Author
Kota Nozomi
Illustrator
029
Shiori Miyazaki
(TRIGGER)



When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace 13


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Supernatural Battles

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Black fire?

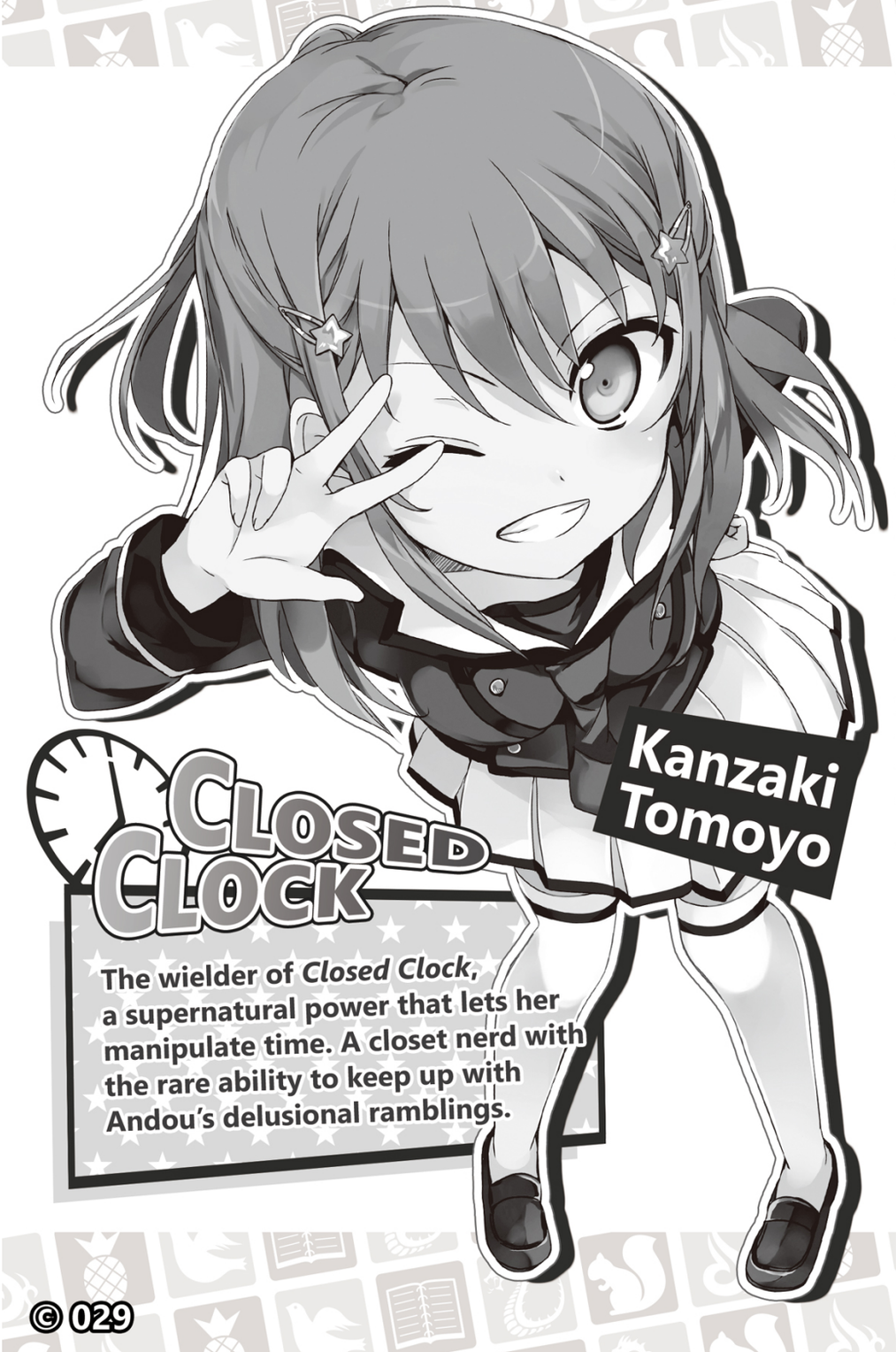


Squirrel?

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CHARACTERS

ILLUSTRATOR: 029
Shiori Miyazaki (TRIGGER)



Kanzaki Tomoyo

Closed Clock

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

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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
DARK AND DARK
A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.
Andou Jurai
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
WORLD CREATE
A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.
Himeki Chifuyu
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Prologue

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Prologue

"All's well that ends well" is a phrase that seems to come up all the time, isn't it? It comes up so often, in fact, that I'd hesitate to call it a saying or an aphorism, and I'd certainly never think to look up its origins. It's a common phrase—a conventional one. A phrase that spreads from person to person as naturally as could be…which you might say attests to the fact that it expresses a broad and general truth.

All's well that ends well. It sounds like a positive sentiment, at first blush—like it's saying that no matter what trials and tribulations you may go through, they'll all be water under the bridge when everything's over. It's very easy to read another implication into that interpretation, however: that when all's said and done, the results are all that matter. It implies that no matter what incredible things may have happened over the course of the process, if the ending doesn't satisfy—if the results don't live up to expectations—then everything that came before is rendered meaningless.

We only get to be judged by how hard we work—by the effort that we put in over the course of an endeavor—until we graduate from school. After that point, we're thrust into society at large, where results are everything. Yes, I'm still actively living out my student years even as I say these words, and yes, it's a little embarrassing to monologue about what it's like out in society considering that…but I think this is something that even students like me can understand. Nobody's naively optimistic enough not to catch on to these things eventually.

People—especially celebrities and fictional characters—love talking about how hard work is always rewarded, but from another perspective, wouldn't that mean that hard work that *isn't* rewarded can't be counted as hard work at all? It's a concept that hints that those who never produce results have no right to be proud of the effort that they put in. Kinda puts the harsh reality of society on display, doesn't it?

In the end, everything is defined by results. It's only by achieving clear success—by reaching an ending—that the process of putting in hard work is recognized as hard work.

All's well that ends well. Results are everything.

But there's one thing...just one complaint that I'd like to raise about that idea. Indeed, I hold a single objection to this particular truth of the world—namely, I believe there's an exception to the otherwise universal rule that is "all's well that ends well."

That exception's identity: fiction.

When it comes to manga, anime, novels, light novels, and on and on—to fiction of all shapes and sizes—I believe that results are *not*, in fact, everything. I believe that a story's result—in other words, a story's ending—doesn't define that story in its entirety.

This is really hard to put into words, but there are a lot of stories out there with endings that, well...suck. I mean, maybe saying that they *suck* is taking it a step too far, but there are certainly no small number of stories that make you cock your head and say "Wait, what? That's *it*?" when you read their final chapters.

There are absolutely stories out there that found popularity, made the jump into multimedia franchises, became beloved by fans far and wide, carried on for years on end, laid out all sorts of grand mysteries and layers of foreshadowing...then threw it all away at the absolute last second by ending in such a perfunctory way that not even the most diehard fans could defend it in good faith. Death game series are particularly prone to that, as most of their endings— Actually, scratch that. I probably shouldn't get too specific about this, on second thought.

Anyway, what I'm getting at is that a fair percentage of stories have endings that are kinda hard to give a passing grade. That said, the mere fact that those works got endings at all means that they avoided being a lot worse off—after all, there are also plenty of fictional works that were never able to end at all.

Some stories just never reach their endings, for one reason or another. I can think of all sorts of circumstances that could lead to that result, the most common of which would probably be getting canceled on account of poor sales. Then there are stories whose authors get sick or die, or stories published by companies that go under or magazines that get discontinued. Then you have those works in the light novel world that sell decently enough, by all appearances, but for some inexplicable reason

just never put out another volume.

That's only scratching the surface of potential reasons. Take, for instance, works that were perfectly popular up until their anime aired, but which then had their publication rate drop straight off a cliff the second it finished. Did the anime airing somehow lead to the author burning themself out? Or maybe seeing their work in adaptation was a debilitating shock? Maybe the editorial department dialed back the pressure after the anime ended, or maybe the author had a new series start doing really well and turned their attention to it instead? I'm no author, so I can only speculate, but I have to assume that every author has a unique set of circumstances like those that they have to work under.

The point I'm trying to make is that there are a ton of series out there that were never able to end on account of one real-world issue or another. Actually, "a ton" might not do it justice. These days, I have a feeling that unfinished stories might outnumber the finished ones. We live in an era that's spoiled for entertainment, after all, and a countless number of stories are beginning and ending at any given moment.

I have to wonder: Just how many of those stories ever come to a satisfying conclusion? If I had to hazard a guess as to how many stories have reached an ideal ending—running for exactly as long as they should have without getting prematurely canceled or artificially dragged out, concluding only after the author finished telling the story they wanted to tell, including a perfect final chapter that could truly satisfy each and every reader—I would say that we'd be looking at a grand total of less than one percent of stories, most likely.

The way I see it, a story being canceled before its time on account of circumstances surrounding its production—in other words, a story that readers will never be able to enjoy all the way to its conclusion—is a tragic thing indeed. Even then, however, there's a yet more tragic way for a story to conclude: for readers to stop following the story by their own initiative. Sometimes, readers will simply drift away from a story before it reaches its conclusion. I suspect that, more so than anything else—more so than godawful endings and premature cancellations—*that* is the saddest and most unfulfilling way for a story to possibly conclude.

It's inevitable that not everyone who starts buying a series will

read it all the way to the end, of course. No matter how popular a series gets, its first volume will always have higher sales than every volume that follows it, meaning that there will always be a certain number of people who read a single volume and drop the series on the spot. Literally every series will lose some number of readers, without exception.

I'm by no means innocent myself—I've stopped reading plenty of stories over the years. Sometimes I'll read a single volume and decide a story's not my thing, and sometimes I'll get really into a series while its anime's airing, only to kinda just lose interest as soon as the anime's over. These are stories that I liked—stories that I was super hooked on—that for some reason I stopped reading before I knew it, usually without even having a clear reason like "it got really boring" or "I couldn't stand that one character" to justify my estrangement.

When readers drift away from a story they used to like, they usually don't have a clear reason along those lines. It sort of just *happens*. It's not an obvious, instant, binary thing, like the flick of a switch—the line between love and hate is fuzzy and ambiguous, and it's within that realm of ambiguity that people fall off stories as a matter of course. I'm convinced that that's the most common way for stories to end: by quietly, naturally passing on.

Now then. This speech has dragged on for an awfully long time at this point, but what I'm really trying to say is that most stories don't end up wrapping up nicely. Authors will get bored, give up, and half-ass a lame conclusion. Publishers will abandon stories and cut them off without warning. Readers will take their leave of stories on their own terms before they have the chance to end. All things considered, stories that come to a natural conclusion—where the relationship between story and reader can end cleanly—are *far* rarer than stories where that just doesn't happen.

If, over the course of your entire life, you find even a *single* work of fiction that you fall in love with, that keeps running for as long as you want it to, and that concludes with a final chapter you have no complaints about at exactly the moment you thought it should go ahead and wrap itself up, I think you should count yourself lucky. Most stories aren't so fortunate, and so end in a manner that is, at least to some extent, difficult to accept.

Thus, I protest. Such stories are precisely why I raise my

objection—in fact, I would deny the idea of "all's well that ends well" altogether.

I mean, like...who even *cares* how stories end, right? I'm not saying it's a bad thing for a story to end in a clean, satisfying manner, of course. That's great, when it happens! There's nothing better than stories getting endings that satisfy everyone! The thing is, though, that stories are *not* defined by their endings. Even if a story's conclusion ends up being super lame—even if it loses popularity and gets canceled—if its readers found themselves enjoying that story from moment to moment before it came to an end, then I believe it's those moments that define it.

I believe that's true even if it's the reader who ends up walking away from the story in the end. Even if a series runs for so long that you lose interest and stop reading, even if you lose the time to keep up with reading as a hobby after getting into a new school or starting a new job, even if you lose your passion for a story after its anime ends, even if the author just stops putting out volumes post-anime and you lose interest before the final volume comes out, even if you never see a story through to its conclusion, or even if you simply grow up and the stories you love become the stories you *loved*... In all those cases, I believe the moments that you spent reading and enjoying a series can never be invalidated. In my eyes, the single split second in which a story touches your heart can last an eternity.

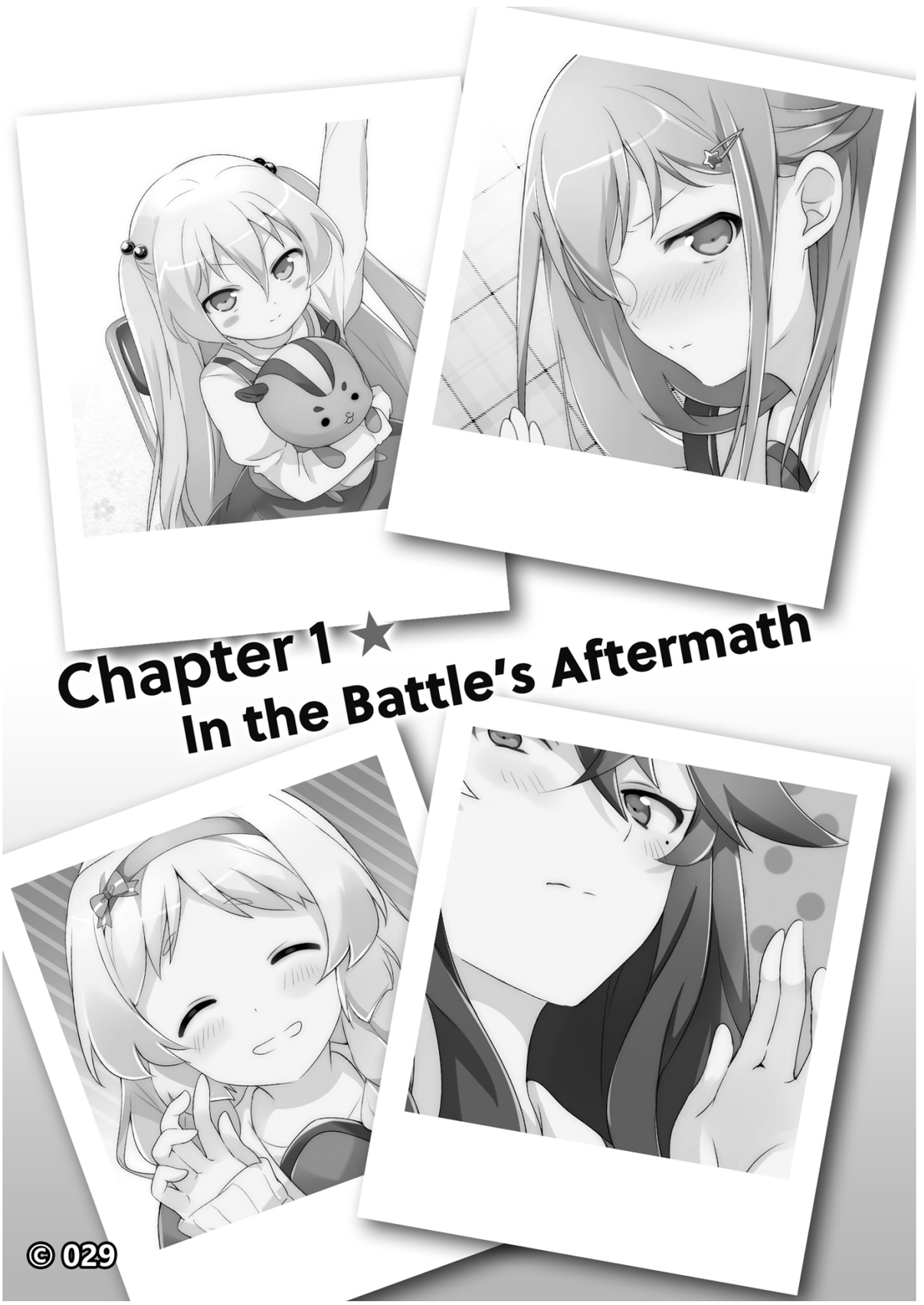
In truth, nothing is defined merely by its ending—not even humans. How we live is far more important than how we die. In the same manner, how a story develops is far more important than how it ends. The process leading up to that ending—the individual moments that readers enjoy—is more important than anything else.

From here on out, my story—*our* story—will reach an ending of its own. This long, drawn-out tale will come to a clear and definite conclusion. Whether that conclusion will be a genuinely spectacular finale that will satisfy everyone or a miserable, half-assed disaster that will make everyone want to demand their time and money back, I can't say. That's something that will vary wildly from person to person, of course...but nevertheless, there's one thing I want to say: No matter how this ending turns out, and no matter how this final volume concludes, the tale we've spun up to this point was by no means a fabrication. We

were by no means just fiction. We lived out each and every moment, each and every volume, to the best of our ability. All the feelings that blossomed within us as we experienced all the events thrown our way were, without exception, genuine. Even if all of it was an intricate plot devised by a third party, even if we were nothing more than characters in a story woven by someone else entirely, and even if our story was a work of fiction with no relation to any real people, places, or organizations… Even still, I'll stand up and shout it out as loudly as I can: *We* are real.

Now then, I think this prologue's gone on long enough. It's high time for us to get started. Time for us to wrap together everything that's come before as we wrap up our final volume.

Now—let us begin the end of the beginning. The ending that will allow all else to begin…begins now.


Chapter 1 ★
In the Battle's Aftermath
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Chapter 1: In the Battle's Aftermath

About a year had passed since we'd fought our final battle. It was the decisive clash between me and Kiryuu—the ultimate showdown between Guiltia Sin Jurai and Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. That battle was truly the culmination of everything that had happened in our story up to that point...and it was a climax that defied description, no matter how hard I tried.

Words could not do it justice. Prose could never depict it. It was such an outlandishly over-the-top battle that your only choice would be to describe it in a brief, vague summary form, or otherwise to cut the scene entirely and only discuss it in retrospect. It was a battle the likes of which had never been seen before and would likely never be seen again. The chances of another conflict even remotely living up to it were simply nonexistent.

Seriously, though, what a *fight*! Looking back now that it was all over, it almost felt like the whole thing—my battle with Kiryuu, the Spirit War's existence on the whole, the fact that we had ever possessed absurdly potent supernatural powers, all of it—had been a dream.

Anyway, that was all over now, and another year had come and gone. All sorts of stuff had happened during that year...and over the course of it, I'd started going out with a certain girl.

"She sure is late..." I muttered to myself. It was the afternoon of a day in our summer vacation, and I was waiting at the bus stop where we were supposed to meet, staring at my watch and heaving the occasional sigh.

I was a third-year in high school now, and I was making the most of the very last summer vacation of my secondary education. Well, making as much of it as I could, anyway—studying for my entrance exams and going to cram school didn't leave me with all that much free time to spare. My day-to-day life was steeped in academics, but today, I was taking a break to go out with the very first girlfriend I'd ever had.

It would also, in fact, be our very first date. As such, I'd dressed way more stylishly than I normally would (in an outfit that my older sister had chosen for me, needless to say) and

arrived at our meeting place thirty minutes ahead of time…only to wait around for *forty* minutes without any sign of my date showing up. I'd tried texting her a few times, and so far, all of those messages were still marked as unread.

"Late to our first date, really…? What the heck is she doing? The bus is due any minute now. I hope she's not in trouble or anything…"

I didn't have to worry for much longer. Just a short while later, I spotted a girl walking along the street in the distance. She was making her way toward me, her pace slow and leisurely. She wasn't making any effort to hurry up at all, from what I could tell. In fact, she was walking in such a calm and composed manner that you'd never think she was running late looking at her. This was, to be fair, pretty much par for the course for her.

Even after noticing me, my girlfriend didn't pick up her pace at all. All I could do was shrug and run over to her instead, calling out her name as I approached.

"Hey, Chifuyu!"

Chifuyu was wearing a sort of cutesy dress and a big, broad-brimmed hat. She was also toting a large backpack, and she was clasping her ever-present stuffed animal, Squirrely, in her arms.

"Mnh. Andou. Morning," Chifuyu said as she noticed me. If she knew she was late, she certainly wasn't letting it show.

"Morning, Chifuyu. You're late, you know?" I replied. "And you weren't picking up your phone at all! I was worried something might've happened to you…"

Chifuyu pulled her smartphone from her pocket, and a very slight look of shock came across her face as she checked its screen. Apparently, she hadn't noticed that I'd been trying to contact her. She had a habit of putting her phone into silent mode so it wouldn't wake her up while she was napping, and this time, it had come back to bite her.

"Sorry, Andou," Chifuyu said, her gaze dropping to the ground. "I got ambushed and ended up late."

"A-Ambushed?! By who?! Or what?!"

"By the sandman."

"Ahh… Okay, I get the picture. Nothing you could do about that," I conceded as my shoulders slumped with dejection. It was just so classically Chifuyu, there was nothing else I could say.

"What's wrong, Andou?" Chifuyu asked.

"Nothing, really—just a little deflated, that's all. I feel like a

moron for getting all excited and showing up a half hour early," I explained.

"You were excited?"

"Ah... Umm, well..."

"Excited for our first date?"

"That's, uh... That's not it, exactly..."

"It isn't?"

"I... I mean... Oh, for the— *Fine*, yes! Yes, that's right, I was! I was *stupid* worked up over it, okay?! I was so excited and nervous that I barely slept a wink last night!" I shouted, abandoning all pretense and just laying it out for her to see.

"Oh," Chifuyu said with a slight blush and a satisfied smile. "You're cute, Andou."

"Bwaugh?!"

Agggh—a fifth-grader just called me cute. What even is this emotion I'm feeling? It's like the weirdest mix of embarrassment, irritation, and excitement all at once...

While I was busy writhing in the clutches of an emotion totally unknown to me, the bus trundled its way along the road toward us.

"Andou, the bus is here," Chifuyu said as she took my hand. It was a bit embarrassing, but I returned her grasp, and the two of us ran back to the bus stop together.

"Andou?" said Chifuyu. "I didn't sleep much last night either."

"Huh...?"

"I was too excited for today," she explained with a smile that was downright enchanting. It was a preposterously adorable, dangerously charming expression indeed. I was, without question, the luckiest man in the world to be with such a pure and charming partner.

It was the summer of my third year in high school...and I had begun a relationship with Himeki Chifuyu.

We'd chosen a local water park as the destination for our date—the same one we'd been to almost exactly a year prior during last year's summer vacation. We'd had Kuki with us that time, of course, which made this the first time that Chifuyu and I were here as just the two of us.

"Oh man! This kinda takes me back," I muttered as I glanced around the lobby. We were lined up at the ticket booth, waiting to pay for entry. "Remember how we came here last year with

Kuki? Actually, speaking of Kuki, how's she been lately?" I asked.

"Normal," replied Chifuyu.

"Gotcha. Nothing beats normal, I guess. Oh... By the way, did she say anything about our date today?"

"Umm... She said it was 'out of the question' and that 'going to the pool alone with him would be totally shameless.'"

"Yeaaah...figures."

That wasn't much of a surprise, considering how violently opposed she'd been to our relationship back when we'd first told her we were dating. She seemed to have reached a sort of quiet acceptance of it recently, but it only took the slightest prompting for her to start meddling and dictating restrictions for us all over again.

"So, what did you say to her?" I asked.

"I asked if she was trying to force me to stop being her friend, and she changed her mind right away."

"Should've guessed..."

That was just a straight-up threat, huh? I was suddenly feeling a lot of sympathy for Kuki. She could be a bit of an overprotective helicopter friend, sure, but ultimately, Chifuyu held absolute authority in their relationship. The balance of power was precariously one-sided.

"Was it really a good idea to force the issue like that? For all we know, she might be watching us from somewhere right now," I said.

"It's fine," Chifuyu insisted. "I said that if she follows us, I'm through with her."

"You're sure giving her plenty of chances to end your friendship, huh...?"

What are you, a grade schooler? Oh, wait. Right. You literally are.

"Hmph... Andou," Chifuyu said with a sulky pout, "no talking about other girls when you're with me."

"Huh...? O-Oh, sorry. Not even Kuki, though?"

"No."

"O-Okay, then. I'll cut it out."

"Mnh. Good," Chifuyu said. Her pout shifted to a satisfied smile.

Man. It sorta felt like we'd been this way consistently ever since we started going out. It was like she held the reins in our relationship—or, more bluntly, like she had me completely whipped. The fact that I, a high school boy, had had the initiative

thoroughly seized from me by a grade school girl struck me as pretty darn sad…but on the other hand, I could also look at it in a more positive light by saying I was like a heroic knight having the selfish princess he was sworn to protect leading him around by the nose. *Actually, wait, I like that a lot. It sounds* so *much cooler that way.*

Anyway, while I was preoccupied by all that nonsense, we reached the front of the line. I bought a pair of tickets from the woman at the counter—one at the price for high schoolers and the other at the price for elementary schoolers.

"Okay, then. Here's your ticket, and here's the ticket for your little sister," the receptionist—who seemed like she was very thorough about her work—said as she handed our tickets over.

Chifuyu's expression suddenly darkened. "No, I'm not," she huffed.

I had just…just the *worst* feeling about where this was going.

"I'm not Andou's sister," Chifuyu repeated.

"O-Oh, is that so?" the receptionist awkwardly replied. "Are you a more distant relative, then, or…?"

"I'm his girlfriend," said Chifuyu. She stood tall and proud as she straight-up declared it, and oh boy, did *that* ever make the receptionist look uncomfortable. I, meanwhile, could feel a waterfall's worth of cold sweat pouring down my back. "Andou and I are dating."

"Uh…"

"We're in love."

"…"

"We've even kiss—"

"*Ahhh*, my sister! She's my sister! You were right, we're *totally* siblings! Sorry about that, she's been going through a real precocious phase lately! Okay thanks bye!"

Around the time the color drained from the receptionist's face and she started reaching for the phone on her desk, I grabbed Chifuyu by the hand, rattled off an excuse, and fled into the park at top speed.

"Come on, Chifuyu… What were you thinking?" I emphatically whispered. "We promised that we'd pretend to be siblings when we're out in public, didn't we?"

"Mngh…" Chifuyu grumbled. She didn't seem satisfied at all. "But I'm *not* your sister."

I didn't know how to reply to that, and the look of bitter

frustration on her face tugged fiercely at my heartstrings. Still, there was no way that a high school boy dating an elementary school girl would receive anything other than a poor reception. The only legal prohibitions regarding this sort of thing were about adults being in relationships with minors, apparently, so two minors like us dating wouldn't technically be an issue in that regard, but the people around us most definitely wouldn't look upon our relationship anywhere near favorably. I would, without question, be written off as a lolicon scumbag.

That was exactly why only an extremely small number of people knew about our relationship. If I could've had my way, I would've loved to have been more open about the two of us being together, but society, its rules, and the world at large disagreed. Moreover...

"Sorry, Andou... I'm being selfish."

...Chifuyu herself was no longer immature enough to not understand all of that.

"Let's just put up with it for a little longer, okay, Chifuyu?" I said as I patted her gently on the head.

"How long is a little?" asked Chifuyu.

"Uh... Until you're in middle school, or somewhere around there, I guess? Actually, no...that's probably out too, on second thought. It might be a better idea to wait till you're in high school after all..."

"That's...really long."

"I-I mean, sure, but considering we'll be together forever, I'm sure it'll feel like it goes by in the blink of an eye!"

"Together forever?"

"Yeah. A six-year age gap will feel like nothing before you know it."

"Together forever..."

A faint blush spread across Chifuyu's cheeks as she muttered quietly to herself, savoring the sound of those two words. I got the sense that she was fantasizing about something for a moment, but before long, a trace of anxiety came across her face.

"Hey, Andou...?" Chifuyu murmured. "Will you mind when I'm an adult?"

"Huh...? Wh-What's that mean?" I asked.

"Will you still love me when I'm not a grade schooler?"

"Will I— Of course I will," I said. I asserted it very definitively.

“I’m pretty sure I already said this back during the cultural festival, but I’m not a lolicon. Remember?”

Lolicon: an abbreviation of the term “lolita complex.” Per its original meaning, it referred to individuals who are sexually attracted to immature girls from the ages of nine to fourteen. That attraction was not a permanent one—the moment a girl became a woman, a lolicon’s love for her would vanish into nothingness.

“I don’t love you because you’re a grade schooler, Chifuyu. I love you because you’re *you*.”

“Yeah…I know,” Chifuyu said with a little nod. “I’ll put up with it. Us dating can be a secret until I’m a bit older.”

“Great. Thanks, Chifuyu.”

“Hey, Andou?” Chifuyu said, gazing up at me as she fidgeted with the hem of her outfit. “I want a reward for being patient.”

“A reward…?”

“A kiss.”

“*Pff*!” I did a spit take. Chifuyu, meanwhile, was still staring straight at me. “W-Wait a second…”

“I want a kiss, Andou. Here and now.”

“A-Are you serious…?”

“Yeah. You haven’t done it even once since the first time…”

“Okay, but, I mean, that was, well, you know…”

“Do you hate me?”

“O-Of course I don’t! I don’t… But, like…”

“If you don’t kiss me now, we’re through.”

“Wha—?!”

“We’re through. I made up my mind. If you don’t kiss me right now, we’re breaking up.”

Chifuyu doubled down on her absurd demand, and I had *no* clue what I was even supposed to do anymore. I quickly glanced around the vicinity. We’d just passed through the entryway to the park, and while there were a decent number of people around, most of them were focused on hurrying in toward the attractions, so nobody was paying any real attention to us.

Could this actually work out…? Nooope, nope nope nope, hold it right there. Whether or not you’d get away with it isn’t the question here! There’s definitely *something wrong with this! Why should I have to kiss her in a place like this? It’d be downright embarrassing, for one thing, and I was hoping that our first kiss after we started dating would be somewhere a little more, you know, romantic… But*

then again, maybe being decisive and just going for it would be the manly thing to do here? Is that what she wants from me?

At the end of my bout of mental anguish, I finally decided to resolve myself and do what had to be done. But then...

"Kidding," said Chifuyu. Then she stuck out her tongue at me.

I blinked. "*Huh*?"

"I was kidding. I didn't mean any of it. I was just teasing you."

"..."

"I wouldn't kiss you in a place like this. I'm not that stupid."

I let out a long, *looong* sigh as I slumped to the ground on the spot, too exhausted to remain upright.

Yeah. Okay. She really does hold the reins in this relationship, no question about it.

"We can kiss some other time," Chifuyu muttered in a quiet, somehow suggestive tone before holding her arms out toward me. "Hey, Andou? I'll wait for the kiss, so for now, carry me."

"C-Carry you?"

"Yeah. Carry me."

"I mean, sure, I guess."

"I'll be your sister today, and that means you have to spoil me like a real older brother would. So...carry me," Chifuyu said, blushing slightly once more.

She was acting far too cute for me to deny her request, so I scooped her up in my arms without a second thought. "Alley-oop!" I grunted.

"Is this okay? Am I heavy?" asked Chifuyu.

"Nah, it's fine. You're super light."

"Good. Hee hee!" Chifuyu giggled.

I could feel her breath on my neck, which was a weirdly ticklish sensation. I felt her not particularly substantial weight in my arms, as well, and while that involved touching her waist and rear end as a matter of course, it didn't feel *weird* in the way you might expect. Mostly, I just keenly felt how precious she was to me—a feeling that filled my heart to its brim.

"Okay, Andou. Full speed ahead."

"You got it! We're gonna have a blast today, Chifuyu!"

"Yeah!"

And so, I set off into the water park with my beloved girlfriend in my arms.

Honestly...is it really okay for me to be this happy? I wondered, saying a silent prayer that this wouldn't all turn out to be just a

dream.

Thousand Winters Route: The End

About a year had passed since we'd fought our final battle. It was the decisive clash between me and Kiryuu—the ultimate showdown between Guiltia Sin Jurai and Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. That battle was truly the culmination of everything that had happened in our story up to that point…and it was a climax that defied description, no matter how hard I tried.

Words could not do it justice. Prose could never depict it. It was such an outlandishly over-the-top battle that your only choice would be to describe it in a brief, vague summary form, or otherwise to cut the scene entirely and only discuss it in retrospect. It was a battle the likes of which had never been seen before and would likely never be seen again. The chances of another conflict even remotely living up to it were simply nonexistent.

Seriously, though, what a *fight*! Looking back now that it was all over, it almost felt like the whole thing—my battle with Kiryuu, the Spirit War's existence on the whole, the fact that we had ever possessed absurdly potent supernatural powers, all of it—had been a dream.

Anyway, that was all over now, and another year had come and gone. All sorts of stuff had happened during that year…and over the course of it, I'd started going out with a certain girl.

"Thanks for waiting, Juu!"

"No problem. Shall we?"

"Sure!"

It was a summer vacation afternoon, and I'd just met up with Hatoko at her house. We were on our way to a nearby park for what you'd probably describe as a hike or a picnic, depending on your perspective. It wasn't much of a destination, and we wouldn't have to travel far at all to get there, but technically, this was still our very first date.

"It's such a nice day out, isn't it?" Hatoko said as we walked along the hiking trail by the riverside.

"It is, yeah. Oh, right—I can carry that," I added, reaching for the bag Hatoko was holding.

"O-Oh, no, it's fine! It's not that heavy," Hatoko protested.

"Come on, just hand it over. Think about how lame it looks for

a guy to be walking empty-handed with a girl who's carrying a bunch of stuff."

"Well, umm... Okay, then. Thanks," Hatoko said as she handed me her bag. As she passed it to me, our hands happened to touch for just a moment...

"Ah!"

"Gah!"

...and we both jerked away reflexively with a pair of startled yelps.

"S-Sorry," I said.

"N-No, I'm sorry too," replied Hatoko.

"Right... Wait, what're you even apologizing for?"

"Well, what are *you* apologizing for, Juu?"

"Oh. Fair enough..."

"Yeah..."

That rapid-fire exchange was followed by a few seconds of silence...

"Pff!"

"Ha ha ha ha!"

...after which both of us burst into spontaneous laughter.

"Ha ha—I guess we're really not used to this, are we?" I said.

"We sure aren't," Hatoko agreed.

Hatoko and I had met when we were little kids, and we'd been together ever since. We'd gone out together plenty of times, and we'd been close enough for our hands to brush against each other on many occasions as well. Now, however, it only took the slightest touch for both of us to end up getting all awkward. We'd been closer to each other than anyone else for ages, but somehow, every little thing we did together felt fresh and new now.

"By the way, Hatoko," I said, "have you, y'know...told your parents about us?"

"No, not yet... What about you, Juu?"

"Nah...me either."

The Andou and Kushikawa households were very close—close enough to go on a family vacation together every single summer. My parents and hers had known each other since we were in kindergarten...and in a weird way, that closeness made telling them that we'd started dating a ridiculously embarrassing prospect. The fact that everyone in the equation knew each other so well made everything so, so much harder.

“Honestly, though, we might not even have to bother telling them,” I said. “Like, it’d feel just as weird to keep it secret on purpose, and I have a feeling they’ll figure it out on their own pretty soon one way or another.”

“Yeah… Actually, when you put it that way, I think my parents might’ve figured it out already,” said Hatoko.

I gulped. “Seriously?”

“I’m not so sure about my dad, but my mom seems like she’s caught on. She had this big smile on when I told her I was going out today, and… I don’t know, she just gives off this really strong impression that she *knows*, I guess.”

“I think I get that… Actually, I’m kind of in the same boat. I think my sister’s caught on too.”

“Machi has?”

“Yeah. She’s been, like, weirdly *nice* to me lately? I’ve caught her smirking at me a bunch of times recently too.”

Up until recently, whenever I talked on the phone in my room, she’d be banging on the wall and telling me to shut up before I knew it. Lately, however, she wouldn’t make so much as a peep when I was chatting with Hatoko. Then, whenever I’d run into her after leaving my room, she’d say something like “Sure was a long call, huh?” to tease me. I didn’t think she was actually eavesdropping on me or anything like that, but I got the sense that she’d sussed out what was going on from the changes in my attitude and tone and stuff. I guess there’s just no pulling the wool over your sibling’s eyes in the end.

“You know, maybe we should go ahead and tell them after all,” I said.

“Yeah, maybe we should,” Hatoko agreed.

“It’s kinda embarrassing and all, but if I’m gonna have to have a really serious conversation with your parents someday anyway, I may as well think of this as a warm-up for the real thing…”

“Huh…? Wh-What do you mean, a serious conversation?”

“Well, like, I have to go through all those formalities if we end up getting married, right? Just because we’ve known each other forever doesn’t mean we can just brush past—”

I slammed on the brakes and cut myself off mid-sentence, but I was *very* late on the draw, so the damage was done. Hatoko’s face was beet red, and I had a feeling that mine was a similar shade.

“I-If we get married…?”

“No, I mean… I-It was a hypothetical, y’know?! I’m not saying we should get married *right now* or anything! I was just thinking, hey, maybe things might go in that direction sometime in the future or something…”

“I-I know! I know!” Hatoko said with a frantic nod before giving me a smile. “But also…I’m glad. It’s nice to know that you’re thinking about these things too.”

The gentle smile on her face made me feel so profoundly bashful, all I could do was look away from her. “You’re thinking about these things *too*,” she’d said.

Agggh, come on! How can a single word make me feel like I’m about to die of cardiac arrest?!

“Hey, Juu?” Hatoko said, stepping a little closer even as I turned away from her. “Can, umm… Can we hold hands?”

“Y-You don’t have to ask every single time,” I muttered. I didn’t turn back toward her, but I did hold out my hand, which she grasped after a moment of awkward hesitation.

“Hee hee!” Hatoko quietly giggled.

I could feel a grin starting to spread across my face, which I tried for dear life to hold back. We’d held hands plenty of times over the course of our long friendship, but now, the heat of her palm felt *special* in a way it hadn’t before—more special than anything else. I was, without question, the luckiest man in the world to be with such a kind and adorable partner.

It was the summer of my third year in high school…and I had begun a relationship with Kushikawa Hatoko.

The grass of the field before me swayed gently in the summer breeze. There were quite a few people in the park already, possibly since it was summer vacation and all. Parents were playing catch with their kids, pet owners were throwing frisbees for their critters to catch, a few elementary schoolers had apparently come all the way out here to play games on their phones…and a few of what seemed to be couples were around as well.

We found a nice, shady spot beneath a tree, spread a plastic sheet out on the ground, and kicked off our shoes before sitting down on it. At that point, Hatoko opened up the bag she’d brought along for the trip.

“So, umm… I-I made a boxed lunch for us,” said Hatoko.

“H-Huh?! You did?! Really?!”

“Juu…you don’t have to pretend to be surprised. There’s no way you didn’t realize,” Hatoko said with a sigh.

And, I mean, yeah. I sure had. The moment she’d shown up with a bag, I’d assumed that there was a lunch for us inside. In fact, it was pretty obvious that Hatoko would make lunch the moment we decided on having a picnic in the park.

“You know how when people go on dates in manga and TV shows, there’s usually a scene where the girl surprises the guy by revealing that she brought a boxed lunch with her? Well, when you really think about it, it’s weird that the guy wouldn’t notice, right?” I said.

“It sure is. A lunch for two takes up an awful lot of space, and it’d be pretty hard to carry one around without anyone noticing,” Hatoko said as she pulled the container out of the bag and opened it up for us. Well, *containers*, really—there were actually two of them.

One of Hatoko’s lunch boxes contained sandwiches—at a glance, I saw some made with eggs, some with ham and lettuce, and some with potato salad in them—while the other box was filled with an assortment of side dishes. Besides the standard lunch box fare like rolled omelets, fried chicken, bacon-wrapped asparagus, and so on, the second box included a portion of Hatoko’s signature meat and potato stew (heavy on the meat), which was one of my favorite dishes she made on a regular basis.

“Oh, dang! This all looks really good!” I said.

“Hee hee!” Hatoko giggled. “All right, Juu! Let’s dig in!”

I was more than happy to do just that. The two of us said our thanks and started eating.

“Oh, here, Juu! I brought some barley tea for us too.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“So…wh-what do you think?”

“Of the food? It’s great! As tasty as always.”

“Really? Oh, good.”

“Especially the meat and potato stew. It’s weird—that’s supposed to be the most homey dish there is, right? But lately, your version of it’s started feeling more familiar than my mom’s. It’s homier than the food I literally eat at home.”

“I-I’m not quite sure if I should take that as a compliment…”

We kept chatting away, and eventually, we finished our meal. Hatoko had packed plenty of food, but it was all so tasty that we

polished it off in no time.

"Ahh, I'm stuffed! Think I might've had a bit too much," I said.

"I'm glad! Seeing you enjoy it makes all that cooking feel worth the effort," replied Hatoko.

"All right! Seems like a good time for an after-meal break," I said.

Hatoko poured us each another helping of barley tea, and we sat back to relax for a moment. I ended up idly glancing around the area, and my gaze soon fell on another couple sitting on a sheet they'd laid out on the grass just like we were. I didn't know if they felt emboldened because there weren't that many people nearby or what, but they were *very* flagrantly flirting it up without regard to the fact that they were outdoors. Then, the next thing I knew, the guy lay down, resting his head in his girlfriend's lap. I was witnessing a real-world lap pillow.

I took in a sharp breath, tearing my eyes away from them out of pure awkwardness—and I met Hatoko's gaze in the process. She seemed to have been watching the same couple I was, and she'd looked away at the same moment.

Uncomfortable silence followed until, finally, Hatoko seemed to gather her resolve and opened her mouth. "H-Hey, Juu?" she said. "Do you, umm…want to try that too?"

"Th-That? You mean, like, resting my head in your lap?"

Hatoko gave me a bashful nod.

"Well, umm… I'm not *not* interested, I guess…"

"Then…go ahead," said Hatoko, pushing through the embarrassment that her vivid blush was making all too obvious. She turned toward me and sat up straight, almost like she was putting her thighs on display. "If you want to try it…you can lie down on my lap, Juu."

"Wha…? F-For real?" I stammered. My heart was pounding out of my chest. This borderline irresistible temptation had come from so far out of left field, it was making my head spin. I gulped, wavered, and gave in. "Okay… H-Here goes."

I slowly, carefully approached Hatoko, hoping all the while that my heart wouldn't literally explode. I lay down on the sheet, then rested my head atop her thighs.

Holy crap, they're so soft! What the heck?! I mean, like, crazy *soft!* This *is what Hatoko's thighs feel like? She may have always been slender, but, like, it was in a way where certain parts of her end up actually having a surprising amount of volume when it comes down*

to it, not to mention she's always felt soft in terms of, like, her whole general vibe*, so I always sort of figured that she'd be soft to the touch as well…and now her thighs are proving me right!*

The seconds ticked by in utter mutual silence. I was lying on the most comfortable pillow I'd ever experienced, but there was no way in hell I'd feel even the slightest bit sleepy given the circumstances—far from it, I was as awake and alert as I'd ever been. Hatoko, meanwhile, was fidgeting restlessly from what I assume must've been nervousness, shame, or both. Every time her thighs moved, I could feel their softness on my head more clearly than ever.

I decided to shift my positioning a little, hoping it would help me calm down…

"Eeek!"

…and the moment I did, Hatoko let out a shriek.

"J-Juu! Y-Your breath is tickling me…"

"Gah! S-Sorry!" I yelped, reflexively sitting up.

I had, unfortunately, forgotten something extremely important. My childhood friend—which is to say, my girlfriend—was surprisingly well-endowed. She didn't wear very revealing clothing, so it was sort of hard to tell most of the time…but long story short, she had a *lot* going on underneath those clothes. Not that I'd ever seen her wearing anything less than a swimsuit, of course.

Anyway, the point is that lying with my head in her lap meant that there was a certain obstacle right above me, and sitting up rapidly from that position meant that I'd plowed my face right into it with a mighty *thwump*. That's how I learned that, even through her clothes…Hatoko's underboob was *way* softer than even her thighs.

"Hyeek!"

"Wha— Gah! S-Sorry!" I shouted. Hatoko's wordless shriek had snapped me back to reality, and I tumbled away from her, sprawling on the ground in an ungainly heap. "Sorry! I'm seriously so sorry, Hatoko!"

"I-It's fine…" said Hatoko. "I was just a little surprised, that's all."

"What? But I—"

"W-Wait! Don't turn back toward me just yet!"

"Huh…?"

"I-I, umm… I mean, what happened just now, um, bumped

things out of place… I'll fix it, just give me one second!"

"R-Right… Seriously, sorry."

Bumped what *out of place…? There's only one answer, right? What else could've been dislodged in a sort of way she'd have to fix?*

Say, how out of place are we talking, though? How do you fix something like that? My imagination was running torturously wild conjuring up images of what might be happening behind me.

"Okay, it's fine now," Hatoko eventually said.

I turned right around and gave her an apologetic bow. "I'm so…*so* sorry," I said.

"I-It's fine! Doesn't bother me at all," Hatoko replied.

She was as kind and tolerant as ever, but I felt so bad and awkward that I just couldn't bring myself to look up at her. A very uncomfortable moment of silence fell over us. I searched for the right thing to say, but the words just weren't coming to me…

"Hee hee!"

…until Hatoko burst out in laughter. "You know, dating's a lot harder than I thought it'd be!" she said. I didn't know how to reply. "It's like all these things I took for granted up until now feel like the biggest deal all of a sudden. The more I try to act naturally, the less naturally I actually end up acting."

"Yeah… I get that," I said.

"But you know…"

Hatoko paused to crawl in my direction. She sprawled onto the ground, resting her head on my thighs this time. She'd turned the lap pillow routine right back around on me.

"I'm really happy right now," she said, beaming up at me from her place atop my lap. "All the little things that I took for granted before feel so special now, and I'm enjoying every bit of it. I'm seeing all sorts of sides to you that I'd never noticed before too."

"Hatoko…" I muttered. I gently stroked her hair, and she closed her eyes, most likely out of a sort of happy embarrassment. "I'm having the time of my life too. I always thought that no one could be more relaxing to hang out with than you…but lately, you've become the person who makes my heart pound harder than anyone else."

It took quite a lot of nerve to swallow my embarrassment and admit that. Hatoko gave me a smile in return.

"Let's stay together forever. Okay, Juu?" my former childhood friend and current girlfriend proposed.

"Sounds good to me," I replied. It was the best suggestion I

could've asked for, and I didn't hesitate to affirm it.

Honestly...is it really okay for me to be this happy? I wondered, saying a silent prayer that this wouldn't all turn out to be just a dream.

Pretty Pigeon Route: The End

About a year had passed since we'd fought our final battle. It was the decisive clash between me and Kiryuu—the ultimate showdown between Guiltia Sin Jurai and Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. That battle was truly the culmination of everything that had happened in our story up to that point...and it was a climax that defied description, no matter how hard I tried.

Words could not do it justice. Prose could never depict it. It was such an outlandishly over-the-top battle that your only choice would be to describe it in a brief, vague summary form, or otherwise to cut the scene entirely and only discuss it in retrospect. It was a battle the likes of which had never been seen before and would likely never be seen again. The chances of another conflict even remotely living up to it were simply nonexistent.

Seriously, though, what a *fight*! Looking back now that it was all over, it almost felt like the whole thing—my battle with Kiryuu, the Spirit War's existence on the whole, the fact that we had ever possessed absurdly potent supernatural powers, all of it—had been a dream.

Anyway, that was all over now, and another year had come and gone. All sorts of stuff had happened during that year...and over the course of it, I'd started going out with a certain girl.

"Your time is up. Pencil down, please, Andou."

I heaved a sigh, put down my mechanical pencil, then slumped over onto my desk. Meanwhile, Sayumi scooped up the mock exam answer sheet that I'd done my best to fill in completely.

"Feel free to relax while I grade your test," said Sayumi.

"Got it," I replied. "Oh—actually, I'll get us something to drink while I have time." I added, slipping out of my room and making for the kitchen.

A week had already come and gone since my final summer vacation in high school had begun, and now that I was a third-year student with entrance exams on the horizon, I'd spent that

week hitting the books day in and day out, never pausing for even a moment to go out and have fun. I wasn't going to a cram school like some test-takers though—I didn't need to. After all, I had the most exceptional home tutor you could ever possibly ask for.

"Sorry about all this, Sayumi," I said as I stepped back into the room and handed her one of the glasses of barley tea I'd poured. "You would've finally had a chance to enjoy yourself this summer, but here you are using it to help me study instead."

"There's no need to concern yourself with that. I'm helping you because I want to," Sayumi replied.

Ever since summer vacation had begun—or, really, ever since we'd become a couple—Sayumi had watched over my studies like a hawk. This hardly even bears saying at this point, but she was a multitalented academic wonder who'd fought for—and frequently claimed—the top spot in her class's academic ranking all throughout her high school career. The college she was now attending continued that streak of excellence, as it was a prestigious institution known for its students' remarkably high average grades, and Sayumi had been accepted there by recommendation. She hadn't actually had to take the school's entrance exams as a result, but I was confident that if she had, she would've easily passed them with flying colors.

"It's just that considering you're on summer vacation too, you might've wanted to, er... Well..." I muttered.

"To what?" asked Sayumi.

"To, umm...go on more dates and stuff," I tentatively admitted, extremely conscious of the blush spreading across my face.

For a moment, Sayumi's hand came to a stop, hovering above my answer sheet. A gentle smile came across her face.

"No need to concern yourself with that," Sayumi repeated. "It may not be immediately evident, but I am, for the record, quite enjoying myself. Spending time with you, in your room, is worthwhile on its own. Moreover," she added, her voice taking on a mischievous, slightly sulky tone, "I was under the impression that these get-togethers were our version of at-home dates. Was I the only one who felt that way?"

All I could manage in reply to that was a very awkward smile. My sheer embarrassment wouldn't let me produce much else. Sayumi, on the other hand, snickered as she returned to grading

my test. Once again, the room was silent aside from the sound of her pen scratching across the paper.

"S-So, how'd I do?" I eventually asked.

"I'm still only partway through, so I can't say definitively...but so far, you've done quite well," Sayumi replied.

"Seriously? All right!"

"Your grades have improved remarkably, Andou. I'm genuinely impressed."

"Well, of course they would. I've had a great teacher, after all."

"All I've done is assist you. The fact of the matter is that ever since you became a third-year, you've applied yourself to your studies with incredible zeal. Your sister told me recently that even on days I don't come over, you're practically glued to your desk, immersed in your work."

"I mean, sure, but I'm a third-year. That's totally normal when you've got entrance exams coming up, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, but not when your mock exam results all but ensure you'll be accepted to your college of choice already—which is the case for you, isn't it? You seem oddly driven, considering..."

"W-Well, y'know, you can't get complacent about stuff like this, right?"

"Andou..."

Suddenly, Sayumi's hand came to a stop once more. She straightened her posture and turned to face me.

"I intended to feign ignorance about this...but I've changed my mind. I'm going to bring it up after all."

"Huh...? B-Bring what up?"

"Andou...you're planning to take the exam for the college I attend, aren't you?"

I took in a sharp breath and stiffened.

"Yes, I thought so," Sayumi said with a sigh.

"H-How'd you know...?"

"It was rather obvious."

A slightly strained smile spread across Sayumi's face. All I could do was break eye contact. She was right about everything—I *had* been secretly studying to take the test for the college that she was going to. I'd thought that I'd done a pretty good job of hiding my intentions, but Sayumi was clearly not so easy to fool.

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Sayumi.

"Because...I thought that if I did, you'd try to stop me," I

admitted.

Sayumi's college was one of the most prestigious universities in the country. I could raise my grades by a stunning degree and still have only a slim chance of being accepted, at best. If I wanted to make it happen, I would have to study like my life depended on it.

"I see," said Sayumi. "In that case, allow me to ask you a different question: Why do you want to attend the same college I do?"

"Why do I...? D-Do I really have to say it out loud?"

The answer was obvious. What other reason could I have possibly had for wanting to go to the same school as the girl I loved and was dating?

"He he he! My apologies," Sayumi chuckled playfully. "Another question, Andou: Why do you think I decided to feign ignorance regarding your little plan?"

"Huh...?"

"I did so because I thought it would be nice if my suspicions were correct," she explained. Her voice was calm, and it was somehow blissful as well. "I knew that I would be overjoyed to learn that was why you were studying with all your heart and soul...and I ended up indulging in the fantasy that such was the case."

"Sayumi..."

"I have no intention of stopping you. I'm nowhere near tactless enough to stand in the way of a man's resolve. I would have preferred to stay silent about it until you decided to tell me your intentions yourself...but if you really do plan to aim for a more prestigious college, then we'd be better off adjusting the schedule and content of your studies to match your new ambitions."

Sayumi seemed almost apologetic about how she'd broached the subject, but the way I saw it, I was the one who needed to apologize to her. I'd been prioritizing my own petty sense of pride over practicality. After all, the sooner I started studying for the test I actually intended to take, the better.

"I believe in you, Andou. I know that you have what it takes to succeed...and I'm looking forward to enjoying my campus life with you starting next year."

Sayumi sat down beside me and took my hand in hers. She laced her fingers between mine and looked me right in the eye,

her gaze full of trust and expectations.

"I won't let you down. I'll do everything I can!" I declared.

Sayumi gave me a smile in response. I was, without question, the luckiest man in the world to be with such a smart and beautiful partner.

It was the summer of my third year in high school...and I had begun a relationship with Takanashi Sayumi.

About thirty minutes later, Sayumi had finished scoring all of the tests I'd taken.

"Your grades have improved on the whole...but if you want to be admitted to my college, you'll have to improve your score a little more than this. As for what we'll study next...I believe we should focus on Japanese, to start."

"Japanese, huh...? I've never been great at that one," I sighed.

"Your scores in the memorization-focused classical Japanese sections of the test weren't bad by any means, but the issues began to arise in the modern composition section."

"Right, that's the problem. Just memorizing stuff's easy enough if you put the time in, but when you hit the modern section, that doesn't fly."

"Perhaps, but the reading comprehension skills that modern Japanese asks of you are applicable to all other subjects—and, extending a little further, said skills will be helpful in your day-to-day life as well. They aren't something that you can master by simply studying for a day, but that's precisely what makes it the sort of knowledge that will serve you for a lifetime...or so they say, but for the time being, let's set aside that sort of idealistic rhetoric and focus our attention on more expedient means."

"W-Wait, really?"

"Really. There are certain techniques that will allow you to raise your score on a modern Japanese test, and I'll be teaching you those instead. With them at your disposal, I believe you won't have to worry about passing the Japanese portion of your exams."

"Seriously?! I-Is it really that easy...?"

"Allow me to be blunt, Andou: Standardized testing in Japan is a field in which technique, rather than knowledge, reigns supreme," said Sayumi. She really wasn't mincing words. "Think of test taking as a game in which those who study and earn points efficiently are the victors. A game, yes—that might be the

perfect perspective for you. Looking at your tests in that light, I believe, will make it much easier for you to stay motivated."

I just sat there, quietly listening to her.

"Of course, specializing too fully in test-taking techniques may be undesirable, in the sense that it puts the cart before the horse in regard to the actual goal of education…but considering the current state of your grades, this is no time for us to be impractical. Prepare yourself—I intend to drill every single test-taking technique that I'm aware of into your mind," Sayumi said with a broad smile. She couldn't have been a more reliable tutor, but at the same time, she was kinda scaring me a little. "Now then, aside from Japanese… Hmm. As far as English is concerned, your difficulties with pronunciation are causing you to miss otherwise easy questions. Losing those points is truly a waste. Math-wise, I'd hope we can raise your problem-solving speed on the whole, and there are no tricks when it comes to that—you'll simply have to master it. As for biology…it seems you had difficulties applying Mendel's laws. Questions like the one on this test turn up quite frequently in the National Center Test, so you'll have to master that as well. Those aside…"

At that point, Sayumi came to a brief halt. This time, I couldn't read the look on her face at all.

"…you received a perfect score in ethics."

"Heh heh!"

"Explain yourself, Andou. A full score? How?"

"Heh heh heh heh!"

"When I selected the questions for these practice tests, I pulled them from a variety of sources in an effort to match your current level of skill in each subject. Ethics was the one course that I've never personally taken, and lacking any expertise, I simply copied last year's National Center Test's ethics exam verbatim…and you got a perfect score on it."

"Heh heh, ha ha ha ha!"

"I suppose you *have* told me about how much you enjoy ethics, come to think of it," said Sayumi. She sounded about thirty percent impressed with me and seventy percent exasperated beyond belief.

Ethics was indeed both my best and most beloved of school subjects. I liked it so much that I'd done a ton of self-study in the field during the summer vacation of my second year in high school, even though it'd had nothing to do with any of my

summer homework. Now that I had my entrance exams coming up, I'd buckled down and studied even harder...and as a result, it seemed my wealth of ethical knowledge had reached new and unprecedented heights.

"A friend of mine who chose ethics as an elective told me that you can easily score an eighty percent on the National Center Test's ethics exam with just a little memorization...but anything past that becomes quite difficult," Sayumi noted.

"Well, yeah," I replied. "That test is all four-answer multiple-choice, so it's surprisingly easy. I can pick out the right answer for those questions at a glance these days... Ah, just in ethics, I mean. Not the other subjects."

"I cannot fathom how you wound up with such superhuman talent in this single, specific subject... But in any case, considering it's the one subject that I'm not capable of teaching you, I suppose I should consider myself lucky. My college's admissions department places great weight on the social studies segments of the National Center Test, so being able to earn a significant number of points from ethics gives you a distinct advantage." She still didn't seem totally satisfied with my inexplicable ethics talent, but it looked like she was done pressing the subject for the time being. "Now then, Andou—it's time for us to go over the questions that you got wrong."

"Sounds good."

We always made a point of going over all questions that I'd missed the very same day I took a practice test. That was standard practice for prospective entrance-exam takers. It was a great way to clear up any misunderstandings I'd had while also making sure that I didn't forget about and repeat mistakes that I'd already made.

"I'm going to borrow your computer for a moment, if you don't mind. I'd like to make a note of your scores on these practice exams," Sayumi said as she produced a USB drive from her bag. She'd been keeping a complete record of all my grades in an Excel spreadsheet ever since she'd started helping me study. The idea was that it would be easier to stay motivated if I could see how my grades had improved over the course of time in numerical and graph form.

"Go ahead," I said. Her request had startled me a little, I'll admit, but I tried to make my reply sound as natural as possible.

No need to worry—this'll be fine, I told myself. I'd known that

this could happen, so I had made sure that my computer would be perfectly prepared when the time came. All the data that I'd rather not let anyone see was hidden away in places where nobody would ever look for it, and Sayumi was far too reasonable and understanding of a person to go plumbing the depths of my hard drive for no good reason...or at least, that was the idea.

The truth is that I'd been led astray by my own complacency. I'd believed that I'd prepared myself to perfection, and as a result, I'd let my guard down. The fact that I was worn out from all those mock exams certainly didn't help my snap decision-making abilities either.

What I'm getting at here is that a certain fact had slipped my mind. I'd completely forgotten what I'd been looking up online the night before, and by the time I put the pieces together...

"S-Sayumi, wait a—"

...it was already too late. Sayumi was frozen solid, her eyes glued to my computer's monitor. I hadn't bothered shutting it down last night, and it had gone into sleep mode with my research still pulled up—meaning it was now on full display, front and center. Specifically, the screen displayed a web page—an internet search engine—with the results of a single-sentence query still pulled up.

girlfriend boobs how long until touch

"U-Umm... M-My apologies, Andou," said Sayumi.

Please, no. Stop. No apologizing. This would be so much easier if you'd just punch me out.

Agggh... I wish I could just drop dead. That'd be so *much easier than dealing with this shame! Even her finding porn or an eroge or something would've been better than this!* The most pathetically delicate part of my male mind had been put on full display, and pure, overwhelming humiliation was tearing my heart to pieces.

"I-It's all right, Andou. I'll pretend I never saw anything," Sayumi said in a painfully kind, consoling voice. It seemed she couldn't stand to watch me plummet into the pits of despair.

Unfortunately, having her comfort me in such a mature sort of way just made me more depressed than ever. "L-Leave me alone..." I muttered.

Ugh. This is the worst*. She's* definitely *super grossed out now.*

Sayumi had dedicated an incredible amount of her free time to helping me with my studies, and there I was, spending all that time acting like a leering creeper. And of all the ways for her to find out…

"I'm…glad," said Sayumi, her voice so faint, it seemed she'd had to battle her own shyness to say the words at all.

"Huh…?"

"W-Well, perhaps that isn't quite the right way of putting it, but in any case, I'm not bothered. It's a perfectly natural desire for an adolescent boy, I suppose you could say… And I, umm…I won't deny that I have some interest in the area myself… Wh-Which is to say that you can rest assured you aren't the only one who's been thinking along those lines."

"Sayumi…"

"Please…don't make me elaborate."

Sayumi turned her back to me, though not before I noticed how brightly she was blushing. It was such a cute gesture, I could barely stand it.

"Andou…do you want to touch me?"

"Huh? I, uh…"

"He he he!" Sayumi chuckled as she watched me stammer incoherently. "Well then, after you've passed your exams with flying colors, I'll be happy to oblige."

"Wait…really? You're okay with that? That's like a promise straight out of a hentai, you know?"

"It's the least I can do. If offering up my body provides you with the motivation you need, then I see no reason to hesitate," Sayumi replied. Her expression was perfectly deadpan, but there was a very slight waver to her voice that told me she was desperately holding back an awful lot of embarrassment.

"Ha ha… Well, I don't think any guy would ever fail to rise to the challenge after hearing something like that from his girlfriend," I said. My own laugh had come out a little strained as well. "Okay then, Sayumi—seeing as I've already humiliated myself, I figure I may as well make a request while I'm at it."

"A request?" Sayumi repeated.

"Right—one that'll help keep me motivated through my studies."

"W-Well…as long as it's nothing too perverse."

"It actually isn't at all," I said truthfully.

I wasn't planning on asking her for anything dirty. That sort of

thing could wait...well, until my tests were over, anyway.

"Isn't it about time you started calling me by my first name?" I said. "I mean...we're dating now, right? It feels kinda weirdly formal for you to keep calling me 'Andou' all the time."

"Oh..." said Sayumi. "Y-Yes, I suppose that's fair. I've thought that I should reassess what I call you on a number of occasions as well, but I haven't been able to find the right timing to make the change."

"In that case, why not do it today? In fact, why not right now?"

"Th-That's rather abrupt, isn't it? This is something I'll have to prepare myself for, in a mental sense... A-And besides, Andou, you're hardly one to criticize when it comes to being affectionate. You never stopped speaking to me like I'm your club president even after I became your girlfriend."

"Huh? W-Well, what am I supposed to do? You've always been someone I look up to... I don't want you to think I'm taking you for granted by cutting too loose."

"Oh, honestly—what on earth are you talking about? You're supposed to be my boyfriend, so you needn't act so demure. I wouldn't mind in the least if you were more intimate. There's absolutely no need for you to concern yourself with respect or formality with me."

"Oh, like you aren't minding your manners literally all the time."

"That's just a facet of my personality."

At the end of our bickering, we took a moment to collect ourselves, then faced each other once more. Both of us had ended up sitting in a stiff, formal posture on the ground—it just felt like the right thing to do, somehow. The air was weirdly tense, but finally, we managed to speak up.

"I love you, Ju...Jurai."

"I...I love you too, Sayumi..."

The moment the names left each of our mouths, intense, burning shame overwhelmed us, and we broke eye contact in unison. A few seconds later, however, we burst into spontaneous laughter.

"I think we'll both need a little more practice," Sayumi—my beloved girlfriend—bashfully admitted.

"Y-Yeah... True enough," I replied. It seemed it'd be a while longer before our relationship could exit its awkward phase.

Honestly...is it really okay for me to be this happy? I wondered,

saying a silent prayer that this wouldn't all turn out to be just a dream.

Colorful Bow Route: The End

About a year had passed since we'd fought our final battle. It was the decisive clash between me and Kiryuu—the ultimate showdown between Guiltia Sin Jurai and Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. That battle was truly the culmination of everything that had happened in our story up to that point...and it was a climax that defied description, no matter how hard I tried.

Words could not do it justice. Prose could never depict it. It was such an outlandishly over-the-top battle that your only choice would be to describe it in a brief, vague summary form, or otherwise to cut the scene entirely and only discuss it in retrospect. It was a battle the likes of which had never been seen before and would likely never be seen again. The chances of another conflict even remotely living up to it were simply nonexistent.

Seriously, though, what a *fight*! Looking back now that it was all over, it almost felt like the whole thing—my battle with Kiryuu, the Spirit War's existence on the whole, the fact that we had ever possessed absurdly potent supernatural powers, all of it—had been a dream.

Anyway, that was all over now, and another year had come and gone. All sorts of stuff had happened during that year...and over the course of it, I'd started going out with a certain girl.

"*Ugggggggggh*, I'm never, ever, ever, ever, *ever* getting this *doooooooooone*!"

Tomoyo let out a bizarre half scream, half moan as she kicked and flailed ineffectually atop her bed. The setting of this spectacle was Tomoyo's room, and as I watched the locale's primary resident writhe in agony, clutching her well-used hug pillow all throughout her miserable tantrum, all I could do was heave a sigh. I'd been stopping by Tomoyo's place just about every day since summer vacation had begun, and while I would've loved to say that I'd been doing so for the sake of at-home dates...the truth was a little more complicated than that.

"It's never-ending... Never, ever ending... I keep working and working, but it's still not doooooone..." Tomoyo moaned as she crawled all the way under her covers. It sounded like she was

reciting some sort of ancient curse.

You'd think that she was talking about her summer homework being never-ending…and you'd be wrong. I mean, partially wrong—she hadn't so much as touched it, in fact—but that wasn't the point at this particular moment. Rather, my girlfriend was agonizing over a looming deadline.

"I'm *never* finishing the manuscript for volume two! I'm so, so screwed… I've only got a week before it's due, and I'm not even halfway dooone!"

Were these the wails of an aspiring author who'd self-imposed a deadline and was too proud to let herself fail to meet it? Not this time, no. They were, in fact, the wails of a newbie author suffering under the curse of her very first actual, genuine, set-by-someone-else deadline.

It all started just a little while after our final battle had reached its conclusion. One day, Tomoyo had gotten a phone call from a publisher that ran a rookie-author-of-the-year competition she'd submitted a story to. They had not, unfortunately, called to tell her that she'd won…but they did inform her that one of their editors had really taken a shine to her submission, and they were hoping she'd be willing to send them a revised version with the intent of getting it published in the long term. In short, she'd been picked up for publication out of the loser's bracket.

And so, the debut of Kanzaki Tomoyo—pen name: Yugami Hizumi—was confirmed. The contest entry that would become her series' first volume had already been revised, she'd already finished proofreading the final draft, and an illustrator had already been picked out. All she'd had left to do was wait until the book was published.

Now, however, there was something else for her to take care of: writing the second volume that would continue her story. That, unfortunately, had proven to be much harder than Tomoyo had been counting on.

"Oh, get a grip," I said as I pulled the covers right back off her. Somebody needed to deliver some harsh truths to her, and apparently, that someone would have to be me. "Throwing a fit's not gonna get your manuscript done, is it? Write! Get over there and get to work already!"

"Ugggh… You're such a meanie, Juujuu…" Tomoyo moaned, glaring at me and on the verge of tears.

Incidentally, “Juujuu” was the nickname Tomoyo had taken to calling me recently. As to why she’d started calling me that, well…frankly, I’d rather not talk about it.

“Juujuu… It’s over for me. I’m so tiiired. I don’t wanna wriiite. I don’t wanna have to wooork. Write it for me, Juujuu, pleeease.”

“I’m already busy doing your summer homework, in case you’ve forgotten,” I replied.

“Booo,” Tomoyo jeered. She spent a moment pouting at me like a little kid, then sighed heavily. “I never thought writing a second volume would be *this* tough. I’d heard that lots of people put everything into their debut novels and end up with nothing to write about in the sequel, but I didn’t really think it’d happen to me… I guess this is the second-volume wall they always say you have to break through. Man, this sure is one of those problems that only pros know about! Only pros end up suffering like this! God, being a pro is just *so* hard sometimes!”

So…are you trying *to be obnoxious about this, or what?*

“Okay, but is writing a second volume really *that* hard?” I asked. “You seemed like you were doing great back when you started working on it.”

“I was, back then…but.”

“But what?”

“I was making such good progress that I thought I might as well take a little break to work on the story I’m writing for fun. Then I ended up getting way more into that one instead, and before I knew it, the second volume’s deadline was just a week away…”

“So this is *completely* self-inflicted!”

“Oh, shut up! I know, okay?!” Tomoyo snapped—which was, frankly, totally unreasonable of her. “Look, Juujuu,” she added in a sort of chiding tone, “you know how sometimes the publication date for light novels gets pushed back?”

“Well, yeah.”

“And you know how sometimes when that happens, it’s *super* obvious that it’s the illustrator’s fault that the volume got delayed?”

“Sure.”

“And sometimes that illustrator spends the whole time posting stuff that they drew for fun on Twitter or streaming themself drawing on Niconico?”

“I mean…I can’t say that never happens.”

“Well, I always wondered how the hell anyone could have the nerve to do something that shameless…but now that I’ve had my debut, I finally get it. Creating something as a hobby is *so* much fun. When your work’s driven you into a corner, the temptation to work on something you’re not doing as a professional instead is just so intense…”

“Nice excuse. Now get writing.”

“Ugggh, I *know*, okay?!” Tomoyo snapped once more.

This time, though, she finally hauled herself out of bed. I thought she was going to head over to the desk where she kept her laptop…

“Hey, Juujuu…?”

…but instead she made her way in my direction, leaning in so close to me that our faces were practically touching.

“I can’t get motivated. Charge me up.”

“Charge you…? Like, how?”

“Gimme hugs,” Tomoyo rather shyly muttered. Her *tone* was shy, to be precise—her overall attitude was as forward as could be, and she even spread her arms wide open in a “come on, hurry up” sort of gesture.

“This again? Seriously…?” I sighed.

“I wanna hug! I wanna hug! I wanna hug! Gimme hugs, or I’m done! I won’t do *any* work anymore! Then it’ll be all *your* fault if I don’t finish my book on time! A series that should’ve been a light novel legend’s gonna get canceled thanks to you!”

“Okay, *fine*,” I said with a sigh. She was approaching the far reaches of obnoxiousness, but I gave in anyway and gave her the hug she wanted.

I wrapped my arms around Tomoyo, squeezing her gently, and she responded by grabbing onto me and returning the hug with as much power as her kinda-spindly arms could exert. She buried her face in my chest as well, more or less grinding it into me. I couldn’t quite tell if she was trying to sniff me, mark me with her scent, or some combination of the two, but judging by the stifled chuckle she let slip out, she was enjoying herself immensely either way.

“Heh… Heh heh… Heh heh heeeh…”

“Satisfied?” I asked.

“Uh-uh. Not yet. This isn’t enough. A hug can’t get me motivated on its own.”

“Well, what else do you expect me to do?”

“Hey, Juujuu…? Say you love me.”

“*Huh*?”

“You haven’t said it in *ages*! And when you stop saying you love me all of a sudden…I get worried about whether or not you really do.”

“Wait…but that’s not even true. Like, I literally said it yesterday! A ton of times too—you wouldn’t let me hang up the phone until I said it enough to satisfy you. My sister was listening in, you know? Do you have any idea how bad things got after I finally hung up…?”

“Th-That was yesterday! *Yesterday*! You have to say it every day!” Tomoyo grumbled. For all her sulking, she was still being as clingy as ever in a physical sense. It all came together into a downright adorable whole that I was completely powerless to resist. I just had to bite the bullet and accept the fact that I was a slave to her charms.

“I love you, Tomoyo,” I said, swallowing my shame and baring my feelings for her to see.

“Really…?” Tomoyo asked.

“Yeah. Really.”

“How much do you love me?”

“Like friggin’ crazy.”

“If I died, would you follow me?”

“You bet I would.”

“Hee hee… Me too. I love you too, Juujuu! I love you to itty-bitty pieces! If you died, I’d die too for *sure*!”

I was getting some severe secondhand embarrassment just listening to Tomoyo, and she kept gushing like that for what felt like almost a minute or so before finally, reluctantly releasing me from her hug and making her way to her desk.

“All right! Thanks, Juujuu! I’m all charged up and ready to write now!”

“Glad to hear it. Get to work, then.”

“You have to give me more hugs later if I do a good job, okay?”

“…If I feel like it.”

“Oooh, are you *embarrassed*, Juujuu? That’s so *cute*!”

“Oh, shut up! Hurry up and do your job already!”

“Okaaay,” Tomoyo cheerfully agreed before finally—*finally*—getting to work for real.

I, on the other hand, was so mentally exhausted I collapsed to

the floor. I was, without question, the luckiest man in the world to be loved so intensely by my partner... Okay, on second thought, maybe there were actually a few questions worth asking there after all.

It was the summer of my third year in high school...and I had begun a relationship with Kanzaki Tomoyo—but, like, a version of Kanzaki Tomoyo who was so egregiously out of character that some part of me had to question if she was really Tomoyo at all.

It hadn't been like this back when we first got together. Back then, since we were both so preoccupied by the idea that we'd started dating, we'd end up sitting together in awkward silence too flustered to think up a conversation topic, or we'd have the most ridiculously over-the-top reactions to something as simple as our hands brushing against each other, or we'd get comically worked up over something as benign as an indirect kiss. Our relationship was, for a period, as innocent as could be...but that had only lasted for a moment.

Before I knew it...Tomoyo had gone full dere. I'm talking zero to dere in an *instant*. Her dere side had grown at a terrifying speed, to a terrifying degree. She was as dere as dere could be. Like, seriously, zero percent tsun, one *hundred* percent dere. It was like she'd tossed the whole personality she'd displayed up to that point into the trash in favor of going so thoroughly dere that it actually freaked me out a little. It was so bad I was seriously considering calling her Dereyo instead of Tomoyo.

It all started with the Juujuu nickname. Once she'd crossed that fateful line, it was like all the affection she'd kept bottled up over the course of her life came exploding out all at once, all directed straight at me in the sappiest way possible. She was taking every opportunity to match outfits with me in any way she possibly could, she'd call me up on the phone every single morning to whisper sweet nothings, and she'd started getting way touchier and clingier than she'd ever been before.

It's not that I wasn't happy about her being super up-front with her love and affection for me, to be clear! It's just that if I said it wasn't also a *little* bit obnoxious, I'd be lying. The phone calls were particularly hard to deal with—we would talk for hours on end, and when things were finally wrapping up she'd be all "Oh, no way, I'd *never* hang up on you! You have to hang up on me!" Then when I hung up, I'd get *another* phone call moments

later where she'd go, "Why'd you actually hang up on me? Do you hate me?"

Agggh, give me a break!

For real, though, I hadn't seen this coming at *all*. Who could've imagined that Tomoyo, of all people, would end up like *this* when she started going out with someone?

"I did it, Juujuu! It's time! Hugs!"

Thirty minutes of actual, serious work later, Tomoyo spun around on her chair to face the floor table where I was doing summer homework (hers, not mine).

"You 'did it'...?" I repeated. "You mean you finished the chapter you were working on?"

"Nah. I finished writing one new line."

"Then you didn't do squat! You're only one line farther than you were when you started?!"

"Hah! You're underestimating writing, Juujuu. Before I could even start writing that one line, I had to proofread everything that I wrote last night, and I ended up deleting a bunch of parts that I didn't like anymore. I'm not one line farther than I was before—I'm a bunch of lines *back* from where I started."

"That's so, so much worse!"

"Okay, but while I was working, I came up with a really awesome name for a character!"

"Is that why you're smirking at me? Because you came up with a single name...?"

"It's basically the best name you could ever possibly give a Japanese character, but that means I can't actually use it in this story. This one's a full-on classic fantasy without any Japanese elements, so it wouldn't fit the setting at all. I'll have to keep it in my back pocket for my next work... Oh, actually, I know! We can use it as our kid's name!"

"Jumping the gun, much?!"

"Oh, but I guess this feels a little like a boy's name... Or really, it's *definitely* a boy's name, for sure... Okay, no choice! I'll have to come up with a girl's name too on the double!"

"No, you won't! That's not even close to what you should be thinking about right now!"

I did everything I could to talk Tomoyo's train of thought back on track, but it seemed that she'd used up every bit of focus she had to offer. She ended up slumping back listlessly in her swivel chair.

“Ugggh… Nope. Can’t do it. I’ve got no drive. Battery’s drained,” Tomoyo groaned.

“Already, seriously? That was barely even a half hour…”

“Aaand that means it’s time to get flirty!”

I didn’t even have the time to question Tomoyo’s seriously flimsy argument before she’d more or less thrown herself at me. I caught her—because, like, what else was I supposed to do?—and she ended up essentially curled up on my lap like a cat. She had, once again, activated full dere mode.

“Heh heh, heh heh heh! Love you, Juujuu!” Tomoyo cooed.

“Glad to hear it,” I replied.

“Hey, Juujuu? Gimme smoochies!”

“What? No.”

“Awww, why not? Meanie!”

“Give it a rest. Look, I just… I don’t really like being that casual about that sort of thing, okay?”

“Hmmph! Don’t care! Shut up and smooch me! Smoooch!”

“Gah! Cut it out, moron!”

Tomoyo closed in on me, lips pursed, but there was just *no* way I’d be in a kissing frame of mind considering how stupid and unromantic the situation that had led us here was, so I braced my hands on her shoulders and kept her firmly at arm’s distance. It probably would’ve been a really surreal scene to witness from an outside perspective, but to us, it was a deathly serious struggle.

For a moment, we were caught in a total deadlock…but that’s when a noise rang out from outside Tomoyo’s door. I could just make out the distinctive thumping of somebody climbing up the stairs.

I barely had time to gasp before Tomoyo sprang into action at an almost stupefying pace. She leaped away from me, brushed the wrinkles out of her clothing at mach speed, and slammed back into her chair.

“Tomoyo, Andou? I brought you some snacks and drinks!”

“Like I said, Andou, this is no time to be slacking off! Go grab me that light novel I just mentioned from my shelf, okay? I want to check a few things in it for reference. Come on, hurry up! You know how close we are to my deadline, right? I’m an established pro in the industry now—they’re not going to cut me the sort of slack that an amateur would get! Missing a deadline’s out of the question, so hurry up and— Oh, mom!” Tomoyo said, looking up

from her computer and acting as if she'd only just noticed that her mother had stepped into the room.

"Hee hee hee! You certainly are giving it your all, aren't you?" Tomoyo's mom said with a pleasant smile. She stepped over to the table I was sitting at and set down the drinks and slices of cake that she'd brought for us. "Thank you again, Andou. I really appreciate how you're always helping Tomoyo out with her work."

"Nah, it's fine... It's not like she's forcing me to help or anything," I replied.

"You too, Tomoyo! I hope you've been telling Andou how grateful you are for his help."

"O-Oh, stuff it... Of course I have," Tomoyo bluntly grumbled. She was so curt, it was almost like she'd gone back to her old self for a moment.

"I'm sorry about this, Andou," Tomoyo's mother quietly added as she leaned in toward me. "Tomoyo just doesn't know how to be honest about her feelings. I'm positive that deep down, she loves you to pieces."

"Uh... Right."

"*Mom*! I can hear you! Quit butting in, jeez! A-And don't go getting the wrong idea, Andou!" Tomoyo yelped.

"...Right."

"For crying out loud... You're done, right, mom? Give us some space, please!"

"Hee hee! If you insist."

Tomoyo all but pushed her mom out of the room and slammed the door behind her. Then, the moment we heard her descending the staircase, the tension visibly drained from Tomoyo's body. Everything about her—even her expression and the look in her eyes—just went slack, all at once. She sprawled out onto the floor, once again ending up lying in my lap.

"I love you, Juujuuuu!"

"This...is...*exhausting*!" I shouted.

I just couldn't take it anymore. She was almost disturbingly affectionate with me these days, yes, but Dereyo only made an appearance when the two of us were alone. Whenever someone else was in the picture, she pivoted on a dime and went full tsun instead, up to and including going back to calling me Andou. She stuck to me like glue when we were in her room, but she wouldn't even hold my hand when we were walking around

outdoors. It was like…just *total* tsundere stuff, in the classical sense of the term: When other people were around, her tsun side came out, and when it was just us, she went dere instead.

"Look, Tomoyo…can't you, like, work on this or something?" I asked. "The U-turns your personality takes these days are so sharp, they're seriously gonna give me whiplash at this rate."

"Sh-Shut up, okay…? I can't help it! I mean…it's embarrassing," Tomoyo muttered with an abashed blush. "I just can't act all flirty in front of people… Not even my mom. I mean, like…when it's just the two of us, I end up looking like a *total* ditz, right?"

"Oh, so you know…?"

"Yeah, I *do*!" Tomoyo shouted. Her expression grew grim. "Every once in a while…I come to my senses, right? I step back and take an objective look at myself…and I think 'Oh, *god*, that's creepy.' It's honestly hilarious—I've always been the sort of person who makes fun of girls who can't think about anything other than their boyfriends, and now I'm one of them! But…" Tomoyo added, a slight tremor working its way into her voice, "I just… I can't help it. There's nothing I can do to stop myself. I love you so, so, *so* much…I can't hold it back!"

I didn't say a word.

"Just spending time with you makes me so happy I can't even deal… I wanna touch you, and hug you, and kiss you, and mess around with you literally all the time… And you're, like, always so *chill* and blasé about it and stuff? And I start worrying if I'm the only one who feels this strongly about *us*… So I end up thinking that I have to make it even more obvious that I love you, or you'll end up getting sick of me…"

"Tomoyo…"

The reason I'd ended up acting relatively chill about our relationship was because Tomoyo's affection had been so overwhelming. Having someone come at me *that* aggressively, paradoxically, made it really easy for me to keep a cool head. It was like I knew on some level that if both of us went full dere we'd completely lose control, meaning that it was my responsibility to stay calm and keep things reasonable for both of our sakes.

Apparently, however, my calm and collected act had just ended up making Dereyo go to even greater extremes. Her excessive affection was just a manifestation of the anxiety that she felt deep down. I was starting to feel really pathetic,

honestly. How could I let myself make the most important girl in the world to me worry, of all things?

"Tomoyo," I called out. A dark and dreary shadow had fallen over her, but she still looked up when I called her name—and the moment she did, I pressed my lips to hers.

I stole a kiss, as simple as that. The softness of her lips had me spellbound in an instant, and while she jolted with surprise at first, she soon wrapped her arms around me and pulled me even closer. It felt like our kiss lasted for an eternity, and yet at the same time, like it only took a split second before our lips regretfully parted.

"I love you, Tomoyo. I love every part of you, no matter how you act."

"Ah... *Aggghhhhhh*!" Tomoyo moaned as she pressed her face—which was as red as a boiled lobster—into her hands. "D-Dummy... Wh-What was *that*? I-I wasn't ready... Agggh..."

"Are you seriously getting embarrassed *now*? After all that...? You were all over me literally a second ago."

"W-Well, come on... It was so sudden, you caught me off guard... And it's been ages since the last time too."

"Has it, really...? Pretty sure it was just the day before yesterday."

"I-I mean it's been ages since *you* kissed *me*! And it feels like it's been a while since you said you love me on your own too. It's like I always have to go out of my way to ask you to say it lately..."

"Yeah, uh...that's just because you ask for it *all* the time. It has to be just the right time for me to say it naturally, and you always end up asking for it before I get the chance, basically."

"I-I know! I know, but still..." Tomoyo sulkily moaned.

I gave her a pat on the head. "You don't have to worry, okay? I really do love you. It's all fine."

"Yeah..."

The next thing I knew, Tomoyo had flung herself at me all over again. This time, her flying hug was so intense it sent us crashing backward onto her bed.

"Hee hee, hee hee hee! I love you, Juujuu! Let's just do this all day today, okay? We can spend the whole day hugging and cuddling!"

"Or...you could do your work. Like, please, do that. I'm begging you."

“Hmmph. You’re such a meanie, Juujuu! If all you’re gonna do with your lips is complain, then I’ll just go ahead and put them to much better use!”

“I *said* I’m not into that stuff when the mood’s not right, didn’t I?!”

Tomoyo was bearing down on me again, but I shut her down with a well-aimed flick to the forehead. She let out a little yelp and glared daggers at me, but it wasn’t long before both of us cracked up in unison. I couldn’t really say if we were flirting, fighting, or both, but one way or another, we spent the afternoon together in our own unique sort of way.

Honestly…is it really okay for me to be this happy? I wondered, saying a silent prayer that this wouldn’t all turn out to be just a dream.

World Alight Route: The End



Chapter 2 ★ In the Beforemath of the Battle's Aftermath

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Chapter 2: In the Beforemath of the Battle's Aftermath

*"*Innocent Onlooker*: the power of premature disclosure,"* Sagami said before launching into an extended exposition dump about the nature of his ability.

He'd only just awakened to it moments before, but he already had a perfect grasp of how it functioned…which wasn't much of a surprise at all, really. I'd had an intuitive understanding of how *Dark and Dark* worked back when I'd awakened to it as well, even before I'd actually tried using it. The knowledge had sort of just manifested in my mind. It hadn't been the deepest or most specific of information, but it had been enough to give me a general grasp of how my power functioned and what it was capable of.

"To put it simply, it's the power of precognition. I can't use it to see people's futures, though—instead, Innocent Onlooker *allows me to make other people have visions of their own future."*

So, it lets you give other *people foresight?*

"That's right! Anyone except myself."

Huuuh…

"Let me guess: You're thinking that sounds pretty pointless, right? Ha ha ha… Yeah, I can relate. I was all 'What kind of lame-ass power is that?' at first…but when I took a moment to think about it, I realized that there are a surprising number of ways to make use of it," Sagami continued. *"Here's an example for you, Andou: You know how whenever a precognitive character shows up in a supernatural battle manga or anime, their visions of the future usually turn out to be wrong in the end? It'd almost be more of a surprise if their predictions* didn't *end up missing the mark, and everyone knows it from the moment they're introduced. Sometimes it feels like they're put in the story just for the sake of being wrong, doesn't it?"*

I mean, yeah, I guess.

I got what Sagami was trying to say. Characters with precognitive powers spurring the main character into action by predicting a hopeless future for them to avert was a very common trope. The character with foresight would predict that

somebody was going to die or that some horrible cataclysm would occur, but in the end, the main characters would usually rally together and beat the odds to make sure that the terrible future they'd been warned about wouldn't come to pass.

"So, precognitive characters are put into stories to make predictions that end up being wrong, and precognitive powers almost never give characters visions that are guaranteed to come true. My power falls into that category as well—it doesn't have a hundred percent hit rate. I haven't exactly tested it, so I don't have any hard numbers to give you, but I can tell that it's not perfect intuitively. In fact, it might be more accurate for me to describe it as a power of intentionally imperfect precognition."

Intentionally *imperfect? Meaning that your predictions being flawed is a feature?*

"Right. It grants me the ability to give other people precognitive visions, and I don't need their permission to do it. As long as they're within my power's range, I can force my visions on people. The catch is that the visions are imperfectly accurate, and not even I know precisely how likely it is that the futures people see will come to pass. They might come true, and they might not. Who knows?"

The idea of a precognitive power with an ambiguous degree of accuracy struck me as, well...pretty remarkably half-baked, if I'm being honest. It was like seeing a weather report predict a fifty percent chance of rain. It wasn't *stunningly* unreliable, but it also wasn't the sort of prediction that you could structure your plans around.

"If I wanted to explain it in a little more detail, I'd say that my power chooses a single future with a nonzero chance of coming to pass, which it then shows to the person I used it on, I suppose? It picks a single branch from the countless possible paths the timeline could take, showing my target only the future that exists on that one route. But anyway," Sagami continued, *"the real question is this: How would the people I use my power on feel about being shown such unreliable visions of their futures?"*

A vision of a single future with a nonzero chance of coming to pass... A single branch from the endlessly expansive tree of possibilities that is the future... What effect would forcing someone to see that sort of fragmented information—and to see it as their future—have upon them?

"Let's say I used it on someone who was facing some form of difficulty that, under normal circumstances, they'd have a high

chance of overcoming if they worked up the nerve to tackle it head-on. If my power ended up showing them a future in which they failed, then there's a chance that they wouldn't even try standing up to their problem at all, right? And even if they didn't give up entirely, would they be able to handle it with the same sort of spirit they could've mustered back before they'd seen that possible future of failure?"

The idea that seeing the future would, in and of itself, *change* the future is something that got discussed and debated pretty often. Assuming that the principles of the butterfly effect and chaos theory were valid—that is to say, the slightest changes to the present could have a massive impact on the future at large—then it certainly seemed plausible that someone seeing into the future could be all it took to change their future substantially. What if the future observed with precognition was a future that took that act of precognition into account, though? It could even take into account the fact that the observer would try to change the future that they foresaw, meaning that...

Actually, I'm gonna cut this train of thought off here. I'm just confusing myself for no reason at this point.

There was no point in overthinking any of that future stuff. After all, just fixating on the future—whether it was supposed to turn out well or poorly—had the potential to change it.

To give a simple example of that phenomenon: It's like how future Trunks asked Goku to keep his identity secret, since he was worried that if his parents found out who he was, it could bother them enough that he'd never actually end up being born. Having a vision of a future in which you're married to a particular person could make you fixate so intensely on them that you end up acting super awkwardly and drive them away instead. Or, on the opposite side of the spectrum, a premonition could lead you to take an interest in someone whom you'd otherwise pay no attention to whatsoever, ultimately leading you to fall for them.

Seeing the future would always change the present, for better or for worse. By learning the future in advance, it becomes an aspect of your past and alters who you are in the present.

"By the way—I don't get to know what sort of future the people I use my power on end up seeing. I get to see how confused they are by the imperfect visions my power grants them, but that's the only part of Innocent Onlooker*'s effects I actually get to witness,"* said Sagami.

Interesting. I'd hadn't had any clue how a power like his could possibly be useful at first, but it really did have a surprising number of applications if you got a little creative with it. Even more than that, however, I was struck by just how *unpleasant* of a power it was. Its core function seemed to be letting its user mess with people by showing them deeply flawed visions of the future, just for kicks. It was irresponsible, tasteless, and, in a sense, exactly the sort of power I'd expect Sagami to end up with.

"Ha ha ha! I've heard that the powers we get from the Spirit War are supposed to express something about our deep-seated, subconscious desires and psyches…but I'm not so sure that's really true. Take my power, for instance—even if I'd ended up with something completely different, you'd probably still end up thinking that it's perfectly suited to me, wouldn't you? Akutagawa—a kid I'm acquainted with—once told me that 'If it seems like someone's power reflects their personality, that's just the Barnum effect at work.'"

The Barnum effect, huh? That's when you say something super broad and vague that applies to pretty much everyone and people end up thinking it's a personalized statement specifically about them, right?

A few good examples of that sort of statement would be "you sometimes suffer from indecision" or "you're currently worried about something"—very basic statements about someone's personality, essentially.

When Sagami put it that way, I had to admit that the whole "your powers are representations of your innermost desires" shtick that came up so very often in supernatural battle anime and manga really could very easily be written off as a simple manifestation of the Barnum effect. It didn't really matter what power you had—if someone told you that it reflected your psyche, you'd probably find yourself convinced. Even if your personality and your power had nothing to do with each other at a glance, it wouldn't be too hard to come up with a satisfying explanation.

Take my power, *Dark and Dark*. It, well… Okay, so I've always been very proud of how perfectly *me* my power is, but imagine if I'd ended up with another power instead—say, one of the ones that one of the other literary club members had awakened to. Under those circumstances, it's totally possible that I'd still be able to come up with a convincing explanation for why that power was perfectly *me* as well. If that sort of convenient self-

deception could be filed under the Barnum effect, then it wasn't hard to imagine that the same was true of the relation between everyone's powers and personalities…though, of course, I might have just been Barnum-effecting myself into believing that theory as well.

"You know, if someone tells you that something's the Barnum effect and you end up seeing it that way as a result, isn't that kind of the Barnum effect in action? Then again, this is going to get way too complicated if I follow that train of logic, so I'll just call it a day here."

Good call. Especially since we're hitting the point where "the Barnum effect" doesn't even sound like a real phrase to me anymore.

"Anyway, based on what I've observed so far, I do *think that there's at least some small relation between an individual's personality and the power they awaken to. That's just the way I see it, of course, and it's entirely possible that you and the other literary club members are exceptions anyway. This story's author's given all of you a little too much preferential treatment. You're in a category of your own,"* said Sagami. He was clearly implying *something*, but before I could get at what it was, he added, *"Whoops! I'm getting off topic, aren't I?"* and dropped the subject.

"So, Andou—it seems I accidentally caught you in Innocent Onlooker*'s area of effect. How was that? What sort of future did you see for yourself?"*

What sort of future *had* I seen? I thought back on all the futures I'd just witnessed…and suddenly found myself feeling very uncomfortable.

"Ha ha ha! I'm guessing that reaction means you saw a romantic entanglement or two? Were you dating someone in your premonition? Or maybe you got a harem ending? Or a few endings, each with a different heroine—one of those open-ended what-if scenarios?"

Oh, can it. Mind your own business.

"Hmm. Who would *you end up with? I'm as curious as could be…but sadly, this isn't exactly the right time for me to be worrying about that, now, is it? Hell, I'm not even sure how long I'll be alive at this rate,"* Sagami said—though actually, *said* probably wasn't the best word to describe what he'd been doing this whole time at all.

Although every bit of Sagami's speech had been in his usual aloof, vaguely condescending tone, he hadn't spoken a single

word of it out loud. Rather, his words had rung out sourcelessly within my mind. It was like he'd been beaming them into my head telepathically without ever actually making a noise.

"Oh, nah, telepathy's not quite right. This is actually a form of precognitive vision too—it's a practical application of my power," Sagami said into my mind, which it sort of felt like he'd also just read. *"Right now, the real me is thinking about how he'll say all of this stuff to you later. Making that decision means I can beam my words to you in real time in the form of a premonition. Basically, it's a form of pseudo-telepathy made possible by way of precognition."*

Hmm. So basically...

Sagami decides something he's going to tell me → At some point in the future, Sagami actually does tell it to me → In the here and now, he uses his power to show me a vision of him saying those words in real time

...or something like that? I kinda get it, but also, I don't get it at all. Like, the logic more or less checks out...but isn't it weird that we're, y'know, talking *like this? How is the you in my premonition of the future having a back-and-forth with the here-and-now me?*

"Well, again, we're not really *directly talking with each other, in a strict sense of the phrase. It's indistinguishable from you having a back-and-forth with me, but the truth is that I'm actually having this conversation with the* future *Andou. It may feel like a perfectly normal conversation to you, but in reality, you're just actively caught up in another precognitive vision as we speak, and—"*

Okay, nope. You've lost me.

"Fair enough. Frankly, I don't totally get it either. I'd rather not talk to you in such a confusing and roundabout way, if possible...but this was the only way that I could talk to you at all, considering present circumstances."

That made total sense. Jumping through all these convoluted hoops was the only way Sagami could reasonably speak with me right now. After all...

"Ugh! Gaaah..."

...the *real* Sagami was, at that very moment, dying before my eyes.

"Heh... Heh heh, ha ha ha... Yeah... Figures it'd...turn out like this," Sagami muttered. Unlike the fluid, casual speech of the future version of him in my mind, present Sagami's voice was terribly hoarse. He'd managed to force out a laugh, but it felt like every single word he spoke was a painful trial to spit out.

We were in a clearing by the riverbank—the very same one where I'd fought Futaba Tamaki less than half an hour beforehand. Earlier that day she had caught me in an ambush, whisking me off to an unpopulated pseudo-city that some unknown collaborator had created. She'd chased me around for quite a while until finally, I'd squared off against her by the river…and defeated her. *Dark and Dark of the End* had vanquished *Lost Regalia*.

Well… Okay, *vanquished* might be a strong word. It wasn't really a victory I could brag about. I'd been driven to my absolute limits and had just barely squeaked out a win with a desperate bluff. But anyway, after things had been settled between me and Tamaki, Sagami had arrived on the scene. He and Tamaki had talked, reconciled, and put the lingering aftermath of our time in the eighth grade to rest for good. It'd seemed like everything had been wrapped up with a neat little bow…

…until suddenly, Hinoemata Tamaki had been consumed by darkness.

Bwa ha ha!

A dry, distinctive laugh had signaled his arrival: Kiryuu Hajime, aka Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. At first, he'd focused on me—his mismatched eyes, one red and one black, had been so single-mindedly fixed on me you'd think he'd waited an age to see me once more—and yet…

I, Sagami Shizumu, declare my intent to participate in the Fifth Spirit War.

The moment Sagami had spoken those words, Kiryuu had furrowed his brow and shot a glare in Sagami's direction. Now it was my turn to be the third wheel, not to mention totally out of the loop. I hadn't been able to keep up with their conversation at all, so I'd ended up just standing there in a daze. All I could say for sure was that the two of them had a very peculiar sort of relationship, and that said relationship ran *deep*. It felt like the hand of fate had led them to this point—like they'd been destined to do battle from the moment they'd been born.

And so, Kiryuu Hajime and Sagami Shizumu clashed. They stared one another down and invoked their powers in unison. A fated battle was about to unfold…or, well, that was the idea, anyway.

"Ayup. No way I was gonna win that one, huh?" Future Sagami nonchalantly quipped. The present version of Sagami looked like

he had one foot in the grave already, but the one in my mind had the same insufferably casual attitude that I was used to from him.

Sagami…had lost. He'd lost instantly. I really mean it—he didn't last a second. The very moment their fight began, he'd been slammed face down into the ground. I mean, like, *splat*. It was like an enormous, invisible hammer had crushed him in a single blow, and that single strike had ended the fight on its own.

Oh, and as a side note—apparently, Sagami had induced me to see visions of the future during that same instant. All of those futures that might come to pass I'd seen hadn't even taken a second to play out in real time. Actually, rather than saying I'd seen them play out, it might be more accurate to say that the experiences I'd had within them had been written into my mind in a flash.

"Of course this is how it'd go if we used our powers at the same time," said Future Sagami. *"*Innocent Onlooker *looks like a lame excuse for a power at first glance, but when you look a layer deeper, it has a surprising number of uses…and then, when you look a layer deeper than that, it turns out it really is pretty lame after all. How the hell was I supposed to beat a guy who bends the force of gravity to his will with a crapsack power like this? Seriously, this is some broken-ass bullshit."*

I had to admit that Sagami's power seemed more suited for a supporting role or for catching an opponent off guard in an ambush. It didn't seem very well matched for a one-on-one showdown. Actually, it seemed straight up useless under those circumstances.

"Maaan, I swear… Couldn't my power have taken a hint? I finally worked up the motivation to get out there and make a difference, so it could've at least been a little *more combat-ready, y'know?"*

Future Sagami was really laying on the complaints. Present Sagami, meanwhile, was slowly and painfully heaving himself upright. The power that had crushed him to the ground—which, now knowing that Kiryuu was a gravity-manipulator, I figured had been a gravitational wave—seemed to have vanished as quickly as it manifested. The damage was done, however, and it had been nasty enough that Present Sagami couldn't quite make it to his feet.

"Heh heh… Ha ha ha ha," Present Sagami chuckled. He was a

painful mess from top to bottom, but the smile on his face looked somehow satisfied. “So…I lost, huh? It’s weird, though… For some reason, I don’t feel bad about it at all.” His voice was feeble, but there was still a brazen confidence to his words.

Unfortunately, the whole time Sagami was delivering his speech…Future Sagami was still grousing in my mind.

“I knew it from the start… There was just no way I’d be winning this battle.”

“Ugh. I really thought I could pull this off, honestly.”

“A guy like me could never beat *the* Kiryuu Hajime. I could never defeat Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. It’d be a joke. But, still…I wanted to give it a shot anyway. It felt like I *had* to fight you, right here, and right now…”

“I figured that if I pulled a god-tier power, I’d have just one chance to really get him good. Why’d I get saddled with a trash-tier joke instead…?”

“I’ve been a manipulative, self-centered poser my whole life. A garbage ending like this is exactly what I deserve.”

“This suuucks. These powers seriously are just luck of the draw. If this is a game, it blows*. Like, seriously, could we get some rebalancing in here, thanks? Make it so that everyone who didn’t get direct combat powers can still use ki or magic or something so we can still have a fighting chance, for crying out loud!”*

“You know, Kiryuu…”

“You know, you can always tell how well-written a supernatural battle story is by how much someone deciding to use modern weaponry would totally ruin everything. If a story makes its readers think ‘Wait, why are these people fighting with their powers in the first place? Wouldn’t a gun be more effective? Not to mention efficient?’ then that story’s trash. And this War? It’s got that exact *problem. The whole setup’s a shoddy, half-assed mess.”*

“Up until now, I’ve always called myself a reader. I’ve stood on the sidelines, taking it all in from an onlooker’s viewpoint. Fighting you was the first time I’ve gotten involved—the first time I’ve tried to make myself the story’s protagonist. Sure, I got wrecked, and pretty pathetically at that…but even so, I’m proud of what I’ve done today.”

“Ugggggh. I wanted to get a super OP cheat power and kick all sorts of ass.”

*Please…*please *shut up for a second, Future Sagami. I’m pretty sure that this is Present Sagami’s big moment, and you’re totally*

ruining it.

Present Sagami's satisfied smile made it look like he'd graciously accepted his defeat, but the fact that he was *super* salty deep down was really, really obvious to me. He was making himself look as good as possible in the moment while having every intention of complaining bitterly to me the second he got the chance.

"By the way, Kiryuu," Present Sagami said as he gazed up at his opponent, who had walked over to stand next to him at some point along the way. "You took me out in the blink of an eye with some insane instakill ability. You couldn't have possibly crushed me more completely than you did...but you know, when I stop to think about that, it's a little strange. Since when did *you* start instakilling your enemies?"

Present Sagami closed his eyes.

"An instakill...? Obliterating your foe before they have the chance to respond...? I mean, it's not like there's anything wrong with that. For most people, it's just the sensible way to fight. If life gives you a stupid OP power, then there's no good reason not to bring it out at full force from the very start...but that's not *you*, is it? Are you really okay with this? Would Kiryuu Heldkaiser Lucifirst really demean himself by using that boring of a fighting style?"

Kiryuu didn't say a word. He stood there in deathly silence, staring down at Present Sagami with a severe expression on his face.

"Pounding me into the dirt with an ultra-powerful gravitational wave...? Heh... Ha ha ha! It's just so *simple*, isn't it? Sure, an attack like that's plenty to take down someone with a bullshit power like mine...but it's just so, *so* very not like you. What happened to the Kiryuu who went far out of his way to generate black holes just because they'd have the most visual impact? Why didn't you shout your power's name like you usually do? Why didn't you strike one of your signature poses? Why the hell were you so *panicked*, Kiryuu?"

Present Sagami spoke with a smile. His body was a wreck, and he looked like he might pass out at any moment, but still, he kept grinning dauntlessly. He may have been gazing up at Kiryuu, yet it somehow felt more like he was looking down on him.

"Yeah, so, I was desperately making crap up to buy time here.

Figured that if I went super far out of the way to say he'd used an 'instakill' attack on me over and over, it'd make it hard for him to actually *instakill me later on. Like, I was trying to make a situation where he couldn't just finish me off without making it look like I'd provoked him into doing it. Gotta say, I've got one hell of a knack for high-level psychological warfare when push comes to shove."*

Okay, but seriously—shut up*, Future Sagami. I figured that out for myself already. You didn't have to spell it out, and calling it "high-level psychological warfare" yourself actually makes it* way *harder to take you seriously.*

"All that said…it's not like it was all nonsense. I did genuinely have my doubts. Why would the *Kiryuu Hajime get so worked up over* me*, of all opponents?"*

Was "worked up" the right phrase to describe what Kiryuu had done? I couldn't judge that. As far as I could tell, he'd just hit Sagami with a perfectly ordinary attack. He hadn't flailed around or thrown in any unnecessary motions, really—he'd just held out a hand and crushed Sagami like a bug.

That said…I had a feeling that was the point. Sagami was saying that Kiryuu's attack being perfectly ordinary *was* abnormal. An ordinary attack was a sign that he was in a panic—a sign that he was so worked up, he'd gone all out in spite of himself.

"Let me guess: You weren't a fan of the future that you saw?" said Present Sagami.

Oh, I get it. Sagami had used *Innocent Onlooker* to force visions of the future upon me—but *I* hadn't been his actual target. I'd just happened to be in its area of effect, so I'd ended up as collateral damage. Sagami's actual target was the man he'd resolved himself to oppose with everything that his power had to offer…

"Well, how about that… I thought my power was hopelessly useless, but maybe it had more of an impact than I gave it credit for after all. If I actually managed to get one up on you, then I'll call this encounter an unqualified success," Present Sagami said with a sarcastic smirk. "I'm really quite curious now, Kiryuu—just what sort of future did you see in your vision? What kind of premonition would drive you to lose your cool so spectacularly?"

Most likely, Kiryuu had seen his future in the same manner I had. Only he knew exactly what'd been in his vision, but much like I'd experienced, it had been burned into his mind against his

will in a single instant…and after he'd glimpsed that fate, the very next thing he'd chosen to do was grind Sagami into the dirt. He'd used his fastest, most effective attack to take Sagami out without so much as a hint of enjoyment or showmanship. It was like he was rejecting the future he'd seen with every ounce of his willpower.

"Bwa ha ha!"

Suddenly, Kiryuu let out his dry, distinctive laugh. He'd finally broken his extended silence, putting on one of his typical sneers.

"If—and I do mean *if*—you were right, and the vision you showed me made me flip out and rush our battle to a premature conclusion…" Kiryuu said in an almost performatively calm and collected tone.

"…then what about it? So what?"

"…"

"…"

…

Future Sagami, Present Sagami, and I were all struck dumb.

M-My god. He's rolling with it! He's acting like we're *the weird ones here!*

"Heh heh heh heh!" Kiryuu chuckled. "Fine, then. I'll admit it—you've outdone yourself, Shizumu. I never thought you'd outmaneuver me quite like this. *Innocent Onlooker*… Now *that's* a power that's nasty enough to suit you. This is the first time I've ever seen something that sickening," he spat, the smile vanishing from his face.

What was it? Just what on earth had he seen? What kind of future had he witnessed? What would a future that drove Kiryuu Hajime to use the word "sickening" possibly look like?

"You honor me, Kiryuu. Honestly, you really do…but I'm afraid that this is my limit. Sheesh—this extension of mine sure did end up being a short one. Was I struggling in vain or what?" Present Sagami said with a deep sigh, a sense of resignation creeping into his voice. "With me in the running, there are nine Players left in the War—one too many to trigger the Final Eight. The second I die, though, we'll be back to eight again…and the Fifth Spirit War will move on to its next stage."

"That's right—not that it'll have anything to do with you by then," said Kiryuu.

"It's a shame… I would've loved to see your story's conclusion. Speaking as a reader, not getting to do so is something I deeply

regret."

"You've got no one to blame but yourself for that. If you'd stuck to reading like you always have—if you hadn't overstepped your bounds and tried to meddle with the story—I would've let you witness it all the way to the end."

"I know, right? Ugh. This really was a terrible call," said Present Sagami.

Then, for just an instant—the slightest of moments—he glanced in my direction. He'd kept his gaze focused so firmly on Kiryuu this whole time that the way he turned it to me felt downright unnatural. He was sending me a message. Specifically, he was telling me to hurry up and *run*.

"I think you've already figured this out, Andou, but the whole point of me dragging out this conversation and getting Kiryuu riled up for no good reason was to give you a chance to make a break for it. I was trying to get him to focus on me as much as possible—just enough to give you an opening, hopefully."

Yeah, I figured that out, all right. The sight of Present Sagami blabbing away in spite of how beaten and broken his body was had been more than enough to tip me off. The problem, however...was that I couldn't take so much as a single step.

I'd thought about running away, and I'd thought about trying to somehow save Sagami, but I couldn't move. I was paralyzed. I might have been subjected to one incomprehensibly stunning and surreal development after another in rapid succession...but the psychological shock of it all surprisingly wasn't the problem. The problem was that I was literally, *physically* fixed in place.

"You stay right there, Guiltia," said Kiryuu. He didn't make it sound like an order—if anything, he sounded concerned about my safety.

Regardless, I couldn't do anything but comply. I felt *heavy*. My whole body did—so heavy that I couldn't take so much as a single step, nor could I even move my mouth precisely enough to form words. It felt like an intense weight had been placed upon every single cell in my body. It wasn't unendurable—if I put my everything into resisting it, I could just barely stay upright—but I could tell that if I lost focus for so much as a second or shifted my center of gravity in an attempt to flee, I would crumple.

I felt like my body had been turned into a precariously balanced Jenga tower. If I shifted my weight the slightest bit in

any direction, the collapse would begin. It goes without saying that this was Kiryuu's work. He could have twisted me into a corkscrew at any moment if he'd wanted to, but instead, he'd delicately applied just the right amount of gravitational force on me to hold me in place.

"Just sit tight over there. I'll have plenty of time to play with you once I've sent this uninvited reader packing and led the War in its ascension to new, unseen heights," Kiryuu said with a wicked smile. A fiery joy blazed within his mismatched eyes.

I felt a chill run down my spine. Even if his gravitational control hadn't had me bound in place, his piercing stare alone felt like it would have petrified me.

"So, for now, go ahead and watch. Witness the end of a truly shameless reader."

Kiryuu turned to face Sagami once more. He slowly raised a hand aloft, his gaze brimming with bloodlust as he looked down upon the boy who'd stepped beyond the bounds of readership. "Every reader has the right to judge and critique the stories they consume. They're free to praise and to deride—free to read and to drop whatever stories they like...but when a story doesn't develop in the way that they wanted it to, going straight to the author and demanding the story be changed is beyond the pale. You think the author's gonna be all 'The readers didn't like what I wrote, so I decided to redo it'? That shit only flies in the amateur web novel world."

And so, Kiryuu Hajime cast judgment. He brought the ironclad hammer of justice down upon the meddling fool of a self-proclaimed reader who'd chosen far too late to take a step into the story.

"Lament your sins in the depths of Hell—*Road to Abaddon*."

And then there was a hole. Where there had once been a blank patch of earth now sat a gaping pit roughly a meter in diameter. I couldn't see its bottom—it descended seemingly forever into pitch-black darkness. I couldn't even imagine how deep it really was. It was like the gods on high had driven a staff deep into the ground, gouging out a direct pathway to Hell in the blink of an eye.

Just how much gravitational force—just what degree of density packed into a single point—would it take to bore a hole

like that in an instant? It was an attack capable of banishing the sinner it was unleashed upon far into the depths of the earth. Though, really, if a force strong enough to bore a vertical shaft into the ground were exerted upon a human body, whatever was left of that body would be completely indistinguishable from the dirt at the bottom of the pit by the time it was over.

Of course…the most important part of that last sentence was the word *if*.

"…Huh?" Present Sagami grunted with a cock of his head from the patch of ground he remained slumped on, still very much alive. Kiryuu's ultra-powerful gravitational onslaught…had missed him entirely. The pit to Hell he'd bored into the ground was located just a single meter to his side. You'd think that an attack of that power would've done some major collateral damage to him even if he hadn't been hit directly, but it seemed that its effects had been focused with pinpoint precision, and Present Sagami wasn't any more wounded than he'd already been.

Sagami hadn't dodged the attack. In fact, he hadn't moved an inch. The moment before Kiryuu had tried to finish him off, Sagami had closed his eyes in what I'd assumed was acceptance of his inevitable end. He hadn't even tried to evade…but then, what *had* happened? Why hadn't Kiryuu's attack obliterated him? Had Kiryuu missed on purpose? Or maybe…

"…Tch."

Kiryuu clicked his tongue with very real irritation. That ruled out the "he missed on purpose" theory on the spot.

"Way to make a mess of things…*Hitomi*," Kiryuu spat. He sounded somehow enraged and overjoyed at the same time. Now, his piercing glare was directed right behind me and Sagami.

I turned to look over my shoulder and found a lone woman standing atop the embankment. She was wearing a tasteful suit—the sort that people went to job interviews in—and her long hair was styled in a way that made it drape over her right eye. She looked a little older than us—in her early twenties, most likely—and in addition to her hair, she was holding a hand over her right eye, blocking it even more thoroughly from sight.

"*Eternal Wink*: the power of visual violation. You know how it works—after all, you're the one who named it, Hajime," said the woman. I have to admit: As dire as the situation was, the name

she used for her power was awesome enough to make my heart skip a beat. “I have no idea how or why you and Sagami ended up fighting each other…but for the time being, I’ve decided to intervene. If that upset you, then good. That’s what I was going for.”

The Kitaro-haired woman flashed Kiryuu a triumphant grin. She’d called him by his first name, implying that they were pretty close, but the look she was directing at him was anything but friendly. There was a firm, resolved animosity in the one eye of hers that I could see.

“Saitou…? What’s she doing here?”

You know her, Future Sagami?

“Sure do. Her name’s Saitou Hitomi, and she’s one of Kiryuu’s crew. Well, she was—things got complicated, so she’s his enemy at this particular moment.”

Does that mean she has a power too?

“Yup. I’d say you must have heard her say its name just now, but I guess you might’ve been distracted by the metric ton of sarcasm she’d put into it. It’s called Eternal Wink*: the power of visual violation. It lets her grant an Evil Eye to anyone within her field of view, which she then gets to control. She possesses the malevolent eye that rules over the Evil Eyes.”*

“The malevolent eye that rules over the Evil Eyes”?! Wh-What’s coming over me? That sounded so profoundly cool it set my soul ablaze, but also, I have no *friggin’ clue what it actually means at all!*

“Yeah, Kiryuu’s the one who came up with all that naming jazz, and if there’s any actual difference between malevolent eyes and Evil Eyes, it only exists in his head. Long story short, she can give anyone she looks at an Evil Eye. I’m betting that she used it on me, and when Kiryuu made eye contact with me, the Evil Eye subjected him to some sort of illusion.”

So she gives people Evil Eyes, which in turn make other *people see illusions?*

It sounded like a bit of a pain, as far as powers go—pretty darn roundabout, to say the least—but on second thought, it struck me that the power’s complicated nature could actually be its greatest strength. If she simply used an Evil Eye herself, then the moment her opponent caught on to her power’s nature, there was a chance they would raise their guard against making eye contact with her. Having a third party act as a delivery system for the power, however, made it dramatically easier to find an

opponent's openings—the more enemies or allies you had in one place, the more people your foes would have to be wary of making eye contact with. With careful control of the particulars of an engagement, you could even lead your enemies into taking each other out by accident. It wasn't a power that had much use in single combat, but in a messy melee, it could achieve astonishing feats.

"Of course, the Evil Eyes she gives people don't really live up to their name, supposedly. The worst they can do is conjure simple illusions or do some basic hypnosis. Most likely, she used the Evil Eye she gave me to either slightly tweak Kiryuu's depth perception or slightly alter where he perceived me to be."

I get it. So he really did try to finish you off with that attack, but her power made him miss.

"I've gotta say, though, I'm surprised to see Saitou alive at all. Who all would Kiryuu have left alive to be in the Final Eight*? Himself and the five literary club members are set in stone, but who else...?"*

H-Hey...Sagami? Isn't this a problem?

"Isn't what a problem?"

If that woman—Saitou, I mean—used to be Kiryuu's ally, then doesn't he know all about her power?

"Well, obviously. He came up with its name, after all."

In that case, the sneak attack she pulled just now—

"Won't work again. He won't give her another chance to use her Evil Eyes on him."

So then, what are we supposed to—

"No need to worry. She's an idiot when romance is on the table, but most of the time, she has a surprising mind for strategy. She's not stupid enough to waltz on into a fight without a plan. Quite the opposite, in fact. If she's going out of the way to show herself like this, it could very well mean that she has her sights set on an unprecedented chance to get the upper hand on Kiryuu."

Yeah...I'm not really following this. It felt like Sagami had just struck up a conversation about characters from a story I'd never actually read. Saitou Hitomi and Kiryuu Hajime seemed to have some sort of deep connection with each other, and Sagami seemed to know all about it, but I was completely clueless.

Now then—it might seem like I just took a very extended period of time in a very tense situation to casually discuss a new character who'd just arrived, but bear in mind that said discussion transpired with Future Sagami over the course of a

split-second premonition. Back in the real-world timeline, barely a moment passed after Saitou's arrival before yet another new character came into play.

"Hraaah!"

A man sprinted onto the scene with all the speed and force of a raging hurricane, roaring like a frenzied, feral beast and carrying a large jackknife in a backhand grip. It was an incredibly decrepit blade, so beat up and jagged that its edge had grown saw-toothed, and the way he slashed at Kiryuu with it reminded me of how boxers threw jabs.

Kiryuu just barely evaded the man's attack, dodging the knife's edge by a paper-thin margin. He looked frustrated—almost as if he'd thought he was actually in danger for once. The way he dodged made it seem like he thought that even a scratch from the blade would spell disaster.

The knife-wielding man's first attack had fallen short, but he moved on to the next one with such fluidity it was like he'd been counting on Kiryuu pulling off a dodge. Evading at the last second had thrown Kiryuu off-balance, so the man followed through with the motion of his slash in order to pivot into a spinning hook kick at Kiryuu's midsection.

It was a nasty kick that the man had put all his strength into...and it scored a clean hit. The sole of the man's work boot sank deeply into Kiryuu's flank through his jet-black coat. Kiryuu had raised his arm to guard at the last second, but it hadn't been enough to diminish the impact much at all, and he fell to one knee.

"Heh! What's wrong? Wasn't that coat supposed to have an anti-whatever barrier on it or some shit like that?" the man gloated with a savage grin that made him look like one hell of a delinquent. He didn't give Kiryuu time to reply, instead charging forward in another brutal assault, swinging his jagged knife with wild abandon.

"Toki Shuugo... He's another of Kiryuu's allies-turned-enemies," Future Sagami helpfully explained. I thought he was about to launch into another telepathic character introduction, but as it turned out, I ended up hearing from the real-world Sagami instead.

"Are you all right, Sagami?" asked Saitou. She'd run over to help him upright while the guy with the knife was occupying Kiryuu's attention.

“Yes… Well, more or less. I have to say, though…I never thought that you’d end up saving my tail,” said Sagami. “I apologize for every single time I’ve called you an old hag up to this point. I’ll make it up to you, I swear—from now on, I’ll refer to you as a relatively young MILF instead.”

“Right… If you’re doing well enough to crack wise, then I guess you’re in better shape than I thought,” replied Saitou.

“You could say I’m hanging in there.”

“Anyway, you can keep your apologies. It’s not like I earned them—I knew perfectly well you were about to get killed, and I was totally okay with gambling your life to wait for just the right time to spring my trap.”

“Ahh, yes, of course you did. I figured as much, considering just how perfect the timing was.”

“*Lucifer’s Strike* is an absurdly potent power—enough so to make Hajime an indisputably superior fighter. It doesn’t have many weaknesses to speak of…but it does have one: the fact that he can’t use his biggest attacks in rapid succession,” said Saitou.

“Oh?” replied Sagami. “Ah—come to think of it, Nakki sided with you, didn’t she? That would explain why you know all about his power’s flaws.”

“His control over gravity just isn’t very efficient, energy-wise, and the bigger the move, the more of his fuel it burns. But the thing is…for who knows what reason, Hajime always brings those big moves out anyway whenever he’s finishing an opponent off. It’s like using one of his special moves is a matter of image for him, or his pride wouldn’t allow for any other way, or something like that.”

“Both, I’d imagine.”

“Well, anyway, the point is that Hajime’s MP is totally drained right now. He’ll have a hard time taking on Toki in that state—hard enough that he won’t be able to focus on anything else.”

Lo and behold, as Saitou spoke those words, the gravitational force that had been weighing on me vanished. If she was right about everything she’d just said, then Kiryuu had exhausted his MP so severely that he couldn’t afford to keep me paralyzed anymore. I felt so light all of a sudden, I lost my balance and nearly face-planted into the ground.

“It’s nice to meet you, Andou Jurai,” Saitou said as I staggered precariously, just barely managing to stay upright. “I don’t think

you know anything about me at all, but I've known about you for quite a long time. You're... How should I put this? I guess you could say you're the unwitting third player in my personal love triangle."

"I'm *what*?" I said, gaping at her.

"Ha ha ha! Sorry—that probably sounded like gibberish to you, huh? Long story short, I've thought of you as my rival in a really weird, one-sided sort of way for a while. Don't worry about it," Saitou replied. Her one visible eye narrowed as she flashed me a lighthearted smile, but a moment later, her expression shifted into something much more wistful. "Hajime's been over the moon ever since he met you, you know? It's like he finally found someone who understood him—someone who's cut from the same cloth as him. When he talks about you, he gets this look in his eyes that I've never seen from him before."

I had no clue what to say to that.

"Just so you know, I'm not really siding with you or anything like that. I'm just Kiryuu Hajime's enemy. My objective's to give that jerk a taste of his own medicine, and saving you just happened to take me one step further toward that goal," Saitou said as she turned her back to me. As she directed her eye toward her foe, I could see a look of resolve in it that told me she had every intention of defeating him. "I don't know what Hajime's trying to accomplish, and I can't even begin to guess what he's planning on doing next...but one way or another, it's pretty clear that you're a key player in his plan. He came all the way here just to have his long-awaited reunion with you...and we're going to do everything we possibly can to ruin that oh-so-precious event of his."

Sagami, whom Saitou was still holding upright, turned to look straight at me. "Andou...run," he said. "There's no telling what Kiryuu's thinking, but the one thing we know for sure is that his plan can't get off the ground without you around...so *run*. Run as fast as you can, and make sure the story he's writing doesn't play out the way he wants it to."

"Y-You want me to run...? But what about you?" I asked.

"I'm in no shape to get away, one way or another. Standing up's taking everything I have already. I'll stay here and do what I can to help Saitou's crew—or, well, to jump on their bandwagon, really. I figure they wouldn't have made a dramatic entrance like this if they didn't have a decent shot at pulling it off. I don't think

I'll be much help, but I'll at least do my best to take a bullet for someone, if it comes to that."

"A-Are you serious, Sagami…?" Saitou asked with an air of disbelief. "Since when have you been that sort of person? I thought something was weird the moment I realized you were actually fighting Hajime—just what on earth happened to you?"

Present Sagami flashed a feeble smile. "I just went through a bit of character development, that's all. Heh heh heh… You know, I was always the sort of reader who'd gripe about it when characters like me, who'd seemed like antagonists most of the way through the series, suddenly turned a new leaf and got redeemed in the end—'Way to pull the reader out of the story,' I'd say—but now that I've tried it out myself, I've gotta say, I think I'm a fan of it. Guess that makes me an even bigger hypocrite than I was before."

As Present Sagami muttered out his little monologue, he looked over at me once more. There was an intensity to his gaze that I'd never seen from him before.

"Leave this to me and get the hell out of here, Andou."

"Sagami… But, I—"

"Oh, of *course*. There's just no *way* Mr. Andou surprisingly-righteous-and-always-puts-his-friends-first Jurai would *actually* run away when I tell him to…so I'll rephrase things a little. Andou—go find the girls and protect them."

I took in a sharp breath.

"'Virgin Child.' That's what he calls the five of you literary club folks. Apparently, you're all somehow indispensable for his plans. He's been making a big deal out of putting off your big reveal, but there's no way he won't be pulling you all into the story before long. At this rate, the four of them are going to get dragged into his narrative, like it or not."

What was Kiryuu's goal? What was the story he was trying to tell? Neither Sagami nor Saitou seemed to have any clue…but still, the two of them were throwing everything they had into resisting him. They were fighting with all their might to make the conclusion of his planned final chapter collapse under its own weight.

"I'll tell you everything you need to know in premonition form using my power."

"You heard the man. I'll give you a broad outline of everything that happens after you leave."

“So get out of here, Andou. Go, now.”

“If we want to prevent Kiryuu Hajime from finishing his story, then we need you to be out of the picture.”

The Sagami in my mind and the Sagami standing before me took turns urging me to flee. Then, for just a moment, Present Sagami seemed to hesitate. He leaned toward me and whispered into my ear.

“But, hey…Andou? If this doesn’t work out…”

The next words that Sagami spoke were so shocking, I couldn’t believe my ears. I just couldn’t comprehend them. They were purely irrational and flew in the face of everything that had happened up to that point.

“Sagami…? What—”

“Please. You’re the only one who can do it.”

And then, Sagami smiled at me. He clenched his hand into a fist and pressed it to my breast.

“I’m counting on you, Jurai.”

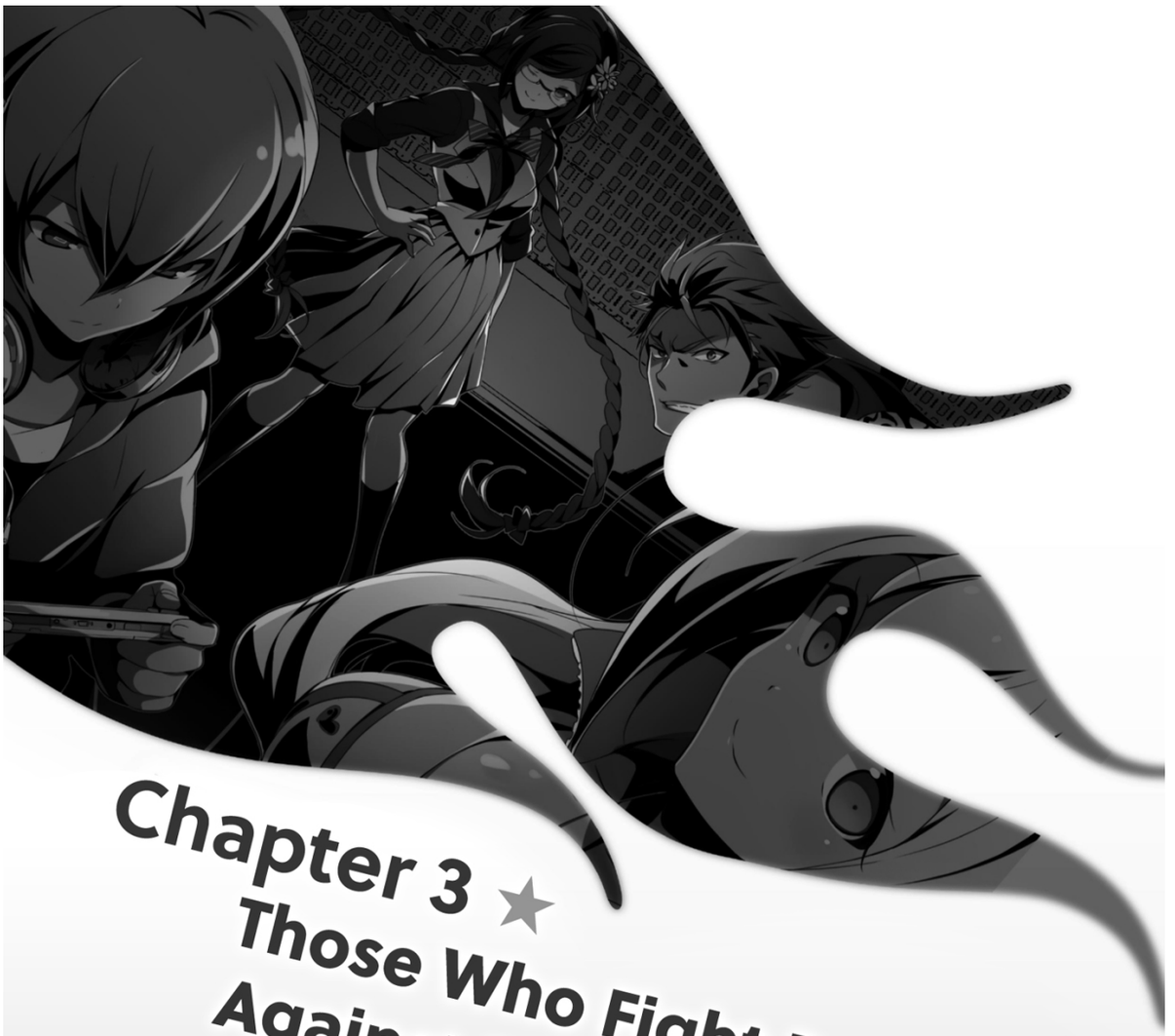
For a moment, an indescribable sense of nostalgia washed over me. For that one instant, I was back in the eighth grade—back when I’d abandoned my chuunibyou and the two of us were friends. It had only been three years since then, but it felt like it was all far, far off in the past.

“…All right, Sagamin,” I replied, pushing through my embarrassment and addressing him with my own long-unused term of endearment.

And then I ran. I turned my back on the battlefield and set off at a sprint. I still couldn’t fully understand what was even happening, but my spirit—my instincts—drove my legs to pump as fast as they possibly could. I needed to protect the most precious girls in the world to me…and to grant the wish of one of my very few male friends as well. I ran with all my might, utterly rejecting my part in the final chapter I’d been abruptly thrust into.

“Okay, but really—did I pick the perfect time to call you ‘Jurai’ or what? I gave it a lot of thought, you know? I went so *far out of my way to keep calling you ‘Andou’ until* right *at the very end, then I let it slip out so naturally you’d think it just happened on its own. What’d you think? Did I pull it off? Was it nice and climactic? And while we’re at it, nice going calling me ‘Sagamin’ in exchange! You really had a read on the scene, didn’t you? It played out so perfectly I almost cracked up, honestly—I had to literally bite my lip to stop myself.”*

I'm begging you... Please *just shut the hell up, Future Sagami.*



Chapter 3 ★ Those Who Fight Back Against Destiny

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Chapter 3: Those Who Fight Back Against Destiny

As I watched Andou dash off into the distance, all the tension that had been keeping me upright drained away and I flopped right back to the ground. Saitou offered me a hand up again, but I just shook my head.

"You can leave me be, thanks," I said. "I know I said I'd stay and help like a real badass a moment ago...but honestly, I think even taking a bullet for someone's beyond me right now."

I could feel a sharp pain in my ribs—most likely, one of them was broken. Characters in battle manga say stuff like "Tch! That last attack broke two or three of my ribs" all the time before carrying on with the fight totally unfazed, but if you ever break a rib in reality, you'll quickly realize that it's a *much* bigger problem than those stories would lead you to believe. For someone like me with the body of a perfectly average, unremarkable high schooler, even a single broken rib was enough to take me out of the action, like it or not.

Ugggh. This hurts so friggin' much...

"I'm not going to be useful regardless, so just ignore me," I said. "I wouldn't want to hold your crew back."

"Oh...? All right, then," Saitou said as she withdrew her hand. It hadn't taken much at all to convince her to respect my wishes.

I heaved a deep sigh. "I'll just stay back here and watch. I'm looking forward to seeing what Saitou Hitomi's master plan ends up looking like."

"Maybe don't get your hopes up. I can't guarantee we're going to win this."

"And yet you seem awfully upbeat, all things considered."

There wasn't a trace of concern or hesitation on Saitou's face. It was like she knew exactly what she had to do and had no doubts whatsoever about following through.

"I guess that's probably because I know I've done everything I can. If this doesn't work, then that's that—I tried my best," Saitou resolutely replied.

Just then, another member of Saitou's crew made her

appearance.

"Hell yeah! Kick his ass, Toks! You've got three more minutes before Ryuu can use another big move—plenty of time to wipe the floor with him!"

Natsu Aki—a girl with long, braided hair who had the power *Headhunting*—stepped up to cheer Toki Shuugo on. It seemed safe to assume that their knowing Kiryuu's power's one weakness, its inability to chain together multiple powerful finishers in a row, was thanks to her. Her power allowed her to analyze other people's abilities, and it could have easily told her precisely how long Kiryuu would have to recharge after using a big attack.

"Now's our big chance—we've gotta get him while he's outta gas! This is the one time he can't actually use *Lucifer's Execution*, the secret move that lets him sever the flow of time! He's been keeping it in his back pocket and hoping to get a chance to be all 'I never wanted to use this power, but I have no choice...' this whole time, but right now, it's off the table!"

Headhunting worked by scanning the memories of whoever its wielder used it on, meaning that all of their secret plans and hidden moves were like an open book to her. And, I mean...hmm. How to put this... It just felt a little *wrong* to me, you know?

This was just like when she'd revealed the nature of Andou's power's second stage. Having all of someone's hidden abilities laid out on the table at once kinda made me lose interest in them. It felt like having someone drop a *huge* spoiler on you out of nowhere about a series you were reading. Aki didn't seem to realize what she was doing at all, though, and kept throwing out pieces of really important information like they were nothing. She didn't even put any effort into the presentation of it all—she just *said* it.

Never mind the state of the story for a moment... The power to "sever the flow of time," is it?

I wasn't at all surprised to hear that the power Kiryuu had been saving for just the right occasion was, in fact, time-based. I was certain that he'd been planning on using it in the last battle that would go down following the formal selection of the *Final Eight*—specifically, in his battle with Kanzaki Tomoyo. Gravity and time were supposed to be closely related in, like, a theory of relativity sort of way? Something about time moving slower in places where gravity's stronger or whatever. Anyway, I had a

feeling that Kiryuu had been planning to use that whole theory as an excuse to class-change from gravity-wielder to time-manipulator.

It seemed that the prediction I'd made about where Kiryuu's plan was going might have actually been pretty close to the mark…though considering he'd since swapped Kanzaki Tomoyo out of the final boss role in favor of Andou—or rather, Guiltia Sin Jurai—I couldn't *completely* say that I'd called it. Plus, it was really hard to imagine that a guy like him would ever be willing to settle for the sort of cheap ending that an utterly unremarkable reader like me could predict.

I'd sided with the group that was doing their best to put a stop to Kiryuu's plan…but I couldn't deny that a part of me regretted that choice. All the instincts that I'd developed over many a long year spent living as a reader were champing at the bit to see the end of the story that Kiryuu Hajime had plotted out. Some part of me was still truly excited to see what sort of incredible final twist he'd cooked up for his conclusion.

Kiryuu Hajime—aka *Ancient Lucifer*—was the origin point of the Fifth Spirit War in a very real sense, and thus he was the root of all the troubles it had caused. After winning the Fourth War, he'd flipped the script by asking to fight in another one right away, bringing the event to our city once more—and with a wide variety of new rules added in. He'd altered and edited the War as he pleased. In a certain sense, I suppose that this War was his New Game +.

The question remained, though: Where was it that he hoped to steer the story for which he served as both star and screenwriter? What would happen when only eight Players remained in the War—when the *Final Eight* had been selected?

"…"

Hmm?

Uhh…wait. What? Hold on. No, really, hold the phone for a moment.

Suddenly, a clear and intense sensation that something was *extremely* wrong came over me. I furiously racked my mind, trying to figure out what it was that had set me off.

Okay, so, who are the eight Players most likely to still be in the running now…? There's the five literary club members, to start. They're set in stone. Andou was just here a minute ago, and I met up with Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Takanashi before I came here. Chifuyu

used her power to help Andou out during his battle with Tamaki too, and Kiryuu was almost certainly planning on keeping them around in the Final Eight *from the start.*

I glanced around at my surroundings. Saitou and Aki were standing nearby, while Kiryuu and Toki were fighting it out in the distance. Counting me, there were currently five Players on the scene. Five here, and five in the literary club. All together...

"...There's *ten* people left?!" I shouted in wild, hysterical shock. Instantly, my midsection erupted in agonizing pain.

Right. Broken rib. Definitely shouldn't be shouting right now. Ugh...

But seriously, though—how was I supposed to *not* shout after a shock like that? Surely you see what's wrong with this picture?

"And that makes eight."

"The auditions are over, and the players have all been chosen. Now—let the beginning of the end commence."

Kiryuu had very clearly—and loudly—declared that there were only eight Players left after he'd taken out Tamaki. That was the whole reason I'd used the special privilege I'd had tucked into my back pocket for *ages* to make myself into a Player. I'd thought that bumping the number of active Players back up to nine would spoil his whole plan. I thought that I'd thrown a wrench into his story's works. But now...there were *ten* Players left?

"Bwa ha ha! 'Ten people left'? Yes...of course you'd have questions about that," Kiryuu said, retreating a safe distance from Toki and glancing over at me. I'd shouted loudly enough for him to make out my words mid-battle, apparently. "Yes, I did indeed say 'That makes eight.' *But*..."

An arrogant smile spread across Kiryuu's face.

"...I don't remember ever saying that I was telling the truth."

"..."

Ugggh.

I just... I don't even... Ugggggggggh.

An overwhelming sense of exhaustion assailed me. I'd screwed up, plain and simple. I'd *known* that you could never, *ever* take anything that Kiryuu Hajime said at face value, but I'd gone and done it anyway. I'd seen *so* many people make themselves look like total morons by making that exact same mistake, and yet here I was, failing to learn anything at all from their examples.

Most likely, Kiryuu had just been trying to look cool when he'd

said that. He'd gotten so worked up by his reunion with Andou Jurai—an event to end all events, in his mind—that he'd made up the "that makes eight" line on the spot, just to add a sense of drama and urgency to the scene. It was like he'd slammed on the story's accelerator, speeding toward its climax so that he could end a volume on a major cliff-hanger or something. The truth, meanwhile, was that there were still *plenty* of Players left in the game.

This was *not* funny. It was misery-inducing. It was *exhausting*. Even now, this late in the game, he was still as big of a poser as ever. On the other hand, maybe that was just a given. After all—we're talking about *the* Kiryuu Hajime. *The* Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First.

"Wasn't that much of a lie, though. After all…it'll be true before you know it," Kiryuu said. He raised a hand as he spoke—and the next thing I knew, the ground where Toki had been standing sunk into itself.

Toki's naturally swift reflexes just barely saved him. He threw himself out of the line of fire, but he ended up sprawled on the ground as a result. The attack had been quite mild compared to *Road to Abbadon*, the one Kiryuu had tried to use on me shortly before, but it had still certainly exerted more than enough force to squash a human flat. In other words, while he wasn't in perfect shape just yet, Kiryuu seemed to have recovered a reasonable amount of his MP.

Toki clicked his tongue with irritation. "Go to hell!" he spat as he rushed toward Kiryuu once more.

Toki's onslaught made it clear that he hadn't earned the title of *Fallen Black*'s assault leader for nothing. He didn't bother with feints or trickery—he just charged in head-on, throwing everything he had at his opponent.

Frankly, I thought that made him an idiot. If Kiryuu really had recovered to an even slightly appreciable degree, then Toki was fighting a losing battle. His style had always been to overwhelm enemies who over-relied on their powers with pure physical might, but Kiryuu's mastery over gravity wasn't the sort of power you could overcome with hand-to-hand combat skills alone. It was a terrible matchup for Toki. He might as well have been launching a suicide attack.

"Be silent in slumber, ye seasoned warrior."

What could I even say other than "called it"? As Toki made a

beeline for Kiryuu, Kiryuu activated his power. He launched a very simple gravitational wave…probably. I technically couldn't see it, but I was pretty sure that's what he'd done.

Once again, the earth sank in on itself. This time, however, it did so in a far wider area than before. No matter how exceptional your reflexes were, dodging an attack like that just wasn't humanly possible. Toki, however, didn't hesitate. If anything, he ran with even more vigor than ever—which was possible because the attack hadn't hit him at all. A gap had opened up in the wave of gravity, splitting it vertically and causing it to rush past him on either side.

A look of astonishment passed across Kiryuu's face. His attack had been cleaved open like Moses parting the Red Sea. The gravity waves themselves were invisible, but the distortion of the ground that they left in their wake made what had happened plain to see. Amid a swath of devastation, a single, straight line of earth was entirely untouched, connecting Toki to Kiryuu—and Toki was sprinting down that one-way path like his life depended on it. In fact, he was sprinting like he'd known it would be there from the very beginning.

"…You're wide open," a dull, gloomy voice rang out as a small-statured boy stepped onto the scene. It was Akutagawa Yanagi, holding a hand outward with two fingers spread apart, like he'd just used them to zoom in on a smartphone's screen.

Dead Space: the power to put the spaces between to work. It allowed its wielder to find and wrench open any and all gaps that they could perceive. Even a completely invisible gravitational wave, it seemed, was nothing more than a gap in Kiryuu's defenses to Yanagi. He'd forced the wave open, creating the perfect path for Toki the assault leader to continue his charge.

I understood all that logic. There was just one thing that I didn't get, though.

"W-Wait, *why*…?" I asked. "I thought you were on Kiryuu's side?"

The last I'd heard, *Fallen Black* had fractured into three factions, each of which had started warring with the others. Kiryuu Hajime, Akutagawa Yanagi, and Hinoemata Tamaki had made up the Kiryuu faction; Saitou Hitomi, Natsu Aki, and Toki Shuugo had formed the Saitou faction; and Yusano Genre and her merry band of alternate personalities had gone solo, becoming a faction of their own.

Tamaki had already been knocked out of the running, but Akutagawa, at least, was still supposed to be part of Kiryuu's camp. He was cold and calculating to a fault, and he had decided to join up with Kiryuu after logically and dispassionately analyzing the state of the conflict. How, then, had he been able to pull off teamwork on the level of precision he'd just displayed—so precise you'd almost think it had all been planned out in advance—with his supposed enemies?

"...Hmph," Akutagawa grunted in response to my baffled, disbelieving exclamation. "As if I'd ever side with that moron. It was all an act."

I was speechless.

"Sorry for tricking you, Sagami. The truth is that we used you," Saitou said, stepping in to fill the void I'd left in the conversation with an explanation. "Akutagawa's been pretending to be on Hajime's side while reporting back to us as a spy the whole time. Hinoemata too, of course. We didn't know what sort of crazy crap Hajime might decide to pull if the whole team betrayed him right from the start, so we made it seem like he still had allies."

Saitou had laid her plan out pretty matter-of-factly, but as it sank in, I realized just how terrible its implications were—how terrible, and how tragic. I couldn't hold back my astonishment or my sympathy.

Oh. I see. So...Kiryuu was betrayed by literally all of his allies. What I'd thought was a split in the faction was actually just him getting excluded from the group. And yet, up until this very moment, he'd thought that he still had friends... It's hard not to feel a little bad for the guy.

"Siding with Hajime would have made most of us look like we'd completely lost our minds, but I figured that Akutagawa and Hinoemata could manage to make it look convincing enough, considering what they're like. Akutagawa's always decided whom to ally himself with based on who looks more likely to win, plain and simple, and Hinoemata... Well, Hinoemata has that whole obsession with Andou Jurai going on, and she never seemed to pay any attention to the actual Spirit War at all."

"...Really, I think he would've believed it even if someone other than me or Hinoemata had joined him. He never questioned me at all. That guy's totally convinced that he has a leader's charisma," said Akutagawa. He almost sounded like he pitied Kiryuu for a moment.

“I get it now… So Tamaki—*Hinoemata* getting Akutagawa to help with her plans, Kiryuu showing up here, and you arriving on the scene with suspiciously perfect timing were all part of a long-term espionage operation,” I observed. “Gotta say, though…I’m surprised, Akutagawa. When I heard you’d sided with Kiryuu I was a little confused at first…but I barely had to think about it at all to make sense of it. It felt like the decision that you’d make.”

Yanagi had always sided with whoever was strongest—whoever seemed to have the best chances of winning. He viewed the world through a calm, logical, and steadfastly pragmatic lens. In that sense, him allying himself with Kiryuu felt natural.

“But now you’ve jumped ship. You’re going for the long shot, lending a hand to a team that the odds are stacked against.”

“…So?” Akutagawa curtly replied. “The way I see it, nothing’s logical about obsessively calculating what will profit you the most and what everyone’s chances of coming out ahead are. Sometimes it’s not so bad to throw all that away and make a stand against the side that disgusts you.”

“Is that so…? Well, well. I guess I’ve been had, then.”

They’d fooled me from start to finish. Akutagawa and Saitou had both told me the bald-faced lie that Akutagawa was on Kiryuu’s side, knowing that I was connected to Kiryuu and would likely bring that false information up with him. In doing so, I’d made him that much less likely to suspect that there was a spy in his camp. They’d exploited my determination to stay an ever-neutral onlooker, taking advantage of the fact that I was willing to share confidential information with anyone and everyone if my whims drove me to do so.

“Honestly…first Kiryuu, and now you too? It seems everyone’s willing to lie to their readers these days.” *Feels like you’re laying on the narrative trickery a little thick at this point.*

While I was muttering to myself, Akutagawa stepped forward. He raised his hand once more, invoking his power to wrench open another barrage of powerful gravity waves, neutralizing them right before they made impact. He even opened up gaps in the air itself to generate powerful gusts of wind, impairing Kiryuu’s movements while aiding his ally’s.

As Toki fought on the front lines, Yanagi supported him with everything he had. A gloomy shut-in and a violent delinquent, two individuals you’d think would never see eye to eye, were taking on their former leader as a shockingly coordinated team.

“Ugh…” Kiryuu grunted as his back thudded against the concrete wall behind him. A combination of Toki’s knifework and Yanagi’s blasts of wind had overwhelmed him, literally forcing his back up against a wall—specifically, against one of the towering supports that held up the bridge over the river.

Kiryuu was cornered. There was nowhere for him to run. If ever there had been a moment when he was at his weakest, it was now. Toki, however, didn’t take advantage of that opening. Instead of piling on the pressure, he laid off, backstepping away from his opponent. It didn’t take long for me to figure out why.

“See you in hell, you dipshit of a boss,” Toki triumphantly declared—and an instant later, a thunderous *crack* rang out as a fissure raced its way up the concrete wall behind Kiryuu’s back. The cracks spread throughout the support before anyone could react, and at the same time, the horrible, screeching creak of metal straining to its absolute limit sounded from the bridge above. In the blink of an eye, the whole structure began to collapse.

Zigzag Jigsaw allowed Toki to leave a fragment of his knife behind in anyone or anything that he cut. That fragment would move with a will of its own, traveling to the core of its target and destroying it from the inside. For a person, that meant the fragment would travel to their heart and tear it to pieces—and for a building, it would target and bring down whatever structural supports it could access. Just as the smallest of leaks can sink the greatest of ships, even a slight graze from Toki’s knife would develop into a fatal injury.

Most likely, Toki had made a few cuts on the bridge in advance, leaving pieces of his knife inside. Then he’d waited until those fragments were just about to finish destroying the structure’s core before luring Kiryuu underneath it just as the collapse would begin. From the very beginning, the combination of shut-in and delinquent had all been for the sake of this one, single attack.

A roaring clamor filled the air as the massive bridge began to collapse into the river beneath it. The wreckage covered Kiryuu in an instant, blocking him from sight. Considering how quickly it had happened, there was no conceivable way he could’ve escaped. He’d entered the scene by standing atop the bridge’s highest point for maximum impact, and now he found himself buried beneath it. You could hardly have asked for a more ironic

conclusion.

“D-Don’t you think you might have overdone it a little…?” I asked apprehensively. “I mean, are we sure that there weren’t any civilians on that bridge? We Players come back to life if we die, but if some random person who happened to be nearby got killed—”

“There is no cause for concern, onlooker.”

Just like that, a girl wearing the sort of bright pink nurse’s outfit that you don’t even see in eroge anymore stepped seemingly out of nowhere to answer my question. There was a mirthless archaic smile on her face that gave her a mysterious, almost inhuman presence. That told me that her core personality, Yusano Genre, was currently in control.

“Militaria’s power has driven any passersby away from the vicinity,” said Genre. “No innocents were harmed in the bridge’s collapse.”

Genre’s multitude of personalities predated her participation in the Spirit War. The power that the War gave her, *Sex Eclipse*, allowed her to transplant those personalities into other individuals, essentially acting as a form of possession. That wasn’t the only power she’d been given, though: Every single personality within her had each been given their own individual power as well. The basic rule of the Spirit War was that each Player got precisely one power, but Genre was an exception among exceptions. She was the War’s greatest renegade—or perhaps its most blessed participant. Anyway, I hadn’t met Militaria myself, but apparently, her power gave her the ability to drive people away from a chosen area.

“Genre…” I muttered. “Don’t tell me—you too?”

“Yes. I, too, have collaborated with Saitou Hitomi to oppose Kiryuu Hajime,” Genre indifferently confirmed. “I departed from *Fallen Black* in order to defeat him, but I was never concerned with the idea of doing so one-on-one. It would be strange for me to suffer from such a preoccupation, considering there was never just one of me from the outset,” she added. I got the sense that she was trying to be witty, but even then, her expression never budged. “If Saitou Hitomi and her fellows were willing to join me in opposing Kiryuu Hajime, then I saw no reason to refuse their assistance.”

Genre teaming up with Hitomi’s team was *not* a development I’d seen coming. This wasn’t the three-way split that I’d taken it

for—the conflict wasn't even in that dimension. This was a coup. The Twelve Wings of *Fallen Black* whom Kiryuu had assembled (of which there weren't actually twelve, but never mind that detail) had all, without exception, betrayed him. A single woman who shouldn't have been anything more than one of his many wings—the woman who'd devoted herself to him with a sort of dedication that no one else had ever displayed—had stolen his entire organization from under him. As things stood, the fallen angel's wings were now all in *her* possession.

"I must praise Saitou Hitomi's willingness to use every resource available to her," Genre continued. "After all, I once intended to take her life in order to announce my intention to oppose *Fallen Black*."

"You... Huh?"

"Moreover, I killed Tanaka Umeko while pursuing that objective."

"*Huuuh?!*"

"I truly admire her willingness to join forces with me in spite of those circumstances."

I whipped my gaze over to Saitou.

"That's not how it happened," Saitou said with a slight shake of her head. "Genre didn't kill Umeko. Umeko died to protect me," she quietly but emphatically asserted. She said it in a tone that brooked absolutely no argument. "I'm not going to claim that I'm not at all conflicted about working with her...but I've decided that right now, I need to prioritize getting as much backup on my side as I possibly can over my own little hang-ups. That's what it'll take if I want to beat Hajime."

With that, Saitou turned to look once more at the pile of rubble. Her allies all had their gazes fixed on the bridge's fallen remains as well.

By all reasonable standards, there wasn't a chance in hell that Kiryuu was alive. As terrifying of a power as *Lucifer's Strike* was, it did nothing to make Kiryuu himself indestructible. He was a perfectly ordinary, flesh-and-blood human being, and like most humans, having several tons of rubble on his head would kill him before he had time to realize what had even happened. Plus, he couldn't use his control over gravity to reduce the rubble's weight with his MP depleted. Saitou's team had won...or rather, it was exactly the sort of situation that would make them *think* they'd won. In truth, however, not even one of them had let their

guard drop.

The seconds ticked by. At long last, the cloud of dust that had been raised by the collapse began to disperse.

"You know, this is the one power that I never wanted to use."

There he was. He stood atop the wreckage, his jet-black coat trailing behind him in the breeze, completely unharmed. Steel and concrete had fallen upon him like rain, but he hadn't been so much as scratched.

Kiryuu lightly jumped from the pile of rubble…and vanished into thin air.

"It's *too* powerful, see. Can't exactly control it."

The next thing I knew, Kiryuu appeared in a completely different place, several meters away from where he'd been before—only to vanish once more before I even understood what I was seeing. Once again, he appeared elsewhere, then disappeared just as quickly. It was as if someone were flicking a light switch that controlled his existence on and off, and after every disappearance, he shifted position before reemerging again. It felt like I was watching a stop-motion video with an incredibly low framerate.

This shouldn't be possible. What am I even seeing? What sort of power is this…?

…is probably what most people would have thought under those circumstances, but honestly, I figured out the broad strokes of it pretty much right away.

"Bwa ha ha!" Kiryuu cackled. "I've gotta hand it to you. I never thought anyone would make me use *this* power… *This* is the true, innate nature of the power I was born with—the power of beginnings, and a power so fiendishly brutal, I had no choice but to seal it away. And that power's name—"

"Okay, guys, Ryuu just used *Lucifer's Execution*! It's that time-severing thingamajig—you've all read my report and we did plenty of prep work, so you know the drill! Just keep calm and stick to the plan!"

The other members of Hitomi's team nodded in response to Aki's shout.

"That… That power's name is…" Kiryuu mumbled. He'd just had the perfect opportunity to reveal his hidden trump card taken away from him, and he looked downright devastated. The

look on his face was so pitiful, even I felt a little bad for the guy.

Okay, see, this is the thing. This is exactly why Aki's power should never, ever *exist in a supernatural battle story.*

A power like hers made battles *instantly* boring. There's nothing fun about fighting an opponent whose secret moves and hidden powers get spoiled before they're even used. I'll admit that I'd always been the sort of person who thought that plot twists that go "The truth is, I haven't even been taking this fight seriously" and "Actually, I still have one trick up my sleeve" and "This move's odds of success are too low, so I'd normally never use it, but" and "This is the one power I never wanted to use" and so on were solid signs that an author was gearing up to compete in the Asspull Olympics…but you know what? Asspulls are good, actually! A turn-based contest of competing asspulls is exactly what a supernatural battle *should* look like. That's exactly why Tamaki's and Umeko's powers worked the way they did.

But anyway, that's more than enough of my reader's perspective. Back to the scene at hand.

Lucifer's Execution: the power to sever time itself. The phrase "sever time" on its own was a pretty clear giveaway that it had something to do with time manipulation, and if he could mess with the flow of time, then his having emerged from a rain of rubble unscathed and flying around in stop motion both made total sense.

Time manipulation powers were, statistically speaking, more likely than not to end up in a final boss's arsenal. Only characters important enough to influence a story from start to finish were allowed to set foot in the temporal realm. I didn't know exactly how Kiryuu's power functioned, but there was still no question at all that it was a mighty power indeed.

"Bwa ha ha…" Kiryuu laughed once more, though this time, it sounded a little forced. It seemed he'd more or less recovered his emotional footing. "Fine, then. If that's how you want it to be…then I'll carve my power's name into your very souls, and brand you with the sigil of the conquered while I'm at it!"

With that enraged shout, Kiryuu made his move—or, rather, he *prepared* to make his move. He thrust his hand into the air, looking like he was about to recite some sort of incantation, eyes glimmering with a fiery passion all the while. Kiryuu Hajime was *obviously* about to use his final, most secret of special techniques: *Lucifer's Execution*, the power to sever time itself.

In the end, however…I never actually found out what specifically that power was supposed to do. After all—he never got the chance to use it.

"I had faith, progenitor."

The voice rang out seemingly from nowhere at all, but I knew its distinctive tone in an instant. I also recognized the strange way in which she referred to people by appellations rather than their names.

"Powers of time manipulation are a poor fit for this girl's ability. Her power, after all, cannot be used unless she is able to witness the very instance that another power comes into effect. And yet…I had faith, progenitor of the Fifth Spirit War. I had faith that you would, without question, strike a pose or recite a chant that told me unambiguously when you were about to use your power."

That peculiar, distinctive manner of talking—like she was monologuing and held no interest at all in listening to what anyone else had to say—could only have come from Yusano Genre…but the voice itself was nothing like how she usually sounded. It was the voice of someone entirely different—but not someone unfamiliar to me. In fact, it was a voice I knew quite well.

"*Phew*… All right! That's mission accomplished," came another voice, one much less focused and clearly rather relieved. It was Genre's normal voice…but no. That wasn't quite right. The speaker wasn't Genre at all. "Ugh… I-I was so nervous! I've never had to impersonate Miss Genre before… I was on pins and needles worrying that someone would call me out…"

"A-Are you…Fantasia?" I asked.

"That's right! It's been a while, Sagami," the girl in the pink nurse's uniform replied with a cheerful smile. The eerie archaic smile she'd worn before had vanished into the wind.

Yusano Fantasia was one of the many personalities in Genre's roster. She was also the most sociable of them all, and as a result, hers was the personality who'd spent the most time in surface-level control of Genre's body. Genre herself had been acting as the main personality more often than usual lately, but up until quite recently, she'd lived as Fantasia the vast majority of the time.

Anyway, it seemed that the person who I'd thought was Genre was, in fact, Fantasia putting on an act. I hadn't noticed at all—though of course, since they *were* the same person, I wasn't going to beat myself up too badly over that mistake.

But in that case…whose voice *had* I heard just now? Who had come from nowhere flawlessly replicating Genre's characteristic cadence?

"Progenitor. I have laid countless plans, run myriad simulations, all for the sake of defeating you. And, at the end of my labors, I reached the conclusion that *this* was far and away the most likely strategy to grant me success," said the person I was convinced was Genre. It really did sound just like her, while also sounding nothing like her whatsoever. "The most likely to grant me success…and far and away the most expedient means as well."

Finally, a girl stepped through a void in space. I assumed she'd used some sort of power to pull that off, and she might've been watching the battle play out through a hidden camera or something as well.

That girl…was Kudou Mirei.

Kudou was a third-year at the high school I attended, the former student council president, and—most importantly—the wielder of a supernatural power, just like the five members of the literary club. She possessed the ultimate power of usurpation, *Grateful Robber*, capable of stealing any other power she so chose.

The girl who'd suddenly arrived at the battlefield was unmistakably Kudou, but the aura she exuded was nothing whatsoever like her usual self. She had a calm, mysterious presence, and a hollow, emotionless, archaic smile graced her lips. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that although she was Kudou, Kudou herself was not holding the reins. Kudou Mirei had been taken over by Yusano Genre.

Sex Eclipse, the power of fractured identities, was the ability that Genre, the core personality of the whole Yusano conglomerate, had awakened to. She could use it to implant any of the personalities within her into another person's body, and—as Aki had secretly informed me some time prior—if the core personality herself took over another individual, the effects of her mental domination became dramatically harder to resist.

“Kiryuu Hajime. Your power…is mine now.”

The moment the words left Kudou Mirei’s—or rather, Yusano Genre’s—lips, Kiryuu staggered, seemingly slumping over in exhaustion. His eyes were wide with astonishment, and an expression of frustration came across his face as he turned to look at the girl who’d stolen his power. He glared at her like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“No…way… Kudou…Mirei…?” Kiryuu grunted.

“Hmm. It seems I’ve succeeded,” Genre dispassionately muttered using Kudou’s voice. She clenched and opened her hand a few times, as if to test her newfound strength, then raised that hand to point at a patch of ground a short ways in front of her—which instantly sunk into itself with a heavy *thud*. “The analyst was correct, then. By stealing his power to sever time, so too have I stolen his power to desecrate the force of gravity.”

The power Genre had just used was, without question, *Lucifer’s Strike*. She really had taken Kiryuu’s ability for her own. She’d casually, easily, and entirely claimed it.

“A new personality awakened within me,” said Genre. “Yusano Destinia is her name, and the power she awakened to in turn was that of omni-comprehension: *Hard Watching*. It grants her knowledge of every living Player in the War, as well as an understanding of their powers. Not as deep of an understanding as the analyst’s power gives her, however—Destinia can only understand their capabilities on a surface level.”

It sounded like a similar sort of power to Natsu Aki’s, but with very different strengths and limitations. While Aki’s power gave her deep, complete knowledge of anyone she could directly observe, Destinia’s seemed to give her shallow and incomplete knowledge of everyone on a broad, all-encompassing scale.

“It was through use of *Hard Watching* that I came across this girl. The power she bears is so mighty, it defies comprehension,” Genre said with her ever-present, empty smile. “It is preposterous…unthinkable beyond measure. How could a power such as it be allowed? How could it be acceptable for her to be able to steal any number of powers, at no risk to herself, with no requirement other than witnessing them in use? It is a violation of all rationality, and one of such excessive scale it could very well cause the collapse of the Spirit War itself. It rivals even

System in the sheer danger it presents."

The ability to steal any power just by seeing it really was way too overpowered. You had to wonder if something had gone fundamentally wrong when it was given to Kudou. If a character with a power like that turned up in a supernatural battle manga, they'd throw the whole story's power curve out of balance single-handedly. It really was just as balance-breaking as *System*—or perhaps even more so, actually. It ran the risk of tearing apart a story's world-building from the ground up.

The fact that its user had been isolated from the Spirit War along with the literary club's members, preventing her from joining the battle in any real capacity, had kept her from exercising her true, terrifying potential so far...but when you thought about what she *could* have done, calling her power cheating felt like an understatement. The fact that it was both the ultimate buff and debuff all in one was enough to put it in the upper echelons of the power tier list on its own, but when you added in the fact that the conditions of its activation were so lax—well, the word "powerful" just didn't do it justice anymore.

Even the godlike powers held by the four literary club girls were but dust in the wind in the face of Kudou Mirei. She was the human incarnation of avarice, capable of devouring power after power without cease thanks to the auspices of her *Grateful Robber*...

"So, *this* is the true face of Kudou Mirei's power, the hoard of the raging despot, *Tyrant's El Dorado*..."

"Your pride has betrayed you, progenitor. In your arrogance, you have fallen victim to Kudou Mirei's *Eater Eater*."

...and apparently, Kiryuu and Genre had both independently given said power their own names.

Well, this is getting confusing. I think I'll stick to Andou's Grateful Robber*, personally.*

"It baffles me as to why this girl was given such an unusual and unorthodox power...but I saw no reason not to make full use of it. Now that I have done so, and now that your power has been stripped from you, you are nothing more than a man like any other," said Genre. A slight sense of superiority had slipped into her words, accompanied by an equally faint touch of pity.

Kiryuu, now powerless, staggered to his feet in a daze. *Lucifer's Strike*, the power that had made him the most dangerous Player in the War, and *Lucifer's Execution*, the power

he'd kept hidden away in his back pocket, waiting for just the right moment to use it, had both been taken from him by way of avarice incarnate.

"This was our plan, Hajime. This whole time, our goal was to have Kudou Mirei steal all your powers away from you in one fell swoop," said Saitou. "Not even Aki's power could predict what exactly would happen if Kudou stole them from you. We decided that if we wanted to be as careful as we possibly could, we'd need to have her steal your power *after* you'd tried to bring out your hidden ability. I'm just relieved to see that it worked out."

The pieces of Saitou Hitomi's plan had finally fallen into place. While a three-way power struggle had played out on the surface, behind the scenes, she had directed every single actor in the scenario to take action against Kiryuu Hajime, leaving him entirely isolated. She'd even pulled me into her scheme, using my status as a reader to leak false information to her foe, all for the sake of engineering the single moment of weakness she'd needed to rally her troops and crush Kiryuu in an all-out offensive. Then, when his back was up against the wall and he'd had no choice but to use the secret power he'd been eagerly waiting to debut for so very long, she'd stolen it from him before he could even show it off.

As far as plans went, it was stunningly nasty...and stunningly effective. She'd brought together so much force to use against Kiryuu it was downright excessive, she'd ironed out her plan so thoroughly that there wasn't the slightest crease to be seen in it, and she'd ultimately defeated him so soundly that it was safe to call her victory absolute. She'd so mercilessly used strength in numbers to crush a single foe, it'd make even a *Super Sentai* hero wince.

"So, Hajime? What do you think?" asked Saitou. "We are *Fallen Black*. We're the team you brought together, the team that fought by your side, and the team that you just couldn't manage to lead."

The twelve wings of sable darkness: *Fallen Black*.

Its first wing: *Eternal Wink*, aka Saitou Hitomi.

Its second wing: *Dead Space*, aka Akutagawa Yanagi.

Its third wing: *Head Hunting*, aka Natsu Aki.

Its fourth wing: *Zigzag Jigsaw*, aka Toki Shuugo.

Its fifth wing: *Sex Eclipse*, aka Yusano Genre.

And, although they weren't present at the moment...

Its sixth wing: *White Rulebook*, aka Tanaka Umeko.

Its seventh wing: *Lost Regalia*, aka Hinoemata Tamaki.

And finally...

Its thirteenth wing: *Innocent Onlooker*, aka Sagami Shizumu.

Those were the names of the twelve wings—or really, the eight warriors—whom Kiryuu Hajime had gathered to serve him. A team in name only, each and every one of its members lacking all but the flimsiest sense of solidarity. To make matters worse, their boss had no charisma or leadership ability to speak of. All in all, they were a ragtag gathering of mismatched powerhouses to the bitter end, each far too strong in personality to ever truly blend in with the rest of the group.

And yet, now...each and every one of them had fallen under the command of a single woman. She'd directed them with precision, and not one of them had fallen out of line. The group that Kiryuu Hajime had so miserably failed to manage ran like a well-oiled machine under Saitou Hitomi's leadership.

"I don't think I'm particularly amazing at this or anything like that," said Saitou. "I'm not very charismatic, and I'm not much of a leader either. I'm as ordinary as it gets. But the thing is, Hajime...I was able to pull it off because of you. You made yourself into such a clear and obvious enemy, it was easy for the rest of us to come together to face you."

"Dammit, Hitomi," Kiryuu growled, gritting his teeth with frustration.

"Heh heh!" Saitou chuckled as she watched him. It was like she couldn't hold back her mirth. "Well, this is nice. At long, long last...you're finally looking at me."

Saitou's smile didn't last long. It vanished away before I knew it, replaced with a dangerously pointed glare. She faced Kiryuu down with the bitter dignity of a true commander.

"It's over, Hajime," Saitou declared. "I still have no idea what you were trying to accomplish...and I guess now I never will. There's one thing I can say for sure, though: We're through with playing along with your games. We'll defeat you. We'll bring an end to your story."

As she spoke those final words, Saitou's allies—the teammates who had gathered up behind her—sprang into motion. Toki Shuugo, Akutagawa Yanagi, Yusano Fantasia, and Genre in the guise of Kudou Mirei went on the attack. Every one of them excelled in personal combat in one way or another, and

all of them attacked in unison, dead set on ending their battle once and for all.

Kiryuu Hajime didn't move. Most likely, he *couldn't* move. Robbed of his power, he didn't have any means by which to counter their all-out attack.

It was over. There was just nothing Kiryuu could do to pull off a dramatic reversal anymore. No convenient plot twist could make the impossible possible.

"Yeah...I get it. I was wrong."

Suddenly, Kiryuu spoke. His voice sounded weak and somehow resigned.

"In the end, I never managed to make all of you see me as your boss...but, of course I couldn't. I never told you the first thing about my goals or my true intentions, and I never put much faith in you either. A guy like me could never cut it as your boss. Ha... The twelve wings of *Fallen Black*? What a crock of bullshit," he spat with a sardonic sneer. "I was wrong... I really was."

Kiryuu repeated himself, over and over...and as he did, his smile changed. What was once a sneer spread wider, splitting open into a crazed, ghastly grin.

"I was wrong to think that I, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First...could ever let a *team*, of all things, hold me back."

With a booming *thud*, the earth sank into itself. It sank deeply, a broad swath of the land pushed flat. The four members of *Fallen Black* who'd gone on the attack and those of us who'd stayed behind were all caught in the impact, driven to the ground by a powerful force. There was only one exception who remained standing: Kiryuu Hajime himself.

"Bwa ha ha, *bwaaa* ha ha ha ha ha... Yes, that's right. I was wrong from the very start. Playing this *friendship* game and trying to fight as a fun little team was all a mistake."

He laughed. He cachinnated. He let out a sneering, scornful, mocking cackle, his black and red eyes shining all the while.

"After all, the path I'm walking...the ideal I'm pursuing...the world I see before me...no one other than I could *ever* understand any of it. It's far beyond the imaginations of you

petty plebeians!”

“Ugh… Gaaaaaah!”

A wail of anguish escaped my lips as an impact crashed across my entire body. It was like an invisible giant had brought its hand down on me, crushing me beneath its massive palm. I heard similarly pained grunts and screams from the others as well. This wasn’t a fractured rib’s worth of pain anymore—it felt like my whole body was broken.

It was like we’d been made to kneel before a king. Like we’d been made to supplicate ourselves before a demon lord. Like we’d been made to grovel before a god. Like the ironclad hammer of a fallen angel had been brought down upon us. We who had dared to rebel against Kiryuu Hajime had now been laid low, one and all.

“U-Ugh… H-How…?” Genre—by way of Kudou Mirei—managed to choke out from the patch of ground where she’d been driven to her knees. “I stole your power… *Lucifer’s Strike* was, without question, in my grasp… So how…did it return to you?”

That was the only possible conclusion: Kiryuu had regained his power. The invisible force that was currently crushing us couldn’t have been anything other than his gravity manipulation. A power that should have been pilfered had somehow returned to its owner’s hands.

“The power to steal any foe’s ability after seeing it be used, with no further conditions or restrictions…? Hmph. That was a bad call. Sure, giving the first enemy a sense of impact is important, but even in that context, Kudou Mirei was just *too powerful*,” Kiryuu monologued matter-of-factly. “Under ordinary conditions, she *would’ve* awakened to the power to *copy* someone else’s power, and only for a limited time. Someone stepped in to change it into an outright cheat that let her steal powers for a potentially unlimited duration, though—and that someone was me.”

“That’s…absurd,” said Genre. “Wh-Why would—”

“Isn’t it obvious? To hype up the moment,” said Kiryuu. “I’d wanted to give Andou Jurai—Guiltia Sin Jurai—a moment to shine. I’d wanted to gift him a spectacular first battle in commemoration of our momentous chance meeting. It wasn’t easy, you know? It took a lot of work to set up a legitimately mighty enemy that *his* power could triumph against.”

The moment I heard those words…the pieces finally clicked

together. The absurdly, irrationally powerful nature of Kudou Mirei's ability and the fact that her battle with the literary club had almost seemed tailor-made to allow Andou to contribute in the most contrived way possible all made sense. It really *had been* contrived, because it was all part of the story that Kiryuu Hajime was telling.

Originally, of course, Tamaki was the one who had arranged for Kudou to be made into a Player. Tamaki had decided to use her as a tool to mess with Andou—and Kiryuu, in turn, had used *Tamaki's* plan to fulfill his own designs. I had some doubts about the timeline of those events—it didn't *quite* feel like they all lined up perfectly—but if you took into account the fact that Kiryuu had the ability to direct the flow of the Spirit War itself, those quibbles seemed downright petty. It was abundantly clear that the spirits had the ability to meddle with humans' memories, so convincing Kudou that her power had *always* allowed her to fully steal other Players' powers would have been the simplest of tasks for them.

Kiryuu had engineered Kudou Mirei's actions—engineered *Grateful Robber*'s capabilities—all for Andou's sake. It was like how light novels would always make sure that their first volumes ended on a big, climactic moment. Even a slice-of-life light novel had to give its main character a chance to shine *somehow*, and modifying Kudou's power to be ultra-broken had given Andou his. She was turned into a character against whom the literary club girls' godlike abilities would do nothing, but who could paradoxically get trounced by a lame gimmick like Andou's "black flame that doesn't burn" shtick. The power to steal powers, in fact, was probably one of the only abilities that could fulfill those very strict conditions.

"It was a pretty clever way to make him look good, I gotta say…but I might've tuned her power to be just a little *too* over-the-top broken while I was at it. And so, I've decided to fix it," said Kiryuu. "Kudou Mirei's *Tyrant's El Dorado*: 'Allows the user to steal any power that they see being used—with the exception of Kiryuu Hajime's, upon which the power will not function.'"

I had no idea what I was listening to. The extra note that Kiryuu had appended after his description of Kudou's power was so profoundly, childishly direct, I didn't even know what to call it. It made no sense.

All of us were as baffled as could be, but Kiryuu ignored our

confusion and just kept talking. The look in his eyes was full of a calm and composed joy as he swept his gaze across us, eventually landing on Akutagawa Yanagi, who, despite being prostrate on the ground, was still desperately trying to move his fingers into position to invoke his power.

"Akutagawa Yanagi's *Dead Space*: 'Allows the user to perceive and forcibly enlarge any and all gaps—with the exception of powers invoked by Kiryuu Hajime, upon which it will have no effect.'"

Like always, Akutagawa spread his fingers apart—once, then twice, and a third time for good measure. Nothing happened. Until moments before, he'd been easily opening gaps in the invisible gravitational force Kiryuu wielded, but now, he couldn't influence it at all.

"Natsu Aki's *Head Hunting*: 'Allows the user to determine the full capabilities of any powers held by individuals they see—with the exception of Kiryuu Hajime's power, which it cannot see through.' Toki Shuugo's *Zigzag Jigsaw*: 'Allows the user to leave a fragment of their knife in anything they slash—with the exception of Kiryuu Hajime, who cannot be the subject of their attacks.' Saitou Hitomi's *Eternal Wink*: 'Allows the user to give individuals they see an Evil Eye—however, this power will be rendered unusable for thirty minutes starting from the moment of this revision.' Yusano Genre's *Sex Eclipse*, plus all affiliated personalities' individual powers: 'Due to a violation of the one Player, one power standard, all personalities aside from the core personality, Genre, will have their powers stripped from them.'"

Kiryuu blabbed on and on without cease, listing off our powers and appending a new restriction to each one. The way he spoke was so expository, so specific and pointed, that it felt like he was reading out the changelog for the rules of a card game that had had its power inflation problem go well past the point of reason.

"Sagami Shizumu's *Innocent Onlooker*: 'Allows the user to cause others to have visions of their future—however, use of this ability will cost the user their own vision.'"

The next thing I knew—as soon as the words left Kiryuu's mouth—the world was cloaked in darkness. I couldn't see. I couldn't see anything at all.

"*Reverse Crux Errata*."

I could no longer see what sort of face Kiryuu was making…but it wasn't very hard to imagine how prideful he must've been as he revealed yet another of his beloved power names.

"This is the one power that I never wanted to use," said Kiryuu. "It's too powerful, see. It makes everything *way too easy to control*."

Oh. Of course.

Why hadn't I noticed sooner? This Fifth Spirit War had begun after Kiryuu, the winner of the Fourth Spirit War, had asked to fight another round. As his addition of the Final Eight rule made clear, he was, in a very real sense, the War's true overlord. To put it in different terms, he had admin privileges over the whole War. If he'd had the ability to modify Kudou Mirei's power and turn it into a game-breaking cheat, then it stood to reason he could freely meddle with other people's powers as well, remaking them from the ground up if need be—and apparently, he could do so in real time.

Kiryuu Hajime had just rewritten all of our abilities. He'd gone out of his way to specifically purge the elements that were inconvenient to him and add ones that worked in his favor. He'd acted like the developers of an online game adjusting characters and abilities that were too strong in order to balance them, or like the makers of a card game writing errata to deal with overpowered cards or rules inconsistencies. He'd *patched* our powers.

"Are you serious…? You can't *do* that…" I said with a pained chuckle. It was so absurd, I couldn't even bring myself to despair over it. I couldn't see how everyone else was reacting, of course, but I had a feeling that they were in much the same boat as I was. Kiryuu had demonstrated that he was operating on such a thoroughly different level than us that despairing over it would just feel stupid.

Reverse Crux Errata. He'd done his best to name it like one of our powers, but from what I could tell, it wasn't precisely a power itself. Rather, it was his name for the authority that he held over the whole War—a power that existed in a completely separate dimension from the ones we held. That explained why *Head Hunting* had never even hinted that he had such an ability.

When the cards were all on the table, the situation was

surprisingly simple: we'd never stood a chance from the start. Kiryuu Hajime could easily defeat any foe he went up against, and he could win the whole War just as effortlessly. He could also put on a convincing act that any battle he engaged in was hard-fought with no trouble whatsoever. He'd been going easy on all of us, enjoying a self-imposed challenge run. From the very start to the very end, from top to bottom, the whole Fifth Spirit War had been nothing more than a chance for Kiryuu to indulge in an over-the-top power fantasy. He had never been playing the same game that we were. He'd never lived in the same world—never saw things the way we did. Even calling him the War's overlord felt like an understatement. He wasn't the overlord of the War—he was, in a very real sense, the author of our story.

To Kiryuu, our powers were nothing more than elements of a plotline that he was still in the process of working out. He could revise them whenever and however he pleased. If a power was so strong it was getting in the way of the story, he could just hit the backspace key and act like it had never been there at all.

A story can have all sorts of its aspects get altered solely according to its author's whims—and, as a result, can all too easily collapse in upon itself. The Spirit War had already collapsed in just that manner. As things stood, no one had the slightest chance of standing up to Kiryuu. He was unbeatable. His power was so absolute that complaining about how cheap it was didn't feel worth the effort. No matter how the characters in a story struggled, they could never defeat their own author.

Our tale of supernatural battles had broken down in the most bullshit way possible: with the introduction of its own author into the story itself.

Silence fell. Nobody was saying so much as a word anymore. The fact that we felt tens of times heavier than usual thanks to the gravitational field was part of the problem, but more than that, our spirits had been shattered.

To pull out another card game analogy, it was even worse than playing a one-of-a-kind card and informing your opponent that all of your cards are toons now, so nothing affects them anymore. It was more like the sheer unfairness of playing against the game's creator and having them decide to change the rules on the spot after declaring that one of your cards was too powerful. It was *stupid*, and once that line had been crossed,

there was nothing left to do but flip the table and call it a day. Shifting back to story terms, if I encountered a twist like that in a book, I'd throw it straight at the nearest wall. You just didn't *do* that.

What are you thinking, Kiryuu? You have to know that this is the one line you should never, ever cross, right?

"...Ugh. Hmnh... Ahhh!"

While most of us suffered in silence under the crushing force of Hajime's gravity...a single individual was still trying to resist. Even after being hit in the face with the most awful, plot-decimating twist in history, just one of us was still willing to play along.

"Agh... Argh... Haaah... Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha! Yeah... I guess this isn't happening," said Saitou Hitomi. Her moan-like grunts of exertion had finally given way to resigned laughter. "I'd really thought I had you for a minute...but I guess this is as far as a foil like me can ever go. Damn it all... Who knew you'd be saving a trump card like *that* all the way to the very end? For god's sake, couldn't you be just a *little* predictable at least *once* in your life?"

Saitou sounded frustrated—as frustrated as she'd ever been. Her chagrin was clear in every word she spat out.

"Hey, Hajime," she continued. "If you kill me here, I'll come back to life without any memories of any of this, right? In that case...why the hell not? Might as well take this one last chance to just put it all out there."

Saitou took a quick breath and hesitated for just a moment.

"Love ya, Hajime."

She came out and said it—and in a weirdly showy tone, to boot. She put all her stubbornness—her inner self—her *everything*—on display. She'd put everything she had into betraying Kiryuu Hajime, scheming with all her might to bring about his downfall, but at the end of the day, who she was at her core hadn't changed at all. On the one hand, she'd fought him with all her might, but on the other hand, she'd faced him with more sincerity and devotion than anyone else ever could have.

Kiryuu offered no response to Saitou's out-of-the-blue, eleventh-hour confession of love. In my blinded state, I had no way of telling how he reacted to her all-too-intense feelings.

"...Later, *Fallen Black*."

As he spoke those words—the last he cared to offer to us—the air around me seemed to shift. I could feel something so

terrible looming over me, it made my whole body break out in goose bumps. Screams of shock and despair rang out around me. Kiryuu had clearly used some sort of absurd special ability, but I had absolutely no clue what specifically it was.

What I did know, though…was that our time in the spotlight had come to a close. Our hopes and dreams would have to be carried on by those who'd spent the whole story so far indulging in the little pleasures of their commonplace adventures.

Welp. I guess this is it for me. Take care of the rest, Jurai—nay, Guiltia Sin Jurai.

As I said that final, internal prayer, an incomprehensible and illogical power assailed me with irrational force. Before I'd even had time to feel pain, I was gone.

Bye-bye.



Chapter 4 ★ Fiction and Reality

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Chapter 4: Fiction and Reality

The instant I had a chance after sprinting away from Sagami, I invoked the Mandatory Assembly Protocol.

What, you may ask, was the Mandatory Assembly Protocol? Simply put, it was one of the many protocols circulated among the members of the literary club. Its invocation would cause all of the club's members to drop whatever they were doing, no matter what that might be, and gather at a predetermined location with all due haste. It was an emergency protocol that clocked in at an SSS rating on the urgency scale. We of the literary club—largely under my direction—had established a set of emergency plans broad and varied enough to cover any disaster you could imagine, and the Mandatory Assembly Protocol was just one of the many countermeasures in our arsenal.

I opened up the group LINE chat that the five of us shared, typed out the words "Mandatory Assembly Protocol," and followed them up with "Point G: 1078," informing everyone in code exactly where we would be gathering. Everyone had called me a chuuni for spending day after day ironing out these plans, but in that moment, I was truly glad that I'd gone to so much trouble to sow the seeds of emergency preparedness.

If this means that we'll be able to come together just a little sooner, then it was all worth—

Tomoyo: "Uh-huh. Get a grip, chuuni-boy"
Hatoko: "Oh, Juu! Thank goodness. We've been trying to call you for ages!"
Sayumi: "Where have you been? We were all worried about you."
Chifuyu: (Sticker featuring a surreal character making an equally surreal expression)

Not even one of them took the order seriously.

Oh, okay, I get it. Looking back with a clear head, I'd been abducted out of nowhere by Tamaki the moment the world had returned to normal from Sayumi's power making everything topsy-turvy. From everyone else's perspective, I'd vanished into

thin air and had been mysteriously out of contact since.

Jurai: “No, for real! I’m 100% serious this time! This is an actual emergency situation!”
Jurai: “Just meet up at Point G: 1078, ASAP!”
Tomoyo: “lol; lmao”
Hatoko: “Sorry, point what? Where is that?”
Sayumi: “Are you familiar with the story of ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’?”
Chifuyu: (Sticker featuring a surreal character making an equally surreal expression)

Well, if it isn’t the consequences of my own actions! I sure did sow these seeds, and I sure am reaping them!

Tomoyo brushed me off, Hatoko had forgotten the location codes, Sayumi went *straight* for the jugular, and who even knew what Chifuyu was trying to communicate. The system of protocols I’d taken so much care to set up for any given situation had totally broken down, so in the end I just texted them a simple “Meet me at the karaoke place by the station, stat,” followed by a series of increasingly desperate attempts to get them to believe that this really *was* an emergency.

Everyone still seemed less than convinced that this wasn’t just a prank, but my panic seemed to finally get through to them, and I ultimately managed to get them to agree to gather up where I wanted them to. I wanted that to happen as quickly as possible, so we fell back on an old tactic we’d used before: combining *Closed Clock* and *World Create* to get us all together at the karaoke place in the blink of an eye. Night had already fallen, and I didn’t feel great about calling an elementary schooler like Chifuyu out at that time of day, but this just wasn’t the sort of situation in which I could afford to worry about that sort of nicety.

“All right, Andou, you’ve got some explaining to do. Why’d you have to bring us here without even bothering to explain yourself?” Tomoyo grumbled with a scowl the moment we were all safely in our karaoke room. “If this turns out to be another of your stupid chuuni stunts, I’m seriously gonna give you hell over it!”

I didn’t say a word. Tomoyo gulped.

“Huh…? Wh-What…? Why’re you staring at me like that…?”

“Ah! S-Sorry,” I stammered.

Hmm. She’s the same Tomoyo as ever, all right. For some reason—by which I mean, because of Sagami’s stupid power—having to look Dereyo, the living embodiment of clingy cringe, in the eye felt…I dunno, kind of awkward, I guess. I had to look away from her in the end, but that just meant I was looking at Hatoko, Sayumi, and Chifuyu instead…and suddenly, all the future memories I’d experienced of *them* flashed into my mind as well. The shame was overwhelming.

For crying out loud… You just had *to go and give me those stupid visions, didn’t you? Do you realize how much harm this is going to do to my relationships with all of them from now on?*

This, however, wasn’t the time. I had to swallow my embarrassment and dive into the very serious topic at hand. This was the moment for us to stand our ground, lest we lose our futures altogether.

“Listen up, everyone. Earlier today…”

I stood before the group and began my explanation. I told them about the supernatural battle with Tamaki that I’d been pulled into, about everything that Future Sagami had taught me…and about the truth of Kiryuu Hajime and the Spirit War. I only had a scattered understanding of the story that had been playing out behind our backs this whole time, but I told them every bit of it that I could, leaving nothing hidden or unsaid.

I knew that the story I was telling them was completely insane. Anyone who wasn’t off their rocker would dismiss it out of hand. But, that said…we were exceptions. All the time we’d spent together in our clubroom—all the trials we’d overcome and all the unbreakable bonds we’d forged—would, I knew, allow my feelings to get through to them, even when my words faltered.

“Okay…you really went all out on the elaborate backstory this time. Seriously, though, did you *really* have to pull my cringelord brother into it? Don’t do that. Like, really.”

“Did you really meet Tamaki, Juu? That part was true, right?”

“…”

“Andou… You *are* familiar with ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf,’ yes?”

“…*Dammit* all!”

At the very least, it was nice to know that everyone was way saner than I’d given them credit for. *Nobody* took my word for it.

Chifuyu was so checked out, she was on the verge of nodding off altogether.

I guess I can't blame them, though. I didn't think that the boy-who-cried-wolf comparison Sayumi kept making was totally fair, but I had to admit that my usual behavior probably made it hard to accept an explanation like this from me, especially so abruptly. Even I had to admit that this sounded exactly like the sort of story that I'd come up with on the fly.

At this rate, we wouldn't be getting anywhere…which meant that I had to pull out my last resort. It was time for me to use the secret stratagem Sagami had entrusted me with to make everyone believe me in one fell swoop.

"I get how you all feel," I said. "This is all coming out of nowhere, so of course you wouldn't believe me. That's why I'm about to show you undeniable proof that I'm telling the truth."

"How long are you gonna keep this up…?" sighed Tomoyo. "Look, tomorrow's a school day, so hurry up and—"

"Allow me to introduce you. Everyone, this is Leatia the spirit."

"Oh, am I up? Hey. Good to meet you all."

"…*Gyaaaaaaaaaaaah*?!"

Now that *worked the way I was hoping it would!*

The subject of my perfunctory introduction was a palm-sized girl who'd appeared out of nowhere. She had a tiny pair of wings sprouting from her back, and she was casually floating in midair. It couldn't have been more obvious that she wasn't human—or, for that matter, a species native to this Earth. The members of the literary club, meanwhile, reacted in exactly as over-the-top of a manner as you'd expect someone to when they'd had an undeniably extraordinary life-form appear before their eyes. Even Chifuyu seemed pretty shaken up, despite still being half asleep.

"Honestly, I don't think anyone will believe this story coming from you. They'll think it's just another chuunibyou flare-up—I see the punch line coming a mile away—so I'll teach you a trick that'll let you sort that problem out in no time."

The technique that Future Sagami had taught me: shoving a transparently supernatural entity in everyone's faces. I'd done exactly what he'd told me to back then, saying Leatia's name out loud, and she'd shown up like he'd said she would, even though I'd half doubted it would work myself. For the record, I'd reacted with just as much shock and astonishment as the others the first

time I'd met her.

Ayup. Guess spirits are a real thing, then. Cool, cool.

"So…it's friggin' *finally* time for *Virgin Child* to step up," Leatia listlessly droned as she pointedly ignored the girls' collective freak-out. "Would you *please* get out there and shut down that dipshit's stupid game, already?"

"Well then—allow me to summarize the current state of affairs, if I may," said Sayumi. The chaos prompted by Leatia's appearance hadn't fully subsided yet, but Sayumi was doing her best to bring us back to some semblance of coherence.

One way or another, everyone at least seemed to believe me now. My story couldn't have been easy to accept on a moment's notice—assuming that I'd just dreamed it all up really was the only reasonable conclusion—but having an openly bizarre entity like a spirit get shoved in their faces had left them with no option but to have faith in it anyway.

"Beings called spirits live in a world other than our own…and those spirits periodically enlist humans to participate in a combat sport known as the Spirit War. All of the participants in the Spirit War awaken to a supernatural power and are made to fight until only one competitor remains. That victor is then allowed to have a single wish granted, with no restrictions as to what that wish may be… This may be somewhat gauche of me to point out, but it certainly is the sort of setup you'd find in your typical death game manga or anime. However," Sayumi said, pausing for a moment before finishing her thought, "the current Spirit War—that being the Fifth—is unlike those that came before it. Unlike prior Wars, this one was initiated and has been officiated by a single human being. That individual, Kiryuu Hajime, is the victor of the Fourth Spirit War, Tomoyo's elder brother…and the man responsible for both the awakening of our powers and our isolation from the Spirit War at large. Is all of that correct, umm…Leatia?"

"Yup. That's basically the gist of it," Leatia replied, meeting Sayumi's nervous inquiry with casual indifference. "Hajime prohibited all of us from saying anything about him being the mastermind behind the Fifth Spirit War, by the way, but there's not really much point in staying quiet about it anymore since Zeon already leaked it to the *Fallen Black* folks. Looks like you—Andou, right?—heard about all of it from Sagami Shizumu too,

didn't you?"

I gave Leatia a nod. Future Sagami had already told me everything that he'd managed to learn.

"This is all very difficult to believe…but considering the circumstances we've found ourselves in, I suppose we have no choice," Sayumi gravely admitted.

That's when Hatoko nervously spoke up. "So…I don't think I really understand all of this yet…but does this mean you're the one who gave us our powers a year ago, Leatia?"

"That's right. Wasn't my choice, though—all of this was on Hajime's orders. Actually, answering question after question with the same speech is gonna be a pain, so let me just put this on the record: Literally nothing about the current Spirit War *wasn't* ordered by him. No matter what you ask me, the only answer I can give you is gonna be 'because Hajime said so,'" Leatia explained with a roll of her eyes.

In short: the whole War had played out under Kiryuu Hajime's direct supervision. He was the source of all its evils, its ruler, and its ringleader. Or, to borrow a phrase that Future Sagami had used…he was its author.

"What the *hell* is that dumbass even doing…?" Tomoyo muttered with a scowl. She was obviously enraged with her brother, and probably mortified by the thought of what he'd put us all through as well.

Leatia gave Tomoyo a long, hard look. "You're Hajime's little sister, right?" she asked.

"Huh?" Tomoyo grunted. "U-Uh, yeah. Technically."

"Well… My condolences."

Even the spirits sympathized with Tomoyo on this one. Leatia had apparently been Kiryuu's Spirit Handler, and I couldn't even begin to guess how much crap he'd put her through over the course of their relationship. Just how much suffering must it have taken to make her look upon his little sister with a face so full of pure, unadulterated pity?

"Andou," said Sayumi, "you said that Sagami and Kiryuu's former companions—that is to say, Sagami and *Fallen Black*—were engaged in combat with Kiryuu himself, didn't you? What do you know about the current state of that situation?"

"About that…it's all over," I replied. "They were wiped out. Every member of *Fallen Black* was defeated and dropped out of the Spirit War."

I'd already stopped hearing Future Sagami in my mind. The instant that Present Sagami was defeated, he'd lost his power and its effect had been undone. Up until the very moment of his demise, however, he'd kept using Future Sagami to feed me a constant stream of information. That was why I knew everything, from how *Fallen Black* had confronted Kiryuu to how he'd turned the tables on them.

"I see... So Kudou was caught up in the encounter as well. I'd thought it was strange when I couldn't get in contact with her, but I never imagined it was because she had already gotten involved," Sayumi said after I finished recounting Future Sagami's final message to me. A sorrowful pall had fallen over her expression as I spoke.

"H-Hey, Juu...? Is Kudou okay?" asked Hatoko.

"Yeah, I think she's probably fine," I replied. "Apparently, she'll have come back to life without any memories of our powers and the Spirit War... That's how it works, right, Leatia?"

"Right. She'll be alive and back to business as usual by now, actually. Why not give her a call and check, if you're curious?"

Sayumi took Leatia's suggestion right away. She called Kudou's cell phone, and Kudou answered right away. I heaved a sigh of relief. It was incredibly reassuring to know that she was still alive...or, well, alive again, really.

I guess that probably means that Sagami and the others are already alive again too—just without any of their knowledge about supernatural powers or the War.

Tomoyo gulped. "You spirits have total free rein over our lives and memories, huh?" she said, a note of fear creeping into her voice. "Your powers let you do anything you want with us and our world. They make you completely superior in every way...and you're telling me my dumbass of an older brother has complete control over them right now...?"

"Yeah... That's right," said Leatia.

The *Reverse Crux Errata* granted Kiryuu the power to alter the parameters of the supernatural battle we'd been pulled into at will. His authority surpassed that of a mere ruler—he'd entered a domain in which only authors dwelled. It was the ultimate administrative privilege, granted only to the Fifth Spirit War's mastermind.

"For god's sake... What the hell are you doing, Hajime? You set this whole stupid game up just so that you could cheat to win it?

You wanted to be the only one who got a perfectly broken power...? That's just so damn pathetic," Tomoyo spat before shooting me a chilly, pointed glance. "Andou...you get it, right? You understand just how crazy his power is?"

"Yeah," I agreed with a solemn nod. "The *Reverse Crux Errata*... Now *that* is one hell of a name. Who knew that when he showed me the *Reverse Crux Record* way back when we'd first met it was all just a setup for this? And the new word, *Errata*... Oh, it's good. It's *so* good. I should've known Kiryuu was the sort of guy who'd wrap card game jargon into one of his names—he's got *such* a knack for this!"

"I *know*, right? 'Errata' is seriously such a good word. It fits his power perfectly, and it doesn't make him look like a tryhard in the way that some super over-the-top words do. It matches the aesthetics of all the other names he's come up with really nicely, and pulling in the name of the cringe compilation he carries absolutely friggin' everywhere with him helps drive home the idea that to him, power names are *the* be-all and end-all. It's probably one of the best names he's come up with to date, and I'm not afraid to admit it. This is the one area where my brother never fails to impress— *Not*!" Tomoyo shouted. She'd definitely dragged out that fake-out way harder than she'd strictly needed to. "Nobody gives a crap about its *name*! Surely even you realize that this is *not* the time?!"

"I mean, I actually thought this was the perfect time to get silly and help everyone calm down a bit..."

"*Nobody* asked for that!"

"Yeah...and I know. You weren't talking about the power's name. You were talking about the power itself."

Honestly, "crazy" didn't even begin to do the *Reverse Crux Errata* justice. No other power could ever possibly work on Kiryuu as long as he had it in his control, and even if a power *did* get through to him in a one-in-a-million miracle, he could just revise it on the spot to make sure it never worked again. Even the god-tier abilities that the other four members of our club possessed might as well have been powerless in the face of his. After all—if he wanted to, he really could tweak them until they were useless.

Kiryuu could write up a new erratum for his own battles whenever he pleased. No matter how set in stone a rule seemed to be, its creator held the privilege to decide that it wasn't a great

idea after all and shamelessly strike it down.

He was operating on a completely different level than we were; he was standing on a profoundly different sort of stage. Just as a human could never stand up to a god—just like a character in a story could never stand up to its author—so too could none of the participants in this supernatural battle royale ever stand up to Kiryuu Hajime.

We couldn't win. He'd given himself a power that could never be beaten, and a power that never should have existed at all.

"I-Isn't there something you can do, Juu...?" Hatoko asked, giving me a look that seemed somehow full of expectations.

"Huh...? *Me*?" I replied incredulously.

"Well, you're the one who's been running simulations this whole time to make sure you'd be ready if something like this happened, right? You've told me over and over again that you weren't just playing make-believe and that they were serious simulations for real potential disasters, right?"

"Mwa ha ha... Well, yeah," I admitted, matching her imploring gaze with a fearless smile. It was the only move I could possibly make. "I've fantasized... I mean, *simulated* battles with every possible supernatural power that could be used against us. Even the *Reverse Crux Errata*... I've thought about powers very much like it—powers that turn the rules of battle on their head and fundamentally alter how the game is played in a way that gives their user a cheat-like level of advantage—and carefully simulated how I'd go about dealing with them."

"Oooh! I knew you'd have a plan, Juu! So, what should we do?!"

"Yeah, umm... The thing about absolutely unbeatable cheat powers like that one is that they're really hard to write around. Once the author realizes they've written themself into a corner, they'll usually come up with reasons not to let it get used...and our only hope's to pray that happens in our case."

"Seriously...?" Hatoko moaned in disappointment.

Well, what did you expect? I'm not a miracle worker!

The thing about my fantasies—ahem, my *simulations*—is that when all's said and done, coming up with the powers was the part I'd put the bulk of my energy into, more or less. I'd always been great at coming up with outrageously mighty powers, but being able to figure out how to *overcome* those powers was one of those skills that separated pro creators from the masses.

Anyway, the only strategy I'd been able to suggest was so

pathetic, it left the room in a state of heavy, oppressive silence.

"B-But, umm…it's too early to give up, guys! I'm sure we'll find a way somehow!" I frantically insisted. I was spouting empty, irresponsible platitudes, and I knew it, but it was all I could think of to ward away the cloud of despair that was settling upon us. "It'll be fine… I know there's something we can do. No matter how broken Kiryuu's power may be, if we put all of our powers together, I'm sure we can find a way to beat him!"

"To beat him?" Chifuyu chimed in, sounding almost mystified by my words. She'd been silent throughout the entire conversation, but now, at long last, she decided to make herself heard. "Andou, you want to beat him…? Why?"

"Huh…?"

"Are we going to fight Kiryuu?"

"I-I mean…I guess…probably?"

"Why?" Chifuyu repeated, still looking as blankly confused as could be.

When she put it that way…I didn't know what to say. Why *did* we have to beat him? Why *did* we have to fight him?

That's…actually a great question.

I'd been operating under the assumption that we'd have to fight him just because it felt like the natural thing for us to do. I'd let that preconception inform all my plans…but when I sat back and thought things through from a more calm, detached perspective, I couldn't think of a single reason we'd actually *want* to fight him.

Huh? What are we even fighting for? Actually…were we ever even fighting in the first place?

"Wh-What do you think, Tomoyo?" I asked.

"*Huh*? Wh-Why're you making this *my* problem?"

"Well, like…you're his sister, right? Isn't that, y'know, a *sign*? Did the two of you promise that someday you'd settle your score once and for all when you were little or whatever?"

"Hell no we didn't."

Huh. No major sibling conflict foreshadowing, I guess. Hmm…

Future Sagami had seemed pretty convinced that Kiryuu had been dead set on having his final showdown with Tomoyo, at least at first…but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the two of them didn't have anything in particular to fight over. They didn't even seem to be on especially bad terms. Sure, there was that whole thing about them being half-siblings, but

from everything I'd heard, it seemed they got along pretty well anyway.

"I'm kinda with Chifuyu on this. Like, why *should* we have to fight?" said Tomoyo. "I know there was all that stuff about us getting a wish granted if we manage to last until the *Final Eight*...but, like, what am I even supposed to make of that at this point? It's not like anyone's going to beat my stupid brother regardless. Who'd get excited about bashing their head against an unbreakable wall?"

"I don't really like the idea of fighting either," said Hatoko. "It's not that I don't have any wishes it'd be nice to have granted...but I don't want them granted badly enough to feel like asking the spirit to do it for me, and I definitely wouldn't want to fight anyone to make it happen."

"I am in full agreement. Fighting for the sake of self-defense would be one thing, but proactively seeking out a fight for the sake of self-interest holds no appeal for me," Sayumi chimed in as well.

Everyone was speaking up in favor of the pacifist approach, and when I really thought about it, I wasn't surprised. God-tier supernatural powers aside, we were just a bunch of ordinary high schoolers. You couldn't just say "Okay, now fight!" and expect us to actually go and do it. Maybe things would have been different if we'd gotten a detailed explanation of the War and what it would entail way back in the beginning, like all the other Players had...but we'd been kept isolated from all of that up until just moments ago. We were getting thrown into the thick of it at the eleventh hour—the climax of the whole event—and, like, who *would* take that well? Of *course* we'd balk at jumping in headfirst.

"O-Okay, I get all that...but do we really have a choice?" I asked. "Kiryuu's going to be coming after us regardless of what we want. We might not have any good option other than fighting him, y'know?"

I still remembered what Sagami had told me: *Protect the literary club.* Nobody had any clue what Kiryuu's goal was, but it also didn't matter. One way or another, he was most definitely trying to pull us into the Spirit War. There was every chance we would have to fight, regardless of our own wishes.

"Hmm. Okay, but Juu," Hatoko began, a look of concern on her face. "Kiryuu's power—the *Reverse*, umm, something or other...?

It's all really complicated, and I don't understand how it works at all…but it's supposed to be really ridiculously strong, right? Strong enough that our powers can't do anything against it?"

"R-Right," I replied.

"So even if we do fight him, we'll just lose, right? What's even the point, then?"

I stood there for a moment.

Really?

I mean, like…really? She's not wrong*, sure, but where are we even supposed to go now that that's on the table?*

The way I saw it, a character with a power so over-the-top you're left wondering "How are you even supposed to beat that?" appearing in a story just meant that the protagonists would keep fighting, never giving up until a path to victory revealed itself. It was such a classic pattern it was practically obligatory…and the point Hatoko had just made had brutally and ruthlessly torn it to shreds.

"So, what, Hatoko…? Do we just give up? Do we sit back and wait for him to come take us out?" I asked.

"No, that's not what I meant," said Hatoko. "I was thinking we should just talk it out with him."

"T-Talk it out…?"

"Yeah. He's Tomoyo's big brother, so I'm sure he'll understand if we just talk to him!" Hatoko said with a big, confident smile.

I wanted to dismiss her proposal as nothing more than the naively pacifistic complacency of someone who had *no* clue how much danger we were really in…but found that, when confronted with the idea of just talking it out, I couldn't actually come up with any objections. All I could think was "Actually, that does make sense."

While I just sat there in stunned silence, Chifuyu chimed in again. "Hatoko's right," she said. "Fighting's bad. Peace is the best."

"Isn't it, Chifuyu? There's no way we'd ever get in a fight like that," Hatoko agreed. The literary club's resident airhead combination was in complete agreement when it came to their total lack of fighting spirit.

"When all's said and done, so long as we remain unaware of Kiryuu Hajime's motives, we lack the means to plan countermeasures against him," Sayumi said after a moment of thought. "We haven't the foggiest idea what he intends to make

us do, or what he intends to do himself."

At that point, Sayumi paused to give Leatia a look. The spirit, however, just shook her head. "Not even us spirits have any clue what Hajime's going for. All we do is follow the jackass's orders. Even if you ask him what his deal is, he just spouts off some cryptic gibberish to dodge the question. It's exhausting, so I stopped trying."

Tomoyo rested her chin in her hand and seemed to lapse into deep thought. "The more I think about it…the less sense it makes for us to fight anyone at all," she said. "We don't have any good motivation to fight, and we definitely don't *want* to. And even if we did and we tried to work out a plan, Hajime could just use the *Reverse Crux Errata* to Mary Sue his way into winning anyway. As long as he has that power on hand, it's totally hopeless from the start."

There was a prevailing mood of hesitation in the air of the karaoke room. We'd come to a standstill. A threat was looming, and yet we could only muster a vague, hard-to-grasp sense of imminent danger.

What is *this weird, messy feeling of exhaustion? We finally figured out the source of the powers we've been wondering about for so, so very long, and we've unveiled the mastermind behind all the weirdness we've been pulled into. Now all that's left is the final showdown!*

Or…you'd *think* that, anyway, but I just couldn't get into the mood for it. I—and, for that matter, everyone else—was at a loss for how to even react. The pivot into for-real supernatural battles had been too abrupt, and we didn't *really* have any connection to the enemy we were supposed to fight over the course of the climax—not to mention no idea what his goals were, what the conditions for our victory would be, or what would happen if we lost. And that's not even starting on his brutally unfair power… In the end, all of the elements of our situation came together to make it seemingly impossible to work up the motivation to go into battle.

The end result? We were left with only a half-baked sense of danger and hostility toward our apparent enemy. The air in the room was stagnant—totally lacking in energy. I guess if I had to put it into words…it felt like our story was just plodding onward, killing time without any clear ending in sight.

What are we even supposed to do now?

“Wait… H-Huh?” Hatoko suddenly exclaimed, her voice cutting through the gloomy shroud of silence. “H-Hey, Juu…? Isn’t this kind of strange?”

“Wh-What is?” I asked.

“Why’s it so quiet?”

“Why is it *quiet*…? Because we turned the karaoke machine’s volume down to zero, obviou— Ah?!” I gasped as, partway through my sentence, I realized what the problem was.

We’d muted the karaoke machine the moment we’d stepped into the room. This sort of karaoke joint played ads and announcements through the machines whenever a song wasn’t playing, so we’d shut the volume off so it wouldn’t interrupt our conversation. The thing is, muting *our* machine wouldn’t do anything about the sound filtering in from the rooms next to ours. The fact that our room was so quiet made it very easy to faintly hear the music and singing from them, even through the soundproofing…and somewhere along the way, those noises had ceased.

It was silent. Completely, deathly silent. Almost as if the world itself had come to a stop…

“Oh, so you finally noticed?” said Leatia. The rest of us were flabbergasted, but she barely seemed to care. “I didn’t say anything because, I mean, I don’t owe you guys squat, so why would I? But, yeah—this world’s time is stopped right now. You five are the only humans who’re actually up and moving.”

That was a tremendous bombshell of a statement to drop in a perfectly calm, casual tone on its own, but Leatia wasn’t done just yet.

“Ah, wait—scratch that,” she said. “Strictly speaking, it’s not just the five of you. One other person’s still moving around. I seriously doubt that this is actually important in any real way, but I guess he stopped time to give his entrance a little more impact, or some stupid—”

“Nobody asked for your color commentary, Leatia.”

All of a sudden…there he was. A dry, distinctive voice, mocking and cynical in tone, rang out from right beside me. I whipped my head around reflexively…and found myself face-to-face with a white-haired man wearing round sunglasses and a black coat. Kiryuu Hajime was sitting next to me.

It was like time had skipped a few steps. One moment we were the only ones in the room, and the next, he was sitting

there as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

"G-Gaaah!" I yelped—pretty late, if I'm being honest—and hurled myself out of my seat. The others leaped up from the couches they were sitting on as well, and all of us ended up clustered into the opposite corner of the room from Kiryuu, petrified with shock and fear.

"Made you wait, didn't I, Guiltia?" Kiryuu said as he leaned back on the couch, a cocky grin on his face. His sunglasses were slightly askew, letting me just barely make out the gaze that he was shooting directly at me.

"Kiryuu..." I muttered.

"Oh, come on. You know better than that," Kiryuu said with a disappointed shake of his head. A hint of anger crept into his heterochromatic glare.

I knew exactly what I was supposed to say. I gulped, steeled myself...and spoke.

"Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First...!"

Kiryuu flashed me a savage grin. "That's right. This is how it should be, Guiltia Sin Jurai. No need to hesitate anymore—no need to worry who may be watching you. It's time for us to be *ourselves*, unshackled by shame," he said with a tone of pure satisfaction.

As I listened to Kiryuu, the strangest sense of elation came over me. It felt like a door deep within my heart—a door that I kept locked at all times—had been wrenched open by force. In a strange sort of way, I felt liberated.

"What the *hell*, Hajime?! What are you trying to pull here?!" Tomoyo shouted. Kiryuu's grin didn't budge. "I have so many things I want to say to you I don't even know where to *start*, but the long and short of it's that you're a grown-ass, twenty-year-old man, and you need to start acting like—"

Suddenly—without warning—Tomoyo's voice cut out. Her mouth was still moving, but I couldn't hear a single word she was trying to say.

"?! ? !"

Tomoyo looked bewildered. She gestured at her mouth, then seemed to try to say something else, to no avail. Her voice remained muted.

"Silence, *Endless Paradox*. If you can't hold back comments better left unsaid, I'll have to do it for you."

"?! ! !"

Tomoyo was frantically shouting *something*—a retort, most likely—but I didn't get to hear any of it. Kiryuu had probably used some sort of power. Considering what all he was capable of, there wasn't much he could do at that point that would've surprised me. If he could freeze time for everyone except us and suddenly appear in our room without warning, then why *couldn't* he do basically anything else? As things stood, he could make whatever supernatural powers he wanted and grant them to anyone, himself included.

"First things first—some congratulations are in order. Well done, *Virgin Child*. All five of you have managed to survive long enough to make it into the *Final Eight*," said Kiryuu. "'Course, we're actually down to fewer than eight at this point. Between the five of you and the one of me...the six people here are all the Players left in the War."

Just six. Six people total. There had been nearly a thousand Players at the onset of the War...and the overwhelming majority of them had already been defeated. Kiryuu had praised us for lasting this long, but truth be told, I didn't feel any sense of accomplishment. After all, we'd never even touched the War, much less fought in it in any real way. We hadn't so much survived it as we'd been *saved from* it—kept for last by Kiryuu, the man who reigned over the War at large.

"A few things went off the rails, and the eight people who were supposed to be around for this got cut back a bit...but it's not a big deal, in the grand scheme of things. The plan's still moving forward just fine. As of this moment...the Fifth Spirit War is entering its next stage," said Kiryuu.

"Its next stage...?" I repeated.

"The time shall be midnight, this evening. The place: our own Senkou High. There, we shall lay to rest the bonds of fate that bind us together. It's the perfect stage, don't you think?"

Tonight at midnight...in our high school. The school we're going to now, and the school Kiryuu used to attend.

None of us had anticipated the setting he named, but at the same time, it was profoundly predictable. All of us gulped in unison. Well, okay—Chifuyu gulped and muttered "M-Midnight..." in a way that made it clear *she* was just upset about the idea of staying up that late, but this was a serious moment, so I tried not to focus on that.

"At long, *long* last...our battle is finally about to begin, Guiltia,"

said Kiryuu. He gazed at me like you'd gaze at your fated rival…or, perhaps, as you'd gaze at your comrade in arms. "It's time for us to put everything on the line…and to the survivor go the spoils."

My heart was pounding. His words—his smile—had been so perfectly stylish, they'd set it aflutter. I wanted to rise to the occasion. I wanted to give him the most purely, perfectly *me* answer I could dream up. And yet…

"W-Wait a second, Kiryuu!"

…I just spoke to him. No fancy verbal flourishes, no titles—I talked to him in a perfectly normal voice, calling him his perfectly normal name.

"I don't… *We* don't want to fight you," I said.

For reasons I couldn't explain, I was filled with a deep sense of guilt as I spoke those words. It was the right thing to say, no question about it, but I felt guilty all the same. If I was in the right, then why did it feel like I was stabbing him in the back?

"We got dragged into all this out of nowhere, and none of us understand it, and now we're supposed to just…*fight* you? How are we supposed to react to that? It'd be one thing if it were just me, but…I wish you hadn't pulled the others in too, and I want you to stop trying to get them even more involved."

At that point, I paused to look over my shoulder at the others, who all gave me a nod. They were all in full support of my attempt to declare our uninvolvement.

If—hypothetically, just *if*—I had been thrust into this situation before I'd started high school, I might not have hesitated to rise to the challenge. I might have been filled with boundless delight and anticipation at the thought of launching myself headfirst into the world of supernatural battles…but the current me couldn't be that selfish anymore. I'd found far too many things that were far too important to me to prioritize my chuunibyou above them, and so…

"Sagami told me all about your power. He told me about the *Reverse Crux Errata*…and there's no way we can beat it. We could all come at you at once with everything we have, and we still wouldn't stand a chance. We don't have any good reason to fight you either. And so…we've decided…that we'll be dropping out of this War."

As I spoke, I gave Kiryuu a slight bow. It was a bow of surrender—a bow of unconditional capitulation. He was far too

powerful for us to handle, so I begged for our lives. That was a choice that Guiltia Sin Jurai could never have possibly taken…but it was the choice that Andou Jurai had resolved himself to make. No matter how lame it made me look—no matter how pathetic—I refused to choose a path that would put my friends in danger. If this fight could be avoided, I'd do everything I could to steer us away from it.

Slowly, fearfully, I raised my head once more and gazed up at Kiryuu. I'd imagined him looking upon me with a gaze of boundless scorn and disappointment…but, surprisingly, that wasn't the case. If anything, he seemed thoughtful, though I couldn't even begin to guess why.

"Hmm… So that's the line you're going with, huh? Interesting… Guess I might've gone a little too hard on the 'cares about his friends' part of the profile…?" Kiryuu muttered, much to my confusion. He stood up from the couch and stepped forward, drawing closer to loom over me, taking full advantage of his unusual height. "Bwa ha ha! It looks to me like you're under two misconceptions right now."

"Misconceptions…?" I repeated.

"First: Are you seriously telling me that you think you can just *talk this out* with me?"

In a split second, a chill ran down my spine, racing through my extremities. I couldn't describe the feeling that Kiryuu was projecting—maybe it was fighting spirit, maybe it was bloodlust—but one way or another, it radiated forth with such intensity it felt like it was piercing right through me. It made it clear to me that we really were operating on totally different levels—or rather, in totally different dimensions. He'd been living a life of supernatural battles, and we'd been living ordinary, commonplace existences. We inhabited two vastly, terribly different worlds.

"There's no turning back—not anymore. Not for me, and not for you either," said Kiryuu.

I clenched my teeth, unable to say a word.

"And, second: You seem to think you don't have any reason to fight me…and you couldn't possibly be more wrong," Kiryuu continued, the corners of his mouth curling into a twisted sneer. A smile of a sort, yes, but an unstable, unsettling one. "You should resent me—every one of you. You should think of me as your sworn, mortal enemy. You would…if you had even the

slightest idea of what exactly it is I've done to you."

"Do you mean...how you made us awaken to our powers?" I asked.

I knew that Kiryuu's plotting had led to our awakenings. And, yes—his actions had certainly caused us plenty of strife and hardship. There had been times when the fear and anxiety brought about by suddenly being forced to bear such extraordinary, overwhelmingly vast powers had seemed like it would crush us.

Looking back now, however, I didn't wish that we'd never been given our powers. I had come to believe that our powers played a major role in making us who we were. I wasn't about to thank him for setting us up like that, but I also wasn't going to erupt in a fit of rage or resentment. Whatever feelings I had about our awakening were in a completely different subset of emotion than those.

"Bwa ha ha! Bwa ha ha ha ha! That settles it—you really haven't figured it out yet!"

And yet...Kiryuu laughed. He cackled wildly, as if to rub in my face just how wrong I was.

"Honestly, I thought I'd dropped enough hints for you to put the pieces together by now," said Kiryuu.

"The pieces...of what? What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Tell me, Guiltia. Haven't you ever thought that this was all just a little *too* perfect?"

Too perfect? What's too perfect? What on earth is he talking about?

"Look at us. We're two sides of the same coin. Opposite yet identical, like reflections in a mirror...and now, we've come together to face each other down at the end of everything."

I didn't say a word.

"A guy who just happens to be in the same club as my little sister just happens to be the exact same sort of terminal chuuni as I am... That's one hell of a perfect coincidence, wouldn't you say? Kinda strains the ol' suspension of disbelief, don't you think?"

"Are you trying to say it's destiny?" I asked.

"Destiny...? Bwa ha ha! Nah—nothing that cheap," Kiryuu chuckled. He swept his gaze across our group, eyeing up each of us in turn. "*Closed Clock*, *Over Element*, *World Create*, *Route of Origin*, and *Dark and Dark*... Those are some good names, all

right. They match my aesthetic perfectly. But of course they do. After all…"

Kiryuu paused. He smiled.

"…*I'm the one who made them up*."

I didn't understand what he'd just told me.

"You… Huh? But… Wha…?"

What was that? What was he saying? I couldn't understand. I wasn't following him at all.

Kiryuu thought them up? But, no. No, no, that's not right. Of course he didn't. I *came up with those names. I thought up all of them. I racked my mind, scoured every corner of my creative spirit, and even pushed myself so hard I retreated into my mindscape to come up with names for everyone's powers. They're mine, and mine alone—names that only I could've thought up.*

"What…are you talking about?" I asked. "I thought up those names. I thought up *Closed Clock*, *Over Element*, *World Create*, *Route of Origin*, and *Dark and Dark*. They were all—"

"Right. Of course you think you came up with them. After all…*I wrote you to believe that you did*."

In a split second—the hairs all across my body stood on end. It felt like the words he'd just spoken were something I never should've allowed myself to hear.

He wrote it? He wrote…me?

My mind was racing, and I couldn't stop it. I wanted to—I *had* to. *Don't think about it*, I told myself. *If you think this through…you'll never be able to go back. Stop. Stop!* My heart and instincts desperately shouted at me, but they couldn't contain the logical process I'd already kicked off. The final, terrible, inevitable conclusion was already nearing its completion.

Oh. Right. He could have. He absolutely could have.

If Kiryuu had the power to exercise absolute authority over the human world—if he had the power to do whatever he wanted, however he wanted to…

…he could create a human from the ground up with ease.

"Looks like you finally got the picture, huh? Bwa ha ha… Bwaaa ha ha ha ha! That's right, Guiltia. I am your creator—the author who gave you life," Kiryuu cackled. He shoved the worst possible truth in my face, and the look on his face told me that he found every second of it so utterly hilarious, he couldn't hold

back his mirth. “All the powers you named, your Guiltia Sin Jurai true name, every page of the *Bloody Bible*, your personality, your interests, your height, your weight, your blood type, your birthday…every last little detail that makes up your character is something that *I* invented.”

The *Reverse Crux Errata* allowed Kiryuu to freely grant and revise supernatural powers as he saw fit. He had used that power to become the author of a world of supernatural battles…but what if that wasn’t the only world he’d tried his hand at writing? What if he’d dabbled in a more commonplace genre as well, dipping into the sphere of slice of life? What if powers weren’t all he could make…and *characters* were just as firmly in his purview?

The losers of the Spirit War were stripped of their memories and returned to their daily lives. In other words, the spirits had the power to freely alter humans’ memories…and what were we without our memories? They played an essential, foundational factor in our identities. The ability to freely manipulate a person’s memories, then, was no more or less than the ability to freely manipulate that person themself.

Taking the same premise a step further, the existence of powers like Tomoyo’s proved that the flow of time was well within the spirits’ capacity to control as well. Imagine if you could ignore the constraints of time, freely altering an individual’s memories as you pleased. Now imagine if it wasn’t just one person—imagine tens, hundreds, or, in the wildest extreme, an entire world’s worth of people, all having their memories and perceptions rewritten however you wanted to. Imagine you could tweak them with absolute control, like an author tweaking the backgrounds of the characters in the story they told.

There was no way of telling when it might have started. I had no memory of my memories or personality being altered…but if he’d simply *written* me to have no memory of it, then, well, not remembering hardly proved a thing, right?

“Bwa ha ha! Y’know how you prefer your names short? Didn’t you ever think there was a certain *something* there? That’d be because I made you that way on purpose, as a way of distinguishing you and your names from me and the longer ones I prefer. I wanted to drive in our two-sides-of-the-same-coin shtick, that’s all.”

I *had* seen the resemblance. Ever since the moment we’d first

met, I'd been drawn to him in the strangest way. I'd gotten worked up about that, thinking it might have been the hand of fate at work…but it was nothing of the sort. The situation had been made to make me feel that way. *I* had been made to feel that way…it was how I'd been written to feel.

All of it was to make me into a character worthy of being defeated by Kiryuu Hajime; everything was designed to turn me into a final boss with whom the protagonist could clash. After all—what could be more classically exciting than the protagonist and his final foe being uncannily similar to one another?

I fell silent. There was nothing left for me to say. It felt like my mind had gone blank. I didn't think that any revelation could possibly be more shocking than the one I'd just experienced…and then I immediately learned I was wrong.

"And it goes without saying that it's not just you. Kushikawa Hatoko, Himeki Chifuyu, Takanashi Sayumi, and Kanzaki Tomoyo…all four of the girls are characters I made from scratch as well."

Another shock—another revelation—crashed down on me. Or rather, *us*.

Them too? It wasn't just me—it was all five of us?

"Guiltia… A moment ago, you turned me down for the sake of your friends, didn't you? That was a pretty loyal decision, I've gotta say, but you know… Bwa ha ha! I mean, of *course* you know by now—you only did it because that's the character I designed you to be. That's who I wrote you to develop into over the course of the story that I plotted out from start to finish."

He wouldn't stop. Each and every word that came out of his mouth plunged us deeper into hopeless despair. He laid out the truth without mercy, letting it crush us with its terrible weight.

"*Virgin Child*… The five of you are the final boss squad meant to send the Spirit War off with a bang. You had to be powerful. You had to be appealing. And so…I made you from scratch, with my own two hands! I gave you powers so mighty that no one could ever compete with them, engineered event after event for you to experience, and ensured that powerful bonds would be forged between you! And I did it all because the more powerful you were, the more appealing you were, the more I would shine when I laid you to waste!"

He was the author. There was no other word that would fit anymore. Kiryuu Hajime was the author of our world. The

supernatural and the commonplace alike were nothing more than ink on the pages of his manuscript. I was no different. The me I thought was *me* had been created by him, solely for the sake of serving as a character in the story he was writing.

"You get it now, right? Your whole past is just a backstory I invented. The time you spent cowering in fear of your powers, the time you spent goofing off with them, the time you spent forgetting they even existed and having a blast without them, your youthful story of fellowship and camaraderie, your charming and heartwarming rom-com antics—every aspect of your silly, commonplace lives and the insane, out-of-left-field supernatural battle twist that upended them… All of it—every last little goddamn *bit* of it—was a story that I came up with."

Scenes of everything we'd been through, all the time we'd spent together, flashed through my mind. I remembered learning about Tomoyo's ambitions and battling with Kudou. I remembered coming to understand the misbuttoned shirt that was my relationship with Hatoko and intentionally buttoning it up the same way again. I remembered getting caught up in the clash that'd unfolded between Chifuyu and Kuki and learning what their friendship truly meant to them. I remembered fighting with Sayumi and finding out why she'd given up on running for student council president; I remembered when I'd given up my chuunibyou in the eighth grade and the time I'd spent with Sagami and Tamaki. I remembered my first meeting with Tomoyo; all our trips to the pool and the beach; when we put on our rendition of *Lolio and Juliet*, starring Chifuyu; when Sayumi accidentally wrought all those changes upon our world; my hard-fought battle with Tamaki, and the ensuing reconciliation between her and Sagami; the time we'd awakened to our powers, and the days I'd spent racking my mind to come up with names for them…

All of it—every bit of it—had just been turned on its head so easily that all I could do was laugh.

Who asked for this? Who wanted this twist? We certainly didn't. We wanted to know why we'd awakened to our powers, sure…but not like this. This *isn't an explanation that anyone would be happy with. What we wanted was* nothing *like this hopeless excuse for an ultimate truth.*

"In short," said Kiryuu—no, said *the author of our story*—"your very lives are nothing more than a work of fiction…created by

me.”



Chapter 5 ★ Reality and Fiction

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Chapter 5: Reality and Fiction

Despair. The room was buried in a palpable aura of pure, overwhelming despair, blotting out all else.

It seemed that time had started back up again when Kiryuu and Leatia left. The muffled singing and music from the next room over had started to filter into our room again, but the poppy, up-tempo tunes were powerless to overcome the hopelessness consuming us. Not one of us so much as attempted to speak.

It had all been fictional. All hollow and vacant. It was like everything I'd valued—everything that had seemed so purposeful and brilliant to me before—had slipped through my fingers as it'd rusted, rotted, and crumbled away to nothingness.

What was I supposed to believe anymore? There was no way of knowing how much of the reality I lived in was truly *real* and how much was a fabrication. Could the path I'd walked up to this point truly have been manufactured, from beginning to end, by a third party? Could decisions I thought I'd made with my own free will have been nothing more than me dancing to an author's tune? Could everything I'd felt—all the joy and excitement, all the rage and sorrow, all the hope and despair, all the pride and jealousy, every last emotion that had budded within me—have been nothing more than artifice?

And was it really not just me? Were we really *all* fictional? Did that mean that *everything* was a lie? That *everything* was fiction?

Were Tomoyo, Hatoko, Chifuyu, and Sayumi simply antagonists designed to play a role in the final battle? Were Tomoyo's latent chuunibyou, Hatoko's long-standing friendship with me, Chifuyu's indefinable eccentricity, and Sayumi's wisdom unbefitting a high schooler all simply parts of their backstories? Were they nothing more than the sorts of character traits you'd read about on a Wikipedia page?

Was the only reason I cared about all of them so much in the first place because that was how I was written? Was the only reason we had those bonds because the author decided that the villain squad genuinely caring for each other would make us more compelling characters than if we were self-serving

monsters who'd stab each other in the back on a whim?

And, if it was all true, and we really were no more than fictional characters, were the commonplace lives we'd led up until now utterly pointless and valueless…?

I shook my head. *No. That's not it. That* can't *be right. Even if we* are *just fictional characters…well, so friggin' what?!*

I already had the answer I needed. I was a chuuni—someone who longed for the fictional world more than anyone else—and that meant that I understood the true value of fiction all too well.

"Fiction lies within your heart!"

Tomoyo's words rang out from deep within me, reverberating throughout my entire body.

Of course. This is nothing to despair over. There's nothing for us to be anxious about at all.

Even if everything that had happened up to this point was nothing more than a storyline that had been laid out for us, that would do nothing to change the fact that everything we were in that moment was unmistakably and undeniably *real*. Saying that everything was fictional wasn't the same as saying that none of it mattered. The distinction between a replica and an original was meaningless. We were *us*, and that meant that we were, and could only be, real.

So it didn't matter. Even if what I was doing right now was just an aspect of a fiction—even if my defiance were just another aspect of my character profile—it still didn't matter. I was *me*, and the feelings and emotions that were welling up within my heart were neither meaningless nor purposeless. Even if I was fictional, I was *not* a lie.

And so, I rose from the depths of despair, ready to shout out words of encouragement to my friends and urge us along on the path we had to take…but before I could, a thought struck me: Wasn't I bouncing back from all of this, like, a little *too* quickly?

And before I could follow *that* train of thought to its conclusion…

"H-Hey…Juu?" Hatoko said as she tugged at the hem of my shirt. I looked over, expecting to see an expression of deepest despair…and was surprised to find one of abashed awkwardness instead. "So, umm…can you explain what exactly's going on right now?"

"I… Huh?"

"Tomoyo's brother said a bunch of weird stuff, and then you

looked really shocked and got all gloomy, so I was trying to play along and act depressed too…but to be honest, I don't actually understand what any of that was about," Hatoko explained, concluding with a sort of embarrassed giggle.

M-My god. Could it be…? She didn't get it?! Kiryuu dropped our biggest plot twist to date, but it sailed right over her head? But she acted *like she understood, just so she wouldn't ruin the moment?*

"Oh, come *on*… You're kidding, right?" I moaned.

"W-Well, what did you expect?! It didn't make sense! He just started babbling all this gobbledygook about *authors* this and *fiction* that out of nowhere! What about you, Chifuyu? Did you understand anything Kiryuu said?"

"Not at all," Chifuyu replied. She sounded sort of proud about it, confusingly enough. "I didn't understand even a little bit of it. I was thinking 'What's this guy talking about?' the whole time."

"Right? It was total nonsense, wasn't it?" Hatoko agreed.

"Oh… Okay, then," I sighed.

This was, perhaps, to be expected. Memory alteration, time manipulation, and world modification were all sci-fi-riffic concepts that I dove into with glee on a daily basis, so Kiryuu's speech had made complete sense to me right away, but since Hatoko and Chifuyu *weren't* deeply familiar with all those concepts, it was probably just too complicated for them to grasp all at once.

Maybe, I reflected, that was a blessing in disguise. Maybe ignorance was bliss when it came to a truth this horrific. Running away from the truth wouldn't change it, though. I steeled myself, preparing to impart upon them the desperate reality of our circumstances…

…and several very long and painful explanations later, they were no closer to understanding than they'd been in the beginning. They were just *not* getting it.

"*Look*, like I've said a *bunch* of times already, the long and short of it's that Kiryuu is the one who made all of us. He wrote us as characters in a story. He established *everything* about us. Even us being childhood friends is just something that he made up out of nowhere."

"But that doesn't make sense. We met in kindergarten, didn't we? Kiryuu would've still been in elementary school then. How could a little kid make stuff up like that?"

"No, see, that's where the time manipulation comes in! I'm

sure his power lets him ignore time paradoxes and stuff, or whatever. Probably."

"Okay, so where did it start? Since when and up to when did Kiryuu set everything up? Since we were born? Did Kiryuu make up how our moms and dads got married too?"

"I mean... Okay, so I don't know for sure, but he probably found a way to make it all work out."

"How many 'probablys' does that make, Juu? Hmm... So then, how much of everything is real and how much of it's fiction in the end?"

"Look, again, there's no way of knowing that! That's the point—we can't know, so we end up worrying over it, and it drives us into despair..."

"Oh, come on! What does that even mean? I don't understand this at *all*!" Hatoko pouted. No matter how carefully and clearly I tried to explain, I just couldn't get through to her.

"I'm me. What else would I be?" Chifuyu asserted. *Her* attitude had remained completely steadfast throughout my whole explanation...which was *kinda* badass of her, if I'm being honest. You'd think it would've taken us a ton of conflict, debate, and turmoil before we ultimately reached that answer, but she jumped to it pretty much instantly.

I paused, at a loss for what to try next...

"Indeed...there *are* a number of elements of this scenario that strike me as inexplicable."

...when Sayumi spoke up instead.

"Perhaps," she continued, "Hatoko's and Chifuyu's responses really *are* the appropriate ones."

"Huh...?"

"Andou, you understood Kiryuu's explanation immediately and seemed to accept the so-called truth he presented to us as logical...but by any rational standard, his whole story was utterly absurd. The typical reaction to a speech like his wouldn't be choosing to accept or reject it—it would be not understanding it at all. Or, rather... How to put this...? His story felt terribly *contrived*, I suppose."

"Contrived...?"

"Andou, are you familiar with the simulation hypothesis?"

"Y-Yeah," I replied.

To *very* roughly summarize the concept: The simulation hypothesis is the idea that the world humanity lives in is, in fact,

a simulation that was constructed by some external entity. In other words, our world—our very reality and everything we experience within it—is nothing more than a form of virtual reality, with we, its inhabitants, remaining none the wiser to its artificial nature. Or, to frame the matter slightly differently: It's the theory that the world we live in is a work of fiction.

So the world would be nothing more than a stage some third party made, and its inhabitants nothing more than virtual actors who play out their roles with no clue they were never real *to begin with…*is about as far as my train of thought managed to travel before it struck me how familiar all of this sounded. It was, in fact, strikingly similar to the situation we'd found ourselves in.

"Outrageous and outlandish though the simulation hypothesis may be, so long as we remain human, our inherent limitations prevent us from ever definitively disproving it," said Sayumi. "It's quite similar to the five-minute hypothesis and The Butterfly Dream, in that respect. Because it can't be proven one way or the other, once it's on the table, there's little you can do to argue against it. In other words, whoever proposes it first controls the narrative."

"They control the narrative…"

"Now then, Andou," Sayumi said, seeming to shift conversational gears. "Returning to the subject of Kiryuu's claims: I must now reveal that Kiryuu Hajime is, in fact, nothing more than a character I wrote. I personally devised and laid out every word he just spoke to us. This may come as a surprise, and I'd never intended to reveal it to you, but the truth is that *I* am the actual mastermind behind everything that has happened up to this point."

Wh-Whaaat?! Are we seriously following one world-upending twist with another *world-upending twist?! Having a member of the main cast turn out to have been the evil mastermind all along is a classic development in a sense, sure…but Sayumi? Really? I can't believe* she's *the true, secret final boss who was manipulating even Kiryuu from the shadows this whole time…*

…is *not* what I thought. Give me *some* credit.

"So…you just made that up," I said.

"Yes, I did," Sayumi agreed with a nod. "And what Kiryuu did earlier was no different from what I did just now."

It was like suddenly insisting, without any foreshadowing to back you up, that everything that had happened in the story so

far was, in fact, all part of your master plan. Any plan can go off without a hitch, as long as you wait until after the fact to make it up and work the story's actual events into it retroactively. As long as you make the claim before anything can contradict it, you control the narrative.

"B-But, I mean…his whole story sounded so convincing, didn't it?" I protested. "Like, what about how he and I are both chuunis, but with subtle differences in how we make up names and stuff working to differentiate us? That really is exactly the sort of thing that you see all the time in manga, isn't it? It's super fiction-coded!"

"That's simply a matter of phrasing and interpretation, I believe," Sayumi countered. "For instance, you just claimed that your taste in names being subtly different makes it feel more like something out of a manga…but imagine if you *did* have perfectly identical tastes. Wouldn't you think that was manga-like and fiction-coded in its own right?"

I fell silent. When she put it that way…I couldn't deny how much the possibility rang true. It felt like everything had, once again, wrapped around to something Barnum effect-adjacent. If you stacked enough tiny, insignificant coincidences that occurred in your daily life together, treated them as one big *thing*, and asked if the real world could ever be that conveniently plotted out, it really would start feeling like it was all too much to *truly* be the work of random chance—in spite of the fact that it could be, and *was*, just that and nothing more.

"Okay…so are you saying he just made it all up?" I asked.

Did this mean that Kiryuu Hajime was *not* the author of our story? That he hadn't written our character profiles? That his claim that we were fictional was, itself, a work of fiction? That we were the same perfectly normal people we'd always thought we were?

"That…is what I would prefer to believe. Unfortunately, however, I lack the means to prove it at this moment. Just like the simulation hypothesis can't be definitively disproven, so too is it difficult to refute Kiryuu's claims. After all, we have every reason to believe that he *did*, in fact, have the practical means to write all of our characters as he claims to have. I believe the claim that he intervened to make our powers unnaturally potent was likely true as well. However," Sayumi continued, "I choose to believe that his overall claim was, indeed, a lie. Perhaps that's wishful

thinking on my part, but I simply don't like to think that the bonds between the five of us were brought about artificially."

"Sayumi..." I muttered.

"But of course...that does raise a new question we'll need to consider: Why would he choose to tell such a lie? It's unclear to me in what way doing so would benefit him. And, more so than anything...I'm curious as to why the lie he chose was such a haphazard one. It feels...rushed, I suppose you could say, or lacking in explanation? It certainly wasn't adequately foreshadowed. Frankly, it's hardly a surprise that Hatoko and Chifuyu didn't understand his attempted reveal, considering how poorly constructed it was."

"You have a point..."

I probably didn't have any right to criticize, considering I'd been taken in by his story hook, line, and sinker...but when I reexamined it with Sayumi's ideas in mind, it *did* strike me as sloppy in a number of ways. If his goal had been to fool all of us, there were a thousand different ways he could've done so more convincingly—and yet he'd chosen to give us a simple, verbal explanation and leave it at that. Hatoko and Chifuyu hadn't managed to keep up with the concept as a result, and Sayumi had caught on to how unnatural it was and seen through the lie with ease. As far as sudden plot twists went, it just seemed a bit *shoddy*. It was a contrived, haphazard development indeed.

"What do you think, Tomoyo?" I asked. She'd been silent for quite some time, so I prompted her to put her two cents in.

"Huh? O-Oh, right," Tomoyo stammered.

"Do you have an idea about what's going on? Feels like you've been mulling something over for a pretty long time now."

"I... Yeah," Tomoyo said with a nod. "The truth is...this whole situation's giving me a serious case of déjà vu."

Déjà vu? Huh?

"Wh-What do you mean, Tomoyo?" I asked. "Have you been through something like this before?"

"No, not like that! I just...well..." Tomoyo muttered. Whatever she was trying to say, she was having a really hard time spitting it out. "I don't mean I've seen something like this in the real world. I was talking about a story..."

"A story? How's that?"

"The very first novel I ever wrote was...well, it was sorta like this, more or less."

“Oh! You mean the one that didn’t make it through the first round of judging in that one contest?”

“You could’ve described it *any* other way, you know?!” Tomoyo bellowed indignantly before clearing her throat and carrying on. “A-Anyway… My first ever novel was basically this same story.”

“This same story, as in…?”

Tomoyo hesitated. “It was more or less your typical supernatural battle school story. The main character was chosen to wield a special power, and he used it to go ham on jerkwad classmates and evil terrorists and stuff. All the heroines fell in love with him too, so just a full-blown harem power fantasy all around… And the more I describe it, the more I realize it’s just exactly what you picture when you hear the words ‘generic light novel,’” she explained, fighting through her very conspicuous shame to finish her description. “Anyway, the big twist was that in the end, it turns out that all of the protagonist’s badass curbstomp battles and all the girls who fell for him were all just a work of fiction that the final boss made up. The villain’s all ‘Everything you’ve done, every battle you’ve fought, was all just a story that I wrote. You think that you had a harem? That you were unbeatable? That you were OP AF? Dumbass. You can’t seriously have thought that a light novel plot like that would ever play out in the real world, right?’ So, the protagonist falls into despair. It turns out that he was just a totally average, ordinary person after all, but at the very end, he resolves himself to get back on his feet and live his life to the fullest anyway in an inspiring denouement…”

“O-Oof,” I grunted.

There were no words. Tomoyo’s summary had been rough. Like, *really* rough. If I had to sum it up, I’d say that her story sounded like one of those books where you could practically *see* the author smugly smirking at you through the pages. The sense of “Aren’t I awesome for being able to write something like this?” was intense. It felt like it was screaming “Hah, as if I’d write a generic-ass light novel that’s totally indistinguishable from a billion other ones on the shelves! Bet you didn’t see that coming, right? Nobody could ever predict *my* plot twists!”—or maybe “It’s my job to teach all the readers who’re happy guzzling down generic light novels what *real* literature looks like!” Basically, it sounded like it’d make its author look like a self-righteous egomaniac in the most aggressive possible way. If I ever found a

plot twist like that in a book I'd paid real money for, I was confident I'd chuck the stupid thing *straight* at the nearest wall.

"Tomoyo, you can't *possibly*—"

"D-Don't say it! I know, okay?! I am *extremely* aware of how cringey that is, but what the hell do you want from me?! It was my first friggin' book!" Tomoyo shouted at a breakneck pace, her face a vivid shade of red. "Back then...I thought that kind of stuff was what made books interesting. I thought that if I got all meta about the usual tropes, critiqued the usual generic plotlines, and went straight for the antithesis of what was popular with readers by turning everything on its head in a big, last-second twist...it'd make for a really good story. I was *super* wrong."

Tomoyo paused, and I gave her a moment to collect herself.

"But then, when it got dropped from the contest in the first round, one of the judge's comments told me that I should 'think more carefully about how my readers will feel'...and I guess that just snapped me right out of it. I'd been totally focused on what I wanted to write, and I hadn't thought about what the people *reading* my work would think at all," Tomoyo said. She paused again to heave a sigh. "Looking back on it now, I think that's a mistake that a lot of aspiring novelists probably make. They think that if they can just write something that's unlike anything anyone's written before, they'll get popular by virtue of novelty alone."

"'They'...? That's pretty big talk considering you're still an *aspiring* novelist yourself, last I checked."

"O-Oh, stuff it! I'm different now! I've grown, okay?! I'm a late-stage wannabe! I've gotten through the first round, after all!"

That last part aside, Tomoyo had a point. Her very first story and Kiryuu's lie really *did* seem sort of similar. They both featured the same "it was all fiction all along" asspull plot twist that turned the whole story on its head, ruining it utterly in the process.

"Hey, Tomoyo...? Did you ever let Kiryuu read that story?" I asked.

"Hell no," said Tomoyo. "I've never shown it to anyone I know, and I'm never planning on sharing it either."

"Gotcha..."

Clearly, Kiryuu wasn't straight-up mimicking her story. Was it just a coincidence, then? Had his falsehood and her fiction just happened to overlap? Had they both just happened to decide to

run with the exact sort of plot twist that an aspiring author would put into their very first light novel, prioritizing bucking their readers' expectations above all else and screwing their whole story up by doing so?

"Wait!"

I gasped. It felt like a bolt of lightning had just flashed through my mind. Inspiration had struck. The pieces all fit. It all connected together.

It couldn't be…could it? But if not that, what else could *it be?*

I didn't want to think that I was right, but it was the only answer that made any sense. It would explain everything—or to be more precise, the fact that *nothing* could explain everything meant that this was the only explanation left that would work at all.

Seriously? This is awful. Like, this is what-the-hell levels of bad.

Was this really it? Was this a resolution that anyone could possibly be sold on? It was even more sloppy and haphazard than the "it was all a work of fiction" twist. It would tear our whole story up by its roots and ruin it from top to bottom…but it was all I had. It was the only possible way that all of our story's loose ends could be tied together.

Oh—I get it now. I guess this explains what Sagami told me. But really, though, what the hell? This *is the truth we have to deal with?* This *is our actual final plot twist?*

"H-Hey, what's going on, Andou?"

"Juu…? Are you okay?"

"Andou?"

"Please pull yourself together, Andou."

The truth that I'd come to understand had paralyzed me. The strength seemed to drain from my limbs and I nearly collapsed on the spot, much to the others' obvious concern.

"I… I figured it out," I gasped as I barely held myself upright and returned their gazes. "I finally know what Kiryuu was going for…what Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First was trying to accomplish."

And then…I told them. I revealed my revelation—the truth that was at the root of this whole story.

"Kiryuu…was being a chuuni."

Just like I was.



Chapter 6 ★ When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace

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Chapter 6: When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace

I think it's high time that I provided an actual answer. I don't mean some muddled, vague explanation that doesn't really resolve anything either—I think it would be for the best for me to give, in my own words, a clear, direct, succinct answer regarding what I believe to be the true nature of chuunibyou.

This would be so much easier if I only had to provide a dictionary-style definition. I could talk for *hours* about that. The thing is, though, that language is ever-changing. People have started using "eleventh-grade sickness" and "image-obsessive" as pseudo-synonyms for the term these days, and the meaning of "chuunibyou" itself has gradually shifted with the times as well.

And, of course, if I'm being completely honest, the word chuunibyou is, well...it kinda feels like it's on the verge of becoming obsolete. I'm not saying that people are going to stop saying it entirely—just that it feels like it's a lot less prevalent in society at large now than it was just a little while ago. The word's popularity has peaked, and now that the boom's over, it feels like it's a relic of a bygone era. Who knows? Maybe a few years from now, people really *will* stop using it altogether. Maybe a new word will be born to take its place, and "chuunibyou" will be relegated to occasional listicles with titles like "The Top Ten Nerdy Words of Yesteryear" at most.

That's where my feeling of urgency—my feeling that now is the moment for me to give my answer—is coming from. This is the moment for me to explain what chuunibyou is to *me* as best as I can. And, well, I figure I might as well cut to the chase and open with my conclusion: To me, the true identity of chuunibyou is an imitation.

Yes, an imitation. A fake, a counterfeit, a faulty copy, a flawed derivative, a half-baked forgery. That's what I see as the true nature of chuunibyou and the true nature of its sufferers. No matter how I try to pretty it up, no matter how positive of a spin I try to put on it, that core reality is something that I simply can't deny. It's a truth from which there can be no escape.

This is so obvious it really doesn't even bear saying, but I'll say it anyway: My name is not Guiltia Sin Jurai. Deep down, I've always known that. I knew it…but I couldn't stop myself from perpetuating my own lie. I thought that the name was cool, and I wanted to be as cool as I thought it was. Whatever society at large thought about it, the fact that *I* thought it was cool was something I could never be mistaken about. My feelings—the feelings of someone who had looked up to countless fictional characters over the course of his life—were, without question, genuine.

And yet…I couldn't help but wonder. Like it or not, a certain thought was never far from my mind: Was the fact that I longed to be like those fictional characters not, in and of itself, irrefutable proof that all I was doing was spuriously imitating them?

I don't think any of the characters I was so obsessed with looked up to anyone in the way I looked up to them. They didn't put on airs and pay careful attention to what people thought of them. Sure, they had evil eyes, wrapped their right arms with bandages, chanted incantations, and went by titles and aliases, but *they* weren't doing any of it to look cool. *They* weren't doing it because they were imitating someone they looked up to.

At the point where I looked up to them—at the point where I thought they were cool—I had already made it painfully clear that all I was doing was making myself into a sad, hopeless imitation of them. Maybe it's possible for an imitation to devote themself so thoroughly to the bit that they become the genuine article in their own right…but not me. I couldn't handle it.

I can't do it anymore. It's time for me to own up and face facts. It's time for me, at long last, to admit the obvious.

Right now, I'm on the verge of getting over my chuunibyou.

I'm not really sure when it started. Somewhere along the way, almost entirely unconsciously, I started feeling from time to time like I was just playing the *role* of the one chuuni in my social circle. I'd find myself thinking "Oh, I should have some overblown chuuni reaction to this! It'd be weird if I didn't," acting out a chuuni persona due to some strange, self-imposed sense of obligation. As time passed by, I started feeling that way more and more frequently. Some part of me was keeping my

chuunibyou going solely for the sake of preserving the status quo.

"To be a chuuni is to never lie to yourself, even as you lie to the world."

Those were my words—though I can't exactly remember when from—and if I may say so myself, I think I did a pretty good job of hitting the core of the matter with them. That said, if you look at them from another perspective, you can extend that conclusion to reveal another truth: Once you've started lying to yourself, you can no longer remain a chuuni. If you're forcing yourself to act out a case of chuunibyou, then you're not *really* suffering from chuunibyou at all, or anything like it. At that point, you're just making up your own personal fiction—just putting on a persona. The more you become conscious of your own behavior, the more your chuuni potential diminishes.

I'm not saying that I've stopped loving all the ultra-chuuni works of fiction that I've always been into, of course. I still adore manga, light novels, anime, and video games that cater to the chuuni crowd's particular tastes from the bottom of my heart. But...it's different. Something about it's not the same anymore. The sense of uniqueness and omnipotence that led me to the misguided belief that I was *special* in some profound way; the rebellious spirit that drove me to critique society first and think about what I was actually saying later; the aesthetic preference for lone-wolfism and being in the minority; the drive and grit to tell myself that I wasn't like everyone else and that that made me awesome, portraying myself as a cynic in every way I possibly could; the glee I took in my use of the word "cynic" despite the fact that I didn't *really* understand what it meant on anything but a surface level... All the things that actually well and truly make someone a chuuni have begun to fade away within me.

They haven't completely vanished yet. If anything, I still have a surplus of them sticking around. But still—I can tell that their peak has come and gone. From now on, I'll drift further and further away from my chuunibyou. The illness will lapse, and I'll make a full recovery. I'll grow up. I'll become one of the perfectly ordinary adults whom the old me held in such utter disdain.

When all's said and done, I'm nothing but an imitation. I could never hope to become the real deal, and I also lack the resolve to stick with my deception. I'm pretty darn half-baked all around. But...I can't help but think: Could that very half-baked nature, in

and of itself, be the true essence of chuunibyou?

I said something a while ago about an imitation being able to become the real deal if it sticks to its bit, but the truth is, if a chuuni stuck to the chuuni bit with that sort of dedication, they'd become something else entirely. They'd become something sublime—something precious and lofty that nobody could ever criticize—but still something *different*.

I believe that chuunibyou is only chuunibyou *because* its sufferers will eventually get over it. Someday, we'll all move on from our illness. An end will inevitably come. Everyone, without exception, will eventually grow up—we don't have a choice in the matter.

Chuunibyou is chuunibyou because it ends. Just like the cherry blossoms fall year after year, and just like every human will someday go to their death, so too a day will come when every chuuni is forced to give it all up and move on.

I'm no exception. Someday, I'll move on from my chuunibyou as well. I'll reach my twenties, then my thirties, then my forties, and as I move along into adulthood, there's every chance that I'll look back on the current me and feel such a soul-wrenching sense of shame I'll want to drop dead on the spot. Or maybe I'll manage to get over that as well. Maybe I'll end up telling my friends stories about what a crazy cringelord I was back in high school, using my dark past as conversation fodder over drinks. Maybe I'll go online somewhere and write a thread titled "When I was in highschool, I insisted that my classmates refer to me as Guiltia Sin Jurai. AMA."

I am an imitation—I'm not authentic by any means, nor am I resolved enough to see my mimicry through. I've been operating on a distinctly youthful set of values that I'm sure to view as a cringey blot on my history when I grow up—a blot that will only last for the blink of an eye in the grand scheme of things, and one that will depart in a split second as I mature and move on.

That is the identity of chuunibyou...and yet, I've chosen to embrace that identity. I'll accept it. I'll accept the full reality of being a chuuni, warts and all. I'll accept that split second and its painful ephemerality.

Chuunibyou is bound to end. One day, it will, without question, become an unfortunate mistake to look back upon...and that's fine. That's how it should be. Like how flowers are truly beautiful because they'll eventually wilt—like how life is

truly precious because it will inevitably come to an end—the transitory nature of chuunibyou, a split-second existence, allows it to shine brighter than anything.

If an end is sure to come, then all we can do is resolve ourselves to enjoy it to the fullest. The path forward would be to enjoy the ending of chuunibyou—to enjoy the advent of our adulthood. Refusing to allow your values to change and evolve would be a terrible mistake—they can only stretch so far before the stagnancy becomes untenable—therefore it's much better to let nature take its course and guide your chuunibyou toward its conclusion.

Growth is inevitable. Change is inevitable. Endings are inevitable. Final volumes are inevitable.

Of course, you already understand all of this. Isn't that right, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First?

No— Isn't that right, Kiryuu Hajime?

☆

It was midnight, and the school grounds of Senkou High were deserted.

The man we were waiting for appeared exactly when he'd promised, on the dot, stepping through the gates with a slow, self-assured stride. All of us knew that he could have moved around by any number of extraordinary means if he'd so chosen, but he walked with his own two legs anyway. It was like he was savoring the moment—like he didn't want to let it go. He walked up to us, moment by moment, step by step...

"So...where are the others?"

...until he stopped dead center in the middle of the courtyard, opening our exchange with an understandable question. The only people here to meet him, after all—the only actors onstage for the final showdown—were me and Tomoyo. Hatoko, Chifuyu, and Sayumi were nowhere to be seen.

"The other three aren't coming," I said. "We talked to Leatia and had her help them drop out of the War."

They'd done so at my request, specifically. I'd asked them to let me and Tomoyo be the only ones who'd participate in the final battle.

"Bwa ha ha! Did you, now?" Kiryuu asked with a confident grin. "Can't say I didn't see that coming. I knew it would turn out

this way from the very start. The three of us were always going to be the ones who'd be around to mark the end of this story."

He was grinning. Kiryuu Hajime was smiling the same way he'd always smiled, acting like the same person I'd always known him to be...but for some reason, it seemed different to me now. There was a terrible emptiness to his smile that I'd come to recognize.

"Kiryuu..." I said. "Everything you told us about inventing the literary club—about how we were all just characters in a fictional story that you were writing...that was all a lie, wasn't it?"

"Oh, you figured it out? Way to make this boring," said Kiryuu.

I didn't reply.

"I figured that it would make for a pretty compelling hook if you took the bait...but it's not a huge issue that you didn't. Truth is, it was actually supposed to be a joke at first. You took it so much more seriously than I'd expected though. You were *actually* freaking out, and I just couldn't resist pivoting. Rest assured: The only part of you and your friends that I tweaked was your powers. I didn't alter your personalities or backstories at all," Kiryuu said with a calm, composed chuckle. It almost felt like he was saying that even us realizing he'd been lying had been part of his plan from the beginning.

"You can stop now, Kiryuu," I said. "You don't have to keep forcing yourself to smile like that. You don't have to keep pretending that each and every little twist that turns up was all part of your master plan."

I hadn't meant to say that so directly. The words had flowed from my lips unbidden...and Kiryuu fell silent.

"I've figured it all out," I continued.

The pieces had all fit together...or so I'd like to say, but really, that wasn't true at all. In fact, it was the exact opposite of the truth. The truth was that the pieces had been so scattered—so hopelessly, outlandishly mismatched—that they'd seemed like they could never possibly fit together at all...which, in a roundabout sort of way, was exactly what had led me to the truth.

"W-Wait a minute, Andou," said Tomoyo. "Why're you acting like you have all the answers? Would you *please* explain yourself already? You haven't explained *anything* since you had your little revelation, so I'm still totally clueless..."

I hadn't told Tomoyo about the truth I'd come to understand

yet, and I hadn't told the other three either. I *couldn't* tell them. How could I? How could I possibly explain a twist as terrible as this one? How could I possibly reveal an ending this embarrassing? In truth, Tomoyo was the last person I ever wanted to disclose it to...but unfortunately, she was also the one person whom I had a clear and unambiguous responsibility to tell. She was his sister, after all. She was a member of Kiryuu Hajime's family—someone of irreplaceable importance to him.

"Kiryuu...I can say it now, right?"

"Guiltia...what are you—"

"I can explain everything now, can't I? Everything you've done up to now, and what you'll be trying to do from here on out... I can pull back the curtain and expose it all, right?"

I knew that this was something I *had* to say, one way or another. Kiryuu would never be able to say it himself. If I didn't put an end to all of this, then nothing could possibly stop him.

"Wh-Why're you dancing around whatever it is you're trying to say, Andou...? Stop dropping hints and explain yourself! What did you figure out? What has Hajime been trying to do all this time?!" shouted Tomoyo.

I turned to look Kiryuu in the eye. He returned my gaze, his deeply, irregularly colored eyes meeting mine. "Kiryuu. The truth is..."

"The truth is...you didn't have anything in mind at all, did you?"

"...*Huh*?" Tomoyo grunted. She blinked, several times. "Wait...Huh? Wh-What? What do you mean, Andou?"

"I mean what I said. Kiryuu...doesn't have anything in mind that he's working toward. He wasn't thinking about that at all."

Tomoyo stared at me in blank, dumbfounded silence. I couldn't blame her for that. Who knew how much of a shock the revelation must have been for her? Who could have guessed that the man who'd been pulling all the strings behind the curtain—that Kiryuu Hajime, a man of unfathomable motives and intentions who was practically *dripping* with an aura of mystery—had not, in truth, been thinking about what he was doing at all?

Of *course* none of the pieces seemed to fit together. After all—none of them had ever been meaningful in any real way.

"Though, actually, it's probably not strictly true that he wasn't

thinking about it," I continued. "If anything, I'd bet he's been thinking about it harder than anyone else ever could."

He's probably taken this more seriously than anyone. He's mulled it over, pondered the possibilities, and racked his mind for solutions more desperately than any of us.

"He's thought, and thought, and thought…but in the end, he just hasn't been able to come up with anything," I said. "He hasn't thought up an ending to this story."

"An…ending…?" Tomoyo repeated.

"I mean, just look at the situation we're in now. Isn't it kind of obvious that everything's jumped the rails? Why's the final battle happening between *three* people? Like, did we just forget about the whole *Final Eight* thing, or what? Wasn't there supposed to be some big, grand significance to there being eight people here? And while I'm at it, wasn't everyone in the *Final Eight* supposed to get a wish granted? When did *that* stop being a thing?"

The whole idea was that the War would move on to its next stage once only eight Players remained, but Kiryuu had brought the numbers down to six in one fell swoop by taking out all of his former allies at once, and ultimately we'd ended up pushing them down further to three before anything could begin. What was *happening* here? It was a mess. It was such a mess, I could barely even believe it. The longer the story carried on, the more it tore its own internal logic to shreds.

"W-Wait, Andou… What do you mean, an ending to the story? What was he trying to do this whole time, then?" asked Tomoyo.

"Basically…Kiryuu's chuunibyou led him to try to be an author," I explained.

Kiryuu was a high-level chuuni, and he had a highly developed inclination toward authorship as well. He was just as much of a chuuni as me…or, well, if I'm being honest, he was such a high-level chuuni he put me to shame. There was only one thing he could've been trying to do, considering that.

"In the end, all he was trying to do was tell a good story."

He'd wanted to tell a good story. He'd wanted to write the sort of story that would make people say "That was incredible!" or "I knew Kiryuu Hajime had it in him!"

"Here's a question. You could tell what made Kiryuu's power so incredibly dangerous the second he described it, right?"

"Y-Yeah," Tomoyo hesitantly replied.

"The *Reverse Crux Errata*—the power to freely create and alter

skills and characters as he sees fit. It's an outrageously mighty ability with the potential to let him turn the very world that we humans live in into his own fictional reality. In a sense, it's a power that makes him this world's author."

An author could rewrite their story as they pleased. They could make everything turn out exactly the way they wanted it to. They could make their setting and characters behave in whatever ways they saw fit.

"But tell me, Tomoyo…can authors *really* do whatever they want to in their stories?"

"Can they… Huh?" Tomoyo grunted.

"Like, think about the light novels you write. Does being their author *really* mean that you have complete and total control over every aspect of them? Are you free to do whatever you want, without any restraints or exceptions? Is writing a story that'll entertain people really that easy?"

"O-Of course it isn't! Writing a story's really friggin' hard! Like, sure, you can *technically* do whatever you want, but in a roundabout sort of way that's actually what makes it so hard… Like, sometimes the story just won't progress in the way you want it to, or elements of the world-building will start tripping you up, or the characters will start acting with a will of their own in ways that don't work with what you had planned at all… Point is, it's really hard! Writing's basically just a process of nonstop trial and error from the very— *Oh*!"

It seemed Tomoyo had finally caught on as well. She had to eventually—after all, she was the one who'd taught me this lesson back in the eighth grade, when I'd given up my chuunibyou and hers was still blazing forward at full throttle.

Back then, I'd started perceiving a sense of "Yeah, you people will eat this garbage up, won't you?" in all the works of fiction I encountered, and I'd ended up preoccupied by the misconception that everyone who consumed a work of entertainment was just dancing in the palm of its creator's hand. I'd ended up going off on a pretentious ramble about how the sort of fiction that kids like us obsessed over had been *designed* to make kids obsess over them by a bunch of adults…and Tomoyo had taken my whole argument down with direct and brutal efficiency.

"Cartoonists and novelists and scriptwriters all work themselves

ragged to make their stories!"

"And anyway, writing novels is… It's really *hard, you know? Sometimes you can imagine things perfectly but just can't write them right, and sometimes you just can't think up dialogue that's fun to read at all… Sometimes not even you know if your characters are standing up or sitting down… Sometimes your world-building just falls apart, and sometimes you make stupid continuity errors without even realizing it… Sometimes your story ends up going in a totally random direction you never planned on… But someone like you wouldn't know a thing about any of that, and you think the people who make media are trying to play you like a fiddle?"*

"It's not that easy*, okay?!"*

It all seemed so obvious, when she put it that way. Creating a work of fiction isn't that easy. It's *hard*. Writing something that your readers will actually enjoy and appreciate is as hard as it gets.

"Kiryuu won the Fourth Spirit War…and asked for another one as his reward. He was given full administrative authority over it, and he tried to use that power to become its author."

With the power of authorship at his disposal, he'd sought to write the greatest story ever told. A no-holds-barred battle royale where the last surviving participant would be granted a wish had been, in his mind, a little too played out—so he'd decided to tweak the setup here and there, penning a story that he'd hoped would be brimming with stylish originality, one set right here in the real world.

"This time, we awakened to abilities of our own—and Tomoyo's and the other girls' were god-tier superpowers. You founded *Fallen Black* as well, and the *Final Eight* rule was added to the setup. You threw all sorts of new elements and ideas at the wall, peppering the story with foreshadowing wherever you possibly could."

The result of his efforts, at this point, went without saying. The tragically messy situation we'd found ourselves in made it abundantly clear: His own world-building had tripped him up. His characters had started acting with wills of their own. The story hadn't progressed in the way he'd wanted it to.

"In the end, you didn't manage to make any of the foreshadowing you'd set up pay off in any real way. You *tried* to force the story to an ending anyway…but keeping us in your

back pocket to serve as its final boss backfired. We've been isolated from the rest of the story for so long that we just couldn't keep up with the last-second supernatural battle plot twist you threw at us. After all, we just don't have any good reason to fight you, when all's said and done."

"S-So, basically...you're saying he didn't do a good enough job of giving his characters clear motivations?" asked Tomoyo.

"Right. He ran smack-dab into the classic 'It doesn't make any sense for the characters to actually do any of this' problem. I'm sure he was hoping that he'd be able to pull us into the supernatural battle side of his story without much trouble, but would we *really* jump into combat headfirst? That'd be super weird, right? It'd be totally out of character for us. That's why he had to rack his mind and come up with *something* that would give us a half-decent motivation to get involved in the fight."

"Wait... Y-You don't mean...?!"

"Exactly. That's why he pulled the 'You're all just a work of fiction' twist out of thin air."

Kiryuu had needed a motive for us to do battle with him...and that was the best one he'd been able to come up with. He'd gone with it because it was a twist that was impossible to entirely discount, no matter how out of nowhere it seemed...or maybe he'd just been indulging in the exact same feeling of omnipotence that Tomoyo had fallen victim to when she was writing her very first story. Maybe he'd been caught up in the idea that writing a twist nobody could ever possibly see coming would make him look super awesome, so he'd decided to go with exactly the sort of story-upending revelation that you'd expect from a first-time author who was just a little too caught up in their own self-importance.

The plot he'd been hoping to follow, I figured, went something like this: After learning that we were nothing more than fictional characters, we would fall into despair. Before long, however, we'd have an "Even if we are just fictional, the feelings and passion in our hearts are as real as it gets!" sort of moment, get back on our feet, and strive to free ourselves from the shackles of fiction by standing up against the root of all the evils that'd plagued us...or something along those lines, anyway. In the end, however, his outrageous plot twist just hadn't landed. It hadn't worked on us at all.

I mean...okay, I *fell for it hook, line, and sinker, but still.*

“In the end, your whole plan crashed and burned,” I said. “There aren’t any endings left that could wrap up the story that you set into motion.”

The final twist…was that there was no final twist. What sort of pathetic joke of an ending was this? How could I possibly have told everyone that a farce like *that* was the reality we had to live with?

“Right now, you’re smiling as confidently and dauntlessly as ever…but deep down, you’re at a total loss. You can’t think up a decent twist, and it’s driving you crazy. You have *no* idea where to take the story next. You’re like a weekly manga artist staring down their deadline with no manuscript in sight, or like a light novel author whose series has been selling just fine but who can’t seem to put out a new volume no matter how long they spend trying to write it. Isn’t that right, Kiryuu?”

“Bwa ha ha…”

Kiryuu laughed. It was the same laugh he’d always done—the same dry, peculiar, unnatural laugh.

“Bwa ha ha, bwa ha ha ha ha ha! You think I’m at a loss? *Me*? You think I don’t have an actual plan…? Bwa ha ha ha, *bwaaaaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha*!”

It was like something had broken in him. His laughter grew more and more unhinged, echoing up into the night sky above. Then, when he was finally finished, he ran a hand through his silver hair and turned his gaze upon me once more.

“Well…you’re right, god dammit all.”

A moment after Kiryuu spat those words…he took off his rounded sunglasses, removed the red colored contact in his right eye, and hurled them both to the ground. It was the first time I’d ever seen his true face.

Kiryuu flashed a weary, put-upon smile. There wasn’t a hint to be seen of the ominous threat that his usual confident grin had always seemed to pose. Now he looked at me with a pair of black, homochromatic eyes, which he quickly turned up toward the sky. It felt like he was running away from my gaze, maybe, or like he was searching for something. I couldn’t say for sure.

“Hajime…” Tomoyo muttered. Her expression was sympathetic, and it carried a slight hint of nostalgia as well. After all, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First no longer stood before us. We were now speaking with Kiryuu Hajime, the perfectly ordinary human being.

“Every last little bit of what you just said was right, Andou Jurai,” said Kiryuu. The time for him to call me Guiltia, it seemed, had passed. “Right now…? I’m in a fix like you wouldn’t believe. I spent the whole walk here racking my mind about what the hell I was supposed to do next and how the hell I was supposed to wrap my story up. You hit the nail on the head…I’ve been worrying and freaking out over this for ages. I’m the one who started the whole damn story up in the first place, but somewhere along the way it got out of hand, and I’ve been failing to bring it back in line ever since…”

The story had gotten so out of hand that its author could no longer bring it under control again. I wasn’t a creative by any means, so this was pure speculation on my part…but I had a feeling that the problem Kiryuu had found himself facing was a very common one in the storytelling world—sometimes getting out of hand was exactly what made a story entertaining, so authors would always strive to reach beyond their means.

“I do have one thing I wanna put on the record to defend myself, though,” Kiryuu added. “It’s not like I went into all this without a plan from the start, y’know? I wasn’t taking being an author lightly and jumping in without testing the waters. I knew what I was getting into. I even had a conclusion planned out, all the way back then. But…”

Kiryuu pressed a hand to his forehead. He looked *deeply* dejected.

“…then fuckin’ Shizumu *guessed* the whole damn ending.”

“W-Wait a minute…you mean his theory about you trying to make the literary club into your final boss and it all coming down to you job-changing from gravity-wielder to time-manipulator for your ultimate showdown with Tomoyo?”

Kiryuu sighed. “That’s the one.”

O-Oooof… Why are you like this, Sagami? Did you really have to be the worst kind of reader all the way to the bitter end?

“I bet I looked pretty calm back when he guessed it, but inside? I was losing it. I knew I had to do *something*. An ending that a reader like *him* could see coming was out of the question. I thought I had to come up with some really crazy, incredible twist that no one would ever predict…and that’s when it all started to fall apart.”

He’d changed his story because a reader had guessed the twist that he had planned. This is, again, pure speculation on my

part…but I was pretty positive that that was one thing that an author could never, *ever* let themself do. It's not like it was unethical or anything, but I had a feeling that the more you forced yourself to try to buck your readers' expectations and come up with plot developments that no one could call in advance, the more your story would end up breaking down as a result.

In this day and age, all you had to do was glance at the internet to learn exactly what your readers thought of your stories. Some of them, inevitably, would manage to put the pieces together and guess future plot developments in advance. Readers don't have to take responsibility for their predictions and can make as many as they want, so they're free to throw dozens of them at the wall and gloat it up if even one of them turns out to be right. "See? I told you so!" they'll say. "Yeah, that's exactly what I thought would happen," or "That wasn't as epic of a moment as I expected it to be," they'll condescendingly opine.

Dodging every single one of those irresponsible, limitless reader predictions is, I figure, all but impossible…and if you force yourself to try to dodge them anyway, you'll end up breaking your story itself as a consequence. That was exactly the trap that Kiryuu had fallen into. As he penned his first ever story, he let himself get preoccupied by his readers' impressions of it. He tried so hard to subvert their expectations—went so far out of his way to write around them—that he'd lost sight of what his story was actually supposed to be about in the first place.

"Y'know something…? I *really* get how Oda Eiichirou and Aoyama Goushou must feel right now. Imagine keeping a series going on and on for decades, having all sorts of internet randos spout their theories about how it'll finally end the *whole* damn time… Can you even imagine how rough that must be?"

I…didn't reply to that one. *Nope. Back it up. You* definitely *shouldn't be comparing yourself to authors who're on* that *level.*

"So, I tried to buck Shizumu's prediction…but there's no way I could course-correct that majorly that late in the game and have it turn out well. Then, while I was busy figuring out what the hell I could even do…*Fallen Black*'s other members kicked off their epic betrayal. I didn't see that one coming at *all*, and it backed me into one hell of a corner. I had no choice but to use the *Reverse Crux Errata*, in the end. They forced my hand."

"I thought so," I said. "You really didn't plan on using that

power at all, did you?”

“No shit. Of *course* you shouldn’t put a broken-ass cheat skill that nobody could ever possibly beat into a supernatural battle story.”

Thinking up overpowered abilities was easy. I’d come up with plenty of them myself. Making good use of them in a story, however, was *hard*. If a power you introduce really is the strongest—if literally nobody can beat it—then your only choices are to come up with some arbitrary excuse to take it away or to introduce a character who’s on such a totally different level that you can just say the power straight-up doesn’t work on them or something. In other words, your only choice is to pull out a plot twist that’ll strain credulity even further.

“I know you probably would’ve lost if you hadn’t brought it out…but using the *Reverse Crux Errata* to wipe out *Fallen Black* was still a fatal mistake, wasn’t it?” I asked. “You hadn’t finished seeding our motivation to oppose you, after all. There’s just no way you could show us a power that’s *that* broken, say, ‘Okay, let’s fight now,’ and expect us to play along. Of course we’d back out.”

“Right? Trust me, I know that was a mistake as well as you do. That’s why I tied my brain into knots to think up the ‘you’re all fictional’ story. I thought it’d work as a final twist and give you a decent motive to fight me, all at once…but in the end, that failed too,” Kiryuu said before heaving a long, heavy sigh. “You know, when I think back on it, I think everything might’ve actually gone off the rails the moment I met you.”

“Me? But why…?”

“I really just happened to stop by the literary club on a whim that day. Us meeting was total coincidence, but we were such birds of a feather I figured it *had* to be fate. I thought I’d been struck with some sorta revelation—that I *had* to pull it into the story in some big way. So…that’s what I did. I wrote you in. I threw a whole new character into the plot, hoping you’d make everything more exciting.”

He’d outlined his whole story in advance, then thrown a new element into the mix on a whim. He’d let himself go full improv, ad-libbing developments on the fly. He’d probably thought that if he just laid out enough random foreshadowing, he’d be able to tie it all together later down the line, one way or another. He’d thought it would all work out in the long run…

“But in the end, I never managed to figure out how I could actually *use* that new character. I threw you in off the cuff and never got a handle on you.”

“…”

“I thought I could swap Tomoyo out of the final boss slot and use you instead, wrapping the story up with a fight between the two of us…but that just wasn’t gonna happen. Seriously—what the *hell* is up with your stupid, useless-ass power? How am I supposed to make a final battle exciting when *that’s* what I have to work with? Even the awakened version’s worthless!”

“Y-Yeah, uh… Sorry, I guess…”

My *Dark and Dark*, it seemed, was a force to be reckoned with. It was so profoundly petty it had transcended the fourth wall and stumped the very author of our story. From a certain perspective, I guess you might say that actually made it a tremendously potent power after all.

“*You’re* sorry? That’s my line,” Kiryuu said with a brief, troubled smile. “I wanted this to work out better, y’know? I wanted to rise way above whatever expectations you had for me.”

Kiryuu’s self-deprecation felt like it pierced me right through the heart. *Oh, I get it now*, I thought. *Sagami isn’t the only reader that he’s been thinking about this whole time. He was thinking about me too. Knowingly or not, I’ve been one of his readers as well.*

The first time I met Kiryuu, I was elated by the encounter. Not only did it feel like I’d finally met someone who was cut from the same cloth as me, but it also felt like I’d met someone who stood *far* above me in my chosen sphere. I’d felt something in him—some limitless well of potential—and I’d put him up on a massive pedestal, treating him as some sort of ideal that I could expect the world of. I’d looked upon him with eyes full of admiration and envy. I’d believed wholeheartedly that there was something that made him *different* from everyone else I knew—and he’d been all too delighted to be the subject of my innocent expectations.

At the same time, however, those expectations may well have placed a burden upon him. I might have been the equivalent of someone who loved the work of a particular author a little *too* much tweeting “I’m a huge fan of your series! When’s the next volume coming out?!” at them. That sort of excessively pure enthusiasm, in a backward sort of way, can actually pressure an author rather than supporting them, and that’s likely just what

I'd done to him.

On the one hand, you had my pure and innocent enthusiasm, and on the other, Sagami's shrewd and discerning analysis. Kiryuu had faced two very different flavors of pressure from two very different readers, and as a result, his story had begun to drift off the course he'd tried to set for it.

"Talk about pathetic... This was *my* story. I'd started it for myself, but now I can't even give it a half-decent ending," Kiryuu spat as he flopped listlessly to the ground.

The way I saw it, Kiryuu Hajime was, without question, an author. There are all sorts of authors, though, and he was the sort who'd just set out to write his very first novel—in other words, an amateur. He'd probably been brimming with enthusiasm when he'd kicked his story off...but then his poorly developed setup dragged him down, the characters he'd thrown in on a whim piled up, he'd mistaken self-importance for originality, and he'd focused so single-mindedly on his readers' opinions that he'd ended up veering off course and losing sight of where he wanted things to end entirely. His story was left in limbo, and all signs pointed to it remaining on eternal hiatus.

"So...you know how Shizumu's power showed us visions of our future?" Kiryuu muttered as he leaned back, gazing up at the night sky.

Innocent Onlooker had allowed Sagami to force people to witness premonitions of their potential future—and the moment he'd used it on me and Kiryuu, Kiryuu had snapped and crushed Sagami in the blink of an eye. It seemed like he'd panicked—like he was rejecting the vision he'd received with everything he had. He himself had described the future he'd seen as "sickening."

"Y'know what I saw back then...? I saw myself well into my forties, still with the same silver hair, sunglasses, and coat as ever, still telling people my name was Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, and still not able to hold down a job to save my life."

I took in a sharp breath. It almost felt like I'd break down in tears if I didn't hold myself together.

Y-Yiiikes. Yeah, that's...that's rough*.*

It was pretty different from what I'd been imagining he'd seen...but I certainly couldn't deny that it was the worst, most sickening possible future for him. No wonder he'd lost his cool. Anyone would want to lash out against a future like *that*.

"It was a real shock, y'know? I mean, it was depressing on its

own, sure, but the fact that I was shocked about a future like that was also shocking in its own right. The fact that I was shaken by that vision felt like…like it meant some part of me was admitting that everything I was doing was nothing more than a childish game," Kiryuu said. His words came out in a nonstop, profoundly lamenting deluge. "I always knew. Deep down, it was never, ever in doubt. I…am not Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. I'm just…just Kiryuu Hajime."

I didn't say a word.

"It wasn't like this back in the day. I didn't worry about what other people thought about me…didn't hesitate to stick to what I thought was cool, come hell or high water. But now…I can't keep it up anymore. It got especially bad around the time I hit my twenties. No matter how hard I tried to stay strong…it kept slipping away from me. It kept fading. The chuuni power within me's diminishing by the second."

"Kiryuu…" I muttered.

I got it now. It all made sense. He was the same as I was. Kiryuu…was on the verge of getting over his chuunibyou too.

When a chuuni made an effort to keep their affliction around, fending off its eventual departure…the act of making that effort, in and of itself, was contrary to the nature of chuunibyou. Kiryuu understood that all too well, and the knowledge had brought him to far, *far* greater and longer-lasting depths of conflict and anguish than I'd experienced.

There's no specific source or trigger to chuunibyou's end. It's more of an inevitability than anything else. Just like we lose the ability to hear high-frequency noises, and just like boys lose their ability to sing in soprano, so too does chuunibyou fade as we make our way into adulthood. People just *change*. The act of living, in fact, is all but synonymous with the act of changing. Of *course* our dispositions and personalities shift over the course of time. It'd be stranger if they *were* perfectly consistent. I don't think there's a single person out there whose personality remained completely unaltered from childhood to adulthood.

Suddenly, my own potential futures from Sagami's visions flashed into my mind. He'd shown me four vastly different routes in which I'd ended up dating four different people, but there was one aspect of my future that had remained consistent throughout all of them: Regardless of all other circumstances, I was no longer a chuuni.

None of the future versions of myself had engaged in any pretentious posing. They hadn't forced themselves to enunciate a perfect "mwa ha ha" every time they laughed. They'd all been perfectly ordinary, unremarkable teenagers in their last year of high school. Those visions had only been set a year in advance from now, but the me in them had seemed strikingly different from the me in the present day.

Perhaps, surprisingly enough, that was just how it went with chuunibyou. Maybe finding a girlfriend was all it took for someone to get over it in the blink of an eye. Maybe it was just one of countless phases that one's personality might go through over the course of a lifetime—a blip on an ever-shifting radar of perspectives.

"Just when I realized that there was nothing I could do about my chuunibyou fading away…I met Leatia and learned about the Spirit War. I literally trembled with joy. I couldn't even find the words to describe how happy I was. The world that I'd always wanted to be a part of had finally showed up at my doorstep."

What would I have done if I'd been in his position? What if I hadn't been isolated from the War, met my Spirit handler, and learned exactly what was going on? How would I have reacted? What choices would I have made?

"If I could just stay in the War—just keep fighting battles straight out of a manga—I could keep my chuunibyou alive. I could keep viewing the world through the same lens I always had. I could be a version of myself who was proud to be a chuuni…or so I'd thought."

That was why Kiryuu had drawn out the war. That was why he'd made the outlandish choice of wishing to fight in another one.

"But in the end…it was all pointless. Deep down, some part of me was always thinking 'Seriously, aren't you too old for this?' Once that thought took root, there was no getting rid of it. The more I wished I could stay the same forever, the more I could tell that I really was changing."

Kiryuu had gone to incredible lengths to reject the force of change. He'd done his damnedest to keep liking the same things he always had. He'd wanted to remain addicted to the exact same media he'd always consumed…but it wasn't possible. Everyone's tastes change as they grow up and leave their childhood behind. Sometimes you'll just stop buying the new

volumes of a manga you're hooked on without even realizing it. Sometimes you'll watch every episode of an anime with fervent interest while it's airing, only to then lose interest entirely once the anime ends, its sales dry up, a second season is all but ruled out, and the author seems to have lost all motivation and stopped putting out the original work it was adapted from.

That sort of change was inevitable…but Kiryuu had fought it with everything he had anyway. He'd wished with all his heart to stay the same fanciful, idealistic child as ever—and the effort was just as doomed as if he'd tried to keep speaking in the same tone as ever, even after his voice had started to deepen. He'd tried to make the inherently transient perspective that was chuunibyou into something that would last an eternity. He'd done it because letting himself change felt like it would be no different than letting his current self die—like it would mean betraying everything that had made him himself.

But it didn't work. People change. Time moves on. Even if you have the power to do anything you want to—even if you can stop time or reshape the world itself with total impunity—the one thing you'll never be able to stop from changing is yourself. Maybe you could brainwash yourself into an unchanging state, sure, but at that point, you wouldn't be *you* anymore. No matter how broken and cheat-like of a skill you might have…you yourself will always be the one exception.

"So I thought, hey…if it has to end one way or another, I might as well go out with the biggest bang I possibly can. I decided to carve the name 'Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First' as deeply into this world—and more importantly, into myself—as I could. That's the mindset that I went into coordinating the Fifth Spirit War with…and, well, you already know how *that* turned out for me. Turns out that when a chuuni writes a novel, all they get is something to look back on and cringe at."

Such was a novel written *with* chuunibyou, not *for* chuunis: a self-centered story that paid no interest in the slightest to its readers, and a work that you could only ever view as a blot on your history when you grew up and looked back upon it.

"Seriously, though—what *should* I have done?" Kiryuu asked, the words seeming to spring from his mouth unbidden. "And…what am I supposed to do now?"

I couldn't answer his question. If he hadn't asked it, I might've done so myself. The moment we became aware that we were

going to change and wished we could remain the same, that very wish would prove to us that the change had already begun. What's a person supposed to do when they find themself stuck in that dilemma? What could we do to make sure that we'd keep liking the same things we always had?

"Why not just grow up already?"

Suddenly, Tomoyo spoke up. Her tone was as kind and compassionate as that of a mother gently consoling a lost child... Okay, no, not really. She actually sounded more like a mother whose kid had just asked her "Why does one plus one equal two?" replying "Because it does. You'll just have to live with it." Her tone was cold, exasperated, and above all else, blunt as all get out.

"You're really glorifying the hell out of all this crap, Hajime...but basically, you're just throwing a tantrum because you don't wanna grow up and don't wanna get a job, right? Well, shut up and do it anyway. Get out there and *contribute* something to society for once. That's what being an adult means. Deal with it."

A moment of silence passed as Kiryuu and I gaped at her, completely lost for words. It felt like she'd driven the hefty fist of common sense *right* into my solar plexus.

"W-Wait, Tomoyo, no," I said. "Framing it like *that* ruins everything, doesn't it? You're making it sound like Kiryuu's conflict and mental anguish is exactly the same as what jobless shut-ins go through... Like, it degrades this whole thing into a ridiculous farce, y'know?"

"What do you mean, 'degrades it'? This whole thing's been a stupid farce from the start," Tomoyo quickly and curtly huffed before walking over toward Kiryuu, who was still sitting on the ground. She stopped right in front of him, looking down on him with all the intimidating presence of those guardian statues that loom over the entrances to Buddhist temples. "You're a *total* moron, you know that, Hajime? You haven't changed at all for as long as I've known you."

Kiryuu didn't reply.

"So, look—there's basically no way you could've missed this, but I used to be a chuuni too," said Tomoyo. "I came up with all sorts of wild fantasies, gave myself ridiculous titles and aliases, ran around in the park wearing your coat and sunglasses, and basically made a huge, cringey idiot of myself...but in the end, I

got over it before I graduated from middle school. By the time I started high school, I was a totally normal girl. I've been living the normie life—the total opposite of what chuunis go for."

"Wait," I interjected. "*You*? A normie…?"

"Shut *up*, Andou!" Tomoyo snapped, shooting me a death glare before turning back to Kiryuu. "Nowadays…I see my chuuni period as a super embarrassing phase that's better left forgotten. Just thinking about it makes me so embarrassed, I wish I could drop dead and get it over with. Why did I have to act like such a freaky nutjob? I have *so* many regrets…but on the other hand, it also feels like it was for the best. I went through a chuuni phase in middle school, got all that crap out of my system, went on the mend, and ended up making a total and complete recovery, resulting in who I am today."

"I mean…it kinda feels like you've still got some latent chuunibyou aftereffects lingering in your system, so I'm not sure I'd say you've made a *complete*—"

"I-I said shut the hell up, Andou!" Tomoyo roared again.

Look, it's not like I want *to undermine you here, okay? You just keep saying stuff that makes it totally impossible to resist butting in! Your story's so dubious, questioning it is literally reflexive for me!*

"A-Anyway, what I'm trying to get at here…is that even a stain on your personal history is still *part* of your personal history. Even the stuff that we're most embarrassed about and the stuff we wish we could go back and undo are part of what makes us into the people we are today. Putting together all those experiences is what makes us change, mature, and grow into adults," Tomoyo concluded.

"Hmph… That's a pretty condescending thing to say, eh? Not to mention pretentious," said Kiryuu.

"Well, I *get* to condescend to you. I *get* to be pretentious when I talk to you. I'm a step ahead of you in life, so I've earned that right," Tomoyo declared, sounding just a little proud about it.

When she put it that way, it struck me that Tomoyo really was a step ahead of everyone else present. Kiryuu and I were still obsessing over an illness that she'd gotten over ages ago. She'd made peace with her chuunibyou in her own way.

"I don't really know how to put this, but…I guess you're just being too all-or-nothing about this, Hajime. You and Andou both, actually. You're acting like doing away with your chuunibyou would basically be the same thing as killing the person you've

been up until now, right?"

Kiryuu stayed silent.

"I mean, I get it, okay? Letting yourself change really does feel like denying the person you've always been. But think about it this way: No matter how much you change, the old you never just *disappears*, right? This moment's never going to stop having happened no matter what comes after, right?" said Tomoyo. A somewhat bitter smile came across her face. "I got over my chuunibyou...and I'm *super* embarrassed about all the crap I did back when I had it. I'd undo every bit of it if I had the chance, but no matter how much I deny that part of my life, I can never *actually* erase the chuuni me from my past."

There's no undoing what's been done. No matter how much you disavow your past, and no matter how hard you try to erase it, it will never really change.

"A stain on your past is a stain because you *can't* just wash it away...so you can rest easy and let yourself change, the way I see it. Just let yourself grow up. Even if the grown-up you ends up rejecting the you from right now, he'll never be able to erase you. And on the flip side, no matter how hard you try to preserve the current you, it just isn't possible to keep it going all the way into the future. The only moment you'll feel exactly the same way that you do right now *is* right now," said Tomoyo.

Her words struck me as incredibly idealistic, but at the same time, unwaveringly pragmatic as well. The present moment will never disappear, no matter how you try to deny it down the line...but moreover, the present moment is *just* the present moment, and it can never be preserved and brought into the future. All we can do is leave our present feelings and perspectives behind, sequestering them in the annals of our memories.

"You're getting older, Hajime, and so am I. Andou and the others are too. We'll all be adults someday, and somewhere else out in the world, some other kid will come down with their own case of chuunibyou. I don't know if I'm making any sense here, but, well...if that's how the world works, then I don't really have a problem with it. Why not leave it at that?"

"Do you seriously think that's an option for me, after everything I've done?" Kiryuu asked with a pained, bitter scowl. "I ran wild. I pulled everyone and everything around me into my whims. I wanted to wrap all of humanity up in a massive War

under my direction. Do you really think I can just leave my story unfinished, dropping it on the spot to go off and be a normal adult…?"

"I mean…I don't know what all you've done that you'd feel responsible for, but in terms of your options, I don't see why leaving the story unfinished *wouldn't* be on the table. It's not like finishing it would free you from all that responsibility anyway. Nobody's gonna praise you for wrapping up a story that you started purely for your own self-satisfaction, you know?" Tomoyo said with a frigid glare.

O-Oof! Harsh!

"Personally, I think you should go around and apologize to every single person you pulled into your stupid little game…but considering most of them don't even remember it at this point, probably better not to stir that pot again. I'd say you're better off just feeling guilty about it for the rest of your life."

Once again, Kiryuu didn't say a word.

"Going back to the part about leaving your story unfinished…speaking as an aspiring author myself, I don't *like* the idea of any story getting dropped partway through, but there's not much else to do at this point. It's not like you're slacking off on your writing, or got bored, or whatever. You thought it through as hard as you possibly could and worked yourself to the bone to come up with a good ending…but you just couldn't do it. You couldn't come up with the right twist, couldn't put out the next installment, and couldn't write your final volume. And at that point…what else can you do? It's a lost cause. What else can you do?" Tomoyo repeated under her breath.

So, so many stories have ended without ever reaching completion. So many stories have ended on unsatisfying, incomprehensible notes. So many have been canceled or quietly abandoned…and Kiryuu Hajime's first story was about to become one of them. He'd written himself into a corner, and he was about to set down his pen for good without even bothering to put down a final period. A lack of ending would be the ending. A lack of a final twist would be the final twist. That would be how this story concluded.

"What else is there to say…?" Tomoyo pondered. "I mean, there's a bunch of other stuff I could comment on, but I'm starting to get pretty tired here… So, uh, basically…" She seemed

to hesitate for a moment, then held a hand out to Kiryuu. “Let’s go home, Hajime,” Tomoyo said with a slightly bashful look on her face. “Mom and dad are worried about you.”

“Tomoyo...” said Kiryuu.

“If you can’t decide what you want to do next, then just take some time back at our place to think it through. Of course, whether you decide to get a job or go back to college, you’re gonna have to let your hair get black again one way or another.”

“Yeah...guess I will,” Kiryuu agreed. He let out a slight sigh, then took the hand that Tomoyo offered him. “Let’s head home for now, then.”

The look on Kiryuu’s face as he stood up was so calm and placid, it almost felt like he’d just been released from the clutches of a spirit that had possessed him. He looked like he’d accepted everything the world had thrown at him—like he’d compromised, given up, and grown up.

“But, hey...Andou? If this doesn’t work out...”

Suddenly, the words Sagami had spoken to me sprang to the forefront of my mind.

“If this doesn’t work out...”

“I want you to save Kiryuu for me.”

“Please. You’re the only one who can do it.”

That’s right. Sagami had asked me to *save* Kiryuu—not to defeat him or stop him, but *save* him. Maybe he’d already figured out, at least to some degree, what Kiryuu was going through. Maybe he’d been dimly aware of the mental anguish that had driven Kiryuu into a corner. Maybe he’d realized how, in his role as a reader, he had tormented the author of the story he was following. I certainly didn’t think Sagami had figured *everything* out, but it was easy to believe that he’d at least had a hunch, deep down. He and Kiryuu had been friends since they were kids, supposedly, so they probably had all sorts of shared history that I wasn’t aware of.

I looked over at Kiryuu once more. He was smiling, but not the crazed, menacing grin of madness I was used to. Now he was smiling like a calm, good-natured young man. I could tell that he’d accepted it all—he’d embraced the transience of chuunibyou and given up on maintaining his own case forever. He’d come to understand that there’s value to be found in things that only last an instant, and also that lasting an instant is exactly what gives them the power to last an eternity. He’d been

freed from the bonds of chuunibyou, and he would go on to set forth into adulthood. He'd go home to the family that was waiting for him, spend some time getting himself together, and then find a place for himself in the grown-up world.

A few years from now, Kiryuu would be the sort of perfectly normal adult who could look back on this moment and admit—with no small amount of embarrassment—that he used to be the cringiest person you could ever meet. That, however, by no means meant that this moment would vanish. It would never come again, but it would stay with him forevermore.

This was right. Surely, this was for the best. This had to have been the sort of ending that Sagami had wanted me to help Kiryuu find. That's exactly why I had brought Tomoyo along with me for this confrontation. I'd brought her because I'd thought that only she—a member of Kiryuu's family—had what it took to save him.

One way or another, this was case closed. Everything had ended as well as it could, and with that done, our story was ready to come to its equivalent of an ending as well...

"No."

...but then, just when it'd seemed that everything had wrapped up, a voice rang out—my voice.

"No...this can't possibly be right, Kiryuu. Why are you acting like it's all over? You think you can stroll off into the sunset and become an adult, just like that?"

I knew that I was ruining the mood of our big grand finale, but I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't bear to watch Kiryuu embrace a life of ordinary mediocrity. I'd accepted this ending on an intellectual level, but still, I just *couldn't*.

Something was driving me. My heart, maybe, or my instincts. Or maybe...it was the chuuni power within me.

"H-Hey, come on, Andou...what are you talking about?" said Tomoyo. "Are you trying to make us have this whole conversation all over again? I *finally* got Hajime to try to shape himself up, for crying out loud..."

"Yeah, I know. And don't worry—I'm not planning on rehashing all of that again," I replied.

I knew that chuunibyou was something you had to get over. I knew that adulthood was inevitable. There was one thing, however, that I couldn't accept, no matter how hard I tried.

"Why are you giving up on your story? Why would you

abandon it unfinished?"

He's the one who kicked this tale off. He caused the Fifth Spirit War—so why's he trying to leave it in a state of eternal limbo?

"Let's finish it, Kiryuu… You've already started the story, so let's make sure that your readers can experience it all the way to the end. Isn't that an author's responsibility?"

"Wh-What do you want from him, Andou?" Tomoyo interjected once more. "It's not like Hajime wants to drop it either, you know? You get that he doesn't *like* the idea of putting his story on ice, right? Sometimes creatives can think and think and just never manage to carry on their story. Even stories written by pros get abandoned without endings all the time! So…there's nothing he can do. It's a lost—"

"It is *not* a lost cause!"

I was no author. I didn't understand the pain that went into making up a totally new story. For all I knew, every work that'd ended unfinished had done so on account of completely unavoidable circumstances. For all I knew, the world was full of stories that had truly been lost causes…but that wasn't enough for me.

"Just because there are tons of unfinished stories out there doesn't mean it's fine for you to leave *your* story unfinished too!"

I knew that I was out of line. I was a selfish, arrogant reader, making demands of an author whose suffering I couldn't begin to understand. But still—how could I stop myself? If there was nothing that could be done about an author's inability to write a continuation of their story, then there was nothing that could be done about their readers' desire to keep reading it as well.

"Are you really okay with this, Kiryuu?!" I shouted. I desperately, earnestly made my case to him. "You said it yourself a moment ago, didn't you? You said you wanted to go out with the biggest bang you possibly could! You wanted to use your story to leave a lasting mark on yourself and the world—to carve the chuuni version of you in so deep, it could never fade away! Are you really okay with letting that ambition go in a sad little anticlimax like *this*?!"

"…The hell I am!" Kiryuu growled with a bitter scowl. "But…what else am I supposed to do? I'm out of ideas! It's my own damn story…but I don't have a clue how I could possibly close the book on it. I've spent so much time mulling it over, and it hasn't helped at all. I'm lost…"

“In that case…we’ll think it through together!” I declared. I made the proposal totally off the cuff, driven by instinct alone. “Right, that’s it! That’s the solution… If you can’t come up with an ending on your own, we just have to put our heads together and think it through as a group! We might just come up with something great if we pool our ideas, right?!”

“Think it through…with you…?”

“I mean, I know. There’s always a chance that even with both of us working together, we won’t come up with anything. Maybe we still won’t have a worthwhile final arc after it’s all done. But even so…let’s do what we can to settle the score!”

Let’s settle our score. Let’s find our ending. Let’s bring this story—our story—to a full and definitive conclusion.

“No matter how pathetic or laughable it ends up turning out, we should give this story a real ending. If your story gets canceled, then you should give it the best we-got-canceled-style ending you can manage! Why would you keep the truth from your audience? Why would you just stop putting out volumes, never even announcing that your series got canned…? That might just be how the modern light novel industry works, but it’s still wrong! If you write a story, you need to finish it too!”

Just like how chuunibyou can only be what it is because it will someday come to an end, so too can stories only be stories because they eventually conclude. Not all endings are perfect and beautiful, of course. Sometimes stories’ endings spring from perfunctory cancellations, sometimes they’re hopelessly half-assed, sometimes they go on hiatus, sometimes their next volume is listed as “pending” forever, and sometimes they simply drop off the face of the earth unfinished. An incredible number of stories have ended in ways that are hard to swallow…but that doesn’t mean that it’s fine for you to leave your own story by the wayside. Struggle. Fight back. Even if you have nothing to write, even if you’re totally out of ideas, do everything in your power to resist the nonending that looms before you. Even if the perfect finale is beyond your reach, you should still do *something*, whatever you can, to produce a conclusion that’s just a little better than no ending at all…

…and so, I stepped back from Tomoyo and Kiryuu and held my right hand aloft.

“I am he…who conquers chaos.”

I spoke the words of a malediction—the coolest incantation I’d

ever come up with. It felt like it'd been quite a while since I'd last said them aloud.

"O purgatorial flame that sways upon the brink of the Abyss, O twisted blaze of sable darkness, blighted crimson of deepest night! O howling, maddening inferno that paves the road to oblivion! Fetter sin with sin, pierce my being with thine onyx sigil, and bare thine fangs at the arrogance of providence!"

I was worried for a moment that I might have forgotten the words, but the moment I started reciting them, they flowed from my lips with ease. I'd put so much time and care into making them up that it seemed I'd carved them deeply into my very soul.

Still, I knew there might come a day when I forgot those words—just like I'd forgotten the Kamen Rider and Super Sentai transformation poses that I'd been able to copy perfectly back when I was a kid. Someday, all of the titles and spells that I'd poured my everything into inventing would be lost to the oblivion of forgetfulness. Someday, I'd dig up the *Bloody Bible* from way in the back of my closet where I'd sealed it, give it a read, and chuckle over how ridiculous it was that I'd thought all of that nonsense was *cool* when I was a teen.

But that was fine. That's just what it meant to live in this world. And so—for now, while there was still time…

"*Dark and Dark*!"

A flame emerged. A black flame, still clear to see in the dimly lit schoolyard, darker even than the black night itself, blazed within my hand. Not a fire—a *flame*. That was the one point that I would never, ever be willing to compromise on.

"Come, Kiryuu Hajime! Nay—Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First!" I called, shouting from the depths of my soul as I extended my flame-wreathed arm toward him. "If this world is to fall to ruin, then let us destroy it ourselves, here and now! You and I shall spin the ultimate tale of world's end together!"

Let's bring this to an end. A true, proper end. If it has to end someday, then let's not drag it out in a dreary, plodding sequence of nonevents until it's brought to a close by a cancellation so unceremonious you can hardly tell if it ended or not. No, far better to end it now. Far better to let this story's ending mark one final, dazzling display with which to send your chuunibyou off with a bang. If it has to be a farce one way or another, the least we can do

is make it the grandest farce you'll ever see.

For a moment, Kiryuu was silent. He looked stunned and simply gaped at me. But then, a moment later...he began to move. He reached into one of his coat's pockets, producing a spare color contact that he placed in his right eye. He stooped down, picking up his rounded sunglasses from the patch of ground he'd thrown them to and returning them to his face. He ran a hand through his silver hair, flicked his jet-black coat with a satisfying *snap*...

"Bwa ha ha!"

...and he laughed. A dry, peculiar laugh.

"Well said, Andou Jurai—or rather, Guiltia Sin Jurai!" Kiryuu declared. His voice, his expression, his eyes—all of them seemed to be quivering with delight. "You get it, right? You know that you've just set forth into the deepest reaches of darkness this world has to offer...? Are you sure you're not gonna regret it? Are you sure you have what it takes to walk the sin-paved roads of Hell itself?"

"Bring it on," I said. "No matter how deep the darkness you envelop the world in—no matter what extremes of chaos you lead our story into—I'll bring it all to an end with my own fist!"

"Bwa ha ha!"

"Mwa ha ha!"

And so, we laughed. We both let out the most stupidly cool, no-holds-barred laughs we could muster. Our story had stood on the brink of eternal hiatus, but we'd pushed back its untimely cancellation. Now, the protagonist and the final boss would come together to think up its continuation as a team. Author and reader would join hands to bring our tale to a true ending. This was, undoubtedly, an unprecedented development...but surely the world had room for at least one story that played out like this?

Of course, all that said...I didn't know who was the protagonist and who was the final boss anymore. I couldn't say who was the author and who was the reader anymore. The one thing that I *could* say with certainty was that both of us, Kiryuu and I alike, had chosen to throw ourselves into our lives with wild abandon. We could only live as the characters we were now in this one, single moment, and so we'd live with everything we had. We knew that someday our quirks and idiosyncrasies would fade away, and so we chose to celebrate them to the fullest now,

while we still could.

We were like shooting stars in the night sky, knowing perfectly well that we were doomed to burn ourselves out but nevertheless struggling to shine as brightly as we could until that moment arrived. We did it because we wanted someone to witness our brilliance. We wanted them to witness the characters that were us—to witness the story that was ours—that could only play out during this fleeting interval. We wanted to carve this time deeply into ourselves and into the world—to make sure that someday, when this was all just a memory for us to look back upon, we'd see ourselves going at *full* power.

"Huh…? O-Okay, seriously, how did we get *here*…?" Tomoyo muttered in fed-up bewilderment as she watched Kiryuu and me sink *deeply* into chuuni character. Her cold, indifferent attitude would almost make you think that she couldn't keep up with us at all, but the look in her eyes was so obviously excited, I half expected her to scream "I want in on this!" at any moment.

Caught between common sense, curiosity, and the welling surge of chuuni potential within her, Tomoyo spent about ten seconds very thoroughly mulling the situation over. Finally, she let out a very long, very deep sigh, then cracked a slight smile as she muttered a few words.

"Go off, chuuni-boys."

And, somehow, that felt like the most fitting possible note to wrap our story up on.

Epilogue
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Epilogue

About half a year had passed since we'd fought our final battle. It was the decisive clash between me and Kiryuu—the ultimate showdown between Guiltia Sin Jurai and Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. That battle was truly the culmination of everything that had happened in our story up to that point…and it was a climax that defied description, no matter how hard I tried.

Words could not do it justice. Prose could never depict it. It was such an outlandishly over-the-top battle that your only choice would be to describe it in a brief, vague summary form, or otherwise to cut the scene entirely and only discuss it in retrospect. It was a battle the likes of which had never been seen before and would likely never be seen again. The chances of another conflict even remotely living up to it were simply nonexistent.

Seriously, though, what a *fight*! Looking back now that it was all over, it almost felt like the whole thing—my battle with Kiryuu, the Spirit War's existence on the whole, the fact that we had ever possessed absurdly potent supernatural powers, all of it—had been a dream.

Anyway, that was all over now, and another half year had come and gone. For the time being, I found myself walking home from school, side by side with Sagami. It was the last day of our third semester—in other words, the day of our school's closing ceremony.

"Honestly, I'm impressed all over again just *remembering* that fight! The final battle between the literary club and *Fallen Black* really was a clash for the ages. Especially your last duel with Kiryuu—words can't do its sheer emotional impact justice!"

"Heh heh heh! I mean, I can't deny it. It *was* a pretty amazing fight, even by my standards!"

"I really did think your power was gonna stay worthless to the bitter end, but then *right* at the last second you awakened to its final form, the flame of the end: *Grand Finale*! And to top it off, it ended up being so ridiculously overpowered that part of me wanted to ask if you'd made it up yourself!"

“I-I mean, that was probably just it reflecting my innermost psyche, right?”

“And who could have ever predicted that you and Kiryuu had history dating all the way back to your past lives? It’s crazy to think that your fates have been intertwined since the very formation of the world! In the end, the Fifth Spirit War turned out to be such a massive-scale conflict that reality itself hung in the balance! You met each other because you were fated to meet, and you fought each other because you were fated to fight—rivals bound from lifetime to lifetime by the chains of fate itself! I gotta say, it really justified all that lead-up in the end. It felt like reading the last light novel in a ten-plus volume series and seeing it *perfectly* stick the landing!”

“Ha ha ha! I couldn’t have said it better myself!”

“…”

“Wh-What?”

“Oh, nothing,” Sagami said, brushing me off with a smile that told me he had more to say but wasn’t about to share it.

In the aftermath of our nighttime schoolyard meeting…Kiryuu and I had redone the Fifth Spirit War together. We’d taken a story that had stalled out, rewound it as far back as we could, and rewritten it from the ground up. We’d excitedly proposed idea after idea to each other—talking them all through in discussions and debates that grew so heated it sometimes felt like we were moments away from devolving into a full-blown fistfight—then used the *Reverse Crux Errata* to make them a reality.

And, in the end—with occasional help from Tomoyo—we managed to somehow bring our tale to a close. It might not have been a perfect conclusion, and it might not have wrapped up all the loose ends we’d left dangling, but it was still an ending. It was *our* ending, for our very own story. Only a very small number of people knew the truth. I hadn’t told Sagami…but I got the sense that he’d managed to suss out the whole thing anyway, somehow. Not that I minded or anything.

Anyway, all that aside…

“It really is over, huh, Andou?” said Sagami.

“It sure is,” I agreed.

It was over. *Dark and Dark* had departed from my right arm. All I had now was the gradually fading reserves of chuuni power within me.

“The confusing, cryptic mystery that was the Spirit War is over;

our seemingly endless yet blink-of-an-eye-short second year in high school has passed; and once spring break's done, we'll be third-years," Sagami continued.

"Yup," I said with a nod. "Not to mention that Sayumi and Kudou graduated."

The graduation ceremony had already come and gone. Starting this spring, Sayumi and Kudou would both be college students. From what they'd told me, both of them would be leaving their homes and hometown to live on their own.

Meanwhile, those of us who'd been in the second-year crew would be starting our final years in high school, while Chifuyu and Kuki advanced to the fifth grade. We'd all be moving on into a new era, living in new environments as new versions of ourselves. Our old selves would be left behind, morphing into nostalgic memories for us to look back upon.

"Come to think of it, what's going on with Kiryuu these days, Sagami?" I asked.

"Hmm? You haven't been in touch with him?"

"Nah... I haven't seen him at all. Kinda hard to, after our final battle. It's just awkward, y'know?"

The battle had been just *that* over-the-top, after all. We'd clashed, power versus power, in an exchange so heated you'd think we were willing to burn out our very lives to take each other down. In the end, we'd been reduced to tearful, tattered wrecks as we'd resolved our differences through the one means of conversation left to us: our fists. Point is, I was hoping to not have to see him again for about another half decade or so.

"From what I hear, he just went back to college," Sagami explained. "The same college that Takanashi's going to, if I recall correctly."

"Seriously?" I said, gaping at Sagami. "Oh, right—I'd actually sorta forgotten that Kiryuu was supposed to be really smart."

"Yup, yup. He's been sharp as a tack for ages. That's part of why he's so hard to deal with, in all sorts of ways."

"Those two going to the same college, huh...? That sure is weird to think about."

"He and Saitou have started dating as well."

"Huuuh."

He went back to college and got a girlfriend straightaway? It sounded so...normal, I guess. On the other hand, that was probably for the best. Neither he nor I could keep up our chuuni

ways forever, after all.

"Speaking of dating," Sagami said as he gave me a long, appraising glance, "Andou...have you taken an interest in someone?"

"Bwuh?!" I gasped. More of a full-blown spit take, really. I was *not* making it hard to tell that he'd taken me by surprise. "Wh-Where's this coming from?!"

"Oh, come now! Surely you must realize how easy to read you've been lately? You've been *very* conspicuously focused on a certain girl in particular. The way you talk when you're with her is just so *clearly* different."

I had no clue what to say, so I just broke eye contact. Sagami let out an exasperated chuckle in response.

"So even Andou 'Dense as a Rock' Jurai's finally fallen in love! Ahh, man, now I'm actually feeling a little *jealous* of you! If only I could fall in love too! Maybe I should just go ahead and get back together with Tamaki!"

"*Dude*."

"Ha ha ha! Okay, okay, I'm sorry. Not funny, I know," Sagami said with his usual flippant smile. All I could do was sigh.

We walked on for a while longer until we passed by a bus stop, where Sagami came to a halt.

"All right—I'll be heading to the hospital, so see you later, Andou," he said.

"Got it," I replied. "Say hi to your mom for me."

"Will do. You should come visit again sometime. She's been saying she'd like to see you."

"Sure," I said with a nod.

Right around the time the Fifth Spirit War ended, Sagami's mother—who'd been in a coma for years—woke up again. She was still hospitalized for the time being, but from what I'd heard, she was due to be discharged in about a month. The spirits hadn't intervened on her behalf, to be clear—she'd just simply, naturally woken up on her own. Whether that was a convenient plot twist right out of a storybook or just one of the many extraordinary coincidences that happened around the world every single day was all a matter of perspective, I guess.

The Barnum Effect. The Simulation Hypothesis. Schrödinger's Cat. They were all just a matter of perspective, in the end. It all just came down to how we saw the world around us.

"All right," I said to myself after saying my goodbyes to

Sagami. I set off once more, strolling along the well-worn road that I took to and from school.

"Have I 'taken an interest in someone,' he asks...? That guy really is too perceptive for his own good," I muttered with a slightly strained smile. "Though, then again...I wonder what he'd say if I told him we were actually going out already?"

I guess not even Sagami can see through me quite that *deeply.*

Slowly but surely, my casual stroll intensified. Before I knew it, I was practically running through the streets—and when I arrived at the park where we'd agreed to meet up, she was already there waiting for me.

"Ah... Well, uhh," I mumbled. I couldn't seem to find the right words.

I was trying my hardest to act natural and talk like I always did, but of course, the more I focused on acting natural, the less naturally I actually acted. She was in the same boat, and both of us ended up descending into awkward incoherence. We'd pretty much been like this nonstop since we'd started going out.

"So, umm... Ready?" I finally asked.

My attitude wasn't showing any sign of improvement, but I at least managed to suppress my embarrassment enough to hold out a hand, which she took with a bashful, red-faced nod. She squeezed my hand tightly, the heat of her palm striking me as far hotter than *Dark and Dark* had ever been.

Our whole story had been a ridiculous, absurd, over-the-top joke of a fairy tale. It was easy to think that it had all been made up now that it was all over...but even if it *had* been fiction, it'd still *happened*. It was a true work of fiction that had led us to our futures.

We couldn't tell in what precise ways our lives had changed, but the fact that they *had* changed was something we could be certain of, and that was what allowed us to move forward. We'd put our story firmly to rest, which meant that now we could move on to the next one.

The end of the beginning...was over. It was over, yes—but that's exactly why we could now begin again. The end of the beginning takes a split second, but it lasts a lifetime.

And so, to let our pasts be the past—to let our futures be the future—we stepped forward side by side, savoring every moment of a present that would never come again.

Afterword

“Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind.” Those are the first words of “Youth,” a poem by Samuel Ullman, and although on their face they express a downright invigorating sense of positivity, if you look at them from another perspective, it’s just as easy to read the idea that “no matter how old you are, if you don’t have the right state of mind, you’ll never have a youth” into them. As it happens, if you go on to read the remainder of *Youth*, its central concept is surprisingly severe. People like to say that the heart is sometimes more of a liability than the body, claiming everything will turn out just fine as long as you keep the right perspective, but the problem is that keeping the right perspective *isn’t* nearly that easy. In fact, that’s exactly what makes life so hard sometimes.

Youth and chuunibyou: two words that are by no means synonymous, but that nevertheless fall into a very similar bucket. Chuunibyou is not limited to the time you spend in the eighth grade; it is a state of mind. From another vantage point, however, that same idea means that if you fail to keep the right perspective, any age can spell the end of one’s chuunibyou.

Youth may be a wonderful thing, but could youth’s end not be just as wonderful? Chuunibyou may be hella cool, but could chuunibyou’s end not be just as hella cool? I’d certainly like to believe so.

All that said, hello! This is Kota Nozomi, and this has been the final volume of *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace*. This series has carried on for a long time now, but with this, it’s reached its conclusion. It took more than five years in total for me to complete it, and now that all’s said and done, I can proudly say that I wrote everything I set out to write. I hadn’t even begun to think about how the series would end up wrapping up in the long term back when I wrote its first volume, but I guess you could say that everything went about as far off the rails as it possibly could. The theme of this volume, by the way, was endings. I wrote it with the ending of chuunibyou, the ending of a story, and all other kinds of endings in mind. Also, although I wasn’t intentionally aiming for it, I’m pretty happy that the series

wrapped up with a total of thirteen volumes.

Now then—I'd like to do some commentary on the series' characters next! I'm perfectly aware that a series' own author commenting on its characters like this is kinda lame by definition, but I want to, so I'm doing it anyway. First up, the heroines!

1. Kanzaki Tomoyo. *Closed Clock*. A former chuuni tsundere. Technically the main heroine—or, well, the one who got featured on the first volume's cover, anyway. Chuuni heroines were going through a boom back when I was writing the first volume, but I was absolutely convinced that a heroine who *used* to be a chuuni would be way cuter, which was the mindset that Tomoyo sprang from. Being a former chuuni, she ends up being put in the position of calling out the main character's nonsense more often than not. That said, despite being a comparatively sensible person, she's not great academically, not even decent athletically, low-end average when it comes to communication, and not incredible at cooking either. When you really look at her in a broad sense, her specs are pretty low across the board, though I guess you could say that's just part of her appeal.

Incidentally, *Closed Clock* was the very first of the many power names that I came up with over the course of this series. My first thought the moment I came up with it was "Huh? Is it just me, or am I actually surprisingly good at making these up? And for that matter, is it just me, or is making up this sort of name really fun?" Thus did the direction this story would develop in, as well as my journey down the path of naming, begin. The name Kanzaki Tomoyo, meanwhile, is one that I took great care to make come across as pretty cool, but not *too* cool. I actually made an effort to ensure that all of the chuunis in this story's cast had names that felt like they would lead into a chuunibyou infection—after all, having a name that feels *special* is one of the key risk factors for chuunis...probably? It sure was for me, at least (oh, the shame).

2. Kushikawa Hatoko. *Over Element*. A pleasant and mild-mannered childhood friend. There are some concepts that people who don't *get* chuunibyou can never really come to understand, and Hatoko is a character I intended to embody that phenomenon. Even though she's Andou's childhood friend—or rather, *because* she's his childhood friend—she doesn't understand him. Her extralong rant in the second volume is a

favorite moment of mine, by the way. In fact, if I can be even more real for a moment, it was the scene that I was most excited about writing back when this series was first starting up—though I found more and more parts to get excited about writing after that point, of course. That rant was *really* something else in the anime too.

3. Himeki Chifuyu. *World Create*. A mysterious little girl. For better or for worse, not even I, the author, could ever understand what exactly she was thinking. You'd think that would make her hard to write, but it actually did quite the opposite: No matter what she did, "Eh, it's Chifuyu" could explain it, just like that. Whenever I was at a loss for what to write, I just had to shine the spotlight on her and things would start moving right along again. Writing the Chifuyu-and-Cookie combo was really fun too. Oh, and when I found myself wondering how an elementary schooler would make the trip to the clubroom every single day on her own, I eventually realized "Oh, right, she can just use her power" and solved the whole problem in two seconds flat. *World Create* can make anything, so why not let her make a gateway that connects straight to the clubroom? Though, honestly, I can't believe I got away with that one.

4. Takanashi Sayumi. *Route of Origin*. A reliable older sister type. Not only is she older and more mature than the rest of the cast, her skills in academics, athletics, and general domestic tasks are all top-notch, making her Tomoyo's exact opposite: a super high-spec character. She tends to shut down the protagonist's off-the-cuff trivia with proper, respectable knowledge. It's a little hard to believe she's really in high school, actually. A certain trickster starts manipulating her partway through the story, but in the end she pulls herself back together again in a very proper manner. The reason she ended up with *Route of Origin* as her power was that I had this idea in mind that it made sense for a character who was individually strong to have a recovery-based ability, basically. Hatoko's power, by the way, was the exact opposite way around: Since she was a soft, gentle character, I gave her a power with ludicrous offensive potential. If I may self-analyze for a second, I have a feeling that I tend to work that sort of contrast into my characters quite often. It helps them stand out, I guess, though it's not something that I've ever made a conscious effort to do.

5. Kudou Mirei. The student council president. While I did

quite a bit of planning in regard to the other four's traits and personalities, Kudou's ended up coming about entirely off the cuff. To be brutally honest: She was actually a guy in the series' initial plot outline. It was only when I was nearing the end of the writing process for volume one and finally hit the scene where the student council president would be introduced that it struck me that nobody would *really* be happy to see a guy get thrown into the story at that point, and I changed her into a girl on the spot. That was *such* a good call, seriously! She ended up being so, *so* much cuter than I ever imagined in the anime, to the extent that it influenced me to give her more screen time in the later novels as well. As for why she ended up with a stupidly broken power like *Grateful Robber*...well, I think this volume's main text already explained that in a nutshell.

6. Saitou Hitomi. A heroine in her mid-twenties—specifically, a heroine for the final boss rather than the protagonist. She started the story out already in full-blown maximum-affection mode, unlike the other heroines, which made her quite fun to write. To be totally frank re: Kiryuu et al, when they showed up back in volume 2, my driving motivation was to just throw out a whole squad of villains all at once. I ended up coming up with their basic characters and power names, then didn't really think them through much beyond that. I blame the fact that power names are so fun to think up for that questionable decision! Let's just call it my special move: Leave It for My Future Self to Figure Out. It's a tactic that I use pretty often, and it works out a surprising amount of the time.

7. Futaba Tamaki. A rustic sort of girl with a thick accent. An *aspiring* heroine, but one who just couldn't make the cut. I feel like she ended up coming across as a conniving villainess sort of character, in a sense, but from another perspective, I would say that she's the most normal girl in the whole cast. Not a heroine—just a normal girl. I really do have to wonder if anyone actually appreciated her having that Fukushima accent in the end, though.

Next up, the men!

1. Andou Jurai. The protagonist. *Dark and Dark*. A chuuni. The moment I came up with the name "Jurai," it hit me that this series could actually go the distance. That's a relatively common thing to have happen in my writing process, actually. Although Andou's a chuuni, he's a chuuni with the capacity to look at

himself from an outside perspective—in other words, he's a character whose nature is self-contradictory from the word go. Volume 6 was born from that contradiction, and I think it played a pretty big factor in this final volume as well.

I spent a long time thinking over how this series would end, to be honest, but when all was said and done, I decided that having it conclude with Andou moving on from his chuunibyou would be the right direction to take it in. That's how a line that I wrote back in volume 1 with no intent of it having any deep significance—"Let us begin the end of the beginning"—ended up being a surprisingly perfect note for the series to wrap up on. And, speaking of which...I ended up making "hella cool" into something of a catchphrase for Andou, which in the long term had the unfortunate side effect of making me have a character sing the praises of names I came up with myself. So, that was sort of humiliating! It was like I was shouting "All right, readers, *this* is how you give a supernatural power a cool name!" every time I put a new one in, raising the bar for myself to a stupid degree over and over...and god *damn* if it wasn't fun as hell!

2. Sagami Shizumu. A self-proclaimed reader. A character who would honestly be even cringier than Andou if he existed in real life, and who threw the story for a loop in all sorts of ways, repeatedly. If it weren't for him, I feel like the series would've probably wrapped up after half as many volumes. I do have to admit, though, that I really like meta characters like him. He also ended up playing the roles of both narrator and protagonist in volume 11, and speaking as the author, even I'm shocked that *he* of all characters managed to reform himself.

3. Kiryuu Hajime. A final boss, protagonist, and author all in one. A chuuni who's a step ahead of Andou in terms of both age and his place in the overall story. A man who loves being a chuuni more than anyone and who wants to stay that way more than anything, all the while having already realized that having that desire means he's started to stray from the chuuni path.

Changing yourself is hard, but forcing yourself to *not* change can be even harder. I believe that I, myself, have changed considerably as an author over the five years that *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* has run. You could call that growth, in a sense, but you could also call it degeneration. In any case, for better or for worse I don't think I'll ever be able to write a story like this again. I could probably write another

supernatural battle story, and I could probably write another high school rom-com, but I don't think I could write *this* story or these characters anymore. In that sense as well, this final volume represents an ending and a moment of moving on. I'll still be writing more stories from here on out in general, of course!

And now, it's time to completely ruin the sentimental mood I have going here with an incredibly blunt announcement! On the same day this final volume goes on sale, the first volume of my brand-new series, *Isekai Tennis Musou: Tennis Player Toka Iu Nazo no Otoko ga Chotto Tsuyosugirun Desu Kedo!* (Isekai Tennis Warrior: This Mysterious Tennis Player's Just a Little Too Overpowered!) will be released! I'd explain what it's about, but I think the title pretty much says it all. It also has an ever so slight connection with *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace*'s setting, in the sense that Andou's child makes an extremely minor cameo! Please check it out, if you're interested!

Finally, I'd like to offer some thanks. First, to my editor, Nakamizo, and my illustrator, 029. Next, to the good people at Studio TRIGGER, who not only handled the anime but also helped out with the interior illustrations of the novels. And finally, I'd like to offer my thanks to my readers for sticking with this series this whole time. The fact that I was able to finish it off with a proper ending is all thanks to you, and I offer you my greatest and sincerest gratitude.

And that's all! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

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Bwa ha ha!
Are you sure you have what it takes to walk the sin-paved roads of Hell itself?
Come,
Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First!
© Shiori Miyazaki (TRIGGER)

Bonus Translation Notes: On Endings

I was already a fan of *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* long before I began working on the series, but in retrospect, it wasn't until I translated a certain scene in the first volume that I *really* fell in love with it. That scene: the fateful conversation between Kiryuu Hajime and Andou Jurai in a chain restaurant, and specifically, the moment in that conversation where Kiryuu invoked the name of the Man of La Mancha himself, Don Quixote.

I was prepared for the endless media shoutouts, the impenetrably Japanese language gags, and the flagrant disregard for conventional storytelling, but a shout-out to the story that inspired one of my favorite childhood musicals came *completely* out of left field. Thankfully, that shout-out would set the tone for the whole rest of the series, both in terms of how fascinatingly eclectic the concepts and philosophies the novels dug into could be, as well as how layered their characterization often was (considering the subtle revelation later on in the conversation that everything Kiryuu said to Andou over the course of it came straight off of Wikipedia).

In short: while I was ready for this series to be a hilariously good time, I was *not* prepared for just how dang *much* there was to it beyond that. The more substance I found between the gags and geek culture indulgence, the more I came to appreciate just how well-considered *Supernatural Battles* was from start to finish. Plenty of light novels can do silly parody and meta gaggery, but very few can fit those elements in seamlessly alongside genuinely well-developed themes that are essential to the plot rather than incidental to it.

Anyway, we're four paragraphs in now and I haven't even begun to touch on this essay's ostensible subject, so I'll cut to the chase: as the previous three paragraphs might have hinted, I unabashedly love how Kota Nozomi chose to conclude *Supernatural Battles*' story! I firmly believe that this was the ending that this series deserved—and, to paraphrase Andou, that this was quite possibly the *only* ending that could have tied it all together in a believable and satisfying way.

Kiryuu Hajime's plan—insofar as he ever had one—could only ever have been a failure, and that failure could only ever have come about thanks to his own mistakes. After all, for all that Kiryuu was an overarching enigma, he was also an open book from his very first appearance. For every moment when he took someone in with his mysterious, dangerous badass shtick, there was another moment where he was undermined by his own lack of forethought. For every moment that the series implied that he held all the cards and pulled all the strings, there was another where it was made abundantly clear that deep down, he had *no* idea what the hell he was doing. And, well, of course he didn't! At the end of the day, Kiryuu was a chuuni, and a chuuni who actually managed to live up to their own hype would not, in fact, be any sort of chuuni at all.

And then there's the literary club side of the spectrum! Sure, it would have been fun to see them really go all in on the Spirit War, and I'm sure some readers will be disappointed that they don't get one final on-screen moment to let their powers shine...but once again, that would have flown in the face of everything we'd learned about them as characters up to that point. However much fun having the literary club crew get involved with *Fallen Black*'s world of supernatural battles might've been, it never really would have made sense for them, and personally, I think it's really cool that the series both acknowledged that truth and actually followed through on it. The powers were the inciting incident for the literary club's story, but in the end, that story was never really *about* the powers. Andou himself put it best all the way back in volume 1: "Supernatural powers are the coolest thing ever—and that's all they are. That's all they have to be."

There's so much more that I could gush about—like how clever it was to front-load the volume with four separate epilogues, thus letting the climax *be* the climax without needing a lengthy cool-down period afterword, or how delightful it is that when all's said and done, the entire conclusion was brought about by Sagami being a smarmy little prick back in volume 11 and ruining everything entirely by accident—but I think I've more or less made my point already. Are there characters and aspects of the series that I would've loved to see more of before the end? Absolutely, but I could also keep reading about these characters for years on end without ever being *completely* satisfied, and as

the story itself argues, it was far better for them to go out at the top of their game in a real, definite ending.

But of course, this isn't *just* an ending. With every ending comes a beginning, and with the ending of *Supernatural Battles* came the beginning of the rest of Kota Nozomi's writing career. That brings me to the one last elephant in the room that I'd be remiss to not address—an elephant that, I confess, I willfully glossed over back in the TL notes for volume 7, but that this volume's afterword makes it very hard to ignore. That elephant's identity: the controversy surrounding *Isekai Tennis Musou*, the novel that released alongside volume 13 of *Supernatural Battles* and that, as Kota Nozomi described in its afterword, features Andou's son (whose name, by the way, is revealed to be Andou Mei) in a cameo appearance.

Why was the novel controversial? Simply put, shortly following its release, it was accused of being a *Prince of Tennis* rip-off. In particular, two aspects of the novel—its illustrations and the names of some of its special moves—were seen by some vocal *Prince of Tennis* fans as going a step beyond parody or homage and entering the realm of plagiarism. The matter was never litigated in any sense beyond the court of public opinion—and for that matter, I've been unable to find any statement or even acknowledgment of the controversy from anyone associated with *Prince of Tennis*, though there's every chance it's out there somewhere and I just missed it—but regardless, the previously planned second volume of the series was ultimately canceled as a result of the backlash.

Now, having read neither *Prince of Tennis* nor *Isekai Tennis Musou* in their entirety (and being almost comically *not* impartial when it comes to Kota Nozomi's work), I am very much not prepared to offer a fully informed take on whether or not the novel was a rip-off. That being said, I *do* feel comfortable critiquing a common thread that I found in online comments left by *Prince of Tennis* fans at the time of the controversy: the idea that Kota Nozomi was essentially trying to slip the inspiration under the radar and pretend that he'd never even heard of *Prince of Tennis*, much less incorporated elements of it into his series. Simply put, I just can't possibly believe that an author who directly referenced *Prince of Tennis* more than half a dozen times in his previous series—sometimes by name—could ever possibly think that he had *any* hope of stealing its concepts without

anyone noticing. The idea that he was trying to pay homage to the series, on the other hand, is so plausible I have a really hard time imagining that any other explanation could be more convincing.

So, that was all pretty depressing, huh? Fortunately for the tone of this section, though, this particular story doesn't end there! Kota Nozomi didn't stop writing after the *Isekai Tennis Musou* controversy—in fact, he's written so many books and been involved in so many projects since then that it's actually kind of hard to give a concrete number for how many of them there've been! He's had two new novels published in the past several months alone, in fact: one called *Kotori Yuu-chan ha Uchikiri Manga wo Aishisugiteiru* (roughly, *Kotori Yuu Loves Canceled Manga Way Too Much*), published by MF Bunko J, and a spinoff novel for Sakurai Norio's manga *The Dangers in my Heart* (a series that he seems very well-suited to adapt, considering it stars a character with a very distinct case of chuunibyou!).

And that's not even the half of it! In a stroke of serendipity so implausible it fits in right alongside Sagami's mother waking up the moment the Spirit War ended, literally *eight hours* before I sat down to start writing this afterword, Kota Nozomi just happened to post a short story follow-up to *Supernatural Battles*! That short story, titled *Guiltia Sin Jurai Reborn*, features the main cast of *Supernatural Battles* having an extremely meta chat about the series, its ending, and how it relates to the modern day. It was written in commemoration of the anime's tenth anniversary...kinda? Technically, it was written to commemorate an instant udon commercial that used the anime's tenth anniversary as an excuse to do a cheeky retake of Hatoko's ever-famous rant scene, photoshopping in instant udon bowls all over the place and re-recording all the lines (using the original voice actors!) to make it all about udon instead of chuuni nonsense. It's *extremely* funny, and I really couldn't think of a more hilariously appropriate way for this series to end up getting a short-story follow-up.

So, in short: though *Supernatural Battles* the series has ended, its author is still going strong, and it lives on in the popular consciousness! I really couldn't have asked for a better note to round out the decade-plus-long tale of Kota Nozomi's meta masterpiece. I would love to translate the short story itself someday, though the world of publishers and licensing—even

when it comes to content that's freely available online—is complex and unforgiving in a way that means I absolutely cannot make any promises whatsoever on that front.

And with that, we've come to another ending: the final conclusion of my TL note sections! I've certainly had more than my fair share of fun writing them (as evidenced by the—oh, gods—sixty thousand-plus words I've put into them over the course of all thirteen volumes), and I can only hope that reading them has been at least somewhat close to as entertaining for you! We're not *completely* done, to be fair—there's still the unusually short list of citation-worthy media references to go through, as well as the author and artist jacket comments—but as far as my own self-indulgent ramblings go, this is it. It's been an honor and a privilege to work on this series, and I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to *Supernatural Battles*' editor, its project managers, its image editor, its many, many proofreaders, its readers, and—of course—its author for making this possible. Translating these books has been the greatest and most enjoyable challenge of my career to date, and I desperately hope I get the chance to work on a series even half as gleefully weird and clever in the future.

I never really bothered making up a consistent sign-off a la Kota Nozomi, but I'm feeling the irresistible urge to do so now by aping a certain verse that comes to mind: may the wild winds of fortune carry you onward, whithersoever they blow!

-Tristan Hill

Chapter 1

△ Thousand Winters/Pretty Pigeon/Colorful Bow/World Alight Route: The End

We touched on this back in volume 11, which used similar naming conventions for a number of its chapters, but as a refresher: each of these route names is a play on the kanji used to write the names of the characters that they focus on! It's worth noting that, like in volume 11, the names—and, in fact, the whole phrases—were in English in the original text, though we had to do a little more tweaking this time to make said English come across naturally. In the original text, they read "Route of [thousand winter/pretty pigeon/colorful bow/the world light] is the end." Our goal in tweaking the lines was to make them come across more naturally as the sort of message you'd receive upon

clearing a character's route in a visual novel (on account of the fact that the way Sagami's power is described in relation to Andou's visions is dating sim coded from start to finish—hence why we decided to keep the word "route" as is).

△ Questions like the one on this test turn up quite frequently in the National Center Test, so you'll have to master that as well.

The National Center Test is a standardized exam used by many Japanese universities for the sake of admissions! If you're familiar with the American college admission system, think the SAT or ACT, but notably more intensive and complex in structure. The whole process takes place over the course of two days, and a large number of tests are offered, out of which students only have to actually take a set selection as determined by their college of choice—hence why having to take the Ethics test wasn't necessarily a given for Andou and Sayumi. Roughly half a million students take the test every year, and although it's usually just one step in the long, complicated, and grueling process of applying to college in Japan, it's the one that tends to get the most representation in media on account of its scale and how (mostly) universal the experience of going through it is for anyone who tries to go on to higher education.

Note that although I've been referring to the Center Test in present tense, it technically doesn't exist anymore! It was replaced in 2021 by a new exam called the Common Test. That said, the Common Test shares all of the traits of the Center Test that I described above and is mostly distinct in terms of the specifics of the subjects offered and the methodology of the tests themselves. In other words, for media consumption purposes, you can more or less think of the two as interchangeable—just know that if they call it the Common Test, the series is probably set in 2021 or later.

△ "I...I love you too, Sayumi..."

As you may have noticed at some point over the course of the past thirteen volumes, we chose to not directly carry over the original Japanese honorifics in our translation of this series! Our reasoning behind that choice was pretty simple: the use of honorifics throughout the series just isn't impactful or significant in a way that isn't simple to portray through natural English dialogue...with the *sole* exception of this line, which in the original text hinges upon Andou dropping the "-san" from

Sayumi's name. The intent of the exchange is to show how Andou and Sayumi still aren't totally comfortable talking to each other in a way that expresses intimacy, which made it a relatively straightforward one to handle, but I just find it amusing that it was only *right* at the end of the series that it finally decided to throw a curveball and make the honorifics matter in a way that had to be written around.

Chapter 3

△ *She'd so mercilessly used strength in numbers to crush a single foe, it'd make even a* Super Sentai *hero wince.*

The *Super Sentai* franchise, more or less by definition, involves teams of five or more protagonists fighting the forces of evil. As you might imagine, having five or more protagonists gang up on a single villain can, from time to time, come across as a little unsporting. The series tradition of giving its villains hordes of literally faceless minions to call in whenever the fighting starts is presumably intended to rectify this issue, but it's just not quite enough to dispel the impression that Sentai heroes are all about winning through strength in numbers.

△ *To pull out another card game analogy, it was even worse than playing a one-of-a-kind card and informing your opponent that all of your cards are toons now, so nothing affects them anymore.*

It's time for one last *Yu-Gi-Oh* shout-out! Toon World is the signature card of Pegasus, one of the series' arc villains. In the manga and anime it essentially renders all of your cards untouchable (though the actual, real-world version of the card is, of course, significantly less overpowered). Being as Pegasus is both the creator of the card and the only one who has a copy, it comes across as more than a little unfair when he uses it!

Chapter 4

△ *...Hajime could just use the* Reverse Crux Errata *to Mary Sue his way into winning anyway.*

I feel the need to clarify that this is not, in fact, any sort of localization—the original Japanese text really did use the term "Mary Sue," entirely as is.

Chapter 6

△ *I* really *get how Oda Eiichirou and Aoyama Goushou must feel right now.*

Oda Eiichirou is the creator of *One Piece*, and Aoyama Goushou is the creator of *Detective Conan*! Being as those are

respectively the 20th and 27th longest-running manga of all time by volume count, as well as the first and fourth best-selling manga of all time, it's very safe to say that Kiryuu is indeed comparing himself to creators who are far, *far* above his pay grade.

Author: Kota Nozomi

I played tennis all the way from middle school to college, and I've decided to make the most of my experiences from that period in my next work! Incidentally, my tennis player title back in the day was "the mirthless clown: *Bad Trick*," on account of the fact that my completely unpredictable playstyle made fools of my opponents. Note that absolutely nobody other than me ever knew about said title.

Illustrator/Character Designer: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part-Timer!*, *Yuusha no Segare*, and *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*.

I just can't stop imagining who Andou might've ended up going out with in the end. Thank you so much for the past six years!

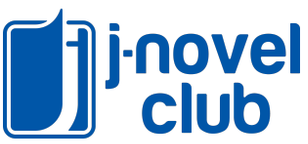
Interior Illustrator: Shiori Miyazaki (TRIGGER)

Animator who recently worked on *Kiznaiver* (2016), *Little Witch Academia* (2017), etc. Currently working on *Darling in the Franxx* (2018).

Congratulations on the final volume's publication! I wasn't able to participate in the anime's production, but I'm very happy to have gotten involved with *Supernatural Battles* by doing the color illustration at the start of this volume.

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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 13
Originally published as INOU BATTLE WA NICHIJOUKEI NO NAKADE Vol. 13
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.

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2025
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