right?!”

“Okay, so wait. If this is my mindscape...then who’re *you*?”

“Hmm. Well, the easy way to put it would be that I’m an illusory version of myself that was generated by your mind, or whatever.”

“Yeah, okay. That checks out. Ugh, that sorta sucks, though! Doesn’t that mean I’ve been talking to myself this whole time?”

“As opposed to what? Look, if you’re gonna start going down that road, then it’s only a matter of time before you decide that *all* protagonists who go into their mindscapes are freaky lunatics who have full-blown conversations with themselves. Is that the conclusion you wanna reach?”

“Hmm. Yeah...you’ve got a point. I guess it’s kinda silly to question that part too deeply. And besides, even when we talk with other people, humans are always talking with ourselves. Some part of us is always in a dialogue with an imaginary version of the person we’re speaking to in our minds, predicting how they’ll respond to whatever we’ll say next.”

“Could you not say stuff that actually sounds sort of deep out of nowhere...? It’s really hard to react to.”

“Okay then, Tomoyo,” I said, drawing a line in the conversational sand. “It’s time. C’mon, give me something.”

“Huh? What do you mean, something?”

“A hint for what to name my power!”

“Why me?”

“Well, this is my mindscape, right? That must mean you’ve shown up here to give me a lecture or encourage me or something, then you’ll give me a hint to help me along on my way. That’s basically always how it works when an acquaintance shows up in a character’s mental world.”

“And you’re just, like...saying that? Out loud? Anyway, nah, I don’t have anything like that. I’m not interested in sticking my nose into your naming business.”

“Huh? What’d you even bother coming here for, then?”

“Well, the plan was to have this whole bonus story be forty pages straight of you talking to yourself, but that ended up being just *way* too much, so they scrapped it and sent me in as an emergency measure.”

“Oh, so it’s a meta reason!”

“Honestly, they kinda just threw me in here to prop the story up.”

“Don’t be honest about that!”

“Anyway, I’m here now, so we may as well make the most of it. I’ll play along with your whole naming thing, if you want.”

“Oh, nice! I knew you had it in you, Tomoyo—thanks! Okay then, let’s get started! Naming card battle number two, go!”

“Oh, *hell* no!”

“Why not?”

“That’s...something that I can only manage when I’m really worked up. I can’t maintain that sort of energy level otherwise. I really don’t think I’d be able to pull off that sort of high-energy scene right now.”

Hmm. That’s a shame. That card battle was super fun—I’d love to have another one.

“But anyway, back to your power’s name. Speaking of last time, why not just go with the one you came up with back then, *Flame of Darkness*?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Well, why?”

“Why?! Because... Because it’s just wrong, that’s why. It’s got major this-isn’t-it vibes, y’know?”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll admit that it feels maybe a little too simple, but I don’t think that’s really *that* bad of a thing. Some series make a point of having their final boss-tier powers have simple, straightforward names, right?”

“Well, one way or another, it’s out because it doesn’t match up with the format I settled on during your session!”

“Oh. Right, yeah.”

“And even if it *did* fit the format, I’d still be against it. I dunno how to put this, but, like...I’d just rather not use words like ‘darkness’ and ‘dark’ at all, if I can.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too played out. It’d cheapen the name, the way I see it. Like, if you had some random person look at my power and come up with a name for it, odds are good the first thing they’d suggest would be Dark Something-or-Other, right?”

Now, don’t get me wrong...“darkness” and “dark” are perfectly cool words. I’m absolutely not debating that! The problem is that they’re cool in a way that an elementary schooler could easily come up with. The word “chuunibyou” has grown so far apart from its roots nowadays that the actual eighth grade has basically nothing to do with it anymore, so it might be silly for me to act like a stickler about this, but I just can’t help but think that for something to have a ton of chuuni appeal, it has to be something that an elementary schooler wouldn’t be able to *get* yet. A cool factor that a kid in the early years of elementary school could understand just wasn’t the sort of chuuni aesthetic that I was going for.

“Okay then,” Tomoyo said with an understanding nod. I was very aware that the concept I was trying to explain would be pretty tough for most people to pick up on, but Tomoyo had grasped and accepted it in an instant. That’s a former chuuni for you, I guess. “But you know, Andou— isn’t that basically just you chickening out, in the end?”

“Wh-What was that...?”

“You heard me. It is, isn’t it? You know the words are cool, but you’re giving up on them just because ‘anyone could come up with them.’”

I fell silent.

“I get it, you know? The fundamental principle of chuunibyou is thinking that not being like everyone else makes you cool. Of course you’d want to avoid using a name that anyone could come up with. You can’t help but feel that way, and it’s making you raise your own standards. But...if you’re at this point where you’re sticking so strictly to chuunibyou’s fundamental principles, doesn’t it mean that you’re using them as a crutch?”

“Huh?!”

Tomoyo had just slapped me with a truly profound statement—profound, yet also incredibly obnoxious. Wanting to be unlike everyone else was the very nature of chuunibyou. It was a philosophy that made being part of a minority group its prime aesthetic. The thing is, though, that minority groups are still *groups*. They’re still *part* of something—not individuals. Though chuunis wish to be unlike everyone else, when all’s said and done, they also wish to be part of a *group* of people who wish to be unlike everyone else.

I could deal with having countless people laugh at the names I came up with...but I still wanted some small percentage of them to understand me as well. I wanted some number of people to identify with me. I wanted people with my sensibilities to praise me for my creations. I never wanted *those* people, at the absolute least, to laugh at me. And, in letting myself indulge in those desires...

“Before I knew it...I’ve ended up pandering to the chuuni crowd?”

In not pandering to the majority, I’d wound up pandering to a minority. I had put on a pretense of being solitary and aloof, but in truth, I was as far from it as a person could be.

“I really do understand how embarrassing it is to use an obvious name. But you know what, Andou? Thinking up a name for your own supernatural power is *already* plenty embarrassing on its own.”

“...”

“So why care? Who gives a crap about a little extra embarrassment on top of it?”

“Tomoyo...”

“It takes guts to go with something played out on purpose. That’s a sort of courage that creators need.”

“*Oof*. Way to talk like a published author, Miss Hasn’t-even-had-her-debut-yet.”

“Oh, screw you!” Tomoyo shouted, blushing as bright red as a tomato—only

to suddenly start fading away a moment later. “Oh... Looks like time’s up.”

“Huh? Wh-What do you mean?”

“Just that my turn’s over, that’s all. There’s a pretty big line behind me, and I can’t keep eating up screen time forever.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but one way or another, Tomoyo’s body was fading at a rapid pace. She grew gradually more and more transparent, until finally she began disappearing altogether, starting from her feet.

“What?! No! Tomoyo?! Tomoyo!” I shouted.

“Andou... Don’t forget about me, okay?” said Tomoyo. For just a moment, there was a faraway look in her eyes—and then she was gone, vanishing entirely.

“Tomoyo! Tomoyooo! N-No... *Nooooooooooooooooo!*” I wailed, falling to my knees and pounding the pure-white ground with my fists. “Dammit! It happened again... I couldn’t protect her this time either!”

“Protect who?”

“Gwaaaugh?!”

I’d really had a good “crushed by regret and self-condemnation” thing going for a second there, but then an elementary schooler I was very familiar with suddenly appeared right next to me and knocked me *completely* out of the moment.

“Ch-Chifuyu...?”

“What’re you doing, Andou?”

“U-Umm, well... I’m, uh...”

“You ‘couldn’t protect her this time either’...? Who?”

“...”

“You weren’t really punching the ground either. You stopped right before.”

Chifuyu’s innocent gaze was boring a hole into me. There was nothing I could say to her. The honest answer, after all...was that I was acting out a “main

character who'd failed to protect his friends" scene. Watching Tomoyo vanish before my eyes had given me the urge, and I'd been helpless to resist it.

Speaking of which, this is as much your fault as it is mine, Tomoyo! What was that "don't forget about me" for?! Of course I'd run with it if you give me a setup like that!

"So, you're here in my mindscape too, huh, Chifuyu?"

"Yeah. To prop up the story," Chifuyu brazenly declared.

Oh, okay. I think I'm getting the picture now. This is probably one of those things where everyone's going to show up in order, right? Seeing as this is the last bonus story, they're pulling out an all-star cast to send us off!

"I didn't come alone, though," Chifuyu added.

"Oh?"

"Squirrely's here too."

Chifuyu proudly lifted up her stuffed squirrel for me to see. The way she was insisting on counting a plushie as a person struck me as really charming, in a childlike sort of way.

"Oh, that's great! Nice to have you on the team too, Squirrely," I said.

"And someone else is here too," Chifuyu added.

"Oh? You brought another plushie with you this time?"

"I asked Cookie to come."

"You... *Huh?!*" I gasped in bug-eyed shock.

Just then, another grade schooler stepped out from behind Chifuyu. "It's been a while, Andou," Chifuyu's best friend, Kuki Madoka, said with a polite bow.

"Wait, wait, no, this can't be right!" I protested. "We can't bring out Kuki here! That'd mess up the whole premise here so badly, we'd never recover from it!"

"But why?"

"Why? Well, because..."

It's just obviously not okay, right? Kuki doesn't know about our powers! And, like, on a more basic level, these bonus stories are set half a year before the main series starts! Me meeting Kuki now would result in a seriously unresolvable continuity error!

"Are you trying to leave Kuki out, Andou?"

"Ugh!"

"But she's my best friend."

"Augh!"

"And she worked so hard to sing the ED for you, every single episode."

"Gaaah!"

Now that's a hard point to argue against! Kuki and Kudou sure did sing the ED together, yup.

"It's all right, Andou. You don't have to worry about any of those nitpicky details," Kuki said in a kind, understanding tone. "This is just your mindscape, after all."

It kinda feels like we're setting ourselves up for failure by using that excuse...but sure, let's just say it works.

"Okay, then, Chifuyu, Kuki. Are you two here to give me naming advice too?" I asked.

"Yeah. But not really," said Chifuyu. "I'm not giving advice. I thought up the best answer."

"Uh?"

"I thought up a name for your power, Andou."

"You... *Huuuuuuuh*?! Y-You mean...?"

To be blunt: I appreciated the thought, and *only* the thought. For one thing, I was very dedicated to the idea of coming up with my power's name myself. For another...I just didn't have any faith whatsoever in Chifuyu's taste.

"Listen up, Andou," Chifuyu said, sounding a little proud of herself as she talked right over my moment of internal turmoil. "The name I came up with for

your power is...*Andou*."

I blinked.

"It's *Andou*."

"Uh... Huh? Wait. Are you saying that you want to name my power *Andou*?"

"Yeah. *Andou's Andou*."

Chifuyu seemed pretty pleased with herself...but, like, come on. Really? No way was I naming my power after myself. I *had* to come up with a good reason to object—but before I could, a big, beaming smile spread across Kuki's face as she took Chifuyu by the hand.

"That's amazing!" Kuki exclaimed. "It's great, Chii! What a perfect name!"

"Really?" asked Chifuyu.

"Really! I'm sure *Andou* loves it too!"

"Yeah. I worked really hard to think up something he'd like."

Okay...we've got an emergency on our hands. Who knew that Kuki would give Chifuyu's name such a rave review? Her habit of being pathologically soft on Chifuyu was manifesting in the worst possible way for me!

"Naming *Andou's power Andou's* such a genius move... I knew you'd come up with something incredible, Chii! You're always thinking up ideas that an average person would never even consider!"

I mean...I'm not gonna argue with that last part, at least.

"Yeah. I put my all into it. And if his power has the same name that he does, if he ever loses it someday, whoever finds it will know who to give it back to."

Is she treating my power's name like a name tag?! I'm not gonna lose it, for crying out loud! It might get stolen or sealed, sure, but it's not the sort of thing that can accidentally fall out of your pocket when you're out and about!

"Right? That's so you, Chii! Naming *Andou's power...Andou*... Wh-What an amazing...idea... Pff! Yeah, it's...pff, hee hee...i-it's just...just great..."

I see that hysterical laughter you're holding back, Kuki! You know exactly what sort of crime you're committing right now! You're killing two birds with one

stone by praising Chifuyu and humiliating me at the same time!

“Okay, Andou. It’s almost time. I’m going home,” Chifuyu said. She’d delivered the news she came here to share, so she was apparently satisfied now. Her form began to fade away, and Kuki started fading right along with her.

“Oh. One last thing, Andou,” Kuki said, a thought seeming to strike her before she vanished completely. “The anime portrayed me as being pretty interested in you as a man, in the end...but honestly, the me in the original novels couldn’t care less about you.”

“Dropping a bit of a bombshell, huh?!”

With that final, incredibly inflammatory remark, the elementary schooler combo popped out of existence.

“Well, why don’t you tell me what you *really* think of me, Kuki...?” I grumbled. “Though, wait. Actually...I guess there *could* be a chance that she was just being a really huge tsundere at the end there? Which would mean that the novel version of Kuki *actually*—”

“What on earth do you think you’re speculating about? She’s an elementary schooler, Andou,” a harsh, judgmental voice rang out from behind me. It was, of course, Sayumi. “So, you genuinely wound up on a trip into your mindscape just because you were having trouble thinking up a name...? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. I’m almost moved by how typical of you that is.”

“Sayumi... I mean, it’s not *that* impressive or anything, y’know?”

“Please don’t get bashful over what was plainly supposed to be sarcasm. Just how much time and energy will you waste on these power names before you’re satisfied?”

“Well, I mean, look... Things are complicated, okay? I have a lot to deal with.”

“Do you, truly? You’re going to name it *Dark and Dark* in the end, regardless of what happens here, so I fail to see what makes this so difficult.”

“I *definitely* already told you to stop saying stuff like that!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it? You’re planning on using your conversations with the five of us as inspiration that will ultimately lead to you coming up with *Dark and*

Dark, aren't you? I suppose that means I should start thinking up some sort of clever hint to drop myself..."

"Stop! Please, just *stop!*"

You're gonna ruin everything! Yes, things kinda felt like they were moving in that direction, but saying it in advance spoils the whole deal!

"Have mercy, Sayumi, I'm begging you... I'm already at my wit's end, and I just can't deal with this right now. Having to cope with the name that Chifuyu shoved onto me is hard enough as is."

"*Andou*, you mean? You could always just use it."

"Hell no!"

"Oh? Isn't sharing a name with your power an established trope in its own right?"

"Only when the power name ends up getting used as a code name for someone, like Weather Report or Accelerator! It's really, *really* weird for someone's real name to get used as their power name! Especially when the character in question is Japanese!"

"How very demanding of you."

"It's not about me being demanding, it's just... Look, I just don't wanna use it, okay? I'm not some raging narcissist like Ellery Queen, who likes throwing his name around everywhere."

"Speaking of whom... I should say, for the record, Andou, that while the works of Ellery Queen do sometimes feature a protagonist who shares a name with their author, the real-world Ellery Queen was, in fact, a pen name shared by *two* authors who wrote together."

"Huh?! For real?!"

"Quite—a pen name of much the same kind as Ashirogi Muto. Though their medium of choice was the written word rather than manga, and supposedly, one was in charge of coming up with their stories' overall plots while the other handled the nitty-gritty prose."

"Oh, wow! I guess that's why they were totally okay with naming their

protagonist that, huh? Way easier to name him after a pen name when it's shared between two people."

"That is, of course, the most basic of the basics when it comes to having an understanding of Ellery Queen, and I'd thank you for not throwing their name around so freely when you lack that sort of fundamental knowledge. Not unless you want to earn the ire of mystery fans everywhere, at least," Sayumi said with an exasperated sigh that made me bury my face in my hands from the shame of it all. "By the way, Andou," she continued, "regarding your power's name—have you settled on any of its smaller details, at least?"

"Oh, yeah, I have. I know for sure that the main name will be made up of two major English words and that I'll be using the word 'flame' in the title associated with it."

"'Flambé'? It sounds like you have quite the tasty title in the works, then."

"Flame! Not flambé! *Flame!*"

"Oh, my apologies. They're such similar words, I must have misheard you."

"No, you didn't! That was totally on purpose! Sure, they're technically only one letter and an accent off from each other when you write them out, but there's no way you could ever *mishear* one for the other! I don't want my power to sound like it's about to be served for dinner!"

Flame.

Flambé.

Crap, they do kinda look alike! The left side's totally identical!

"Although flambé is associated with a wide variety of dishes in modern times, and although its origins are somewhat unclear in a historical sense, when one examines early examples of recipes that call for the technique, it's hard not to notice that a vast majority seem to be sweet dishes rather than savory. As such, strictly speaking, using 'flambé' in your power's name would make it sound like it's about to be served for *dessert*, not dinner."

"I wasn't asking for a crash course in the historical context of flambé! We're not accomplishing anything helpful with this tangent!"

“Of course, I favor Japanese sweets over flambé desserts regardless—the sort that use red bean paste as a filling, for instance. Speaking of which, do you prefer your bean paste smooth or only partially processed, Andou?”

“Oh, so we’re sticking with the tangent whether or not it’s pointless, huh...? Well, I’m a smooth paste person. I don’t really like having chunks of whole beans in my desserts, so I basically only eat sweets that use the smooth stuff. What about you?”

“I’m partial to the chunks, as it happens. Bean paste is defined by beans, after all.”

“Oh? Well, y’know, I like uguisu-an bean paste! Do you know what that is, Andou?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s a lot like red bean paste, but it’s green because they actually make it out of peas instead of— Wait, *Maiya*?! What’re *you* doing here?!”

“Ha ha, been a while!” said Maiya. “I was just kinda bored and all, so I came over to hang out!”

“She seemed bored, so I brought her along with me,” Sayumi confirmed.

The Takanashi sisters seemed not to make very much at all of Maiya’s presence, but... *Like, this can’t be okay, can it? She doesn’t know about our powers either, and me meeting her now would totally break continuity!*

“Oh, Andou, there’s no need to fuss about this kind of thing! Kuki already made an appearance, so why shouldn’t I show up too?” said Maiya.

“Well, I mean... Kuki sang the ED and all, right? She did a ton of good work for the anime.”

“Hey, I did great work for the anime too! They’re saying that I’m its rising star, y’know? People are talking all about how that one mole I have on my collarbone is super sexy and stuff!”

“Yeah, uh... Sorry. If people are talking about that, I sure haven’t heard it. Pretty sure not even most of the people who read the novels noticed your mole at all.”

“Huh? Well, that’s weird! My boyfriend said it’s super eye-catching!”

“Your boyfriend must be a really nice guy, huh...?”

“Okay, but, like, I’m the only girl in the whole series who actually has a boyfriend, right? Doesn’t that earn me a buncha points? I bet the viewers all think I’ve got some major girl power going, right?”

“Uh, about that... Sorry, but considering the sensibilities of the usual late-night anime viewer demographic, I’m pretty positive that having a boyfriend *definitely* isn’t working in your favor there.”

Hmm. Yeah, I’m really not great at dealing with this girl. She has no clue about all the rules and theories that we geeks abide by. She’s a full-fledged, all-out normie if I’ve ever seen one, and I just don’t know how to talk with people like that.

“If we may return to the topic at hand, Maiya, uguisu-an bean paste is improper,” said Sayumi, steering us back onto *entirely* the wrong topic.

“Aw, what? But it’s so tasty!” Maiya protested.

“That, I will freely admit. The fact that it’s tasty, however, does nothing to lessen the fact that it’s self-evidently *wrong*. The only sweetened paste that ought to be used in Japanese sweets is objectively anko—red bean paste made from adzuki beans in particular.”

“Okay, but Sayu—”

“Yes, people have made pastes from tubers, pumpkins, sesame seeds, soybeans—the list goes on and on, but I consider all of them to be equally improper. Daifuku are filled with anko. Manju are filled with anko. Ohagi are covered with anko. That’s simply the proper way of making them—the way they’re meant to be,” Sayumi firmly stated.

She seemed way more fired up about this than she usually got over just about anything else. Who knew that Sayumi would have such deep-seated and passionate opinions about bean paste? I was starting to think that if she used *Route of Origin* on a manju, whatever it was stuffed with would end up turning into anko instead.

“Just to reiterate, the fact that I consider alternate pastes improper doesn’t mean that I consider them *bad*. I’ve eaten them on numerous occasions myself.

However...when all is said and done, I simply cannot help but be drawn to red bean paste above all others. The sky is blue, rice is white, and bean paste is red. It has to be red, or else—”

“Hey, uh, Sayu?”

“Oh honestly... What is it, Maiya? I was in the middle of something,” Sayumi grumbled, clearly upset about having her little soapbox moment interrupted.

“You’re kinda disappearing, y’know?” Maiya blithely pointed out.

She really was. Sayumi’s body had started fading away, and Maiya was in much the same state. It seemed their time was up.

“What...? But— No! This isn’t over, Anko Jurai!”

“Who’re you calling Anko?!”

“Ha ha ha ha! Bye-bye, Anko! See you ’round!”

And so, the Takanashi sisters vanished, leaving one final stupid gag in their wake.

“Seriously...? We spent almost that entire conversation talking about bean paste, for crying out loud!”

It seemed that something about these bonus stories made Sayumi feel the urge to go *almost* completely out of character. It was really weird for her to have made *this* many dumb jokes and derail our conversations on a whim, not to mention how she’d brought Maiya along with her, of all things. Like, seriously, I *really* hadn’t expected her to make an appearance. I know I said we’d have an all-star cast this time, but it feels like we’re taking that a little too far!

“All right! Judging by the established order, Hatoko’s probably up next. Me being surprised every time a new person shows up is getting pretty old, so I may as well take a moment to calm down and prepare myself.”

I paused to take a few deep breaths, calming my nerves and steadying my mind.

“Hatoko *loves* comedy and variety shows, which means there’s an extremely real chance that she’s going to make some sort of completely over-the-top,

utterly hilarious entrance that I could never see coming in a million years. She knows that grabbing the audience with your entrance is the most important part of an act, after all. Whatever she does, it's sure to be *wild*."

"S-Stop hyping me up like that, Juu! You're making it so much harder to make my entrance!" Hatoko pleaded, nearly in tears as she appeared in a perfectly normal and unexciting fashion.

"Oh, what, that's it?" I said. "I thought you were gonna do something special or whatever."

"I wouldn't do that! I've told you a bunch of times that I like watching variety TV shows, not acting like I'm in one! I'll let you handle all the funny slapstick gags, Juu."

"I don't want any part in all that stuff either! I'm no more of a variety TV performer than you are!"

"Oh, really? I think you'd be pretty good at it! I mean, when we did that comedy sketch just the other day, you—"

"We are *not* talking about that!"

God, the dread...or, well, more like the gut-churning shame! Just remembering *that* incident was enough to make a waterfall of cold sweat pour down my back. It felt like I was going to break out in hives. The comedy sketch that the two of us did in the third of these bonus stories would, without a doubt, go down as the single most genuinely cringe-inducing moment in my personal history. I would never, *ever* allow it to be brought into the light again.

"Aww, why not?" Hatoko whined.

"Because!" I snapped. "And for the record...I am *not* doing that again. We promised that it'd be a onetime thing, and I'm not budging on that."

"Hmph! As if I didn't know that already," Hatoko grumbled with a petulant pout. She did drop the subject, at least. "Ah! In that case, you know what?"

"What?"

"When we did the comedy sketch the other day—"

"Were you listening to me at *all*?!"

Okay, that one caught me off guard! Like, majorly off guard! Was she trying to rehash that line as a gag, or what?! What depths isn't she willing to sink to for the sake of a joke?!

Or so I thought in my moment of astonishment, but it quickly became clear that she was actually being sincere.

"No, no, not like that!" Hatoko said before moving on to explain herself. "I won't talk about the actual sketch at all anymore, but I was just thinking that there's one thing that we forgot to decide on back when we did it."

"What do you mean?"

"We never picked out a stage name for our group!"

"Oooh... Right. I guess we didn't."

"I keep thinking about how since we put on a whole act together, we should've come up with a group name while we were at it."

"Okay, but why would we need one of those, anyway? Our group lasted for one performance, and it was pretty much something we threw together on the spot."

"Aww, but I *want* a group name!"

"Well... If you really insist, I guess we can give it one, sure. Have any ideas in mind?"

"So, umm, I was thinking it'd be nice to make it a name that doubles up on something!"

"Huh? 'Doubles up'?"

"Yeah! Apparently there's a superstition in comedian circles that using two words with similar rhythms in your group's name will make you more popular. You'll start noticing groups like that all over the place if you know to look for them!"

"Huuuh. You know, now that you mention it, I guess that might be true, yeah."

"So, I was thinking it'd be nice to have our name be like that too! If you want

to get ahead in a cutthroat world like the entertainment industry, you need every edge you can get, so you may as well pay attention to charms and superstitions, right?”

“Hatoko...” I sighed. “I know I’m repeating myself here, but our group’s never getting back together. That was our first and last gig. Our debut performance was also our breakup performance.”

“I-I know, I know!” Hatoko said with a frantic shake of her hands. However much she protested, though, I could see a slight flicker of ambition in her eyes.

Yup, I’m officially terrified. I have a feeling I might wake up one of these days to find that she’s put our names down as an act for next year’s cultural festival or something like that.

“Don’t worry, Juu,” said Hatoko. “I’d never sign you up for a comedy trade school without getting your permission first!”

“Your fantasies have already hit the turning-it-into-a-career stage?!”

“It’ll be fine! Even if I get way more popular than you doing solo stand-up, we’ll still keep the profit split at fifty-fifty for our performances!”

“Your fantasies are racing along at an unheard-of pace! You’re skipping so many steps!”

“Hmm. So, what do you think, Juu? What’s a group name we could use that doubles up on something?”

“How am I supposed to know? You sprung this on me out of nowhere! The standards for this name feel nothing like the ones for the names I normally make up.”

“I guess we’ll have to think it through together then, huh?”

“Looks like.”

Hatoko and I fell silent, taking a moment to seriously consider what name to give our comedy unit.

“...Wait, what are we *doing*?! This whole mindscape exists to help me think up a name for my power! Why is this all about our comedy duo all of a sudden?!”

“Ooh, nice callout!” Hatoko said with a satisfied smile as her form began to gradually vanish. “Thanks, Juu. I don’t have any regrets left anymore.”

“Why’re you acting like you’re moving on to the afterlife?!”

“With that last gag, I’ve entrusted all the gags I’ve ever set up to you, Juu. You can feel free to call yourself Delayed Comeback Jurai from now on.”

“Wait, was all that supposed to be some sort of ceremony?! You were handing off the Delayed Comeback Hatoko title?! Do your delayed comebacks get passed down through the generations like the Spirit Wave Style or One For All?!”

My comebacks rang out in vain as Hatoko vanished with a blissful smile on her face.

“Okay, seriously...what even *was* that?” I sighed.

Delayed Comeback Jurai, huh? Nope. Definitely don’t wanna let that be the direction my character develops in. Characters who are all about calling out other characters’ nonsense are a big thing, sure, but the only time I’ve ever seen a character who’s specifically known for playing along before firing off a delayed comeback was in Psycho Logical.

“Well, anyway, I guess that’s everyone covered,” I said to myself.

All of the literary club girls—Tomoyo, Chifuyu, Sayumi, and Hatoko—had made appearances, in the order they’d been depicted on the covers of the anime’s Blu-ray and DVD releases rather than that of the original novels. I’d chatted with all four of them, and now...well, what *was* supposed to happen? How was I supposed to return from my mindscape to the real world?

“This is weird. I was so sure that once everyone was finished, I’d get put back in the real world auto—”

“It’s a little early for you to decide that *everyone’s* finished, Andou Jurai!”

A powerful, confident voice arose from nowhere at all. The next thing I knew, there she was, walking straight toward me with a calm, leisurely stride.

“Heh heh heh! I hope you’re not going to try to say that you forgot me?” said the girl—who, timeline-wise, I *definitely* shouldn’t have met at this point, but

why even bother questioning that anymore—letting out a dauntless laugh as she approached me.

Oh, right. Of course! If Kuki and Maiya got to make appearances, then of course she'd get some screen time too. She's the rising star who gained a sudden and massive popularity boost thanks to her killing her role in the anime, after all—not to mention one of the ones who sang the ED and made regular appearances all throughout the show. She was our main antagonist in the first and last episode! The anime both began and ended with us defeating her! Without her, our anime would never have come together at all!

“That’s right! All the others were just a warm-up act for me, Kudou—”

“Hey, Andou! Would you just wake up, already?!”

Just then, a voice that seemed to shake the very heavens rang out, and I felt a light impact on the back of my head. Then, before I even knew what was happening, my consciousness was being yanked out of my mindscape and back into the real world.

“...Huh? Wha— W-Wait a second, Andou! What about me?! When’s my turn?! Wait! I...I said wait... Don’t you think you’re kinda treating me like crap heeeeeere?!”

“Oh! Finally awake, huh?”

I opened my eyes and looked up to find Tomoyo standing in front of me and holding a green dictionary in one hand.

“For crying out loud, Andou, what were you even doing in here? The room’s a mess, and you were out like a light!”

“Tomoyo... Huh? What’re *you* doing here?” I mumbled.

“Well, we were all going to go home, but then everyone got worried and decided to come back and check on you.”

The club room was lit by the warm glow of the sunset, and all of our other members were present as well. It was just like the last cut of the anime’s OP—all five of us were gathered up together.

“Huh...? Wh-Wha? What about my mindscape...? Where’d the endless white expanse go...?”

“*Huh?* Are you still half asleep, or what?” Tomoyo sighed with an exasperated shrug. The other three were snickering behind her, as well.

As best as I could tell, at some point along the way, I’d fallen asleep. What I’d thought was my mindscape had been a dream, plain and simple...but then again, I guess mindscapes are more or less dreams by default, in a sense?

Anyway, I couldn’t say for sure what all had been real and what all had been a dream, and I couldn’t remember most of the stuff that had happened in my mindscape regardless, but there was one thing I knew for sure: Kudou was *definitely* still in there, bawling her eyes out.

Man. It really does feel like I can hear her wailing from somewhere deep within my soul. I must be imagining it, right? It was just a dream, right? She’ll stop on her own before too long, surely?

“Hm...? Oh, Andou,” Tomoyo said as she looked down at my hands. “You finally finished your power’s name, huh?”

“I... Huh? What’re you talking about? I still haven’t—” I began, before cutting myself off with a sharp gasp.

An involuntary shudder ran through me. I’d been slumped over on the table, asleep and motionless...yet only now I realized I was clutching a pen firmly in my right hand. That wasn’t all that surprising, considering I’d dozed off while scribbling on a sheet of paper...but. *But*, that pen wasn’t positioned over loose-leaf now. It was hovering over the *Bloody Bible*: a truly unique notebook, the only copy of which was in my possession.

I could’ve sworn the *Bloody Bible* was still stashed in my bag, and yet there it was, right beneath my hand. And, beneath that hand, there *it* was—a single line, written out on the page that I had been saving specifically for the name of my power.

The stygian flames of purgatory: *Dark and Dark*

I had no memory of writing those words. Had I scrawled them out while half asleep? No, clearly not—the penmanship was much too stable and confident for that. It was written in the exact same hand that I always wrote out the names I came up with.

I couldn't even begin to explain what had happened, and for a moment, I was actually terrified...but the other members of my club accepted it without batting an eyelash.

"Hmm. I mean, it's fine, I guess. I kinda like how you came straight out of the gate with the word 'dark' like that. Just kinda, though—like, seriously, only just a little."

"Oooh, huh! And you doubled up on 'dark' too! That seems like a name that could get popular quickly!"

"The 'and' in the middle is like 'Andou.' I like it."

"Oh—the *flames* of purgatory. For just a moment, I thought it said 'flambé.'"

My clubmates had plenty of impressions to share, and most of them were actually quite positive. It was almost as if they were seeing their own ideas reflected in the final product.

"Okay, seriously, are you still asleep or what?" Tomoyo asked with a quizzical glance toward me. I was still in a daze. "You spent ages fussing over that name, right? I was expecting you to be way more hyped-up when you finally finished it. Normally, you'd be screaming it from the rooftops for the whole world to hear by now."

"Right? This isn't like you, Juu!"

"You're being quiet, Andou."

"Too quiet, in fact. I must say, Andou, this feels like something of a letdown."

I listened to each of their words in sequence. And then...

"Mwa ha ha!"

...I laughed. I *cachinnated*, just like I always had.

My power's name had been completed out of the blue. Perhaps my

subconscious had guided me to write it in my sleep, or I'd written it down before passing out and forgotten about it, or my dark side had awoken to write it for me. The truth was veiled in darkness...but I was ready to accept that. In fact, that was the best possible option. After all: names that seemed to be the work of the inscrutable hand of fate were always, invariably, *hella* friggin' cool!

"I am he who conquers chaos!"

I thrust my right hand forward and incanted the first words of the Malediction of Unleashing. I still hadn't nailed down the particulars of its invocation, but I threw my all into improvising it as best as I could in the heat of the moment. Then—the very moment the Malediction was finished—I activated my power.



© Tetsuya Hasegawa (TRIGGER)

A jet-black flame surged forth from my right hand.

“O flame of mine: I shall name thee *Dark and Dark!*”

As I declared my power’s name for all to hear, my clubmates looked on. They seemed mostly fed up with me—but at the same time, I could tell that they were just a little amused as well.

Dark and Dark: it was the ultimate power name. That may sound like I’m singing my own praises...but no. I knew I never could have reached this name through my power alone. It was only because everyone was there for me that I’d managed to complete it. I had no basis for that theory—it was purely an assumption—but it was one that I felt strangely certain of anyway.

This name was a piece of art that we’d all created together. I suppose, in a sense, you could call it a shared pen name. And so, I felt no reluctance to take a step back and praise it for all I was worth. I would laud it with all the hyperbolic superlatives that came to mind, lavishing it with boundless affection.

Dark and Dark. I knew that from that point onward, I’d be shouting that name out time and time again. And, each time I spoke those words, I would remember what had happened on this day. I would be reminded that no matter what life threw at me, I would never truly be alone.

“Incidentally,” Sayumi muttered just moments after I thought that I’d really wrapped everything up on a nice note, “judging by the timeline established in the main series, Andou and I would have to be having our showdown tomorrow, wouldn’t we? You came up with your power’s name immediately before that conflict was resolved, after all. Should I take this to mean that we’ll be going from this remarkably good-spirited moment of club unity to an all-out battle in just a single day?”

“...”

“And for that matter, you announcing that your power is named *Dark and Dark* to all of us, here and now, feels like it causes a continuity error so flagrant, it’s entirely indefensible...”

“...”

This bonus story is a work of fiction. Any relation to the original work is purely coincidental— Okay, no, not really, but if you could just write off all the contradictions and inconsistencies found within as the work of some parallel world sorta situation, that'd be great. Thanks.



Side Story ★ Umeko's Fate

Side Story: Umeko's Fate

"Hmm. The new generation's killing pachinko, huh?"

It was an early autumn morning, and Hitomi and I were eating breakfast. Hitomi was muttering to herself as she split her salmon fillet into pieces and watched a news broadcast on her television.

First was not present, nor had he been since the day before. He was, as a rule, a man who came and went as he pleased...or rather, he was one who wished to be *known* as a man who came and went as he pleased. To facilitate his goals, he intentionally lived a lifestyle bereft of structure or pattern—routine was anathema to First, to put it succinctly. One might say, perhaps, that he rejected the temptation to surrender himself to the comforting allure of the commonplace.

In any case, setting that aside, Saitou Hitomi and I, both clad in the flower-patterned pajamas we had purchased together, were the sole occupants of our apartment for the time being.

"It feels like people have been taking every excuse they can possibly get to say that the new generation's killing something lately," Hitomi mused. "The new generation's killing golf, the new generation's killing cars, the new generation's killing the tobacco industry—people just go on and on about it, when really, it's all just the times changing like they always do. Trends come and go, and young people's interests shift. That's all there is to it—it feels kinda silly to me that people always throw such a huge fuss over it."

"I recall a news program we viewed recently that ascribed those trends to the proliferation of smartphones," I noted. "It claimed that smartphones can fulfill, or at least offer an alternative to, the bulk of everyday desires."

"I mean, I guess that's not totally wrong...and, like, the recession's gotta play into it too, right? It's just natural to cut down on spending and save as much as you can when you're worried about the future."

“Is that so?” I asked with a cock of my head, over which her words had flown. “You mean to say that saving money is a natural reaction to troubled times?”

“Well, yeah,” said Hitomi. “There’s no telling what’s gonna happen to Japan in the future, and since we don’t know what things will be like when we’re old, it just makes sense to put together a plan and save money while we’re young. I’m not gonna go all ‘Ant and the Grasshopper’ on you or anything, but at the very least, I can say that if you act like Hajime and *never* plan things out or learn to be self-reliant, you’ll end up really regretting it when you’re older. And that’s not even *starting* on how Hajime...”

As the conversation shifted into an extended ramble regarding First’s less-than-desirable traits, a realization finally struck me. I finally understood what it was that was making me feel so oddly askew from Hitomi’s lived experience.

Oh. Yes, I see now. The youth of this nation fret over what the future may bring them...and never stop to consider the possibility that they may die tomorrow.

Not for a moment. Not in the slightest capacity.

The fact that they chose to save money for the sake of an indefinite tomorrow was ample proof of that. They worried for the future of Japan, but they had blind faith in the idea that their own lives were secure. They worried about their futures, taking it for granted that they would, in fact, have futures in the first place. They fully believed that they would simply amble onward into the hereafter, irrespective of what they might encounter along the way...just as the ants fully believed in the certainty of winter’s arrival.

Perhaps this was proof that ours was a society in which peace had won the day, or perhaps it was a sign it had begun its descent into degeneracy and ruin. I had no means by which to weigh the merits of those conjectures—and even if I had, they were premised upon a sense of values I found simply incomprehensible.

As one who would die the very next day, the sentiments were totally beyond me.

Tomorrow, I would die. Roughly around midday, my body would begin to fade

away...and ultimately, my very being would be expunged. Such was the simple truth of my predetermined lifespan—such were the parameters of my creation. Perhaps you could say it was my fate.

I was brought into this world as *System*: an entity created by a rebellious spirit in order to bring an end to the Fifth Spirit War. My life was never intended to last indefinitely. I was given a hundred days, no more and no less. My lifespan was set in stone...and I was aware of that fact from the very start. From the instant my sense of selfhood began to bud, the knowledge of the day I would die was present within me.

Ninety-nine days ago, I knew that I would die tomorrow. The question of whether that knowledge was a blessing or a curse was beyond my reckoning. An outsider might have viewed me as a tragic, pitiable figure, perhaps, yet I in turn saw humans—beings who lived without any knowledge of when they would die—as far more worthy of sympathy.

In any case, my lifespan was simply the nature of my existence. First and Hitomi were the only other people in this world who were aware of my relatively brief longevity...but not even they knew that I would die tomorrow.

When I'd told Hitomi that I "would not last beyond the winter," I was lying. Well, perhaps not in the strictest sense—I simply hadn't expressed the truth to the fullest degree I could have. The complete truth is that I would die tomorrow at the latest, and not only would I fail to survive past winter, I would perish before it even began.

Not telling Hitomi the full truth of my limited lifespan was my way of doing her a kindness...or so I had told myself. More honestly, I simply hadn't wanted to reveal it to her. I loathed the thought of her giving me a grandiose, overblown farewell. I would allow her to believe that I would live for a time longer...and before she could consider otherwise, I would simply and quietly pass away without a fuss.

"Hmph! A good haul indeed," I said to myself.

As soon as breakfast was over, I had excused myself for a brief trip to a large suburban grocery store located nearby. I was now making my way home, a

plastic bag filled with a hoard of HI-CHEW dangling from one hand. It would be, as they say, my last supper.

Though I suspect this may reveal how truly banal my desires are, when I found myself mulling over what I would do with the final day of my life, “eat as much of my favorite food as I wish” was the first thought that sprang to mind. That thought inevitably led me to HI-CHEW. No other food would suffice.

And so, I committed all of the pocket money I had steadily saved up over the course of my life to the singular purpose of buying every flavor of HI-CHEW that I had ever wished to try. From aloe yogurt to ripened pineapple, from honeyed kumquat to shikuwasa citrus, from the most standard of standbys to the most shocking of innovations, I purchased every single flavor I was able to, allowing my ravenous hunger for that most sublime and miraculous of treats to consume me—and oh, how blissful it was to submit to temptation. The urge to partake of just one piece was almost overwhelming...but in that instance, my will stood strong. In order to accomplish my ultimate objective, I could not afford to open so much as a single package.

“With this many packs, I know it will finally be possible. I shall reconstruct the tower of HI-CHEW I bore witness to at the arcade!”

The sight was burned into my mind’s eye. Two months ago, I had accompanied Hitomi to an establishment known as an arcade, and there I had discovered a veritable building of HI-CHEW. Tall and radiant beneath the transparent dome that’d encased it, the tower had stood so wondrously one could only imagine that it had been erected by way of divine providence. So great was the surge of emotion that’d welled up within me the moment I’d witnessed it, I’d believed my sanity would be wholly consumed. How could I have imagined that one day, I too would be capable of reproducing that Jenga-like spire by my own hand? The excitement—the purest anticipation—I was experiencing was like nothing else.

Is it right for me to be so overjoyed, knowing full well that I’ll die tomorrow?

Though it was unlike me to show such transparent emotion, I was ebullient. I even began to skip. My steps grew quicker and lighter with each passing bound...

“Gwaaaaaugh!”

...and as a consequence, I lost sight of my surroundings and barreled into a hapless passerby.

Oh! What a blunder that was. Though one certainly would not think it judging by my appearance, my physical capabilities were, frankly, rather outlandish—so much so that a carefree skip could carry me forward at speeds normally only reached by an automobile, were I too thoughtless.

“My apologies. Are you hurt?” I asked, coming back to my senses and addressing the individual I’d sent crashing to the ground. He was a black-haired young man wearing a somewhat stylish outfit. One would think him a trendy, modern youth at a glance, yet somehow, it seemed as if his clothes were wearing *him*—as if he were wearing an outfit that he had been compelled to don by a third party.

“Oof, ouch... Ah, yeah, I’m fine,” the boy said, patting the dirt off his backside as he rose to his feet. Though I’d been traveling at highway speeds when I’d collided with him, I’d slammed on my brakes the moment before impact, and I seemed to have spared him any serious injury in doing so.

“Again, you have my apologies. This was a lapse on my part, and one I shall endeavor not to repeat,” I said.

“Nah, really, I’m fine! It’s not that big a deal, so please, don’t sweat— Wait, *shall*?! A little girl just said *shall* to me?! That actually happens in real life?!” the boy exclaimed, eyes full of wonderment.

It had become increasingly apparent to me over the course of time that the manner in which I spoke was, per the standards of modern society, somewhat rare.

Hmm.

At the time I’d chosen my typical register, I had been under the impression that it was a perfectly normal manner to speak in. Thus, the overblown reactions I received on occasion, such as this boy’s, left me puzzled. Perhaps the cause of that disconnect was the manner in which I had attained an understanding of language: the ability to communicate had been transferred

directly into my mind while I'd still lived in the test tube where I'd been cultivated, long before I'd actually communicated with another individual.

In any case, it seemed clear now that the manner of speech I had chosen for myself—which, let it be known, I had chosen for no particular reason—had been a less than desirable option. I had considered correcting that mistake, but at this point, it'd hardly seemed worth the effort.

"Are you certain you are uninjured, boy?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah," said the boy. "I'm fi— Ah, I mean... Nay, 'twas naught but a trifling fall!"

Well, he's certainly risen to the occasion. "'Twas naught"? Surely speaking like that would prove needlessly cumbersome?

I reached down for the boy's bag, which had fallen to the pavement when I'd collided with him, and began gathering up the contents that had spilled from it.

"Oh! Thanks," said the boy.

"Think nothing of it. Anyone would do the same."

I collected a pencil case, a notebook, and a number of pocket-sized novels, as well as...

"What...are these?"

...a number of what seemed to be playing cards, at a glance. Upon picking them up, however, their flimsiness and lack of rigidity made it clear that they were simply paper, cut into the shape of cards. Some were blank, while others had words written upon them, such as "*Chronos*," "*Hourglass*," "*German*," "*Deadline*," and "*SEKAI NO OWA—*"

"Oh! Those are for a naming card game," said the boy.

"Hmm?"

"It's, uhh, kinda hard to explain, actually... Basically, it's a card game that you play when you need an extra bit of inspiration to come up with a name, or something like that...? I thought it up about a year ago, and I've started thinking about ways to make it more fun as, y'know, a real *game* recently."

“I see. I had thought them to be garbage.”

“Ha ha ha... You really don’t mince words, huh?”

Whether or not they were indistinguishable from garbage, if the papers were the boy’s personal property, I had no choice but to treat them as valuable. I carefully collected the cards one by one, only pausing when my eyes fell upon a certain card’s phrasing: “*End of the World.*”

The end of the world...? And in English, no less.

“Tell me, boy. If you knew that the world was to end tomorrow, what would you choose to do?” I asked.

The question had sprung to my lips on nothing more than a moment’s impulse. I did not intend to convey anything meaningful through it—but nor, in fact, did I intend to convey anything shallow or meaningless either. I had simply opened my mouth the moment the question had come to mind...and yet, when the boy heard my words, his eyes shot wide open with a start. He looked astonished, while at the same time, he seemed somehow elated. It was as if I had asked him a question he’d been seeking to expound upon for ages on end.

“W-Wait a second! Like, seriously, just a sec!” the boy shouted, instantly reaching into his bag and producing a black notebook. It struck me as rather like the one that First kept. Perhaps, I speculated, keeping a notebook upon one’s person at all times was a trend among young men.

“C-Come on, calm down... Keep it together... It’s finally time! I finally got asked question number four on my ‘questions that I want to give a hella cool answer to someday’ list! I can’t let this chance slip away from me... I *know* I had some really good ideas written somewhere around here...” the boy muttered as he feverishly flipped through his notebook’s pages. I surmised that he was searching for an answer to my question that he’d penned some time in advance.

Hmm. It’s interesting how clearly this boy’s behavior brings First to mind.

Eventually, the boy closed his notebook...then faced me with an expression of tortured gloom upon his face and a sardonic sneer on his lips, speaking in a tone that struck me as flagrantly theatrical.

“What would I do if the world was ending tomorrow? Mwa ha ha... You’re asking the wrong question. After all, if this world’s going to be destroyed...there’s not a chance in hell it’ll be done in by anything other than my own fist.”

I...struggled to find an apt reply. The atmosphere was simply indescribable, and if I were compelled to describe it in words regardless of the impossibility of the task, I would have no choice but to sum it up with a single verb: bombed. Bombed, in the sense that his delivery had bombed to an unprecedented degree. It had plummeted through the upper atmosphere, detonating on impact with the ground before me.

The boy, who seemed to have realized this fact, was sweating profusely. “S-So,” he said, “I, uhh, guess that’s not what you were looking for? Maybe I committed a bit too hard? Or maybe I should’ve just straight up ripped off Hiruma and said ‘I’d do everything I possibly could to stop the world from ending’ after all...?”

He was reflecting on his mistakes, clearly. Reflecting on them in entirely the wrong manner, but reflecting nonetheless.

“So, uhh,” the boy continued, “how about you? What would you do if the world was gonna end tomorrow?”

“I would eat as much of my favorite food as I wished,” I said, describing the action I was actively taking. “A last supper, if you would.”

“Oh *ho*! You sure know some deep allusions, huh? Leave it to a girl who says ‘shall’!”

“Though truth be told, it feels like an answer I reached through process of elimination. If I am to die tomorrow, then what I do today holds little significance. What is there left but to indulge in pleasures and amusements?”

“Huh?” the boy grunted, cocking his head. “But... Wait, just a sec. The question was ‘what would you do if the world was ending,’ right? Not ‘what would you do if you were going to die’?”

“Indeed it was.”

“Oh, good! Thought I’d totally misheard you for a second there.”

“What of it, though? I see little difference between the two. The world ending tomorrow and your life ending tomorrow are all but the same, are they not?” I asked. In the sense that your selfhood would be erased, they seemed identical to me.

I had been born to hunt down each and every Player in the War—and no sooner had I been born than I had lost that purpose. The fraction of a year that my life had lasted had been devoid of any and all sense of meaning. That is precisely why mine was a life of happiness, in fact. In lacking a purpose—in lacking any mission or duty to my name—I was allowed the freedom to spend the expressly limited time I had been granted as I pleased. Given the opportunity to use that time for myself, I was able to stroll the path to my fated end at my own relaxed pace.

I could wish for nothing more. All that was left was to quietly go to my death. With that, all would come to an end. That was simply the nature of my being. What difference, then, would it make if the world were to end rather than my life? However...

“Nah, they’re *totally* different,” said the boy. “The world ending and you dying aren’t even close to the same.”

“Oh...? How do they differ, then?”

“If the world’s ending tomorrow, then sure, you can do whatever you want to. The goal’s to make sure you don’t have any regrets...and, I mean, that’s probably not happening, but you can at least work toward satisfying as many desires as you can. If you’re dying, though—if you’re going away, but the world’s sticking around—then I think I’d rather leave something behind instead.”

“Something? Of what nature?”

“Hmm... Kinda hard to dig into the specifics, honestly. Just *something*, I guess. Doesn’t really matter what, as long as it proves that I was alive at one point. Maybe I’d say thanks to someone who helped me out, or make up with someone I was fighting with.”

“Why? Regardless of what actions you take, you would die in the end all the same, rendering them meaningless.”

“Well, sure, but... I guess it’s all a self-satisfaction thing, in the end. When I die, I’d like to know that a part of me will be living on in someone’s heart.”

“To live on in someone’s heart...? But all that would accomplish is afflicting them with a lingering sense of loss, would it not? All you would do is saddle them with ever-stronger regret. Was dispelling regrets not the first goal that you offered?”

“I mean, you’re not *wrong*. But, like...maybe I actually *want* to leave some regrets behind after all? That may be what I’ve been trying to get at this whole time, actually,” said the boy. It seemed that he himself had come to a realization, even as he spoke. “Yeah. If I was gonna die tomorrow, I’d wanna leave some regrets behind when I did it.”

“You would...?”

“I’d leave behind regrets—leave behind a bit of myself—and then leave it all behind.”

“...”

The boy’s feeble attempt at wordplay was by no means inspiring...and yet, somehow, it felt like it resonated with me ever so slightly.

To leave behind regrets...and leave behind a piece of yourself.

I said my goodbyes with the boy and set off once more on the path home, my HI-CHEW-laden bag swinging with every step. I had almost arrived at Hitomi’s dwelling when I caught sight of a familiar figure.

“Is that...?” I muttered as I inspected the girl before me. She wore a pink nurse’s outfit with a pink tracksuit jacket thrown over top. Her hair was a shade of golden blonde, as well, which only made her stand out all the more conspicuously as she walked toward me. She was Yusano Fantasia—or so I’d thought, but no. There was a peculiar pressure to her presence that I recognized Fantasia never could have exuded.

“Genre, is it?” I asked.

“The one and only,” the girl replied.

Yusano Genre, the core personality around which myriad alternate personalities orbited, flashed a calm and entirely fabricated smile as she nodded to me. I had spoken with Fantasia and Adventura on a regular basis, but it had been quite some time since I had met with Genre herself face-to-face. I'd only exchanged words with her once, and for only a sparing few minutes, after which she'd never chosen to show herself to me again.

"Where can I find Saitou Hitomi, transcendent one?" Genre asked, forgoing the pleasantries one would normally expect in this sort of exchange.

Her singular manner of conversation, it seemed, had not changed since we'd last met. She was a poor communicator, to put it plainly, and did very little to conceal that fact...though I suppose I had little room to criticize her in that regard.

"I paid a visit to her apartment, but she wasn't at home," Genre added.

"Hitomi left to buy ingredients for supper," I explained. "I believe she was going to the nearby supermarket, so I do not imagine she will be much longer."

"Oh, good. In that case, I'll wait for her here."

"Would it not be simpler to contact her through... 'LINE,' was it? I believed that you and Hitomi...pardon me, that Fantasia and Hitomi frequently communicated through such means."

"Ah... Yes, I suppose that is true. Communication tools like that are something of a natural enemy for me, and the possibility entirely slipped my mind. I've never been able to stomach the idea of speaking with someone while unable to see their face."

"What is your business with Hitomi?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing terribly important," said Genre, her smile hollow and her tone bereft of warmth.

"I was just planning to catch her by surprise and kill her, that's all."

"For what purpose?"

“Very little, frankly. It didn’t have to be her. Any one of you would have done just fine—any one of Kiryuu Hajime’s companions, that is. Any of your deaths would serve perfectly well as a declaration of war.”

“‘War,’ you say?”

“Precisely. We intend to withdraw from *Fallen Black* and make an enemy of Kiryuu Hajime. I believe that killing one of his friends will make our hostility perfectly clear to him.”

I fell silent.

“I was just considering targeting someone else, seeing as Saitou Hitomi wasn’t around...but yes, LINE. Of course. I had not considered it at all. I could indeed pretend to be Fantasia and call her directly to me. My thanks, transcendent one,” Genre said before taking her leave, walking past me and carrying on down the street.

As she left, she produced a smartphone from her jacket’s pocket and tapped a green icon on its screen to pull up an app...but before she could go any farther, that app, the screen, and the phone itself were split in half. I had struck the phone with the side of my hand, cleaving it in twain. The two halves of the former phone clattered to the pavement.

“What is the meaning of this, transcendent one?” Genre asked, seemingly unperturbed by my outburst. “Do you intend to stop me? How unexpected. I had believed that you would not intervene. My actions should have nothing to do with you...considering you’ll be dead by this time tomorrow.”

Apparently, Genre was aware of my lifespan. That was hardly a surprise. Nearly a hundred personalities dwelled within her, each with its own supernatural power. There was nothing she could know that would shock me.

“Oh? Another surprise,” said Genre, though the still-unshifting look on her face did nothing to express her supposed shock. “I had no idea you could make an expression like that.”

“An expression like that”? What expression would that be?

I had no idea what sort of look I had on my face...but nevertheless, I was certain of one thing: it was an expression that I had never worn so much as a

single time before that moment. I was experiencing a feeling that I had never once felt in the fraction of a year that I had been alive...

“You are correct. Tomorrow, I will die,” I said. “And so, today...I would like to accomplish something.”



Less than an hour later...I had won. Decisively so—a crushing, overpowering victory. Our battle had unfolded hundreds of meters up in the sky, far past the range at which anyone could have witnessed us, and I'd had the upper hand from start to finish, ultimately driving Yusano Genre to retreat.

The outcome had felt inevitable, frankly. I had been given life to use *System*—or rather, *White Rulebook*—to eliminate each and every Player from the War. If I had so chosen, I could have prevailed against any Player, so even a Player in possession of nearly a hundred distinct powers was no exception. Genre had swapped from personality to personality at a breathtaking speed, assailing me with attacks of all shapes and sizes, but I had adapted to and dealt with each and every one of them, pulling awakening after awakening out of thin air. I truly was peerless in battle, with the one and only possible exception—my natural enemy, as it were—being Hinoemata Tamaki's power. Short of her ability, no foe could stand against me.

Genre had soon determined that she stood no chance of defeating me, so she'd touched down somewhere out of sight and fled. Considering the wounds I'd left her with, I thought it likely that she would need quite some time to rest and heal. One of her personalities did have a healing power, but I had taken care to crush it especially thoroughly—I had awakened to a power that allowed me to target and attack specific personalities within an individual who possessed a multitude thereof, and I had made careful and efficient use of it. I felt confident in saying that neither Hitomi nor any of our other members would be caught in a surprise attack anytime soon.

Had I had my way, I would have finished Genre off for good, but regrettably, that had proven impossible. I would have chased her down if I'd had the time to do so...but time was the one thing I lacked.

"Hmph... So, this is my limit," I muttered.

The moment I had alighted upon the ground, I had fallen prone on the pavement. My legs no longer had the strength to support me, and when I glanced downward, I found that the tips of my toes had already begun to turn transparent and fade into nothingness.

It seemed I had pushed myself past the brink. My power was a double-edged

sword that ate away at my life with each use. Such was the price I paid for an ultimate power that brought certain victory—it was only by not using it at all that my life had lasted this long to begin with. In this battle, however, I had used all the life that had been left for me. I would have faded away by noon of the next day regardless of whether I'd fought Genre at all, so I'd had little life to spare in the first place, but with this, I'd undoubtedly expended what scant little I'd preserved.

In a sense, it felt like this was my natural lifespan coming to a close...but in another sense, it felt like my fate had been overturned. I had thought that I could only wait to die tomorrow, and yet here I was, dying today instead. By my own will—as a consequence of my own decision—I had defied the fate that had been written for me...though of course, I knew very well how hopelessly optimistic of an interpretation that was.

“Was there a purpose to this, I wonder?”

All I had done was very slightly extend the life of a woman I'd only spent the span of a few months with—a woman who would have come back to life regardless, per the Spirit War's covenants. In a fundamental sense, the problems that had led to this situation had not been resolved at all. It was a stopgap measure, at best. What purpose could such an act have possibly served...?

Of course, it hardly mattered. I knew that no matter how much I pondered, no answer would be forthcoming. After all, I hadn't acted with any clear sense of purpose. By the time I'd realized what I was doing, I had already sprung into action. My body—the body that had carried me through life up to this day, the physical form that had been granted the name Tanaka Umeko—had moved like it had possessed a will of its own.

“If only I could have eaten all that HI-CHEW,” I lamented with a sigh.

Partway through the battle, the last supper I'd prepared for myself had been caught in one of Genre's attacks and incinerated, leaving not so much as a trace behind. What a waste it had been. Had I known it would end this way, I would have abandoned all thoughts of Jenga towers and sampled at least one of the flavors in advance.

Just then, I heard a voice. Someone was shouting, and when I strained to turn my head and look, I found Hitomi rushing toward me. She was on her way home after finishing her shopping, it seemed, and she had cast aside her reusable bag as she sprinted to my side. I tried to sit up, but that proved impossible—my arms and legs had already lost all feeling. I was well on my way to vanishing altogether.

Hitomi clutched my limp body in her arms. She was frantically screaming something at me, but my auditory sense seemed to have already deteriorated, and I could no longer hear anything at all. My sight, however, remained. I could still just barely make out her face as she looked down at me.

Oh, really, now. There's no need for you to bawl so despondently, Hitomi. I'd planned to die quietly tomorrow precisely because I didn't want to see that look on your face.

Eventually, my eyes ceased to function, and the world was blanketed in an all-consuming whiteness. I could no longer see Hitomi's tearstained face...but I could still feel her warmth. I felt the warmth of her arms, the warmth of her tears as they fell upon my cheeks...and they told me that even after I was gone, my being would remain within her. I knew that very well, and that knowledge brought about a surge of emotion within me—a flood of sentiment powerful enough to fill my heart to its brim. This, I knew, was the attachment—the regret—that people so often spoke of.

I see now. So this is what it means to leave regrets behind. Honestly...

Oh, how I curse you, boy whose name I never learned. It is your fault that I learned to fear death. It is your fault that I have found the desire not to die. It is your fault that I have come to wish that I could live on.

At the same time...I thank you, nameless boy. It is thanks to you that I, an entity who was brought into this world with no sense of humanity, could leave this world in a manner befitting a human. I can pass on, praying all the while that my death could be delayed. I can die, wishing all the while that I could live on. I can leave behind regrets—leave behind a piece of myself—as I leave this world altogether.

I could no longer move my mouth, and I could not speak out loud...but with

my inner voice, I spoke soundless words, straight from my heart, as loudly and clearly as I could manage.

My life had lasted for less than a hundred days, but now, in my final moments, I felt blessed beyond measure to be able to wish that I could have lived longer still.



© Tetsuya Hasegawa (TRIGGER)

Afterword

I, Kota Nozomi, the author of this book, have a typical structure that I use for my afterwords. I open them with a sort of mini-column consisting of logically questionable philosophical ramblings that may or may not have any sort of point, then I say something to the tune of “With all that said, hi! This is Kota Nozomi speaking” before moving into a section in which I discuss the contents of the volume, then I finally wrap things up with a thanks section. This time, however, I’m afraid to say that I’ll be ignoring that format entirely.

Sorry! And while I’m at it, sorry for releasing a volume that will be almost totally incomprehensible to anyone who hasn’t seen the anime!

I imagine some of my readers are already aware of this—and in fact, if you’ve already read the volume you’ll have been aware of this since the first few pages—but this volume is a compilation of short stories that were originally included in the Blu-Ray and DVD releases of *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* (plus an original side story featuring Umeko). I went into those bonus stories with an “All right! It’s time to write a bunch of stuff that I could never get away with in the main series!” sort of attitude, completely forgetting the possibility that they might be released in volume form in the future. That was a terrible mistake. When it came time to put the volume together, I considered altering its contents to make the stories easier to understand for someone who hasn’t seen the anime...but doing that would’ve more or less required me to rewrite the whole volume from the ground up, so I reluctantly abandoned the idea. There *are* a few gags that were subtly altered to work better in the novel format, but I didn’t make any truly major revisions. And so, I offer this message to any readers who have been following the novels but have yet to watch the anime: I am deeply, deeply sorry for putting out a volume full of ultra-meta gags that assume you’ve seen the show and numbering it like it’s part of the main series. I sincerely hope that you’ll approach the volume with an open mind and enjoy it as well as you can, given the circumstances.

Now then: some background information on each story!

First up, the Tomoyo chapter. To start, I should establish that I absolutely hadn't had these short stories planned out from the beginning. I'd wanted to give them a real sense of in-the-moment development, so I'd just started writing without a plan for how they'd conclude, figuring out where their plots would go as I wrote them. The stories were commissioned at a fairly early stage in the anime's production, but tragically, I've always been a "procrastinate until you have to do all of your homework on the last day of summer vacation" sort of writer, so I ended up having to run my deadlines down to the wire, fighting for my life to finish them all in time. That's not to say that I cut corners, of course—that's a very different thing. I believe that a sense of in-the-moment development is born from works that are created within a limited time span...probably.

So anyway, my broad plan was to make the stories a series of prologue chapters detailing how each of the literary club's members' powers got their names...but when I actually started writing, I realized that the details that had already been established about that time frame were surprisingly hard to balance with a story of that nature. I tried paying careful attention to continuity at first, taking great care to consider what each character would know at any given point in time, but eventually that turned into too huge of a pain—or rather, I realized that nobody would even want that sort of fussy continuity checking from this series in the first place! That's how everything took a meta turn, and from that point onward, writing the stories was a blast.

Being the first of the bonus stories, Tomoyo's was written before I'd developed a good grasp of how writing them would really play out, and I ended up going way over the length limits that'd been imposed on me. Painful though it was, I had no choice but to cut a few aspects of the story. I considered bringing them back for the novel-form release, but when I went back to reread those sections, I found myself thinking that the story was actually better without them anyway, so I left them on the cutting room floor.

Next, the second story: Chifuyu's. Now that I'd gone meta, there was no turning back. I found myself leaning into meta humor more and more heavily, and I also found myself burning through all my good name-related material surprisingly quickly. I almost panicked, but then Chifuyu herself saved the day,

carrying me along to the end of the story by way of her capricious nature. Now *that's* in-the-moment storytelling!

Story three: Sayumi's. It felt like the meta humor really peaked with this one. As a side note, I only went to one of the anime recording sessions—one for the first episode—and a discussion came up about the intonation of *Route of Origin*, specifically in regard to whether the “o” or the “ri” should be more emphasized. Seeing as I was the original author, they asked me for my input, and I *wanted* to say “Huh? How am I supposed to know? And anyway, I grew up in the bumpkin backwaters of Tohoku, so I’m nowhere near confident that my intonation would be correct anyway!” In the end, though, we decided that emphasizing the “ri” was the way to go. Making anime’s tough.

Story four: Hatoko's. Hmm. I mean, I think it turned out well and all, but I still found myself thinking that it would've been better if we could've stuck with the Tomoyo, Hatoko, Chifuyu, Sayumi order. Something about that order just feels really structurally *right*, I guess, whereas having Hatoko come after Sayumi just feels *wrong* in a way I can't quite put my finger on. It's like following up your after-meal coffee with a fish entrée. The change did help me get a better grasp of my feelings for that order, though, so in a sense, it might be a good thing to shuffle things around a little every once in a while.

Story five: Kiryuu's. To tell the truth, I'd actually been requested to make the fifth story be about Kudou initially. A bunch of stuff happened, though, and in the end, they asked me to scrap that plan and make it be about Kiryuu instead. My editor felt really guilty about the whole thing and talked about being really sorry if I'd already written it as a Kudou story, to which I responded with a friendly smile and an “Oh, don't worry. I haven't even written a single word yet!” The terrifying part is that I wasn't just saying that to make my editor feel better—I genuinely hadn't even started writing the story. I'd also actually wanted to write about the power names on Kiryuu's side of the story anyway, deep down, so it all worked out for the best in the end.

Story six: Andou's. To be brutally honest, when these bonus stories were first proposed, a part of me could only think “More work? What a drag.” By the time I'd finished writing Andou's story, however, part of me had started wanting to write even more of them. I have every intention of continuing to write

professionally, of course, but I really do think that I'll never have another chance to pen this meta of a story with characters this capable of carrying meta content.

The side story: Umeko's. I had a feeling that not including any totally original content would be a bad move, so I wrote about certain events surrounding Umeko that were sort of brushed past in the previous volume. Talking about them too much would probably be in poor taste, though, so I'll just give this story a "no comment" and move on.

And now, some thanks. To my editor and 029: thank you both so much for your hard work, as always. Next, to Ishige Rie, Hasegawa Tetsuya, and Yamaguchi Satoshi: I'm profoundly thankful that you not only worked on the anime, but contributed to the novels as well. And finally, I offer my greatest of thanks to all the readers who have stuck with this series all the way to volume 12.

Last but not least...I would like to deeply apologize one last time. Rest assured that the next volume will actually move the story forward.

And with that, may we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi



KOTA NOZOMI PRESENTS ★★
ILLUSTRATION 029





© Rie Ishige (TRIGGER)

Bonus Translation Notes: On Manga

My initial premise for this penultimate translation notes section was to go over all the little bits and pieces of material I'd thought up in the past that weren't *quite* substantial enough to turn into a full essay. It was a good idea, in theory, and I decided to start out by writing about the *Supernatural Battles* manga adaptation, which I'd promised to cover all the way back in volume five and just never got around to...but by the time I'd finished writing about the manga, I realized that I'd already used up almost all the space that I had available for essay purposes.

Sooo, whoops! Guess we're only talking about the manga this time! In my defense, we have almost *eight pages'* worth of media references to go over after this, so space is kind of at a premium. Also, the *Supernatural Battles* manga really is deserving of a section devoted to it exclusively, since as it turns out, it actually kinda rules!

The *Supernatural Battles* manga was drawn by Kurose Kousuke (who would go on to draw the manga adaptation of *Goblin Slayer*, which is still running as of the writing of this section). It was four volumes long, with each volume covering the events of one of the first four volumes of the original light novels. It's a very straightforward adaptation compared to the anime, as it doesn't shuffle the order of events so heavily and it adapts a lot of the novels' jokes in a much more direct fashion (volume four, for instance, commits to the The Heart gag so fully it not only dedicates a full page to the gag itself, it also does a 1:1 pastiche of the *BLEACH* page that led up to it).

The only point where the manga's adaptation goes off the rails is in its final chapter, which features a manga-original ending that is both somewhat similar to and yet totally distinct from the anime's original ending! It also features the one major point of timeline reorganization that the anime does: Tomoyo passing the writing contest's first round and going to a café with Andou is relocated from midway through volume 3 to the end of volume 4.

The scene proceeds more or less exactly how it does in the novels until one of the café's workers gives Tomoyo a strange pin shaped like an infinity sign. After that, things diverge! Instead of meeting Tamaki (who, tragically, is cut from this version of the story once again), Andou and Tomoyo find themselves trapped in an empty city, walking along a street that seems to be looping infinitely upon itself. They fail to find a way out, and Andou eventually realizes that the pin Tomoyo received must be the cause of the problem. The pin's made of metal, however, and the two of them fail to find a way to break it, causing Andou to very nearly use *Dark and Dark of the End* to melt it...only for Tomoyo, who finds herself worried about how much Andou's behavior resembles Kiryuu's, to intervene and stop him.

The sequence ends in a manner that's once again evocative of the anime: the mastermind behind the incident (who was also aided by information from Sagami) is confronted by Kiryuu, who deletes her with a black hole. Andou and Tomoyo find themselves waking up on a park bench (or rather, being woken up by Hitomi and Umeko) with no memory of what happened beyond a vague sense that they'd had a strange dream.

So, what is it that makes the manga so special? In short: its commitment to the bit. The art goes *super friggin' hard* when it comes to how it depicts Andou's chuuni fantasies. The chuuni-riffic light novel synopsis that Andou contributes to a story relay back in volume one, for instance, gets a full *five pages* dedicated to it, drawn to look like the exact sort of chuuni sci-fi that inspired the sequence in the first place. By the same token, the series knows when to get silly as well, often pivoting from perfectly deadpan depictions of chuuni excess to silly faces and ridiculous reactions on a dime. All together, it strikes an exquisite balance between portraying Andou how he thinks he looks and portraying Andou how he *actually* looks.

It's very important to note that the *Supernatural Battles* manga started in 2013, over a year before the anime began airing, and ended in early 2015, just a couple months after the anime finished. In other words, if the manga's depiction of the events of volumes one through four was influenced by the anime at all, it could only have happened toward the very end of its run, and even that seems pretty unlikely. On the flip side, it's immediately clear that the

anime wasn't adapted from—or even inspired by—the manga, making this a relatively uncommon case in which a light novel got two very creative adaptations that played around with a lot of visual humor *completely* independently of each other.

Now, the bad news is that the *Supernatural Battles* manga has never been fully translated into English, and will almost certainly never be picked up officially (much to my dismay, since I really wanna work on it). The good news, however, is that since it adapts the novels so directly, having them available means that you more or less have a functional translation to follow along with on hand! Physical copies are neither expensive nor rare, if you're at all acquainted with importing manga from Japan (I highly recommend Mandarake if you live in the United States), and the art alone is so well executed that I would definitely give it a solid recommendation to any fan of the series, translated or not.

And with that, it's time to get to the references...or it would be, if it weren't for the fact that there's one other topic that I really do need to address in this section. In previous essays, I've speculated that there isn't any *Supernatural Battles* bonus content remaining that I haven't already discussed, and that the Blu-ray bonus stories that made up this volume were the only actual short stories that had been written. It is my profound displeasure to inform you that I was dead wrong.

There *were* bonus stories released as sales bonuses for earlier volumes, and there were probably quite a lot of them! The good news is that they seem to have been pretty insubstantial—I've managed to get my hands on about a half dozen of them, and topics range from "Andou tells Tomoyo about how he jumped into a conversation thinking it was about *Jojo's*, only for it to have been about actual bands instead" to things like "Hatoko nitpicks a comedy show for a page straight," "Chifuyu sleep talks her way through an extremely surreal dream," and "Sayumi explains the concept of phantom vibration syndrome to Andou (who just thinks the name's hella cool)." They're all just two pages long and consist almost exclusively of dialogue, so you're really not missing much by missing them.

Nevertheless, the fact that there is an indeterminable amount of written

Supernatural Battles content out there that I will probably never get my hands on and will definitely never be allowed to translate is knowledge that will torture me till the end of my days. The light novel industry's disrespect for media preservation is a curse, and we all suffer under its malevolent influence.

Anyway, let's identify some media references!

Chapter 1

△ I'd wanted to be the one who chose which napkin to take and set the standard for the rest of the world.

We're kicking things off right with a *Jojo's* reference! This line is a shout-out to a famous and heavily memed speech by United States president Funny Valentine (no, really) in *Jojo's Part 7: Steel Ball Run*. In short, Funny explains how the standards of society are set by single individuals through an extended, somewhat tortured metaphor: if society is a dining table, then the first person to choose whether to take the napkin on their right or their left would, in doing so, determine which napkin everyone else at the table must take in turn.

△ ...doubling down on the pressure like I was the protagonist of one of those games where you play as a huge creep who exploits women.

In the original version of this line, Andou directly refers to “kichiku games,” a subgenre of bishoujo game characterized by abusive protagonists and/or the torture and humiliation of their characters. The genre lacks a commonly used English name, leading to our choice to describe the games that fall into it rather than citing its less than accessible Japanese name.

△ The Solid Vision system then caused the card to materialize in physical form...in the fantasy that flashed through my mind's eye, anyway.

The Solid Vision system is, of course, the holographic technology in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* that allows the card games to be portrayed in a much more visually interesting fashion! Whether or not Solid Vision holograms are, y'know, *solid* is generally somewhat less than clear.

△ I guess it was a little like how in the early stages of the manga, the game — Actually, y'know what? Forget I said anything.

The early instances of Duel Monsters in the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* manga are, to put it

nicely, notoriously rules-light! To put it more bluntly, it's pretty evident that the rules were made up as the story went along in much the same way that Andou and Tomoyo make up rules over the course of their own card game.

△ “SEKAI NO OW—”

Sekai no Owari is the name of an incredibly popular Japanese band! Their name really is written using the English alphabet, and they really do have a big enough fanbase to make Tomoyo's panicked reaction come across as pretty reasonable.

△ “You're saying it's a God Card?!”

It probably goes without saying at this point that this is another *Yu-Gi-Oh!* shout-out! The God Cards are incredibly overpowered and plot-significant cards from the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* manga/anime that have indeed been printed as pack-ins for other products, which have never been legal to play in any format. That being said, there *are* versions of the god cards that are actually tournament legal, though they're significantly toned down compared to their original versions.

△ Quit my-turn-never-ends-ing me!

One last *Yu-Gi-Oh!* gag for the road! We've been over this one before (several times, in fact) thanks to Hajime referencing it on a couple occasions, but for good measure, it's a reference to an infamous scene from the anime in which Yami Yugi brutally overkills an opponent over the course of a single, comedically extended turn.

Chapter 2

△ I prided myself on having a nature as focused and aggressive as that of Andy, the right pectoral muscle...

Andy is a character—kind of—from *Yowamushi Pedal*, a bicycle racing manga by Watanabe Wataru! Andy is very literally the right pec of Izumida Touichiro, a muscle-obsessed bicyclist who, well, names and talks to his pecs. The left one is called Frank, by the way, making the pecs a shout-out to Andy and Fränk Schleck, a pair of real-world bicycle racers.

△ This, I figured, must have been how Yugi-boy felt when he realized that Pegasus was controlling him through subliminal messages.

And we're right back to *Yu-Gi-Oh!* again! Yugi's first encounter with Pegasus involves the two of them playing a card game, despite Pegasus only being present in the form of a prerecorded video tape. Eventually, Yugi realizes that the tape has frames spliced into it that have been planting subliminal messages into his mind, tricking him into playing particular cards without even realizing why.

△ *Take a page out of Shenron's book, Chifuyu!*

Shenron, the wish-granting dragon summoned by the Dragon Balls, has a number of rules regarding the sort of wishes that he can grant! Some of the rules—like not being able to resurrect the same person more than once—are very specific, but the dragon also shoots down wishes on occasion for much less well-defined reasons, allowing what it can and cannot make happen to be more or less dictated by storytelling convenience.

△ *I knelt on the ground, agonizing like Bank Director Ohwada trying to force himself to bow down to Hanzawa Naoki.*

This one is a deep, *deep* cut by English-speaking standards, but ironically it's probably one of the more accessible references from a mainstream Japanese perspective! Andou is referring to a scene from a TV drama called *Hanzawa Naoki*, which was record-breakingly popular when it first aired in Japan. The story revolves around the titular character as he works his way up the corporate ladder in the Japanese banking industry, and it deals with the toxicity and unethical dealings that are all too common in that business.

The scene that Andou is referring to occurs at the end of the first season, and it involves Ohwada—a bank director who set Hanzawa up as a scapegoat—losing a bet that he'd made with him. The stakes of that bet involved Ohwada bowing down to Hanzawa, which he does with great, *great* reluctance, physically straining against it every step of the way. Frankly, it's kind of incredible how hard Ohwada's actor sells the fact that this man does *not* want to be bowing down under any circumstances.

△ *You just can't use "world" in the name of a power that lets you stop time anymore.*

...On account of The World, DIO's time-stopping power from *Jojo's*! It really is

just that iconic.

△ In short: this is less of a dungeon crawl than it is one of those escape rooms that've been all the rage lately! Like, the really big ones that companies will rent out the Tokyo Dome to set up as promotional events.

Escape rooms really were all the rage in Japan when this volume came out, and they're still a pretty big thing to this day! That being said, while the sort of small-scale, small-business escape rooms that can be found all over America are very much a thing in Japan, the ones that Andou is referring to here are (to the best of my knowledge) a pretty uniquely Japanese take on the concept.

In short, somewhere along the way, somebody came up with the idea of promoting media by setting up escape rooms themed around it. Popular manga getting escape room experiences was a pretty huge thing for quite some time, not to mention video game franchises—I myself got the chance to go through an escape room themed around *Resident Evil 7* around the time it was released. They really do rent out the Tokyo Dome for them sometimes too! As recently as January 2024, an escape room themed around—incredibly—a radio comedy show was held there, and in December 2023, there was actually a *Sekai no Owari*-themed escape room at the Tokyo Dome, if you can believe it.

△ It was such a swarm of Bs that part of me wanted to ask if Chifuyu had awakened to some kind of insect-whispering power.

This is one of those gags that took quite a bit of localization to make work on a basic level! In Japanese, Chifuyu's "puzzle" uses the Japanese character 欠, read "ta," with the clue being a drawing of a tanuki (on account of the fact that "ta nuki" roughly translates to "without the tas").

So, if there weren't any Bs in the original text, what was the insect power line like? Simple: it was a *Fist of the North Star* reference. As in, Andou really does just say "What is this, *Fist of the North Star*?!" The joke is that Kenshiro, the protagonist of the series, shouts "Atatatatatatatata" when he unleashes a flurry of punches upon his foes. Considering both that using "ta" as is would have felt very unnatural in an English context and that *Fist of the North Star* is far less well-known outside of Japan and would have required a degree of explanation in its own right, we chose to spin Andou's comment in a more generally chuuni

direction and go with a version of the puzzle that would come across as the sort of thing that a very lazy person might actually make up in English.

△ Forget the Four Witches Technique—this would call for the Multi-Form Attack!

The Four Witches Technique and the Multi-Form Attack are both special moves used by Tien Shinhan in *Dragon Ball*! The former causes the user to sprout an extra pair of arms from their back, while the latter causes the user to split into four copies of themselves.

△ Word was still out on whether it was wrong to pick up girls in a dungeon, but I could say with confidence that a dungeon without anyone to talk to was wrong in its own right.

This line is a very direct reference to *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?*, a light novel series by Oomori Fujino! A common struggle in translation, incidentally, is that it can be very difficult to pack all the nuance of a Japanese title into an English version that comes across as sufficiently, well, title-like. Sometimes there's no choice but to read specificity into a title that was more broad or vague in the original Japanese, and sometimes that can cause issues when a nuance that had to be brushed past in the English title suddenly becomes important in the text of the series itself.

I've discussed how this phenomenon has caused issues with *Supernatural Battles'* many title drops in previous TL notes sections, and *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* falls into a somewhat similar category, where the official English release chose—by necessity, I should note, as I very much do not intend this as criticism—to take the title in a specific direction where the Japanese version can be interpreted a little more broadly. Specifically, the verb translated as “to pick up” in the English title absolutely has that nuance in certain contexts, but can *also* simply mean “to meet” in others...which is unambiguously the context that Andou is using it in when he says “It is absolutely not wrong to want to meet people in a dungeon” in the Japanese version of this line. Having him say “It is absolutely not wrong to try to pick up girls in a dungeon” would have been *wildly* inappropriate, given the context of the scene, and so some adjustments had to be made in order to keep the reference intact. I have to say: this is the first time that I've struggled to

translate a line in a novel on account of the official English title for a completely *different* series!

Chapter 3

△ *I could muster neither an “Objection!” nor a “No! That’s wrong!”*

Oh hey, we did these two back in volume 6! Just as a refresher: “Objection!” is in reference to the *Ace Attorney* franchise, while “No! That’s wrong!” is in reference to *Danganronpa*. Both are interjections that characters shout out during trials right before they pick holes in the opposing side’s argument.

△ *I’d seen her reading books on business, history books, autobiographies of celebrities, manga by Tezuka Osamu...the list went on and on.*

Tezuka Osamu was, without question, one of the most influential artists in the history of manga. Being the creator of *Astro Boy*, *Black Jack*, *Phoenix*, and countless other iconic series, his presence in the field really can’t be overstated. As such, when Andou says, “Sayumi reads Tezuka manga,” he’s more or less saying, “Sayumi reads legendary classics of the medium.” The fact that Tezuka’s works range from extremely serious historical dramas to extremely silly works of schlock fiction only reinforces Andou’s point that she reads a huge variety of books, as well.

△ *Just on a gut level, ‘center’ seems the most promising...but no, we can’t! Hikaru no Go already has dibs on ‘center of heaven’!*

Hikaru no Go is a manga written by Hotta Yumi and drawn by Obata Takeshi, and “center of heaven” is a real piece of Go terminology! The term is also sometimes rendered as “origin of heaven,” but we couldn’t bring up the word “origin” during the part of the chapter where Andou is trying to call it to mind.

Chapter 4

△ *Like, it worked for Flazzard and Todoroki Shoto because they were all about having the opposing elements of fire and ice packed into one person.*

Todoroki Shoto, a character from Horikoshi Kohei’s *My Hero Academia* who has the power to create fire and ice, is probably already known to most of our readers. Flazzard, on the other hand, is significantly more obscure in the English-speaking anime and manga fandom! He’s an antagonist from *Dragon*

Quest: The Adventure of Dai, a manga spinoff of the *Dragon Quest* video game franchise written by Sanjo Riku and drawn by Inada Koji that's only had a fifth of its volumes published in English to date (despite being one of the best-selling manga of all time thanks to its popularity in Japan). Flazzard's design and power set are remarkably similar to Todoroki's, with the right side of his body being ice-themed and the left side fire-themed, though unlike Todoroki, his appearance is overtly monstrous.

△ Sure, I might've made like the mothers of the protagonists in a certain basketball manga and a certain other sumo manga, apologizing to my flame for not having been able to make it hotter, but that didn't mean it'd bothered me at all!

The two manga in question are Hinata Takeshi's *Ahiru no Sora* and Kawada's *Hinomaru Sumo*! Both feature short protagonists who are put at a disadvantage in their chosen sports thanks to their stature, and both really do feature scenes where their mothers apologize for the fact that they didn't end up taller.

△ There's a certain well-known anime quote turned internet meme that goes "Even an idiot can write a masterpiece novel if they spend twenty years working on it," but was that really true?

The quote in question comes from a character named Straight Cougar—no, really—from *s-CRY-ed*, an anime produced by studio Sunrise! When not busy pontificating on the nature of speed and having one of the most incredible names of all time, Straight Cougar can be found using his super power, Radical Good Speed—again, really—to turn cars into much faster cars. It's really no wonder that this guy ended up getting memed by the Japanese internet, frankly.

△ The best thing about words written in the English alphabet is that they can end up looking super friggin' cool when you turn them into acronyms. Take D4C, for instance, or IWGP.

D4C stands for "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap," which is both an AC/DC song as well as a Stand in *Jojo's Part 7* (which has yet to be released in English as of this writing, hence the Stand's current lack of an established official, copyright-safe English name). IWGP, meanwhile, is short for *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*,

which is both an actual landmark in real-world Ikebukuro as well as the name of a series of mystery novels which were adapted into an extremely popular TV drama (and a generally less impactful anime some twenty years later).

△ Next thing you know, Hatoko would be telling me I nicknamed her Jugemu Jugemu.

“Jugemu Jugemu” is the beginning of a comically long name that plays a central role in a rakugo story called, well, “Jugemu.” The story bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the picture book *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (I’m convinced it must have been the inspiration thereof, but I can’t find any solid evidence to back that claim up), though our readers are probably more likely to be familiar with it from a certain *Fullmetal Alchemist* gag or the ending song of *Joshiraku*.

△ Like, she was a fan of this one show that had comedians try to make a particular member of a live audience laugh...

In the original text, Andou refers to the show in question by name rather than describing it! The show is called *Iromonea*, and it’s a comedy game show in which contestants have to make five randomly chosen audience members laugh in sequence within a time limit, with a prize of a million yen on the line. It’s another of those cultural touchstones that a Japanese reader would know instantly, but which never established any sort of presence outside of the country.

△ It’s-a-go-go-go-go-go-go-go-go-go-go! Whoa-whoa! Whoa-whoa!

As Andou alludes to later on in the chapter, these are the lyrics—if you can really call them that—to the entrance music for contestants in the M-1 Grand Prix! You can listen to it yourself by running a search for “M-1グランプリ 登場曲” on Youtube, if you’re curious.

Chapter 5

△ ...a blinding effulgence would herald its metamorphosis into a legendary sword known as ‘Á Bao A Qu, the tower’s blade of certain victory.’

Á Bao A Qu is either a legendary creature that watches over an equally legendary tower or a space station in *Mobile Suit Gundam*! It seems safe to say that the *Gundam* station was named after the creature, so the point’s a little

moot, but it's equally easy for me to imagine Hajime having pulled the name from either source.

△ *Gevanni duplicated it overnight...not.*

This line—the “not” aside—was lifted from one of *Death Note*'s final chapters! In that instance, of course, the notebook being duplicated overnight was significantly more important than Hajime's personal cringe compilation. It's also worth noting that this line, like so many, has turned into something of a meme on the Japanese internet.

Chapter 6

△ *In Prince of Tennis terms, I felt like I'd just gone up against Ibu Shinji and Captain Yukimura, one after the other.*

Ibu Shinji and Seiichi Yukimura are both *Prince of Tennis* characters (surprise surprise) whose opponents end up injured or debilitated over the course of the series, with one of Ibu's moves causing his opponent to suffer an eye injury and Yukimura's playstyle straight up giving his opponent a case of the yips (which is almost certainly where Andou learned that word).

△ *We're basically standing in a blank canvas! It's like we're in BLEACH!*

BLEACH is somewhat notorious for the fact that its backgrounds often, well, aren't! Tite Kubo makes use of pure white backgrounds and featureless voids so often that he and his series have become rather notorious for it. This is, incidentally, a rare instance in which both the Japanese and English-speaking fandoms picked the same aspect of a series to meme about.

△ *Only when the power name ends up getting used as a code name for someone, like Weather Report or Accelerator!*

Accelerator is the name of an antagonist turned supporting character from Kamachi Kazuma's light novel series *A Certain Magical Index*, while Weather Report is a character from *Jojo's Part 6*! Both characters are, as Andou describes, named after their own powers, and while Weather Report's birth name is eventually revealed, Accelerator's has never been explicitly stated.

△ *Quite—a pen name of much the same kind as Ashirogi Muto.*

Ashirogi Muto is the pen name taken on by the protagonists of *Bakuman.*, who form a two-person manga team that is indeed somewhat similar to how Frederic Dannay and Manfred Bennington Lee wrote as Ellery Queen!

△ Do your delayed comebacks get passed down through the generations like the Spirit Wave Style or One For All?!

The Spirit Wave Style is a technique from *Yu Yu Hakusho* that gets passed down through the generations and is eventually inherited by the series protagonist! One For All, from *My Hero Academia*, is also passed down from generation to generation, but it's a full-blown superpower (or Quirk, to use the series's terminology) rather than a technique.

△ Characters who are all about calling out other characters' nonsense are a big thing, sure, but the only time I've ever seen a character who's specifically known for playing along before firing off a delayed comeback was in Psycho Logical.

Psycho Logical is part of *Zaregoto*, a series of novels by Nisio Isin! It does indeed feature a character named Oogaki Shito who is known for the extremely specific form of comedic quip that Hatoko named herself after.

Side Story: Umeko's Fate

△ Or maybe I should've just straight up ripped off Hiruma and said 'I'd do everything I possibly could to stop the world from ending' after all...?

The Hiruma in question in this line is Hiruma Yoichi, a character from *Eyeshield 21*, an American football manga written by Inagaki Riichiro and illustrated by Murata Yusuke! The line Andou's quoting seems to have come from a Q and A section with the series' various characters, and amusingly, Andou very slightly misquotes it (though in a way that doesn't have any real impact on the line's overall meaning).

Afterword

△ There are a few gags that were subtly altered to work better in the novel format, but I didn't make any truly major revisions.

This is, in fact, true! Or at least, I have confirmed one instance where the novel-form version of a story had a definite addition relative to the original

bonus booklet release. I didn't have time to read through all of the booklets I've gotten my hands on in their entirety, but I did check out a few passages I had suspicions about and managed to track one clear alteration down. Specifically, the section of Tomoyo's story in which Tomoyo calls Andou out on the fact that bonus stories often get compiled and released as full volumes—from "just because it's a bonus story..." to "...okay again, you know?"—was, hilariously, added into the full volume version. I would bet money that the line where Andou promises to petition the illustrators to draw his accidental chest-grope with Hatoko was a novel-edition original as well, but I unfortunately haven't been able to acquire a copy of Hatoko's bonus booklet (those things are *really* hard to get ahold of these days) and couldn't confirm it for sure.

And, that's (finally) it for the references this time! See you in the final volume!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 12

I thought that working on anime bonus stories meant that I could throw caution to the wind and write whatever the heck I wanted to, and then they went and released those bonus stories as a full volume. I'm grateful—I really am, honestly—but also, err, sorry about that.

Illustrator/Character Designer: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works) and *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* (Published by Shufu to Seikatsu Sha).

Thank goodness Umeko finally got to make an appearance in a color image!

Interior Illustrator: Ishige Rie (TRIGGER)

Japanese anime(tor). Worked on: *SEX and VIOLENCE with MACHSPEED* (2015), *Little Witch Academia: The Enchanted Parade* (2015), *Ninja Slayer From Animation* (2015), *Kiznaiver* (2016), etc.

It was great to get to draw the *Supernatural Battles* crew again! I'll be happy if you enjoy my art, and the story as well.

Interior Illustrator: Hasegawa Tetsuya (TRIGGER)

Animator for a large number of TRIGGER projects. Animation director for *Kill la Kill* (2012), *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* (2014), *Kiznaiver* (2016), etc.

I had a lot of fun working on the anime, so I'm very glad to have had this chance to draw for *Supernatural Battles* once again!

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Chapter 1: The Path of Closed Clock](#)

[Chapter 2: The Path of World Create](#)

[Chapter 3: The Path of Route of Origin](#)

[Chapter 4: The Path of Over Element](#)

[Chapter 5: The Path Astray of Lucifer's Strike](#)

[Chapter 6: The Path of Dark and Dark](#)

[Side Story: Umeko's Fate](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustration](#)

[Bonus Translation Notes](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 13 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 12

Originally published as INOU BATTLE WA NICHIJOUKEI NO NAKADE Vol. 12

by Kota Nozomi

Translated by Tristan K. Hill Edited by Zubonjin

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 Kota Nozomi Illustrations copyright © 2016 029

© 2016 Rie Ishige, Tetsuya Hasegawa, Satoshi Yamaguchi (TRIGGER) All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published in arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: January 2025

Premium E-Book for faratnis