

# A Boy, a Girl, and Finding the Right Way

A Narrative Set in Sakurada

## Sakurada Reset 7

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# Prologue

*I love communicating*, that girl had once said, her low voice resonating with slight huskiness.

It had been two years since then, but Asai Kei had not forgotten about it, not one bit. The day of the week, the time, the weather, the color of her uniform, the shape of her fingertips, and even the angle to which her neck was tilted was all immediately available to him.

He truly could remember every detail.

So how had he failed to notice? Why did the huskiness in her voice never register to him? Why had he never given it more thought?

It had taken him two years to realize the truth behind it.

*Souma Sumire must have been crying.*

Why hadn't he realized that before? He was thick-headed. So stupid. So...

She had been crying without shedding a single tear.

"I love communicating." She had pushed out a smile despite her crying. "I want to exchange all kinds of words with all kinds of people, from the greatest of blessings to the smallest of formalities."

Souma Sumire. She really should have cried. She should have rejected her suffering and sorrow.

*She should have called me out for being so dense.* She should have let her tears introduce pain to his heart. He could have

been filled with regret, pushed to treat her well with a deep love. But...

She smiled.

Every time that she smiled and threw out her chest, she was pushing back her tears.

*You were too strong for your own good.* Far too strong, and far too beautiful. The Kei of two years past couldn't have even imagined her crying.

No middle schooler, no girl, no... person, should have ever needed that much strength. The strength to abandon their own happiness.

It was almost like a weakness. She was so strong and so perfect that it became a problem. She was so capable of enduring, and enduring, and enduring, that she could smile her way into death. She could even stand to kill herself.

He couldn't think of her as anything but foolish. Perhaps even weak, contradictory as it was. The reality of her fleeting existence saddened him.

*But that's just it.*

It was because she was strong, beautiful, foolish, weak, and fleeting.

*Because of that... I've been given another chance.*

Asai Kei's words could reach out to Haruki Misora. A boy became able to speak with a girl once more. He could convey some amount of words to someone, somewhere.

That was the singular narrative that Souma Sumire had put her life on the line to set up.

# Chapter 1

## Sakurada Reset

1 - October 25th (Wednesday), 7:30 AM

It was a quiet morning. Was it the soft light leaking through the curtains that woke him up? Or was it the faint sounds of sparrows chirping in the distance? Whichever the case, it was a very peaceful awakening.

Asai Kei rubbed his eyes, got out of bed, and stood by the window. He grabbed the curtains, throwing them back. The previous night's rain had already ended, and the clear, beautiful sky was a wondrous sight. He opened the window, and two sparrows perched on a nearby electric line flew off at the same time. Their two small shadows glided across the ground, passing over a puddle. The wind blew, shaking the reflection of the sky and clouds from within the puddle.

It was a wonderful morning. One that made it hard to believe that all abilities had disappeared from Sakurada the previous night. It was a quiet morning that made it hard to imagine Souma Sumire crying from inside his bathroom.

Asai Kei squinted in the morning light, thinking, *So now I have two sets of memories.*

The previous night, all abilities had disappeared from Sakurada. More accurately, all memories of abilities had disappeared. It was a city-wide tampering of memory that replaced all recollections of abilities with believable but fake replacements of a world without abilities.

There was only one exception to that phenomenon in the entire world. Asai Kei, the one with the ability to remember everything. He could remember Sakurada's abilities.

*Which leads to my two sets of memories.* One was real, the memories of his life with the existence of abilities up to the previous night. The other was false, a set of memories dedicated to a world where he never had an ability.

How did that make him feel?

*Man, this really sucks.* Grief struck at his core.

Abilities aside, his memories each had one significant difference.

*Even now, I have to compare the two of them.* Haruki Misora and Souma Sumire. Each set of memories was a time capsule dedicated to one of the two individuals.

There were his real memories. Memories of abilities existing up until the previous night. In them, Kei was always with Haruki. She was always watching him with her pure eyes. Souma Sumire had died in the summer of two years past.

There were his false memories. A time where he had never gained an ability to begin with. Souma Sumire didn't die in those memories. She was always nearby. They attended Ashiharabashi High School together. But in exchange, Haruki Misora was gone. Kei had never even met her.

*But why is Haruki gone?*

He could understand Souma not dying. Her death and subsequent revival were all tied to abilities, and would have been otherwise impossible. In a world without abilities, it would only be natural to assume she had never died.

*But that doesn't mean Haruki had to be erased.* What was wrong with having memories of all three of them spending the last two years together?

Unfortunately, Haruki Misora couldn't be a part of his fake memory. In fact, she had fallen ill to some mysterious

ailment just before starting her second year of middle school, and hadn't attended any kind of schooling since then.

*That can only mean some kind of ability was used on her.* An ability must've made something happen to her that would be inexplicable without claiming she disappeared before her second year of middle school.

Kei had something of a prediction regarding what that ability could be.

Urachi Masamune had most likely rewound Haruki Misora's time. Probably to sever the connection between Asai Kei and Haruki Misora. All to remove the threat of a reset.

Haruki Misora must've been rewound to a time before she met Kei, which would've been before her second year of middle school, and everyone's memories had to have been altered to allow that. It had turned Haruki into a girl who frequently fainted from illness.

All Kei could do was quietly accept that fact. *This must be part of the plan, too.* Everything so far had gone perfectly according to the plans laid out by Souma Sumire. All so that no matter what Urachi Masamune managed to pull off, Kei could reset it away if he so wished. The preparations were all in place.

*Urachi-san's plan is the least of my worries.* He had other things to focus on for the time being.

Kei glanced out the window, and a clock entered his peripheral vision. He sighed.

He had about 30 minutes before he needed to leave for school.

He didn't have much of an appetite, but forced himself to eat some leftover chicken curry before leaving his apartment. The soles of his sneakers were wet and uncomfortable from running around in the rain the previous night, but they were likely to dry off before long.

As he began walking towards Ashiharabashi High, Kei took out his cell phone.

He began with a call to Haruki's house. Her mother answered, and with some suitable excuses and reasoning, he

managed to arrange a meeting with Haruki that afternoon. He put away the cell phone, placing both hands in his pockets.

*I doubt Haruki herself will be much of an issue.* He was so familiar with the Haruki of two years ago, after all.

That Haruki was governed entirely by only three rules. She practically never refused a request from someone. She was resistant to reset purely on request, but Kei knew a work-around for that.

*The real problem is what's in front of me.* Kei's gaze lowered down to his shoes.

After another ten minutes of silent walking, he arrived at Ashiharabashi High. It was almost time for morning home-room, and students were hurrying inside. He followed the crowd and changed into his indoor shoes. He went up the stairs, across the hall, and stood before the door to his classroom.

His breath caught as he stared at the ordinary door that he saw almost every day.

He remembered Souma Sumire crying in the bathroom. He knew the sadness that future sight had forced upon her. He couldn't forget the suffering she went through to cast away her identity by dying and coming back.

He remembered the tremor in her voice as she confessed through her sobs that she couldn't forgive the Souma Sumire of two years ago, the one who set everything into motion.

*But now, we're here.* A world where she could forget all her overwhelming suffering.

On the other side of the door was Souma, a girl who would never dream of gaining the ability to know the future. Someone who never had to worry about being a Swampman. Just an ordinary girl.

He made up his mind before sliding the door open. As soon as he did so, a voice rang out.

"Kei!" It was a bright voice.

Souma Sumire. She sat in Haruki Misora's seat. Of course, for all she knew, it was her seat. She smiled, waving a hand. "Morning, Kei."

His breath caught when he saw her.

It should have been obvious. He should have seen it coming.

But it had never crossed his mind until he saw her face to face.

*I can't believe it.*

Souma Sumire, that stray cat of a girl... didn't at all seem like a stray cat.

Asai Kei forced a smile. "Morning, Souma." He kept his tone as light as possible as he moved to his seat. He greeted Nakano Tomoki, Minami Mirai, and other classmates along the way.

The ten steps to his seat felt like a much greater distance. When he finally reached it, he collapsed into the desk.

He had only just realized why Souma Sumire always seemed like a stray cat.

*Souma's always alone.* She was solitary... and she was lonely.

She could put on a smile, and she could feign a bright, cheery tone. But she couldn't suppress the loneliness that exuded from inside her. The Souma Sumire that knew the future had refused to let anyone into her heart.

Kei had always likened her loneliness and solitude to that of a stray cat's. High-minded and whimsical, perhaps letting someone approach and stroke her back, then quickly scampering off. Creating walls that nobody could climb. Accepting her solitude as part of herself. She was like a stray cat, having a dark side that didn't quite fit with a domesticated cat.

But the Souma Sumire before him wasn't like a stray cat at all. She was just a normal, straightforward girl. She looked so happy.

But if she got her ability back, then she would revert. She would be the girl with future sight, that stray cat of a girl. The solitary girl that was connected to no one.

A voice called from somewhere. "What's wrong, Kei?" It was Souma Sumire's voice.

Kei, head still on his desk, turned to look at her. Souma had at some point come to stand right beside him. She was perhaps a little short for a first-year high schooler, but she

fit right in with her prim and proper Ashiharabashi High uniform. Kei couldn't help but notice how new the uniform looked, as though she were attending her very first day.

"You look kind of... worn out," she noted. Her eyes darted down, and she looked hesitant, timid even.

*Souma's acting timid?* The very thought made his head spin. "It's nothing, really. Just not a morning person."

"I know that, but... you're not like this other mornings."

"What's so different?"

"I don't really know, but... you just feel off. And you look so tired, as if you suddenly aged overnight or something."

Kei smiled. "It's really nothing. I just stayed up all night reading."

"If you say so. You really shouldn't stay up like that." The school bell rang, and Souma put her mouth close to Kei's ear. "I made lunch for both of us today. Let's eat together. See you later," she whispered. She looked a little embarrassed, but beamed a lovely smile at him as she returned to her seat.

*I can't believe it,* Kei repeated to himself. To think that Souma Sumire would be so direct if she didn't have her ability. She was so honest, so transparent, so happy.

It made him wonder how far she had to push herself with the ability to see the future. How much did she have to distort who she was?

It was definitely something to be sad about. But, as far as Kei was concerned... that girl who was so distorted by her ability was Souma Sumire.

The Souma before him didn't at all look like Souma Sumire. She seemed more like a fake designed to imitate her.

Loss of abilities aside, high school life hadn't changed in any drastic way. Lessons proceeded on, and Kei used the time to study the classmates around him.

He couldn't stop his gaze from drifting towards Souma Sumire.

Even in middle school, they were in different classes, so it was his first time seeing her sit in class with him. Outside of the fake set of memories that popped into his head the

previous night, of course. Souma took class very seriously. She switched through several colors of pens, taking rigorous notes. She seemed to take great pleasure in copying down the contents of the lesson. Then, upon closer inspection, Kei noticed something.

*Hm, that's a new notebook.* It only made sense. Everyone might have had memories of Souma being their classmate since the beginning of the school year, but those memories were fake. In reality, it was her first day taking classes at Ashiharabashi Senior High. She would have needed to procure a new notebook.

She was writing so carefully simply because the notebook was new. That was a type of reflex for most people. It certainly wouldn't have been unique to Souma.

*Didn't she notice that all of her notebooks were brand new, though?*

Kei shook his head, pushing the question aside. Sure, the notebooks were new, but so what? That by itself didn't really prove anything.

Kei cast a glance around the rest of the classroom.

*Souma's not the only one who's changed.*

His eyes landed on Minami Mirai.

The Minami that Kei knew always masked her face with an unconditional smile. That smile stayed on at all times, even during class. But the Minami he was looking at wasn't smiling. She was glaring rather sulkily out the window. She seemed closer to expressing her true self than the girl who had a special ability.

*I guess I never thought of her the same way that I did Haruki, Souma, and myself. That wasn't very fair.*

Minami Mirai was just another person with her own feelings, thoughts, and motivations. The self and past that she herself had created through acting on her own will was no less significant than anyone else's, and deserved to be treated as such.

*I couldn't have even made it here without her.*

Intentionally or not, she had helped him. She was researching Souma before abilities disappeared from the world.

That research was the catalyst that led Kei to the reality of Souma Sumire's two year long plans.

*Without her, I would've had to give up a long time ago.*

Her wish was to be included in the group of people with special abilities. She wanted to be on par with Souma Sumire, Haruki Misora, and Asai Kei. But she already had a strong connection to them. Sakurada's very future hinged on her existence. Her impact was so much greater than she ever gave herself credit for.

Would it have made her happy to know that before abilities disappeared? Or would she just put on the same smile as usual? Or maybe she'd shake her head with a frown, saying, "That's not what I wanted," or, "You wouldn't understand, Asai-kun."

But that girl was now gone. Her past was cut off, treated as nothing, and she was left staring out the window in boredom.

*But I guess I'm in no position to morally posture about that being good or bad.* Resetting was no different, after all.

Urachi Masamune may have taken away 40 years from Sakurada, But Kei had taken plenty away from other people with resets. He had taken away joys and sorrows to selfishly forward his own goals.

The Reset obliterated three days of people's lives. It treated everyone's last three days of existence as insignificant.

*But I knew that every time I made my decision.* He couldn't always know if it was the right thing to do, but he had believed the best future possible could only come about by taking away certain things.

With that out in the open, he couldn't condemn Urachi as wrong and laud himself as right. It was just a battle between two selfish people. Whether Minami looked fake without that plastered-on smile or not was just his own opinion.

Time flowed forward so smoothly and continuously that it was almost irritating. Kei had several short conversations with Souma and Tomoki during breaks. They were so natural, as if the three of them had always been together like that. And in his fake set of memories, they had.

But Kei was keenly aware each and every time of Haruki's absence.

He could no longer feel the gaze of the girl who had always been beside him. He was always conscious of the fact that he was not being reflected in those lovely, striking, jewel-like eyes.

"What's going on, Kei? You're really not yourself today," Souma Sumire commented, smiling.

Kei pushed on his own smile, looking out the window. "I'm just kinda tired. Felt off ever since this morning."

The pale blue sky was calm and tranquil, like a peaceful sea.

But all Kei could hear was the continual sound of the last night's rain.



There seemed to be more lines around her eyes.

That was Haruki Misora's first thought about her mother, who was walking into the hospital room.

*You have lost the last two years and seven months of your memories,* the man who seemed like a doctor had said.

That would have meant that the face of her mother that she could recall was from two years and seven months prior. She would have to look different after that much time.

Haruki's mother watched her closely as she sat on the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"There are no problems," Haruki replied, before realizing that was not entirely accurate. "To my knowledge," she appended.

"That came as a surprise. You were doing so well lately." Her mother's lips twisted in what Haruki assumed was a smile as she took out some clothes from a bag she was carrying. Her mother had stayed at the hospital all last night, returning home just prior to get Haruki some clothes. "Here, get changed. We'll head somewhere for lunch before going home."

Haruki nodded, stripping off her pajamas. She put on the long-sleeve T-shirt, jeans, and lightly-fitted blouse her mother handed her. Haruki didn't remember owning such clothes, but assumed they had to be hers. They had likely been purchased somewhere during the two years and seven months she could no longer remember.

"Those jeans are a little long for you," her mother commented.

"That is preferable to them being too short," Haruki replied, putting on her shoes. She picked herself up from the bed, and the extra room in her jeans caused them to slip down.

"Did you lose weight?"

"I do not know." Without any recent memories, Haruki had nothing to compare her current body size to.

"Well, you could definitely afford to put on a few more pounds. You've always been underweight."

That was something Haruki could remember. Her weight had been consistently below average since elementary school. "I will take that into account."

"Looks like we'd better buy you a belt first. Then we'll get a nice lunch, and a cake to celebrate your discharge."

"I was only in the hospital for one night."

"A discharge is still a discharge. I'm just glad nothing came up."

"I apologize for the inconvenience."

"You didn't do anything wrong. You don't need to apologize." Her mother quickly folded up the pajamas and put them in her bag. She then retrieved the clothes in the closet, which Haruki had been wearing when she was sent to the hospital. Haruki didn't remember owning those clothes either, but they were quickly folded away into her mother's bag. "The doctor is busy treating another patient, so we'll just let the nurse know we're going."

Clutching her bag, Haruki's mother began walking out. Haruki followed behind.

When they left the room, Haruki found herself assaulted with sudden clamor. The hallway was very busy, and Haruki could hear an alarm blaring somewhere. The alarm noise was

strangely flat. A man in a white coat quickly made his way past them and walked into the opposite hospital room. As he opened the door, the alarm noise got louder.

The room's nameplate only bore one name. Naturally, Haruki didn't recognize it.

"What are you doing? Get over here," her mother urged with an unusual strength.

It was only then that the recognition came to Haruki.

*Someone has passed away in that room.* Or at least, they would soon.

Haruki's mother had always tended to avoid being around such incidents. With no reason to go against her mother's instruction, Haruki began walking behind her mother once more.

Her mother's tone took on an odd cheer. "I got a call this morning from someone who went to middle school with you."

"Is that right?"

"It was a boy. That bring anyone to mind?"

"No." Haruki shook her head. She couldn't come up with anything.

"I'm quite sure his name was Asai-kun. Were you friends?"

Asai. A name she had never heard before. Haruki hadn't lost any memories of being in her first year of junior high. She could remember that time like it had just happened. But was there a classmate by the name of Asai? She didn't know. She hadn't bothered to remember half of her classmate's names in the first place.

*If I can't remember his name, then we certainly weren't friends.* After coming to that conclusion, Haruki once again shook her head. "No."

"Really?"

"I do not remember. It is possible that I forgot."

"Oh..." Her mother's expression changed. It became very complicated, and Haruki was unable to read it. "Well, he mentioned a class reunion."

"A class reunion?" Haruki wasn't familiar with that concept.

“Yes. At any rate, he asked if he could come visit this evening, and I told him he could.”

“Understood.” If her mother wanted to meet him, then there was no reason to make a fuss.

“Maybe talking to him will bring back some of your memories.”

Would it really? Haruki still didn’t feel as though anything had been lost. She just believed it because everyone else told her that was the case.

Would it even be possible for her to get her memories back? And even if it was, would there be any point? Could she get memories back that she didn’t even care to recall?

Haruki couldn’t answer those questions, and decided to remain silent.

Her mother tilted her head, taking a good look at Haruki. “I wonder what this Asai-kun is like.”

Haruki Misora couldn’t have cared less about that.

She didn’t know, and she didn’t even want to know.



When lunch period rolled around, Souma Sumire placed two bentou boxes atop Asai Kei’s desk. “Where d’ya wanna eat?”

Kei almost said that he was fine to stay in the classroom, then stopped short. “Let’s go to the southern building’s rooftop.”

“But the door up there is locked.”

“I know. We’ll just eat on the landing.”

It was supposed to be his and Haruki’s place.

Two years before, the southern middle school building’s rooftop had been a place for all three of them. In the same way, the stair landing leading to the roof of Ashiharabashi High had become a place for Kei and Haruki. He didn’t want to go there with anyone else.

But Kei couldn’t shake the feeling that he had to go there and be alone with Souma. If only so that he could feel the sad awareness that Haruki’s absence would bring.

“Won’t it be all dusty up there?”

“Don’t worry. This school is better cleaned than you might expect.” Kei stood up, grabbing the two bentou boxes from his desk.

As he left the classroom and walked down the hallway, he chatted with Souma, who was keeping up beside him. “Do you remember Haruki Misora, by chance?”

“Haruki? From middle school?”

“That’s the one. You were in the same class your first year.”

A slight frown crossed Souma’s face. “Well it’d be kinda hard to forget her. She randomly fainted, then stopped coming to school. I heard she got some kind of infection that’s hard to treat.”

“For what it’s worth, it wasn’t an infection.” Quite to the contrary, Haruki Misora was in perfect health.

“So wait, you knew Haruki-san?”

“A little bit.”

“Well, what’s all this about?”

“Oh, she just crossed my mind recently. I wonder how she’s doing.”

After a short silence, Souma answered, “Well, it’d be good if she got back into school by now.” Her tone was closer to confusion than sadness. No doubt she was baffled as to why Kei would bring such a topic up.

*You forgot, Souma. We spent an entire summer talking with her two years ago. And then Souma Sumire died.*

For all her talk about loving communication, the only words that Souma Sumire had said that summer were for the purpose of connecting two other people. She never spoke a single word about Souma Sumire, never said anything that could bring herself into the spotlight. And that summer came to an end before Kei could even try to get to know her any better.

“Well, like I said, it was just a coincidence that I thought of her.”

Perhaps he was too late, but he wanted to try talking with Souma Sumire. Even the one before him that seemed

so much like a fake. She was definitely the real Souma Sumire, she just didn't know about abilities. He wanted so badly to talk with her.

They passed down a corridor leading into the southern school building. The southern building only had special classrooms for arts and sciences and the like, so it remained relatively quiet during lunch break.

Kei posed a question as he walked up the stairs. "So, Souma, what are your dreams for the future?"

Surprise crossed Souma's face as she looked over to Kei. "That's quite the change of topic."

"Ah, just another thought I had. Like the one about Haruki-san." Kei had never expected to start using "san" with Haruki's name again. He had done away with that formality so long ago that the honorific felt alien.

"Future dreams, huh?" Souma's answer was rather serious. "Well, they've been all over the place. I wanted to be the director of a zoo in elementary school."

"A zoo?"

"A school field trip really solidified that for me. The penguins were just so cute."

"I see." Kei could get behind that. If he had to rank his top five animals, penguins would be cute enough to make it up there.

"Then for a while I wanted to be a picture book author, then a fashion designer."

"What about now?"

"I'm not sure. Going to a decent college and getting a stable office job seems about right. Kinda shooting for accounting right now. I hear that office jobs are more resistant to economic recession."

"Well, that's a pretty grounded goal."

"Not really a goal. Just something I kinda made up in the moment."

"Then do you have anything approaching a goal?"

Abilities or not, Kei had a hard time imagining Souma Sumire just blindly skating through life without any greater

purpose. She was the type of person who seemed to always chase after the one goal she set for herself.

But Souma shook her head. "I kinda realized that any job would work, to be honest. As long as you really put your all into it, anything could be enjoyable. Even a convenience store register job could be fulfilling in its own way, at least more than just trying to play whack-a-mole with a dozen different options."

They passed the final landing, being greeted by the door leading to the rooftop.

Souma Sumire's eyes narrowed. "This sure takes me back. The rooftop was always our hangout spot in middle school."

But her version of "our" did not include Haruki Misora.

They sat together on the stairs, eating lunch while chatting about all sorts of things.

Kei learned so many things he had never known. He found out her zodiac symbol, her blood type, and her favorite season.

Souma smiled as she placed her lid back onto her empty bentou box. "You're a little strange today, you know that?"

"Am I really?"

"You bet. It's not like you at all to ask these kinds of questions."

"Well, I just thought I'd like to get to know you better."

He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. They were honest, but they weren't something he should have shared with her.

He always let his guard down around Souma. There was a certain freedom in the fact that she knew everything, and could never be surprised by anything he shared. But the girl beside him wasn't the impervious Souma Sumire whose every word and action was guided by future sight.

Instead, the girl before him was starting to get moist eyes. He knew that couldn't end well. But before he could even open his mouth, she spoke first.

"The reason I don't have any more dreams for the future... is because I met you." She clasped her hands together

on her knees. "Back in elementary school, knitting was all the rage in my class."

"You mean like hand-knit scarves and sweaters?"

"Yup. Stuffed animals, too. But I didn't see what was so fun about it. Having to sit there and repeat the same process over and over and over just made me feel icky."

Kei very slowly repeated the last word she had said. "... Icky?" He didn't think that was something she would ever say. But maybe she had avoided that kind of word around him before, knowing that he didn't like it.

"It was like being crammed into a small elevator. I felt like I was kept in this restricted, claustrophobic space. I didn't like doing the same thing over and over again. Didn't like school very much, either."

"Because school is just doing the same thing over and over?"

"Exactly. You wear the same uniform, walk the same route, go to the same place. It just felt like I was slowly being crushed. You know what I mean?"

"Sort of."

Souma smiled. "I was just being a normal teenager, really. I wanted to be free and liberated by growing up. But then... I met you. All of a sudden, that didn't really seem to matter anymore."

Kei was relieved by her saying that something didn't matter. It was a phrase that more suited Souma Sumire. If something wasn't essentially and truly important, then it didn't really matter.

"Going the same route to the same school every day would be fine, as long as you were there. In fact, staying the same... would be better. I'm sure that... I'd enjoy knitting a sweater for you." Her voice was quiet, trembling. As if trying to hide her presence.

Kei took a deep breath in, then let it out.

He searched for what needed to be said.

He spoke as slowly and deliberately as he could manage. "I noticed that... all your notebooks were brand new today."

"Yeah, what about it?"

“It just kinda feels like... a brand new world has started today.”

Souma's eyebrows knit into a new shape of confusion. “I like new notebooks as much as the next person, but isn't that a little melodramatic?”

“Not at all, actually. What I mean is...” He tried pulling a Souma Sumire, using a metaphor to get across what he desperately wanted to say. “Say, for example, that all of our memories were fake.”

The girl he knew two years ago probably couldn't speak in anything but metaphor. She knew so much, even the very future, and just couldn't convey it. She would have to turn every conversation into a metaphor. Kei suddenly found himself in the same position.

Souma Sumire, sitting beside him in absolute ignorance, smiled lightly as she tilted her head. “So, something along the lines of the five-minute hypothesis?”

The five-minute hypothesis was a thought experiment suggesting that the whole world may very well have been created in its entirety no more than five minutes ago. That meant that any memories from more than five minutes ago— The previous night's dinner, the cherry blossoms blooming in the spring, the birthday present from last year— were all complete fabrications, implanted at the world's creation five minutes prior.

The theory was logically unfalsifiable. After all, if everything was created five minutes ago, there would be no reason to trust anything in the past or the present as evidence to the contrary.

Kei gave a small nod. “Well, yeah, something like that. But less that the whole world was created five minutes ago, and more that we were on another one until then. We could have had completely different memories, leading completely different lives.”

“And then those memories were overwritten, and we were placed in this world.”

“Yeah.” Kei knew that was actually their reality, with only small differences. The world wasn't remade five minutes

prior, but the night before. It wasn't the whole world that was affected, just Sakurada. But one past was gone, and a new one written in its place. "Is it even right for us to stay together, when that could be the case?"

"Of course it is." Souma's affirmation was quiet, but resolute. "There's no point to that assumption. Our memories always have the capacity to be wrong. Time passes, memories get murky, and you end up completely forgetting an event, or warping it entirely. That line of thinking is a meaningless venture."

Kei tilted his head a few degrees, on purpose. "Memories have no meaning?"

As if preparing to explain a famous mathematical formula, Souma said, "My mind is dotted with incorrect memories, and those memories determine my emotions. The real, objective past becomes completely unrelated. Mistakes or not, it's still okay to assume that I am who I am, and you are who you are, because of those experiences."

That was certainly one way to approach it. To do nothing more than trust the feelings and memories of the present moment.

"Unless you're suggesting you have a perfect memory, recalling the past with absolutely no mistakes?" she questioned.

*Yeah. I do, actually.* Everything. Sakurada's abilities. Haruki Misora. The former Souma Sumire.

Those memories made him want to reject the girl who stood before him. She was unmistakably Souma Sumire, but not the Souma Sumire that Kei knew.

Not that he could ever say that to her.

Instead, he said, "A girl I know gave me a present. She gifted it in a very roundabout way, and I knew she put more effort into it than any kind of hand-knitted sweater. She worked hard to give me exactly what I wanted."

Slight annoyance spread over Souma Sumire's face. "Must be nice. What about it?"

"You're right. Misunderstanding, or being wrong, none of that matters. I am who I am because of my memories, and those memories determine my emotions. So, I..." Asai Kei

sighed softly inside. "I... really like this world. You're here, smiling with me, and it's like all the problems have been cleanly wiped away. Maybe this is the right answer I've been looking for. But... I still have my memories."

He remembered abilities. He remembered Haruki Misoro.

*I can't forget a single thing.*

So...

"So I can't be with you here forever."

The girl before him knit her eyebrows. "I don't really get what you're saying."

Kei nodded. "Yeah. Sorry. I'll try to put it in a simpler way." But he didn't know how.

He didn't want to lie, but flat-out telling her the truth would only sound like a lie. The only way he could say anything was to wrap it in mysterious half-truths.

"But, well..." Souma Sumire chuckled in what sounded entirely like a sigh. "If I'm hearing you right, you just dumped me, didn't you?"

The smile that remained on her face was sad, solitary, and forced.

It made her look somewhat like a stray cat.

## 2 - The same day, 1:30 PM

There wasn't any point in staying at school after that. Kei skipped out the back gates while lunch break continued on.

With about four hours before he was expected at Haruki's house, he jumped on a bus headed for the train station. His next move had been planned out since he woke up that morning.

It had been about four years since his last train ride. He hadn't ridden one since the day that he first visited Sakurada in that summer four years past. He hadn't been allowed to leave, since he would keep his ability even if he left town. But that didn't matter anymore.

Kei passed through the automatic ticket gate, buying a canned coffee from a nearby vending machine. The train arrived at the platform just as he was finishing it. The doors opened, and a few passengers filed off. Kei boarded the train himself, and the doors closed.

There were only a few passengers on the train. Kei selected a nearby empty seat as the train started moving and an automated voice announced the next stop. He never thought he'd get a second chance at seeing the outside world. He never thought leaving Sakurada would have been that easy.

Kei watched the scenery flow and rush past him, reminded of the several train excursions he used to take when he was younger.

Every now and then, he had simply wanted to go far away. When he couldn't stand staying in one place any longer, he would hop on the train. He would ride it till the sunset, going in a new direction.

Looking back, it was a kind of pseudo-escape. He didn't really want to run away, but all the same, he had been looking for his own utopia.

*Utopia.* A particularly sad word. It was supposed to mean an ideal location, but broken down, it was made up of the Greek words for "no place".

Kei used to get on the train, looking for a place that wasn't real, and that he knew he would never find.

The circumstances brought a certain woman to mind. The woman with future sight who had previously protected Sakurada, calling herself the Witch.

*You're looking for the place where you belong.*

She was right. That was all he had ever been looking for.

*Sakurada will grab hold of you, and not let go.*

That had certainly been correct. After all, once Kei stepped foot in Sakurada, he had been incapable of leaving.

But still...

*Not even Sakurada was the exact place I was looking for.*

Asai Kei loved Sakurada, but it wasn't the true place he had been searching for. The place he had been seeking, and was still seeking, was a dreamlike paradise. A place that

couldn't be reached just by following a set of tracks, and that likely didn't even exist in all the world.

But if that was the case, why be on the train at all?

That morning, as soon as he had woken up, he had decided to get on that train. It just seemed like the natural thing to do. Like turning on the lights when returning home past dark. Like waving back at a person who waved first. That same kind of reflex had decided he should get on the train.

Was it just another pseudo-escape? That was possible. But it wasn't at all like his actions four years prior. He wasn't searching for a utopia, or a place that didn't even exist. He was searching for a very real, very ordinary town.

Something told him that he wouldn't be complete without going there. He felt certain that the final piece lay in that town.

The train continued forward smoothly. Kei closed his eyes, thinking he might get some sleep on the way over. But that didn't happen. Instead, his thoughts began to be entirely dominated by Souma Sumire.

She was able to live happily in a world without abilities. She could just be a girl, experiencing normal joys and sorrows.

If he were to return abilities to the world, all her suffering would return to her as well. Future sight, death, Swamp-men, and everything else that brought her torturous pain and would come right back.

He could do nothing, and Souma Sumire could be happy. He knew that.

*I know that, but I still want to reset.*

Why? To bring back the original Haruki Misora? That was definitely part of it. Kei was quite sure that the present Haruki knew nothing about him. She would only know what had happened up to the end of her first year of junior high, followed by a life of being cut off from everyone else she had ever known. That was horribly sad.

But that wasn't the end. Even in the present world, Kei could still go and find Haruki. They could have countless new exchanges, slowly building up a new relationship. It would

never be like the old one, but it could be just as happy, and it could begin from right where he was.

So Haruki Misora couldn't be his excuse. Nobody could.

*It's just that I personally want Sakurada's abilities to come back.*

Asai Kei's personal, selfish values informed him that it was wrong to throw away Sakurada's abilities. He couldn't accept the idea that abilities were a mistake. So he wanted to get them back with a reset.

That was his reason.

The train wove in and out with a mechanical consistency. The tracks ahead were leading directly towards the town that Kei had been born in.

After a transfer to an express train, the total journey took about an hour and a half. Then, Kei finally heard the station he was waiting for come from the announcement speakers. He stood up, disembarked the train, and stared down at the row of buildings spread before the high platform.

One building was designated as a family restaurant, and signage indicated an Internet café on another section. Opposite to them was a shopping mall with a movie theater, several large posters splayed across its front.

Not too much had changed in the past four years. The most significant difference was a chain drug store right on a corner. Previously, that section had housed a privately run café. Kei had always liked the little café and its sophisticated atmosphere, so he was sad to see that it had been replaced.

Kei was back in the town he grew up in. But although he had lived there up until the very end of elementary school, nobody would remember him. One way or another, the Administration Bureau had completely erased Kei's past prior to his life in Sakurada. Not even the loss of abilities within Sakurada had undone that. Kei's false set of memories placed him in Sakurada from the day of his birth. The filler to make his memories add up was that his parents had tragically died four years ago, leading to his adoption by the Nakano family.

*Nobody outside of Sakurada knows that I exist.* Kei was the only one aware that one more boy used to live within the town he was facing.

Given the time that Kei had promised to be at Haruki's, he knew that he only had about 30 minutes to visit. He walked down the platform stairs and through the ticket station. The light flicked green, and he began walking in the most natural direction. He passed by the drugstore that had replaced the café, continuing on.

He turned off the main street, taking a back alley that led him into the shopping district. Passing further into that, he came across a small park.

He remembered everything. Every detail that he saw was packed full of memories. Memories that only he would ever know.

He came to a stop in the middle of the park. Before him towered a tall apartment complex. He glanced towards the southern end, fixing his gaze on the window third down from the top.

*I'm home.*

He had thrown away the key to that apartment four years ago. Even the keychain that the key had once been on was now turned into a strap, hanging from a girl's cell phone. Not that the girl would understand why she owned that strap anymore.

After all that had changed, and all that had been forgotten... Kei still remembered. He was the only one who did.

That apartment room used to be where Kei called home. No doubt the couple inside had entirely forgotten about him, but Kei knew that he grew up in there. He still remembered the taste of that chicken curry.

It was similar to what he had helped make the previous night, but Souma's wasn't quite there. The chicken curry his mother made was just slightly different somehow.

Kei closed his eyes.

*I feel so sad.* He felt so selfishly sad about something he had so selfishly decided to throw away of his own accord. And he knew he could never get it back.

He kept looking into the window for a silhouette, or even just a shape, but never saw one. But he still thought he had done enough. It would do. He had seen everything he had come for.

*Guess it's time to go visit Haruki.* Time to get back on the train and return to Sakurada. Kei turned on his heel and began walking out of the park.

In front of him, a little girl was running, her feet scuttling restlessly across the ground, headed directly towards him. She looked around two or three years old. Just as they were about to pass each other, the girl got distracted, then stumbled. Kei immediately knelt down to catch her.

It happened right after that.

There was a voice. A woman's voice.

"Megumi!"

He almost thought his heart had stopped. He wanted to thank God for such a miraculous event, but it could have been coincidence. A woman was crossing the street, headed into the park.

Kei let go of the little girl, turning his attention towards the woman.

His first thought was that she was shorter. Of course, that wasn't true, just a trick of his mind. She should have been 39 years old, but she looked much younger. It was good to know that she was in such good health.

The little girl was still holding tightly to Kei's pants leg, likely out of shock from her close call.

The woman took in the situation with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I am so sorry. I take my eyes off her for one moment, and she's already miles away."

Her voice was so familiar. It hadn't changed at all. He never thought he'd get to hear it again.

Kei forced a smile onto his face. "I suppose her name is Megumi-chan?"

"It is."

"Does that use the kanji character for grace (恵み), as in, 'the grace of God (天の恵み)'?"

"It does."

“Well, that’s interesting. My name is written with the same character (恵). It’s just read differently.”

“How so?”

“Kei. It’s read as Kei.”

The woman’s eyes widened slightly, and she smiled. Her gaze dropped down to the little girl, who was still grabbing onto Kei. “What a coincidence. If she turned out to be a boy, I was going to name her Kei. My husband and I had decided long ago on using that specific character for our child’s name. It would be pronounced Kei for a boy, and Megumi for a girl.”

“It’s a great girl’s name, but it always got misread for me.”

“Oh, that’s okay. If someone reads it wrong the first time, that just means they’ll remember it faster.”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

The woman crouched down and gently stroked the little girl’s head. The girl finally let go of Kei, throwing her arms around the woman.

Watching the little girl, Kei asked, “Why did you want to use that particular character?”

“Hm?”

“Well, my name uses that character, too, but I don’t know why. Maybe my parents had the same line of thought as yours.”

The woman put on a shy smile that made her look exactly like the child in her hands. “Well, it was more for us than it was for her.” Stroking her little girl’s head, the woman continued, “Megumi as a word can include the concept of deep love. It invites the interpretation of tenderness and affection.”

“So, you wanted a child who could hold deep love for others?”

The woman shook her head. “That’s part of it, but... names are always called by other people, right? You see, when I say my little girl’s name, I’m calling out my deep love. So are her friends, her future loved ones, and everyone else. And that... makes me very happy.”

*Wow... that’s such a wonderful name.* Kei wanted to share how he felt. But the words just wouldn’t come.

Heat flushed his cheeks. He knew that if he tried to speak, his voice would come out quivering. He forced his breathing to halt, swallowing down the scorching hot lump forming within his throat.

"What's wrong?" The woman asked, looking into his face. "You look like you're about to cry."

Kei shook his head, but he didn't mean anything by it. "I... did something terrible to my mom and dad. I betrayed them... in the worst way possible."

Four years ago, Kei had stopped being their child.

Purposely, of his own decision, he had cut them out of his life.

The woman stood up, smiling. "Did you make sure to apologize, and to make it sincere?"

"No. I can't apologize."

"Why not?"

"I don't... deserve it."

"Oh, that can't be true." The woman placed a hand over her young daughter's shoulders. "You can't break the bond of a parent and child that easily. You will always be their son. Just go and apologize already."

"If I do... will they forgive me?"

"I don't know. But even if they can't... they'll always love you."

"Then..." It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be worth forgiveness.

But he had to ask.

"Can I practice apologizing... with you?"

"Practice?"

"Yes. If I do it too suddenly, then... it might not come out right."

The woman tilted her head in confusion. But with another bright smile, she nodded. "That's fine. I'll be your mother for just a moment."

She held her daughter's shoulders, looking at him. Her eyes were steady. Kei could see his face reflected in them, looking ready to burst into tears. He looked like a child.

Despite all his efforts, his voice still trembled.

“Mom... I am so sorry.”

So very, very sorry.

He couldn't think of anything else. He just repeated the apology over and over in his heart.

The woman's face blossomed into a lovely smile. “Okay.”

It was a short, simple response of affirmation.

But it was... those words were...

*This was what I had thrown away.*

He had thrown away that which couldn't possibly be thrown away.

It was the first thing he had tried to do upon getting to Sakurada and becoming aware of his ability. He had been so foolish.

The girl in the woman's arms shouted something in a high-pitched voice. Kei couldn't really hear it, but the woman seemed to understand.

Kei took a deep breath in, then let it out.

Then, he smiled. “Thank you so very much. I feel... much better now.”

“Then make sure you apologize to your parents next.” Without waiting for an answer, the woman excused herself, and began walking away.

It was time to go back to Sakurada.

It was still hard to hear, but Kei could make out the little girl calling to him.

“Bye bye, Onii-chan!”

With the deepest love he could muster, Asai Kei called her name.

“Goodbye... 恵.”

### 3 - The same day, 5:30 PM

The sun was setting.

Haruki Misora sat in a chair placed in front of a desk, immersing herself in thought.

*This is... my room.* The statement had to be correct, and yet the room was unrecognizable compared to what Haruki knew.

For starters, there were cats as far as the eye could see. Stationery with cat illustrations lay on the desk, three stuffed cats lined the bookshelf, and the pillowcase was cat-themed. It only seemed to make sense that they were all items purchased within the two year and seven month period that Haruki could not remember.

She tapped at a cell phone placed on the desk. She didn't remember having something like that, either. The phone itself was in beautiful condition, looking practically new. In contrast, the cat strap attached to it had accumulated some grime.

She picked up the phone, discovering that the power was on. She didn't really know how to operate it, but after tapping around long enough, she located the contacts list. The list was completely empty, looking almost factory in how clean it was.

She began to place the phone in the desk, then stopped, instead placing it in her pocket. It was hers, after all, so there had to be some functional use for it. She decided that she would ask her mother how to use it later.

She then moved to open the desk drawer. She recognized her Japanese-English textbook placed directly inside, but it looked more worn than she remembered. Underneath it was a CD she didn't recognize which seemed to hold some sort of Western music. Haruki couldn't imagine purchasing a music disc for herself, so it was likely a gift from someone else.

Deeper in the drawer was a square tin that seemed at first glance to be made for cookies. She pulled it out and opened the lid. Inside was a paperback book and a blue handkerchief. The handkerchief was bulky and clearly wrapped around something. When she picked it up and unfolded it, a red barrette fell on the desk with a solid thump.

Nothing she saw sparked any kind of recognition. In fact, it didn't feel like any of it even belonged to her.

Haruki picked up the red barrette. *Was this... important, somehow?* She didn't know. She couldn't even picture herself carefully storing away a hair clip in the first place.

She rewrapped the barrette, placing it and the handkerchief back into the cookie tin. She then picked up the paperback, but before she could turn the cover, three slow knocks came from her door.

Haruki suddenly recalled her mother telling her that someone was going to visit. It was supposed to be about a junior high school reunion or something.

Placing the paperback on the desk, Haruki turned around. The light of the setting sun was beginning to stream through her window. She faced the door, responding, "Come in."

The door opened to a singular boy that she couldn't recognize. He was wearing a uniform. Likely it belonged to some high school or another.

With what was probably a smile, the boy said, "Heya. It's been a minute."

"I must apologize. I do not recognize you."

"Yeah, I know." The boy entered the room and closed the door. "I'm Asai Kei. We met in April two years ago. Maybe you remember Souma Sumire? She introduced us."

Souma Sumire. Finally, a name Haruki could recognize. Souma was a classmate of hers... or actually, she had been her classmate two years and seven months ago, when they were still in their first year of junior high.

"We talked a lot together. So much that it would take me a full season just to describe everything we discussed. We talked so, so much." The boy began slowly approaching her. The light of the setting sun almost made it look like a shadow was approaching her. "I want you to remember everything."

"I do not feel a need to do so."

"I want you to... for me."

"There is no method to make that happen."

"There is, actually." The boy, now standing directly next to Haruki, picked up the paperback from her desk. He flipped through the pages, stopping about halfway through to pluck something thin and rectangular out. "A girl I know gave up absolutely everything... just to gift me a present."

In his hand was a photograph of a sakura tree in full bloom.



Souma Sumire's present was the situation that Asai Kei now found himself in, all culminating in that single photograph. He very gently traced the photo with his finger.

Haruki Misora stared at the photo beside him. She had long hair. No doubt she had been rewound by Urachi Masamune's power, now being the girl from some two and a half years prior.

Kei smiled at the Haruki Misora who had never met him. "This photo can bring your memories back." It could return everything to what it had been three days before.

"I do not think that is possible."

"Oh, but it is."

It wouldn't be right to say that abilities had truly disappeared from Sakurada. They still existed, it was just that nobody could remember them. But not knowing how to use an ability was the same as not having one.

Despite that, there were exceptions. Photographs taken with Sasano Hiroyuki's ability would take anybody who tore one into the world of the photograph for ten minutes under any conditions. The photograph would still activate whether Sasano was aware of his own ability or not.

On top of that, it would recreate the old Sakurada. The Sakurada that existed before the removal of all information regarding abilities.

If Haruki Misora was taken to the old Sakurada, she would remember that she possessed the Reset ability. Once remembered, that nigh miraculous ability could be used again.

"There's a place I want to go that will help you remember everything."

Sasano Hiroyuki's photographs would only function properly if torn while being physically present in the place where the photo was originally taken. The picture Kei had in his hands depicted a sakura tree in the garden of Sasano's house. Getting there would take about a 20-minute bus ride.

Haruki tilted her head. "Will we be leaving presently?"

"Mhm. As soon as humanly possible."

"I doubt that my mother would allow it."

"I'll work it out. It'll be fine." He was gonna get her out there, even if it meant personally dragging her out of the house. He only had an hour and some change. If it passed 7 PM, then it would be 72 hours after their save.

Kei tucked the picture back into the paperback book and slipped the book into his pocket. "C'mon, let's get moving. Don't want it to get dark on us. Just put on your shoes and wait in front of the house. I'll talk with your mom."

"Where will we be going?"

"The place that will help you remember everything. Don't worry, it's not too far away."

The Haruki Misora he knew from two years ago functioned on three basic rules.

The first stated that she refused to cause any kind of trouble for others.

The second required that she follow anyone else's commands. Which was to say, if there were no clear red flags, she would do as anyone asked.

"Please, Haruki, I want you to come with me."

Haruki Misora looked at him with emotionless eyes.

Then, in a mechanical motion, she nodded once.

As Haruki put on her shoes and stepped outside the house, Kei spoke with her mother. Kei made sure to catch Haruki's mom in the kitchen, where there was no sight of the front entrance.

He had never planned on asking permission to take Haruki out in the first place. Any opposition from Haruki's mother would bring nothing but trouble and snag his plan. It was best to operate in secret.

After buying enough time with casual conversation, Kei left Haruki's house. Haruki was waiting for him as he stepped out the door.

"Did mother give you permission?"

"Mhm. We're good to go." Would Haruki catch him out in his lie? Kei was quite sure she wouldn't. The Haruki from two years ago couldn't have cared less about the emotions

of other people. "C'mon, this way." Kei took Haruki's hand, quickly walking away. Haruki offered no complaint, following behind him, her hand in his all the while.

They made it to the bus stop, and didn't have to wait long for the bus. Kei only let go of Haruki's hand once they were safely in the bus and seated. He was feeling uneasy. He felt that Haruki might disappear if he didn't keep a close hold on her. After all, the Haruki before him was not the one who had always been by his side.

The bus door closed, and they began moving. Kei turned towards the window, watching Haruki's reflection in the glass. "Two months ago, we had a conversation at the bus stop we just left. It started when you sent me an e-mail."

"An e-mail?"

Kei took out his phone, scrolling through received e-mails. "This one."

The sender was labeled as Haruki Misora. The screen simply read, *Could you take a moment to meet with me?*

After pausing to read, Haruki turned towards Kei. "Did I send that to you?"

"Mhm. It might not be on your phone any more, but you did."

Haruki took a phone out of her pocket. It was her phone, easily identifiable by the cat strap, but it clearly looked far too new. Kei remembered her phone looking much more used.

*Looks like Urachi Masamune used his ability on her phone, too.*

It was a smart move. There would be too much information on that phone to risk anything without rewinding its time.

"I do not know how to operate this phone," Haruki stated.

Kei decided on a different approach. "How about this? I'll reply to this e-mail, and we'll see if it shows up on your phone." Even if the phone's time had been rewound, it should still have had the same contact information.

Kei hit the reply button on his phone, and sent a new e-mail with nothing in the body.

Haruki gazed intently at her phone's screen. "It is not arriving."

“Just a bit of time lag. E-mails aren’t particularly efficient as far as sending time.” Just as Kei finished his sentence, Haruki’s phone jingled.

“It has arrived.”

“So that proves you sent me that first e-mail.”

“That is not quite accurate.”

Well, she had him there. “Okay, more precisely, it proves that the first e-mail was sent from your phone’s address,” he admitted.

“I agree.” Haruki Misora nodded. “For the time being, I am willing to accept that we were once acquainted.”

“I like to think that we were rather close friends.”

“There is not enough evidence to prove such a claim.”

“Bummer.” It wasn’t worth expecting much more than that.

Haruki moved her intense gaze in the direction the bus was moving. “How do you plan on recovering my memories?”

Kei watched her profile, bathed in the setting sun, as he answered. “A wizard cast a spell on you to make you forget everything, but I know how to reverse his magic.”

“I do not believe that wizards exist.”

“It was just a metaphor. Still, it’s closer to the truth than you might think.”

Haruki’s head tilted ever so slightly to the side. “You claim to know both the cause behind and the cure for my lost memories?”

“That’s about right. You catch on quick.”

“If that is the case, then...” Her gaze was suddenly fixed upon Kei, her jewel-like eyes looking straight at him. They were incredibly lovely. Enough that it was hard to believe they could be part of a real human body. “Why are you so concerned with trying to recover my memories?”

Kei looked straight back. “We made a promise. We were supposed to have dinner together. I want you to remember that, if at all possible.”

His response was metaphorical, but it was closer to the truth than she could have known.

Before long, the bus arrived at their destination. The sun had completely set on the way there, shrouding the area in darkness. Sakurada quickly became rural after leaving the populated city sectors. The location they were in had fields on all sides, with little in the way of artificial light sources. The stop only sported a vending machine, a few street lamps and traffic lights, and light leaking from a small number of nearby houses. Fortunately, there was enough moonlight to illuminate the road, allowing for easy passage.

Haruki Misora's words mixed in with the calls of the autumn insects. "Where are we?"

"Not far from the sakura tree in the photo. C'mon, let's go." Kei took Haruki's hand again, walking forwards. A strange exhilaration was washing over him, similar to the anxiety he would feel as a child when he got lost.

They walked down the nighttime road, eventually finding a house with a large, decorative garden.

"This is it."

"Is this your house?"

"Nope, not quite. Look." Kei pointed to the nameplate next to the entryway that read *Sasano*. "A certain man used to live here, but he moved away from Sakurada in the summer. Now it's just an empty house."

Kei walked into the garden, still holding Haruki's hand.

An old sakura tree stood front and center in the garden, washed in the white moonlight. The tree itself was almost barren, holding nearly no leaves. Its dry bark was reminiscent of an old man's hands.

"That hurts," Haruki said.

Kei realized he had been gripping her hand far too tightly. "Sorry," He apologized, finally letting go. The warmth of her hand remained on his right hand as he stood under the old, withered sakura tree. With that very hand, he reached into his pocket, pulling out the paperback book from earlier. He took out the photo from its pages, holding one side of it towards Haruki.

“Hold one end.” Haruki glanced quizzically at him, but still grabbed a side of the photo. “Hold it tight, no matter what happens.”

“Understood.”

“Things are going to get very confusing very quickly, and I need you to stay as calm as possible.”

“I will do what I can.”

“You’ll be fine. I know you can accept reality for what it is.” Kei looked directly into Haruki’s eyes. She looked right back. The photograph was all that separated them, each side held by one of their hands. “Okay, here we go.”

Kei gripped his fingertips tightly, and the photograph tore down the middle.

Strong white light immediately filled his vision. Their surroundings changed entirely.

A blindingly blue sky. A warm breeze. White petals dancing in the wind. Sakura petals blossoming above them on a strong, healthy tree.

They were now in the world of the past, in a Sakurada that had not forgotten about abilities. The two of them stood there alone.

Haruki Misora stumbled, clutching her head with her hands.

Kei held her shoulders to support her. “Remember, Haruki.”

The Reset. Her ability that was like a pure prayer.

“What is... happening?” Haruki Misora shook her head. “My memories are... mixing together.”

“Don’t overthink it. Just accept it for what it is. This town has abilities. You have an ability called the Reset.”

“I understand that. But how could I have forgotten?”

“The wizard’s spell erased Sakurada’s abilities. But here, you can still remember them.”

Haruki Misora shook her head. “Who are you... Asai Kei? What is this knowledge that you possess?”

At the moment, she could only remember that abilities existed, and that she had one. That still did nothing for the

two and a half years of memories that Urachi Masaume had taken away.

"I've been with you for a long time. I know the memories that you've lost." Kei took Haruki by the shoulders, holding her tightly, but careful not to hurt her. "I am Asai Kei. I know everything about you."

That was a lie.

But he desperately wished for it to be true. He wanted to know her.

Her hair brushed the back of his hands. She was the Haruki Misora of two years prior. The simple girl who was driven by just three rules.

"But I do not remember. I still... do not remember you."

"Yeah. I know."

Abilities were absolute. They couldn't be overcome by emotions like love or friendship. After all, it was emotions just like love and friendship that often brought them into being. It wouldn't make sense for those same feelings to override them.

But Kei had long since accepted that.

*Even if she's forgotten me, I can still make her reset.*

That was the motivation behind all of his actions that day.

He took Souma Sumire to the place where he and Haruki had always been. He talked with her, facing the reality of everything that he would be erasing.

He went back to the town of his birth, a place he hadn't been in four years. He looked up at the apartment room that he would never be able to enter again.

Then, by some miraculous coincidence, he even got to see his mother again. He learned that he had a little sister, and finally understood the meaning behind his own name.

*I've never been good at crying.* He hadn't cried since the day he decided to stay in Sakurada four years ago.

He didn't even cry two years ago, after learning about Souma Sumire's death.

*I've been such a coward.*

He had become incapable of showing his emotions to other people.

He had become scared of showing his weakness.

So he spent an entire day giving himself reasons to cry. He hadn't done it in front of Souma Sumire, he hadn't done it when he visited the town where he was born and raised, and he hadn't done it while meeting his mother for the first time in four years. But he had been preparing for it inside himself the entire time.

*Now's... probably fine.*

Now, Haruki Misora was right before him. Her pure eyes were fixed directly on him. The eyes that he had so adored two years ago. The eyes that held a pure goodness, like an unanswered prayer.

As long as she was in front of him, then...

*I'm sure that even I could cry.*

Staring into those lovely eyes, Kei remembered everything. Everything about Souma Sumire, everything about his parents, and everything in between. All his failures and regrets washed over his mind.

Finally, he brought to mind the short-haired Haruki Misora.

Her smile. The times where she looked the happiest.

He felt himself reaching the peak.

"There are... so many things that I want to do over."

There was sadness that needed to be erased.

There was a better future that needed to be found.

There was happiness to be sought.

He wanted to push forward with all his being, even if it meant doing something unfair. He wanted it with all he had.

His vision blurred. Something warm began streaking down his cheek.

"Haruki... let's reset."

The long-haired Haruki Misora watched him with an unwavering gaze.

Her pure kindness was unmatched, and whenever she saw someone crying, she would always use her ability.



As the pair disappeared into the world of a photograph, Souma Sumire stood alone on the riverside. The river's mouth was a fairly wide section, but she could still identify the tetrapods stacked up on the opposite bank by their blocky shadows jutting out.

The tetrapods had caught her eye as she walked home from school.

*That's where Kei and I met.*

She found herself unable to take another step once that thought crossed her mind. She had already been standing there for about an hour, waiting absentmindedly.

Darkness had begun to swallow the world around her, giving visibility to stars striped across the sky like a series of scars. The moon hung high up in the sky like a great, gaping hole.

The same thought revolved through her mind over and over.

She was a girl who had forgotten everything, but just the same as when she had known everything, he was all she ever thought about.

*What could I have possibly done wrong? What exactly was my mistake?*

She had tried so hard to avoid mistakes. She had done everything she could to make all the right choices. She knew that was an impossible goal, but she tried anyway. Because... it was for Asai Kei. She had been so careful, doing so much to make sure that she only ever made the right choices around him.

*All I want is... just to be with him. Why can't I have just that one wish?*

"I can't be with you here forever," he had said. So where the heck was he even going? Where was this other place that he wanted to be so badly?

The moon clouded over, deepening the darkness. Night continued to fall.

*What exactly was my mistake?* Souma Sumire thought once more.

Tears slid down her cheeks. But they didn't sparkle. No one would see them in the darkness.

The tears fell from her chin towards the ground. They would inevitably make a sound when they hit the ground. But just as inevitably, no one would hear it. Like a small extension of her very self.

As it happened, though, her tears never did hit the ground.

Because of the Reset. The ability that would sacrifice three entire days. Any and all happiness, sadness, smiling, and crying would vanish entirely. The days would be rearranged and begun anew. The world would start those three days over.

Souma Sumire would remember everything in that very next moment. Her ability, her worries, her suffering, and her death would all return to her mind.

All except for one thing.

The tears Souma Sumire had just cried would be forgotten. She would forget the tears that only she had ever known existed.

The drops soundlessly disappeared barely an inch from the ground.

#### 4 - October 23rd (Sunday) - Three days ago

Asai Kei pulled Haruki Misora into a hug. Before him was the Haruki Misora with short hair.

They stood in front of her house, having just returned from the school festival. Three days' worth of time had crumbled away, returning him to that moment. He finally had her back.

Kei closed his eyes. "It would appear we've reset."

He could feel Haruki's head tilt from within his arms. "Did something happen?"

It felt like he hadn't heard her voice in ages. There was an obviously different quality in the voice of the short-haired Haruki compared to the long-haired Haruki. The voice he

had just heard carried new intonations, and even a kind of vibrance. It was a voice colored with emotion.

He kept his arms tight around Haruki for some time before finally letting her go. Then he opened his eyes, looking straight at her. "A lot of stuff happened. There was... so much that happened."

Asai Kei could remember. He knew everything that had been lost from the last three days.

And he remembered Souma Sumire.

"My heart hurts."

He had never fully understood before why sadness, suffering, and heartache were described as painful. But now it was clear. Nothing about that expression was metaphorical. He could feel a very real and literal pain, like a stab wound. A place deep inside his chest stung and ached, drenched with invisible blood. He felt that if it was left alone, it would continue to fester and the wound would grow worse.

"Are you... okay?" Haruki's hand moved slowly, as if she were scared. She placed it upon Kei's chest, right at the center of his pain. Her palm was so warm.

Somehow, that warmth seemed to melt away his pain, at least a bit. Enough that Kei could manage to force a nod. He was eventually able to turn his ragged breaths into words. "The way things are going, Sakurada will lose all its abilities the day after tomorrow." Of course, the accurate expression was to say Sakurada would only lose information and memories about abilities. Everyone but Kei would forget that abilities could exist. "Sakurada will become a place that mirrors the rest of the world. A town without abilities."

"Is such a feat even possible?"

"It is. I didn't like it, so I reset."

Haruki gazed intently at him, her gaze as pure as ever. "Are abilities necessary for Sakurada?"

Kei shook his head. "Strictly speaking, no. We don't have to have them."

Kei's first impression of abilities those four years ago was to think of them as some kind of omnipotent power. They

were miraculous feats that could solve any problem and provide a pathway to the best possible futures.

But he had come to know better. He knew that to only be an illusion.

Abilities were more than capable of bringing suffering and pain, even to those that used them. For some people, an ability could become the very source of all their problems. There was no getting around that fact. But on the other hand, abilities had their merits. They could be used to save and protect others.

As far as Urachi Masamune was concerned, the cost of abilities was greater than their benefit. But Kei was of the opposite opinion. That was what everything came down to.

At the end of the day, it was just a tale of two sentiments.

Kei gazed directly into Haruki's eyes. "I like Sakurada's abilities. I like all the people that have wished for power, and come to attain it."

"You... like them?"

"I do." That was all there was to it. "Nearly every culture has stories about people being granted wishes by demons or other evil spirits. In every single one of those stories, the people who make a wish to a demon meet an unfortunate end."

The message was clear. Don't get comfortable. Don't reveal your desires. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Just accept reality and keep moving forward.

Nothing was really wrong with that message. But...

"Imagine if someone very important to you died. Suddenly, a demon appears, promising to grant any wish. I don't see what's wrong with wishing to see the person that you care about again."

Sure, there were reasons to doubt a demon. Sure, it was true that things never came that easily in life. But a person who could cling to their last sliver of hope, only wishing to see the one they cared about once more, was beautiful.

"I think that's such a natural and beautiful emotion. At least, it's a better response than trying to say something cool like, 'I'll just accept my sadness,' and turning the demon away.

I think that it's beautiful to have a selfish wish for the impossible to happen."

He could never deny a person's desire for happiness. He could never be convinced that giving up and just accepting a situation was the right thing to do. No matter what kind of miracle or underhanded tactic it took, he wanted everyone to live happily ever after.

Those had been Kei's first thoughts when he came to Sakurada and learned about Haruki's Reset.

*No, wait, that's wrong.* It hadn't been a thought. It had been a memory. A memory of being younger, refusing to give up and clinging to simple wishes of happiness.

"How would the story with the demon end happily ever after?" Haruki Misora asked.

"The wish is granted, everyone is happy, and the demon celebrates alongside them. That's the future that I want," Asai Kei answered.

If he wanted to reach that future, he couldn't let go of Sakurada's abilities. He couldn't let his past failures force him into submission. He had the chance, and he wanted to do it over. To take away someone's tears, building a happier future.

That was his true and pure wish. It was like his own holy prayer. He wouldn't let anybody call it a mistake or misstep.

"I like Sakurada's abilities. I really do. I don't want them to be taken away."

Haruki Misora smiled. "It is a much happier outcome for a wish to be granted."

It was a simple observation, but the world was never that simple. There was always another problem, always suffering and sadness around the corner, always another reason to give up.

Kei thrust out his chest. "Yeah." It was always happier for a wish to be granted. *I don't ever want to forget that.* If nothing else, he wanted to remember that single fact for the rest of time. "Alright, Haruki. I've made my decision. I'm going to control Sakurada's abilities."

"Control them, you say?"

“Yep.” Every single one of them. To get where he wanted to go, he needed to be able to make that powerful, even violent, claim. “I’ll control all abilities, find every single problem, and create a place where only happiness can come about. That’s my goal.”

The problem he was presented with was the suffering that abilities could cause others. The obvious solution was to help them. He could manage every ability under his control, careful that nobody had to turn into a sacrificial lamb for the best outcome.

“How will that be accomplished?”

“Well, the Administration Bureau already so conveniently exists, so I may as well use it. If I can get my hands on everything they have, that’ll already give me nearly half of all abilities.”

“Understood.” Haruki nodded, not missing a beat.

*...Does she really understand? She knows I just said something absolutely ridiculous, right?*

But perhaps she really did understand. She had seen and understood everything, and was able to nod without hesitation. She knew that no matter how distant a goal one had, everything began with that first step.

“To get there, we have to deal with our immediate problem.” It was time to take their first step. “There’s a particular member of the Administration Bureau named Urachi Masamune. He’s The Index’s boss. He’s working on a plan that will remove all of Sakurada’s abilities.”

“Understood. Our first action must be to circumvent his plan.”

“That’s the bare minimum. But I want to take it a step further.” Just forcing Urachi Masamune to give up wasn’t enough.

Kei smiled. The corners of his mouth bent upwards, lending him a ferocious and fearless look. It was a smile that made anything look possible.

“I want to make Urachi-san into my ally. He’d be useful in several ways.” The Index’s boss was bound to have quite a bit of pull within the Administration Bureau, and with him

on board, Kei would have significantly more room to maneuver in the future. "And I've got one other person in mind." Kei pointed one finger upwards. "Another person who'd be indispensable."

"Who would that be?"

"Souma."

The rogue pawn. The person with the singularly powerful ability of future sight. Having her on the team would make a significant difference, to say the least.

Haruki Misora tilted her head. "I should think that Souma Sumire would accept any request of yours, regardless of the circumstances."

"I sure hope that's true." He was worried. Souma Sumire always had him worried. "She told me goodbye."

Right after crying in the bathroom, and right before all of Sakurada's abilities vanished. As she left Kei's apartment, she had very definitively said goodbye.

That one word had nagged at him to no end.

"That's the second time that she's ever said goodbye to me." Asai Kei's eyes lowered ever so slightly. "The first time was... two years ago. Just before she died."

*Maybe she's never going to see me again.* He couldn't prove it. It was just an unfounded hunch.

But still... Kei found it hard to imagine that Souma had been putting much stock into the future. What kind of life could there possibly be for a girl that had already died? How could she even define happiness, let alone find it, if she couldn't so much as believe herself to be Souma Sumire? He couldn't shake the feeling that she had already given up.

Asai Kei could do nothing but confide in Haruki Misora. "If she thinks this is where she can exit the stage, then she's got another think coming."

It was possible Souma Sumire's narrative had never been written to save herself.

But if that was the case, then he'd just have to author a completely different ending.

## Chapter 2

# Hero and Heroine

*My story ends here.*

*It's finally all over.*

The girl who spoke those words sounded somewhat relieved. Like the sigh of relief one might give upon opening their front door after a long journey away.

That had happened 23 hours ago. Just before abilities disappeared from Sakurada, and just after Souma Sumire cried in the bathroom.

Asai Kei and Souma Sumire were facing each other, eating from bowls of chicken curry.



The sun was setting, and the fluorescent lights above them were already brighter than the sky outside. A gentle night breeze streamed in through the open window.

"There was nothing I could do to stop Urachi-san's plan," Souma Sumire confessed.

Souma may have known the future, but that didn't mean she could just do anything she wanted. In fact, it likely just made the line between the possible and the impossible all the more clear.

Asai Kei was well aware of that truth, but the revelation she had just given still came as something of a surprise. "Is Urachi-san's plan really that perfect?"

Souma nodded, spooning more chicken curry into her mouth. "As far as I could see, yes. No matter what I did, every future I saw still guaranteed the success of his plan by the removal of information about abilities from Sakurada."

That certainly posed an issue.

Kei brought a spoonful of carrot and curry to his mouth. He savored the flavors before slowly swallowing. "Not even in a future where, say, Ukawa-san didn't use her ability?" The Administration Bureau's final decision to remove abilities from Sakurada had been on the back of Ukawa Sasane's ability use. Was Souma Sumire trying to say that future sight wasn't good enough to stop just that?

Souma shook her head. "I could have stopped Ukawa-san from using her ability today. In fact, it wouldn't have been hard at all. But that wouldn't have solved the core issue."

She was right, of course. If they removed the immediate resolution to Masamune Urachi's plan, he would just have looked somewhere else to get the same result.

Kei scooped up a portion of curry, rice, and onion all together. "Yeah, it'd be pretty easy for him to just keep shooting at it until he finally succeeded." At least, Kei figured that was what he would do in Urachi's shoes.

Having Souma against him would certainly make things difficult, but not impossible. She was an entirely normal girl outside of her knowledge of future events. For one, he could just find her and stop her from doing anything. That wouldn't be easy in the short term, but he had all the time in the world, and would get to her eventually. Souma was only physically capable of doing so much, and she certainly couldn't leave Sakurada, at risk of losing her future sight.

On top of that, there wasn't even a strict need for Urachi to capture Souma anyway. If he kept up a steady offensive, he could wear Souma down while also inching forwards toward his own goal. Then, of course, when abilities left Sakurada, future sight would no longer be an issue.

Souma took a sip of water, her slender neck undulating in a wave. "The real problem is that we don't strictly have a success state. We can stop any one plan of his, but that will only serve to maintain the status quo. He won't lose, he'll just move on to something else."

"So his plan will only end in its success, but we have to end it before its success."

The first hurdle was clear: to establish a win condition.

Souma rested her chin in her hand. "Thing is, I just haven't been able to find a way to do that."

"Well, if you can't find it, then no one can."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, that's what it means to have future sight." Only somebody who knew the future could change the future. Granted, the reality of the Script went against that concept, but that was an outlier.

If someone with future sight said an action was impossible, then it had to be impossible. After all, that person would be the only one capable of possibly overturning that reality.

Her chin still in her hand, Souma shifted her gaze up to focus on Kei. "Do you really believe that?"

"I have to. That's the rules of abilities. Unless there was another person with equal or more powerful future sight than you, your proclamation is law. If you can't change the future, then nobody can."

The girl before him smiled. "C'mon, Kei. You always had a bad habit of beating around the bush even when you knew the real answer."

Kei drew his eyebrows together. "But you know how much I would hate doing that."

"Oh, I know you'll hate it. But I also know you'll do it anyway."

She wasn't wrong.

*I know she's not wrong.*

But that didn't make him like it any more.

Future sight was the only way to be able to change the future. But Souma claimed there was nothing she could do.

If that was the case, then they needed another future seer. Things being as they were, it was unlikely that another person with future sight would simply appear before them.

*But if we don't have one, then we have to make one.* They could just whip one up real quick.

Souma Sumire's smile never faltered. "You need to use future sight."

She was right. It was the quickest way to their goal.

*And that's why Souma called Sakagami-san over to Sakurada.*

Sakagami Yousuke was an old senpai of Souma and Kei's in middle school. His ability allowed him to copy an ability from one person onto another. He could let Kei borrow Souma's future sight.

"You could use my ability to find the future that even I couldn't find. To find your ideal future."

If that was all there was to it, then that'd be great. It would be a dream come true, a perfect solution to their problem.

But that wasn't all there was to it.

Kei's eyes lowered ever so slightly. "But, Souma... I don't want to create a girl only to let her be erased."

That was what she had to be implying by telling him to use future sight.

Souma Sumire was unable to use future sight at that moment, due to her previous affiliation with Urachi Masamune. Urachi Masamune had made use of Oka Eri, a girl who could manipulate memories in ways such as making someone forget how to use their ability. It only made sense. There was no benefit in letting a power like future sight run free once Souma had served her purpose.

Of course, the immediate solution was to use a reset. That would put them back in a time period where Souma had not yet forgotten how to use her ability.

Unfortunately, Urachi's careful guard over Souma Sumire's whereabouts prior to letting her go couldn't be underestimated. It wasn't even worth considering the idea that he could just go see her.

Which left only one trustworthy location that Kei could go and meet her safely.

"I really don't want to use that photo again."

Sasano Hiroyuki's photograph. By holding it atop the tetrapods and ripping it, he could meet with Souma for ten minutes. It would create a new Souma Sumire, one destined to disappear ten minutes after her creation.

Kei hated that. He didn't want to engage with the idea at all. He couldn't stand the thought of allowing a girl to be created and destroyed for a singular purpose.

"Yeah. I know." Souma Sumire smiled gently, and somehow innocently. "But that's what you'll do."

*I'm sure she's right,* Kei thought.

Souma let out a sigh of relief, like the sigh of relief one might give upon opening their front door after a long journey away. "My story ends here. It's finally all over. Everything from here on out is all yours."

The narrative that Souma Sumire's future sight had allowed her to weave had come to its conclusion. All Asai Kei could do was prepare for what came next.

He nodded. "I'll do everything I can to reach my ideals." Even if it meant stealing Souma Sumire's ability. Even if it meant writing his own story.

At some point, the sun had fully set, but it wasn't completely dark outside, as a slight fading glow remained to lead into the moonlight. It was the perfect time for the two of them to relax and enjoy some chicken curry.

As Kei took another bite, Souma asked, "How's it taste?" with a focused look into his face.

Kei offered his most honest smile as he responded. "It's incredibly delicious." It wasn't at all spicy, but instead had a very light and sweet roux with sour undertones. The curry was incredibly delicious. "It tastes kinda nostalgic." Kei, of course, was perfectly capable of tracing back that nostalgia.

*I've eaten this chicken curry before.* Not just once, either. Maybe 10 times? 20? Definitely more. He started counting every individual instance, then stopped himself.

It was his mother's recipe for chicken curry. Not the exact same recipe, but pretty darn close.

“The trick is to add plenty of tomato with just a little bit of yogurt.”

That had happened 23 hours ago. Just before abilities disappeared from Sakurada, and just after Souma Sumire cried in the bathroom.

Souma Sumire spoke with the loveliest of smiles.

## 1 - The same day, 7:15 PM

It all led to the present moment. To Sunday, October 22nd, recreated by a reset.

Souma Sumire walked alone through the nighttime city. She peered into a nearby convenience store through its glass doors, noting the time. 7:15 PM. She had another 15 minutes before the promised meeting time.

Just then, a woman in a suit came out of the convenience store, and Souma called out, “Excuse me. I’m looking for a particular coffee shop. Would you happen to know of a place called Small Forest?”

“Ah, yes. You just have to—” The woman gave concise directions. Turn right at the corner, then go straight. The shop would be just past the next intersection.

“Thank you very much. You have been a great help.” With a bow, Souma began walking in the direction the woman had pointed her to.

*It would appear we’ve reset*, she mumbled in her head. It was an easy conclusion to draw after looking at the woman’s future.

There had been a reset. Although that implied a number of events having already occurred, it only came as a sudden revelation to Souma, who had forgotten all of the time that was taken away. It was like a fairy tale where little pixies would come and do work in the middle of the night.

*And just like that, all my duties have been fulfilled.* She didn’t quite feel accomplished, but she did feel relieved.

Souma turned left at the next corner. She was no longer going in the direction of the café. She didn't need to meet with Urachi Masamune any more.

She walked quickly, thinking things through. *So, what do I do now?*

She quickly surveyed her surroundings, and didn't see anything suspicious. From what she could tell, she wasn't being watched, but she knew that Urachi Masamune couldn't be trusted. No doubt he had already laid out a number of minimum precautions.

*I absolutely must not be caught by Urachi Masamune.* He would find out very soon through his locked notebook that Kei had used a reset. Kei would very quickly become his enemy. That being the case, Souma knew that she was a weak link. She would come second to only Haruki Misora in her usefulness for negotiations with Kei.

*I can't become the chink in Kei's armor.* She was determined not to be caught by Urachi Masamune. She would escape his clutches, no matter what that meant.

With that thought driving her, Souma Sumire continued through the nighttime streets.



The Index gripped the steering wheel of a small, blue car. Behind her, Urachi Masamune mumbled away, talking as if it was someone else's problem. "Only becomes hard to find when you're looking for it."

He was speaking of parking spaces.

The café that Souma Sumire planned to meet them at did not have a parking lot. They had decided on a parking garage ahead of time, but it was marked off with a red sign indicating it had no extra spaces, and no matter how far around the city they drove, they couldn't find an alternative spot.

"You really need to hire an individual driver," The Index admonished, her comment mixing in with a sigh.

"That would be difficult. The Bureau can't afford the extra manpower."

“We’re only talking about one extra person.” Surely they could have afforded that much.

The Administration Bureau was meant to be a pinnacle of perfection to the eyes of the public. They would hardly be respected as such when they were wandering around the streets looking for a parking spot.

“Our specific line of work would not befit hiring an extra person to act as solely a driver. That person would be responsible for the comings and goings of the head of the Countermeasures Department. That information alone is top secret.” Urachi, looking out the window, pointed diagonally. “Ah, look. There’s a sign for parking.”

The Index turned the steering wheel, changing lanes. As she passed a traffic light that was changing colors, her phone rang from her pocket. The phone was distributed to her from the Administration Bureau, so The Index was forced to pull over to take the call. As she pulled out the phone, a hand reached out from behind her.

“I’ll answer it. We’re going to be later than we promised the girl if we don’t hurry it up.”

The Index handed over her ringing phone and went back to driving. She was relieved to see open parking spaces not too far ahead. Glancing into the rearview mirror, she peered at Urachi Masamune in the backseat as he took the call. Urachi hung up the phone after a fairly short conversation.

“Looks like we don’t need a parking space after all.”

“Is something the matter?”

“The second Witch has deviated from her course towards the café. She does not seem keen on keeping her appointment.”

That changed things. Their department had been keeping tabs on Souma Sumire for the last two weeks, so The Index knew just as well as Urachi that the girl had been living in an abandoned hotel. “What will we do now?”

“Go after her. We know where she lives. First, we’ll pick up Kagaya.” Kagaya had already been waiting at the café, unlike the two of them.

“Understood.” The Index drove into the parking lot she had been planning on using, only to use it for a U-turn.

*What could have happened?* she wondered. Had Souma Sumire not planned on ever meeting with them to begin with? That didn’t seem likely. She had already been heading towards the café, only to change directions.

Urachi Masamune spoke as if he could read her thoughts. “The second Witch evidently asked a passerby for directions before her sudden change in destination.”

“What does that mean?” It certainly proved that she couldn’t have been lost.

“She learns the future of anyone she converses with.”

“What could she possibly do with the future of a random passerby?” Given that she was asking for directions, her glimpse into the future couldn’t have been that informative.

“She could learn. There’s much she could know from a mere glance into, say, three days in the future.”

It wasn’t until he specified three days that she got it. “You mean a reset?” The use of that particular ability would greatly change the future of the next three days.

If Souma were to look into the future before a reset, she wouldn’t see a continual flow of time. Instead, she would see a harsh cut into a repeat of previous days, so it wouldn’t strictly be three days in the future. However, if the reset had already been used, then three days in the future would directly translate to three days later.

Urachi Masamune procured a black notebook from his pocket. He toyed around with it in his palm, not opening it. “She checked to see if that ability had been used, then changed her route accordingly. That seems to make the most sense to me.”

The café came into view, with Kagaya already standing at the door. The Index braked, pulling over to the side of the road. Kagaya opened the door, getting into the passenger seat.

“Heya, great work out there. Here.” Urachi handed over the black notebook.

Kagaya took the notebook with his right hand, placing it into a breast pocket. He then pulled out a similar notebook with his left hand, giving it to Urachi.

His right hand locked. His left removed the lock. Anything that Kagaya locked would become incapable of change. The very notebook he held was guaranteed to be unchanged, even assuming the use of a reset.

Urachi opened up the newly unlocked notebook. "Get in touch with our surveillance. We need to track down the future seer as soon as possible."

"Done," Kagaya responded curtly, pulling out his cell phone.

As Urachi flipped through the pages of his notebook, The Index couldn't stop herself from asking, "Was there a reset?"

"Yes. And quite an interesting one. It would seem that my plan went off without a hitch."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Somehow or another, a reset was used after the removal of abilities from Sakurada."

Was that even possible? Assuming the plan's success, the only person who should have been able to remember abilities was Asai Kei. How could Haruki Misora have remembered her lost ability?

Kagaya quietly gave directions to The Index from the Bureau officer that they had tasked with trailing Souma Sumire.

The Index stepped on the gas, causing the engine to rev up slightly.

Urachi Masamune quietly whispered in the backseat. "What did Asai-kun do? Did he use one of the old man's photos? How could I have possibly overlooked that? ...It's so strange. Well, so be it." His reflection in the rearview mirror smiled brightly. "This doesn't pose the slightest of problems. If anything, a reset was to be expected. That just means it's time to move to the next stage of the plan."

His notebook closed with a soft thump.

"It would seem that this boy and everyone connected to him are a liability to my plan. We'll have to remove them, and quickly."

Asai Kei.

Wherever that boy went, trouble always followed.



His left wrist felt off. He was definitely wearing the watch way too tight.

Asai Kei wasn't much of a watch wearer. He didn't want to live a life so hectic that he needed to know the time at a turn of his wrist. Unfortunately, he didn't have that luxury any more.

The issues he was faced with needed to be processed efficiently. Everything needed to be broken down, rearranged, organized, and overcome in a swift and orderly fashion.

The hands on his watch informed him that it was 7:27 PM. Asai Kei and Haruki Misora got off the bus at a stop right near Nanasaka Junior High.

Nakano Tomoki sat at the bus stop bench. Kei had called him over ahead of time. He was still in his school uniform, just like Kei and Haruki, so he had likely made his way there on his route home from school.

"Hey there, Kei."

"Yo."

"Afternoon to you too, Haruki."

"Good afternoon."

After a short exchange, they all began walking, with Kei in the lead.

Tomoki scratched at his forehead with an index finger. "So, uh, what's going on here?" Kei still hadn't explained things to him.

"The situation's too complex to explain simply, and we don't have the time, not to mention how tired I am. Could you help me for 30 minutes, no questions asked?" Kei really did want to explain things to him when there was time. And not just him, but everyone else who he planned to ask for help. But he couldn't spare the time for it yet.

"Eh, that's fine, I guess. You're always so busy."

“Not true. I just happen to be busy every time that I need to ask for your help, is all.”

“But you don’t wanna be running around the night after the school festival, do ya? Standard procedure is to go to sleep early to be ready for cleanup and an after-party tomorrow.”

It certainly didn’t feel like it to Kei, who had just been through a reset, but for everyone else the school festival had taken place just a few hours ago. Technically, it had only been five hours since the curtains had fallen on their class play starring Haruki.

Tomoki looked towards Kei, then Haruki, commenting, “So it’s just us three, then?”

“No. Someone else will be meeting us further ahead.”

“Who?”

“Sakagami-san. He was the student council president when we were second-years in middle school.”

“Oh...” Tomoki smiled. “That sure takes me back. What was that little girl’s name again?”

“Kurakawa Mari. Guess we’re more or less bringing the team back together.”

“But Souma’s not here.”

“Oh, but she is.” Kei took a singular photograph out of his pocket. A picture taken by Sasano Hiroyuki of tetrapods covered in an evening glow. The Souma from two years ago stood front and center.

“And what’s that?”

“A picture. A special one, taken with an ability. We can recreate the world in this photo for ten minutes when we tear it.”

Tomoki tilted his head. “That doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“Think of it like going into the photo. Like how Bastian jumped into the book of *The NeverEnding Story*.”

Tomoki’s eyes darted back and forth, growing wider. “You mean... we’ll see Souma?”

“Mhm. But only for ten minutes, and it’ll be her from two years ago.”

Tomoki took a moment, looking up at the moon in the sky. When he lowered his gaze, he asked, "Are you... sure you want me there?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way. When it comes to one-way communication, I trust your ability more than any cell phone."

Tomoki tilted his head, eventually nodding. It seemed like he got tired of thinking it through. "Say, what's *The NeverEnding Story*, anyway?"

"It's a book. You really oughtta read it, it's a masterpiece. They even made it into a movie."

"Oh, yeah. Pretty sure I saw that when I was little. Is the book better?"

"Dunno. I've only ever read the novel."

"Oh, yeah, you're not much of a movie guy."

"I like going to the movie theater. Popcorn, all that jazz. But I don't like how I can't turn the page when I'm getting interested."

Their conversation continued as the three walked forward. Kei and Tomoki walked side by side, while Haruki trailed just behind them. Haruki remained quiet. She wasn't much for talking unless it was one-on-one.

After about five minutes, they made it to the riverside road. The sun had already set, swallowing the river in an inky blackness. Tetrapods were piled upon the shore in front of them. Even closer was Sakagami Yousuke, standing below a street light.

Sakagami wore something like a lonely smile. It was the furthest expression imaginable from a genuine smile, but he clearly felt that he could do nothing else.

Kei walked towards him. "It has been quite a long time, Sakagami-san."

"Mhm. It really has."

Sakagami had moved out of Sakurada in the winter two years prior. Kei hadn't seen him since then, aside from the brief moment that he later reset away.

Sakagami bowed his head, as if studying his shadow. "Why did you call me here?"

“Souma asked you, not me. You received her letter, right?”

Kei had heard as much from Haruki before the reset. Sakagami had come to Sakurada after receiving a letter from Souma, but hadn’t known what to do, and called Haruki.

“But it... couldn’t have been her. So I guess that means you did it, then.”

Kei shook his head. “No. It really was from Souma.”

Sakagami grimaced, his head still down. “And why should I believe that?”

Wrong question. That part was already covered. “You were outside of Sakurada, and no longer remembered anything about abilities. But you still somehow believed that Souma sent you that letter, didn’t you? Enough to come all the way here, at least.”

People were mostly selfish, at the end of the day. They would believe whatever they wanted to, evidence or no.

Sakagami was clearly at a loss for words, so Kei continued. “I want to help her. Let’s just go meet Souma already.”

Sakagami raised his head. “Meet her?”

“Yep. Only for 10 minutes, though.” Kei climbed onto the tetrapods, asking Sakagami to follow. He headed towards the place that Souma Sumire was standing in the picture. “Thanks to an ability, we can go inside of this photograph for 10 minutes. Exactly and only 10 minutes. Souma’s future will be decided in that time period.”

“You’re not really making much sense.”

“I’ll explain it all when I have more time. For now, I have to keep things brief. Only the basics.” Kei looked directly into Sakagami’s eyes. “We’re going to go into this photo, and see Souma Sumire. Then, you’re going to copy her ability onto me.”

“Souma-san’s... ability?”

“Yes. Souma has an ability. One that even I didn’t know about until recently.” Kei stopped on a tetrapod, pointing to a spot beside him. “When we go in, Souma will be right there. It will be evening time in the summer. You’ll have to hold in your surprise, and just immediately copy her ability onto me.

You can talk with her as much as you like for the next ten minutes.”

Sakagami nodded.

Beside him, Tomoki spoke up. “And what am I doing?”

“You’ll use your ability as needed. Nothing on our person will change after entering the photo, so your watch will still work as usual.”

Tomoki’s ability worked by sending a message to a specified date and time. Kei would need the exact time if he wanted to send a message at a moment’s notice.

Kei finally turned to Haruki, who was standing beside him, staring. “You just need to talk to me. Doesn’t matter what about.”

“Simply... talk?”

“I’ll need it to see the future.”

Souma Sumire’s ability was activated by having conversation, which allowed her to see the future of the person that she was talking to. She could not, however, know her own future. The best she could do was indirectly see her future by watching those close to her.

Considering those conditions, Kei decided it would be best to talk with Haruki. He resolved to tell her anything and everything important from that moment forward. That would guarantee that by looking into her future, he could also know his.

“Everyone grab a corner of this photograph.”

Kei, Haruki, Tomoki, and Sakagami all took a part of the photo.

There was no time for hesitation. Kei checked his watch.  
7:37:11 PM.

*I will now create a girl that is destined to disappear in ten minutes.* Purely to take advantage of her ability, he would make a girl that could not possibly be saved. One that looked so very alike to Souma Sumire.

Only Kei could truly understand how reprehensible his own actions were.

With a smile, Asai Kei spoke.

“Okay, here we go.”

His vision was flooded with a bright white that settled into red. A deep red. The red of the sunset. A new warmth seeped into his body.

Asai Kei stood in the August of two years prior.

A voice spoke from directly beside him.

"I've been waiting for you, Kei."

Souma Sumire's voice. The girl from within the photo.

There stood the Souma Sumire that was destined to disappear in ten minutes.



Souma Sumire walked with quick steps.

*Is Urachi Masamune coming after me?* She didn't know. But she did know that he wouldn't leave a future seer as a free agent.

Worry clutched at her. She had never known how accustomed she had become to knowing the future. Just five minutes in a world that she could not predict was already causing her pace to falter.

*But I can't use my ability any more.* Any future that her ability foresaw could be freely changed by the one that knew it. *If I use my future sight, then the future will change.*

The fact that she had seen any future at all would jeopardize the possibility of that future's existence. Such was the contradiction that her power represented.

*I can't afford to use my ability any more.* She knew that Kei was very likely in a photograph and seeing the future that very moment. If she did anything with her ability, it could change the future that he was seeing, and she wanted to avoid that at all costs.

She passed through the shopping district, coming out on the main street. She was trying to stick to an area with lots of people. Her goal for the moment was trying to track down the informant known as The Operator. He seemed like the only viable person who could provide an escape from the Bureau.

At the very least, she could learn more about what the Administration Bureau was doing if he was willing to help.

*Then again, it's not like meeting him can really change much of my situation.* Still, she wasn't exactly flooded with options.

A bus stop came into view, and Souma considered taking a bus. But before she could decide, she saw a car approaching from the other side of the road. A small, blue car.

Urachi Masamune's car.

The car stopped just before the bus stop. Souma immediately spun on her heel, turning around and walking the other way. She passed by a salaryman who threw her a suspicious look.

*Okay, what now?* They had to know exactly where she was. They wouldn't have stopped in that very specific spot otherwise. That meant it was best to assume that someone had been watching her, someone she hadn't noticed.

Souma was quite sure that if Urachi and his crew were to chase her in earnest, she wouldn't be able to escape. She assumed the only reason they hadn't resorted to more forceful methods yet was purely to avoid public ire. Having a bunch of adults gang up on a middle schooler wasn't a very good look. Souma would even scream if it really came to that.

Unfortunately, the apartment where The Operator lived was in a residential district that tended to have fewer people around at any given moment. If she lost the crowds of people, then they would definitely strike.

*Guess that means I'm going somewhere else.* It wasn't like meeting with The Operator was absolutely essential.

Souma Sumire threw a quick glance at her surroundings, settling on a seven-story building. She noted the emergency exit on its exterior wall. A rather convenient turn of events.

Souma headed towards the building.



Asai Kei bit his lip.

Souma Sumire stood in the glow of the evening sunset, looking exactly as he remembered. Smiling exactly as he remembered.

She offhandedly took a look around. Her gaze passed by Tomoki, Sakagami, Haruki, and finally, Kei. "It's been so long, everyone."

The Souma Sumire before him would disappear in just 10 short minutes. He wished he could dedicate that time to her and her alone.

But they didn't have that luxury. And she wasn't the girl that Asai Kei was trying so hard to save.

"How much do you know, Souma?"

"Just about everything, I'd say. I'm sure it's all gone according to my script." Souma's eyes turned to Sakagami, who looked like he was ready to burst into tears. "Now, give my ability to Kei."

Sakagami shook his head in bewilderment. "Souma-san... You—"

"Talk later. There's not much time."

Sakagami wore a very complicated expression. His mouth was curved in a happy smile, yet his eyes conveyed sadness. Regardless, he nodded, placing his right hand on Souma's shoulder, and his left hand on Kei's shoulder. In doing so, he could copy one person's ability onto another person.

An awkward chuckle escaped his throat. "Ready when you are."

As soon as Souma used her ability, Kei would gain its power as well.

Souma nodded, looking at Kei. "Your move, Kei."

"Look into Haruki's future. The next 48 hours, for a start."

"Alright."

Sakagami began speaking with Souma. Tomoki stared at Souma with a serious expression, one that Kei didn't see often.

Ignoring both of them, Kei turned to Haruki. "Alright, let's start talking."

Haruki nodded. "Understood."

It happened the very moment she began speaking.

The world turned in on itself. It began swirling, changing.

But nothing he saw looked any different. The sounds entering his ears hadn't changed. And yet, everything was not what it had been. The world seemed entirely at odds with what he had known only a few seconds prior.

*I guess that means... I'm the one who's changed.* At some indiscernible moment, he had begun to know things that he should not have known.

All in one moment, Asai Kei became aware of everything Haruki Misora would know, think, and feel within the next 48 hours.

That was the change. He had become the Haruki Misora of the next 48 hours. Who she was became an inseparable part of who he was. The very world around him had changed to reflect that. The red of the sun and the black of the shadows couldn't feel the same any more.

It could certainly be said that he was seeing the future. But that alone came nowhere close to describing exactly what was happening to him. Maybe there were no words that could do so. It was so unlike anything he could ever express.

"My ability is an overpowering influence of the person it's used on. I got it just after I was born, after all. Before I knew myself. This ability can't protect who I am." Souma was supposed to be talking to Sakagami, but she continued. "And then... there was you. From the moment I met you, I became unable to escape from you. Your future... I'd never seen anything like it from anyone else. It was so kind, so sad, and so beautiful."

Kei shook his head. He didn't have the time to be thinking about those things. All he needed to do was process as much information as efficiently as possible. Any emotions or sentimentality needed to be put aside for later. "Haruki, let's keep going."

"Yes."

"So, what do you want to talk about?"

"Whatever you wish to talk about."

The ability was so surreal and incredible. Conversation with someone made that person's future a part of himself.

Even Kei was having a hard time distinguishing who was who, and his memories were more distinct than anyone's in the world. Souma had been right, it truly did not protect who he was. "Well, something banal would be nice then. Something that won't cause any issues, at least."

"For example?"

"For example... well, why is it that when you hold hands, both hands get warmer?"

"Is that some kind of mystery?"

"Well, everyone's hands are at different temperatures, even in different places. But if a warmer hand touched a relatively colder hand, you would assume that one would get colder, right?"

"There might be some individuals with naturally cold hands."

"Well, sure. But either way, when you keep holding hands, both get significantly warmer."

"I see."

The following 48 hours of Haruki's memories mixed and melted into Kei's very being. Kei continued to pick up information as they spoke. It was like trying to pull out an old, muddy recollection. "I just wonder why on Earth that happens."

"Would you prefer an explanation of the physical phenomenon?"

"No. If you ask me, some things are better left to a child-like explanation."

"If that is what you desire, then..."

Haruki's voice was slightly deep for a girl, perhaps even husky, yet comforting. Kei gently closed his eyes.

"I am sure that hands are always warm. It is something of an absolute truth. It only makes sense that something must always be warm if it is warm when you touch it."

His first action with his newfound power was an investigation. An investigation into Souma Sumire.

Asai Kei began sifting through the memories of the person Haruki Misora would be in two days.



The stairway was unlit, and she was worried that she might fall. At the same time, she had no desire to touch the rusted banister. Souma Sumire climbed up step by unsure step.

Her footsteps up the rickety iron stairs echoed in no particular direction. Even worse, hers weren't the only steps echoing. There were at least two more sets coming up after her. She was being chased. Was it Urachi Masamine? Maybe some other Bureau suit?

After climbing up seven flights of stairs, she made it to the rooftop doorway. But the exit was firmly shut behind iron bars, held in place by a solid, old-fashioned padlock.

*So much for my final stand.* She wished she could have pulled off something more showy, but she truly had nothing left.

She raised her head to the night sky above, and the moon floating within it. Surely that was enough of a show to be satisfied by.

Her heaving breaths began to steady as she turned around. Below her, she could begin to make out the sources of the approaching footsteps: two Administration Bureau officials, Urachi Masamune and The Index. Urachi was smiling, while The Index retained a blank expression.

Things could've been worse. Having those two chase after her was actually in her favor.

*My number one priority right now is to not let Urachi Masamune get to me.* She needed to make sure that she wouldn't inconvenience Asai Kei by giving Urachi and his crew that advantage. As long as she could accomplish that, it didn't matter what it took.

She'd already done everything she could for Kei, anyway.  
*What's one more sacrifice at this point?*

Her method of escape from Urachi had become clear.

*A clean disappearance kinda works out better, anyway.* She hadn't been planning on dying again, but so be it.

Deciding to die was just as easy as it had been two years before. Maybe that was just one of the things future sight had gotten her accustomed to. At the end of the day, the desire to live was a desire to see the future. Life gave everyone the natural ability to replace the present with the future.

But Souma's ability let her know that future far before anyone else. She had already experienced a lifetime of futures in less than 20 years. Living didn't really hold all that much value for her.

Besides, she faced a very real problem in the form of Urachi Masamune. His ability could rewind the time of any desired target. Souma could slash her wrist, and he'd bring it back to a normal, unharmed state.

*But even Urachi Masamune's ability has its limits.* Even he couldn't just bring a dead person back to life.

Asai Kei had turned Sakurada upside down two years prior looking for an ability to revive the dead, and never did find one. Souma's resurrection ultimately resulted from an unintended combination of several different abilities, which was more of a loophole than an intended consequence.

*People really shouldn't be allowed to come back to life under normal circumstances.* Which wasn't to say that nobody wished for it. But the ability never emerged. Surely someone or something, whether it be a god or anything else, was forbidding the resurrection of humans. She didn't really have any proof, but she truly did believe that.

*Even abilities deny the validity of my existence.*

Now was her chance to die, and to die grandly, before Urachi Masamune had the chance to use his ability.

She had seven stories to work with. It might depend on the angle, but she had a pretty good chance of things going to plan.

*The real trap would be if someone else is below the stairs.* She couldn't risk the possibility of someone saving her life.

Souma Sumire took a glance over the banister. As far as she could tell, nobody was in sight. The emergency exit had naturally come from inside the building, so they most likely had posted some people at the entryway. Didn't seem likely

that they'd prepare an extra person just to blankly stare up at her from the asphalt.

As the footsteps sounding from the stairs grew closer, Souma turned back, facing forwards.

With slow, purposed steps, Urachi Masamune drew closer. "Good afternoon. You're the second Witch, right?"

It was too late to bother talking with him.

Souma placed her hand on the banister. The rough, rusty feel of the metal felt disturbing on her palms.

All that was left to do was jump.

But just then.

A voice echoed that she shouldn't have possibly been hearing.



The red sun shone down like a film of blood upon the world. Asai Kei stood atop the tetrapods, understanding the future.

He saw a future in which a particular girl completely disappeared from the world. The only thing to understand was that it had to be avoided at all costs.

"Tomoki," he shouted, his voice louder than he intended. "Your ability, to Souma Sumire, now."

"Souma?"

"Do it."

The next thing Kei did was focus a glare on the Souma Sumire beside him. The girl recreated by Sasano's ability, destined to disappear within ten minutes of her creation.

There were so many things he wanted to say. But all he had time for were efficient orders. "Cancel the future sight, then change it to the next 24 hours."

The only way to change the future was to know the future. Kei had seen a future, then acted. That change in action should have changed the future. Ideally, the future would be different upon reuse of the ability.

"Did something happen?" Haruki asked. Without talking to her, he wouldn't be able to keep seeing the future.

“Something incredibly stupid. I can’t believe that...”

“I have not heard you shout like that in quite a long time.”

“I haven’t raised my voice like that without meaning to in a while, either.” Kei quickly looked through the future as he answered. He picked up everything he needed, organizing the events into each place where they belonged.

Tomiki’s voice registered. “I’m ready, Kei.”

Asai Kei took a deep breath, preparing to talk to Souma Sumire.



A voice echoed that she shouldn’t have possibly been hearing.

*Wait, Souma. Just stall for five minutes.*

It was Asai Kei’s voice, echoing inside Souma Sumire’s head.

*What makes him so confident that Tomoki’s ability works on me, too?*

That was the first question to pop into her mind. It was quite trivial, given the circumstances. But his next words quickly swept away such trivialities.

*I’ll use the next ten minutes purely on your future. Forget about Urachi Masamune.*

It was quite a bold statement. Following through with it would guarantee that all of Souma Sumire’s previous efforts had been in vain. Urachi Masamune’s plan would succeed. Without using future sight to change anything, everything that she had seen would become reality.

*You get what I’m saying, don’t you, Souma? His voice was colder than ice. You are going to see me again. You are going to use your ability for me again. That is the only solution.*

It was an incredibly selfish proclamation.

Souma Sumire bit her lip. *Haven’t I already tried hard enough? Haven’t I already done everything I possibly could? What more do you want from me?*

She was already so tired. So incredibly exhausted. She just wanted it to be over. She'd already accomplished every goal she set for herself. Wasn't that enough to end it?

*You can't just make me that sad then go off and disappear on your own terms,* Kei's voice reprimanded. *I won't allow it. If you want me to rescue you, then just buy me five minutes.*

It was a selfish line that sounded like it came straight from a drama film. But he had always been like that. Once he decided what he wanted, he'd egotistically chase after it with reckless abandon.

Souma whispered, making sure nobody could hear. "What the heck are you supposed to do in five minutes?"

She knew her voice wouldn't reach Kei. Tomoki's ability was a one-way service.

But what came next somehow sounded like it was directly in response to her voice. *I'll make a way to get you out of there in five minutes. You'll hear from me then.*

If Asai Kei said he could do something, then it would most assuredly be done.

"Did you say something?" Urachi Masamune was suddenly standing right before her.

Souma turned her gaze towards him. "I was telling you to stay away from me."

"How cruel. Especially after you were the one who broke your promise."

"You really should take the hint when a girl snubs you."

"Ah, but perseverance is such a wonderful virtue. Hard work can get you far in life." The icy chill in Urachi Masamune's voice made it sound unlikely that he actually believed in anything he had just said.

Souma Sumire offered a smile. A smile befitting of the second Witch. As if she knew anything and everything about the future. "I must apologize for not showing up to the café. It's important to keep one's promises."

"Well, it's not too late to keep yours. Your promise was simply to help me."

"You're right. That said, I have the information you're looking for."

"Then let's hear it. I eagerly await." Urachi Masamune gave a pointed look to The Index beside him. It was an obvious reminder that lying was pointless. The Index's ability would inform them of any mistruths.

"Asai Kei has reset."

"I know that much."

"Oh, so you know how he was able to do it and what you missed, then?"

Urachi slowly shook his head. "I'll admit that's been bugging me. Evidently I overlooked something."

"Indeed. You made one single mistake before the reset."

"And what was that?"

"You didn't doubt what you should have doubted, and you didn't ask me what you should have asked."

"Which was?"

"Your first question should have been to ask me who I am."

Urachi Masamune tapped his temple with an index finger. "And who exactly are you?"

She smiled. "I... am not Souma Sumire." Or at least, she wasn't the exact same girl who had died two years prior. "I don't even know who I am. I'm a nameless system. A system set in motion by Souma Sumire two years ago."

She was the second Witch. The second nameless system.

*That's who I am.*

A creation designed to seem entirely human, while never having been human.

Under a beautiful moon, atop a filthy staircase, Urachi Masamune burst out laughing. He seemed to get great enjoyment from his new discovery. His body and mouth twisted and bent as he howled with laughter. "What a surprise! I must say, I'm impressed. I never could have planned for that. I see, I see. How very unpleasant. You really came up with a loathsome plan." Urachi's voice steadily grew louder. "That is absolutely insane. Can one person really hate themselves that much?"

Urachi's ever-present smile remained on his face, but his eyes glared daggers into Souma. "You died and came back just to remove your identity, then? So technically, the version of

you that came from the photo wouldn't think of yourself as Souma Sumire. That meant your actions were not Souma's actions, and ergo, I made my error."

Urachi Masamune had asked two critical questions prior to the reset. First, he asked, "Will my plan succeed?" followed by "Will you be a hindrance to my plan?"

He shouldn't have asked that second question.

Souma Sumire— the nameless second Witch smiled. She didn't know what else to do. She couldn't think of anything else to put on her face. "You shouldn't have asked about 'me' when you wanted to know about Souma Sumire. I'm not Souma Sumire, after all. I wasn't going to do anything, even if Souma Sumire wanted to go against you."

Urachi Masamune smiled back, his ever-present smile clashing with his glare. "Then I suppose it's time to start asking the right questions. Souma Sumire put all of this together, didn't she? A single girl who died two years ago orchestrated all of this to happen."

There was no point in lying any more. "That's correct. All of this was planned by the real Souma Sumire, who is not me. Even I am just another pawn on her board."

It was a simple concept, at its core. All she wanted to do was help Asai Kei.

But Souma Sumire could never escape Urachi Masamune. If he ever got ahold of her, then The Index would make lying a non-option.

So she created a scapegoat.

*That being me. They'd never know as long as they thought of me as Souma Sumire.* She was a girl who looked just like Souma Sumire, while never having that identity. Souma Sumire died for that empty human vessel two years ago.

"How absolutely astonishing," Urachi whispered. "Nobody could be expected to see through such a ruse."

Souma Sumire shook her head. "Not quite nobody. Kei did." He had put it all together with just a few clues.

Kei was always the type of person to get to the right answer eventually. He might hesitate, and he might get lost in

thought, but he would always move forwards without stopping until he arrived at his goal.

"I see. Asai Kei. That boy's got a screw loose, too."

*Wrong.* "He's quite rational. In fact, he might be the only rational person out there, and he's always right."

Urachi Masamune shook his head. "Someone who's always right and makes no mistakes couldn't possibly be rational. A female friend of his committed suicide purely to toss away her identity. No rational person would put that together of their own accord."

"Maybe so." It didn't matter either way. Asai Kei could be rational, or he could be insane. That only depended on the perspective of who was looking at him. One might find him more rational, another more insane. But that didn't change the truth. He was just a boy. A compassionately strong boy.

Urachi Masamune snapped his gaze towards Souma. His eyes held no more care than if he were glancing at a roadside pebble. "There's one more thing I need to ask you."

"Is it something I would know?"

"Before the reset, the world was without abilities. What did Asai Kei do?"

It was a period of time Urachi could never learn about. The 23 hours after all information about abilities was removed from Sakurada, leading to Kei's reset. Urachi simply had no way of recovering any memories of that time. Not even his trusty notebook would help him, since only Kei remembered abilities, leaving nobody to lock or unlock the notebooks.

"Kei did many things. He met me in high school, and even revisited his hometown."

"I couldn't care less about any of that. Did Asai-kun—" Urachi pulled a notebook from his pocket. "Asai-kun read this, didn't he? He stormed up to a me that had forgotten about abilities and forcibly stole it from me so he could learn about my plans, didn't he?"

That certainly would have been the most efficient route to success.

In fact, almost immediately after abilities had been forgotten, Asai Kei searched out Urachi Masamune. He ran around in the sudden downpour, looking for Urachi Masamune as his sneakers soaked through.

“Kei-” Just as Souma began to respond, a familiar voice echoed in her head.

*Five minutes. Good work, Souma.*

It was a kind voice that did not match the situation.

*It'll be alright. Just fall straight backwards.*

A sense of peace washed over Souma Sumire as she leaned her back into the railing.

She directed her voice towards Urachi Masamune. “That night, Kei did something beyond your wildest dreams.”

She shifted her center of gravity, kicking her feet back.

She watched The Index's eyes widen. Even Urachi lost his smile.

*Well, yeah.* Souma smiled unconsciously. Not at the face they made, but rather at her own stupidity.

What she was doing was the farthest thing from rational. Really, that should have been obvious, but she didn't really register that until she saw the looks on their faces.

*A person who can't be scared by something like this really is no more than an empty vessel.*

She could only think of two people who could so unhesitatingly fall backwards into an over 30-foot drop.

*Haruki Misora... and me.*

Too much trust was its own form of insanity. She couldn't deny that.

Her field of vision spun, facing her towards the sky. She was faced with a breathtakingly beautiful night sky.

Her headfirst fall continued for seven stories. All the scenery around her rushed towards the sky. Windows, walls, and the very stairs that she had climbed up moved as if to reach the moon. The only thing in the world moving away from the moon was Souma Sumire.

She figured that would be as good a way as any to die. But she also knew that she wouldn't be dying.

She fell, fell, and fell towards the ground. Then, without the slightest feeling of impact— she stopped.

A disgruntled face blocked out her view of the moon. Souma could make out a girl wearing glasses.

*Oh, what the heck. It isn't Kei.* Of course, that only made sense. Kei was inside of the photograph.

For just a moment, she closed her eyes.

Then Souma Sumire pushed herself out of Murase Youka's arms, stepping onto the asphalt.



Murase Youka was by far his best bet.

Asai Kei had asked her to search for Souma Sumire as his very first action, before even calling Nakano Tomoki and Sakagami Yousuke together.

His thoughts behind that were rather simple: *Souma Sumire acts far too efficiently for her own good.* She was quick to make decisions, and sometimes even quicker to give up. It was almost expected for Souma to get too caught up in things and completely disregard herself.

She had already been completely willing to die for her cause two years ago. It wasn't a stretch at all to imagine that the girl who came from the photo and didn't even consider herself human would die without hesitation.

*It's really good that Murase's the one with Souma.* Not many people could pull off catching someone from a seven-story fall. Murase was the perfect girl for the job. Her ability could allow her to call out, "Full body, impact," and she could completely erase all of the shock from Souma's fall.

Kei glanced at his watch in the light of the blood-red sunset. 7:45:15 PM. He had about three more minutes in the world of the photograph. "Souma, re-apply future sight. Focus on 24 hours from now."

The Souma Sumire of the photo, destined to disappear in three minutes, shook her head. "C'mon, Kei. This isn't the time to be focusing on my—"

Kei cut her off. "There's no time to waste, either. Do it."

She nodded. Her expression was sad, and upon closer inspection, a bit lonely.

“What is your favorite color, Kei?” Haruki asked.

“Probably blue. A deep, deep blue. Alternatively, a blue so light it’s almost transparent. I like both of them equally.”

Kei picked up on future information as their conversation continued. He had to find the best solution. If he wasn’t quick enough, then Souma would be caught by Urachi.

*I have to see Souma Sumire again.* He needed to get to a place where Urachi couldn’t find her. *I have to find it.* He only had three more minutes to use future sight, and he had to find it by then.

He turned towards the Souma Sumire from the photo who was destined to disappear. “Re-apply future sight. Focus on noon tomorrow.”

Kei changed what he would do based on what he had learned of the future, which meant the future changed, so he needed to retry future sight each time to see its effects. It was like refreshing a webpage to see the newest results.

“Do you dislike the color red?”

“Not at all, but I think it stands out a bit too much. I prefer more subtle colors.”

“In that case, what do you think of the color green?”

“That’s a great one. Definitely a favorite.”

*Got it. There.* He finally found the perfect route to get Souma Sumire away from Urachi.

“Tomoki, message to Souma.”

“Yeah. Ready when you are.”

Taking a deep breath, Kei spoke. “Good work out there, Souma. Now, I want you to keep heading up the street north, then turn east at your third intersection. There will be a taxi waiting at the light right ahead of you there. Get in with Murase, and instruct the driver to take you to Nanakasa Junior High.”

Unfortunately, not even such roundabout methods would be enough. As long as Souma was anywhere in Sakurada, Urachi Masamune would eventually be able to find her. That being the case, there was only one place for Souma to go.

“As soon as you get in the taxi, have Murase keep time. After exactly four minutes and thirty seconds, get off. That will put you in front of a bus stop, and you’ll get on the bus immediately, headed to the train station. Once you’re there, get on the train by yourself, and you’ll be home free.”

That route would be enough to ensure that Souma could safely leave Sakurada without being caught by Urachi.

*Her being outside of Sakurada is much safer than her being anywhere inside.* The power of the Administration Bureau would be significantly weakened in a world where nobody else could remember abilities. Urachi’s capabilities would be heavily reduced.

“Just use your future sight as needed. Don’t worry about me. You’ll forget about your ability when you leave Sakurada, but take the steps to ensure that you manipulate your future so you end up back here at precisely noon tomorrow. I’ll see you then.”

Kei glanced at his watch. He had less than two minutes. He turned towards the Souma Sumire of the photograph, who was standing beside him. “Re-apply your ability. Focus on noon tomorrow. From now on, every time I hold up my index finger, re-apply your ability again.”

*I’ll use the next ten minutes purely on your future. Forget about Urachi Masamune.* That was what he had told Souma. But he had been lying.

Souma had intended to die because she considered her role fulfilled. In that case, all she needed was an encore. He was really only buying her some time, but it would give her motivation to keep going. That was reason enough to lie.

He had less than two minutes remaining, but he planned to use it on gathering information on Urachi Masamune. “What’s your favorite color, Haruki?”

“I prefer deep red, myself.”

“Really? Didn’t expect that.”

“You did not?”

“No. I figured you’d say something like, ‘I do not particularly have one.’”

"I have come to like many things in the past two years. Cats and cream puffs also come to mind."

"Well, that's good to hear. Learning things you like is part of becoming happy, if you ask me."

"I would agree with that sentiment."

Kei spoke in a relaxed tone, but was processing information at a rapid pace. His index finger came up in frequent succession, with each new flex bringing a new future. Sometimes the future was only slightly changed, and other times it was dramatically different. Sometimes, the future could change trajectory significantly from a tiny alteration to the order that he would choose to meet with people, but other times, no matter how boldly he acted, the future turned out almost exactly the same.

Future sight offered a strange perspective. It felt like time was compressing around him, all fit into a convenient shape that he could grasp within his own hand. In fact, it felt artificial.

Looking at the future spread before him didn't offer the feeling of omnipotence he had been expecting. Quite to the contrary, it made him feel almost powerless. The future just never went where he wanted it to.

*But I still have to try.* He needed to find something, the smallest sliver of hope for an ideal future.

He desperately continued his search.

With ten seconds remaining, Kei looked at Souma Sumire. Of course, she was the Souma Sumire in the photograph. A girl created without her consent, only to be used for her ability, and only to disappear in ten minutes, without any hope of salvation.

Looking at that girl, Kei said, "Thank you, Souma. I will never forget you."

The Souma Sumire of the photo responded with a childish, conflicted smile. "It's okay. There's no need to waste your sorrow on a mere ten minutes."

She made it sound so uncomplicated.

Immediately, bright white light flooded Kei's vision. He couldn't help but to close his eyes.

Ten minutes had passed. That singular fragment of the past disappeared, along with the Souma Sumire inside it.

He almost thought that he heard a voice.

“Goodbye, Kei.”

When Asai Kei opened his eyes again, he was still standing atop tetrapods, but a deep night sky surrounded him. The sunset only remained in his memory. The torn photo had dropped to the ground at his feet, and was blown away by the wind.

Nakano Tomoki and Sakagami Yousuke looked his way, both clearly wanting to say something. From their perspectives, they wouldn't have known anything about what Kei had been doing. In fact, he might not have seemed to be doing anything at all.

But Haruki Misora was the first to speak. “Will Souma Sumire be saved?”

“Absolutely,” Kei answered.

But he didn't know what it actually meant to save someone. Especially someone like Souma Sumire.

She had always seemed so perfect, so complete, even omnipotent. She was the girl who confessed her feelings of love to him. The girl that was told by him that she could only come in second place to another.

The girl who died purely for Asai Kei's sake.

*What right do I have to try and save her?* What did that even mean? It gave him a bad taste in his mouth. Who was he, just some high schooler, to be going off and saving people? Who was he to get carried away? Did he think himself to be some kind of god?

*Yeah... this is the real me.* When it came down to it, he was just a negative, selfish brat who'd rather run away than face difficulties.

But that wasn't all he was.

*I have one thing that I can hold on to.*

Two years ago, he had seen and admired a girl who represented pure goodness. She could recognize rightness in its true form, and he had found her beautiful for that. He had

wanted to be like her. He had believed in the existence of a pure goodness that existed outside of other factors.

So Asai Kei decided to lie. He reached past himself, grasping for a strength that was not his own. "Souma will be happy. She'll wake up feeling satisfied, and go to sleep feeling fulfilled. She'll walk through every day with a smile. I'll do everything I can to give her that life."

At the end of the day, it was better to be saved than to not be saved. Happiness was always better than misfortune. It was worth wiping tears away. A natural smile was more valuable than any other.

*Those are real and genuine ideals I can believe in.*

And if those were to be his goal, then he had to shrug off his lazy and cowardly nature. He had to press forward without giving up, constantly reaching for the future, even if it meant lying along the way.

All he could do was pray that the lie became truer of him than his feelings did.

## 2 - October 23rd (Monday), 9:00 AM

On the morning of Monday, October 23rd, Oka Eri turned down a street corner that she didn't often frequent. She was tired, and the bright blue sky irritated her eyes, forcing them into a squint. She jacked up the volume on her MP3 player, quickening her pace.

The song in her ears seemed to be a standard rock n' roll number. Not that she really understood much about rock. She did understand classical, although she'd stopped playing piano forever ago. The song currently playing had caught her attention because the title had Beethoven's name in it, despite being a rock song. It was one of those cheap songs sold on a music distribution site, so it was hardly much of an investment.

It was kind of weird to think about how even a famous musician's representative piece was sold for the same price

as a bottle of Coke, but Oka Eri figured that just meant up front value didn't matter much in the end. Plenty of classical musicians' music was no longer in copyright, and the audio could even be downloaded for free, but that didn't make their compositions worthless. It was just proof that the sale price of something didn't always match its value.

The rock n' roll number playing in her ears gave off an old-fashioned vibe and, although she couldn't understand the English lyrics in the slightest, it was a pleasant and uplifting song. The melody was really catchy, and made her almost want to join in. Then, just as she was starting to feel her mood lift, a red light stopped her in her tracks, and she grimaced.

Rows of cars passed by, and eventually the light flicked back to green. But just before crossing the street, Oka Eri noticed a young man standing on the opposite end of the crosswalk.

Her first reflex was to spin around and head the other way. Just keep on moving somewhere else. But that would make her look bad, so she had no choice but to continue onwards.

Asai Kei stood on the other side of the street, wearing a faint smile. When they got close enough to each other, he raised a hand. "Morning, Oka Eri. It's a wonderful day out."

"Heya, Senpai. It's a terrible day out."

"Really? But it's so bright and sunny."

"Yeah, I prefer rainy days."

"Too bad. Whatcha listening to?"

"Ambient rainfall." Oka Eri stopped her music and plucked out her earphones, rolling the cord up before jamming it into her pocket.

"It's gonna get all tangled up like that."

Oka Eri shrugged in response. "It is what it is. Cords get tangled, and shoelaces come untied."

"Hmm. Guess that's true."

Oka Eri glanced over at Asai Kei, who was nodding deeply. "Do you need something from me, Senpai?"

"That I do. Middle school's the other way, though. What are you doing over here?"

"Whatever I want. Just gonna go hang somewhere. Villains don't attend class."

"You think so? I'm pretty sure villains wouldn't help civil servants, either."

For just a moment, she was shocked. *Alrighty, guess he knows more about what I'm doing here than he let on.* She calmed down, then pushed out a laugh. "Kekeke. It's bad manners to ask questions you already know the answer to."

"Well, I wasn't entirely certain. But you are going to see Urachi-san, aren't you?"

"Who can say? I'm just gonna go hang out all day. Anybody I happen to see in that time is certainly none of your business."

Asai Kei shook his head. Then, the smile left his face, and he glared at her with eyes as cold and sharp as ice water. "Urachi-san and I are having something of a standoff right now. We both have an entirely different future in mind. But I want you, Oka Eri, to be on my side."

"Ha!" Oka Eri laughed. She pulled her chest back, looking down at him. "You never did get it, Senpai. Like I didn't already know you and Urachi-san were fighting. That's why I'm on his side. Because you will always be my enemy, and I can't wait to see you lose."

Kei's eyes retained their chill. "Do you know Urachi-san's true objective?"

She shook her head. "Don't need to. Doesn't matter to me what the Bureau wants to do."

"Urachi-san wants to erase abilities from Sakurada," Asai Kei shot back. He hastily continued, "He wants to turn Sakurada into a normal town where everyone forgets about the existence of abilities. I want to stop him, and protect Sakurada's abilities."

That threw her for a loop. Forgetting abilities? What did that even mean?

Suddenly, Kei lowered his head. With beautiful form, he bowed at her deeply from the waist. "So I'm begging you, Oka Eri. Please lend me your assistance."

Oka Eri just stared at the back of his head. What on Earth was happening? “You think I’ll just help you ‘cause you bowed your head or something?”

It was irritating. *You think you can tug on my heartstrings, just like that?* Surely he, her senpai, would be smart enough to understand how ineffective such a method would be, right?

“Of course I do.” Asai Kei lifted his head, smiling. It was that smile where he would bend the corners of his mouth up. It wasn’t at all kind, but sharp and provocative. “I know you’ll help me.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Because it aligns with your goal.”

His expression seemed shockingly similar to the Asai Kei that she had first met. His mouth held a calm smile, and his gaze looked down upon the world. He exuded confidence in his own strength, like he could do anything he wanted without ever having to explain himself.

He was like that Asai Kei again. The one who was evil and strong. The one who could take on the world.

“Oka Eri. You told me that you wanted to beat me back in August, right? You wanted to expose my weakness. That’s still true, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is, Senpai. And that’s why—” She was about to retort that that was why she would never help him.

But Asai Kei stopped her short.

Shaking his head, he said, “That’s why you’re going to help me. That’s the thing, Oka Eri. I’ve already reset.”

“What for?”

“You and Urachi-san backed me into a corner. There was nothing I could do but admit defeat. So I used a reset, and ran away. And now, here I am.” His smile grew wider, the corners of his mouth stretching in supposed amusement. “You already beat me. And what you choose right here, right now, can end the battle for good. You know your options, right? This is my message to you, Oka Eri: I give up, so please help me.”

Oka Eri couldn't stop a smile from spreading on her face. *What a cocky way to give up.* He didn't look like someone who had lost in the slightest.

"So please, Oka Eri. Help me. Then you'll finally win."

Oka Eri forced out another vulgar laugh. "Kekeke. Oh, Senpai. Now you're really starting to look like the senpai I knew two years ago."

He was like the Asai Kei she had first met, the one who looked stronger than anybody else.

He tilted his head disinterestedly. "Is that right? I'm not sure I get what you mean."

As if he didn't get what she meant.

"This is all an act, isn't it? You think by playing my senpai from two years ago, I'll just go along with your little plan?"

"That's not true at all." His gaze bored into her. "This is a heartfelt surrender. The most direct admission of defeat I could possibly give you. I still believe that what I did two years ago was wrong, Oka Eri. I still think I made a mistake."

Two years ago, Asai Kei had saved Oka Eri, known then as Fujikawa Eri. He gave her a weapon that could defeat her father, the greatest enemy facing the girl known as Fujikawa Eri and her mother.

With that weapon, her parents divorced, and Fujikawa Eri became Oka Eri.

"I—" *I always believed that was the right thing to do.*

She had desired nothing more than to have his same strength.

Asai Kei interrupted Oka Eri once more. "But right now, I'm accepting defeat. So I'll accept your claim about the me from two years ago being strong, and I'll do everything I can to act that same way."

His tone was rational, but laced with violent passion. The smile on his face was complex and chaotic, but his eyes shone with a pure desire.

He looked every bit like the Asai Kei from two years prior. Not like a fake, and not to a half-assed degree. He looked like he had that strength she so desired.

Oka Eri swallowed, glaring at him.

*Oh, whatever.*

“Well?”

If he betrayed her expectations, she could just double-cross him.

“What do you want me to do, Senpai?”

Oka Eri decided to keep her eye on him for a while longer.



Oka Eri had been his last stop. Kei took a bus with her to the nearby shopping district.

“Where’re we going?”

“Right over there,” Kei answered, pointing.

“The karaoke place?”

“Yup. The location wasn’t particularly important.” All they needed was to house a large number of students. No other place was as easy for them to access, and they could even rent private rooms for meetings.

“Is it really fine for students to be here on a weekday?”

“Ashiharabashi High had its school festival yesterday, so today is our substitute day off.”

Actually, the substitute day off was tomorrow, with cleanup ongoing at the present moment, but that wouldn’t make any difference to the karaoke staff.

“Great for you, but I’ve actually got school on today.”

“If you just lay low, nobody’ll really see the difference between a third-year middle schooler and a first-year high schooler.”

Kei crossed the road, heading into the karaoke establishment. He immediately got onto the lobby elevator.

“What about reception?”

“Everything’s already set up.”

“There are other people here?”

“Yup. I decided to pull out all the stops instead of keeping up appearances.”

The elevator dropped them off at the third floor. There was only one voice they could make out singing, coming from

the end of the hall. It being 9 AM on a school day, the lack of customers was no real surprise.

The song playing at the end of the hall was a fast-paced, bright song with a poppy rhythm. Kei didn't recognize the song, but headed in its direction regardless.

"I feel like I recognize that voice, somehow." Oka Eri commented.

"Well, it's one of my fairly few friends." They entered the light-gray door with the number "305" etched in gold.

Sofas were lined up in a U-shape along the walls. Kei took a look around at all the people gathered there.

Sakagami Yousuke sat closest to the door. He watched the monitor displaying the song lyrics with an uncomfortable smile.

Beside him was Ukawa Sasane. She had a glass laid before her filled with Pocky sticks, one of which was already in her mouth.

Slightly spaced away from the rest was Murase Youka. She had her legs crossed and was reading a paperback placed atop them. She looked rather bored.

Beside her was Haruki Misora, holding a glass in both hands and sipping from its straw. The glass held a watery, amber-colored drink—likely iced tea.

Last of all was Nakano Tomoki. He stood up, mic in hand, singing bilingual musical lyrics with gusto. He was clearly the only one in the room taking advantage of the karaoke equipment, which made sense, as he was probably the only one confident enough to sing in front of a group.

Add on Kei and Oka Eri to that group of five, and they had themselves a rather large crew.

As soon as Kei entered the room, all eyes were on him, and he led with a, "Sorry to keep you all waiting." Haruki shifted on the sofa to make room for him, and he sat in the open spot. Oka Eri plopped herself between Sakagami and Ukawa.

Once Tomoki reached a break in the lyrics, he shut down the machine with its remote controller.

"So then," Kei announced, "Let's begin."

Ukawa Sasane tilted her head. "Begin what, exactly?"

Grinning, Kei answered, "The council to determine Sakurada's future."

That wording was actually something of a lie.

More accurately, it was a council to guide Sakurada's future in the direction Kei wanted it to go.



9:30 AM had already come and gone. Urachi Masamune looked out of the window at a passing train. "Yup. I knew it. Something's off."

Things were not going according to plan.

According to his notebook, today, October 23rd at 9:30 AM, was supposed to be the day of the first ability outburst incident. A certain girl was supposed to accidentally use her ability to control the gazes of the people around her, resulting in a traffic accident at an intersection. "Supposed to" being the key phrase.

But his view of the intersection offered no such traffic accident. The girl had never unintentionally used her ability, and it looked like any other 9:30 AM weekday.

"Was this a failure?" The Index asked from the driver's seat.

"It certainly was. That boy must have done something."

Urachi had previously been contacted by Kagaya, who reported that Oka Eri had not made it to their designated meeting place. Another look at the notebook showed no such outcome previously.

Urachi tapped his temple with his index finger, leaning back into his seat. "I wonder what it is Asai-kun wants from all this."

The Index glanced back in the rearview mirror. "He wants to protect Sakurada's abilities, does he not?"

"Well, that's true. But..." Urachi Masamune closed his eyes, trying to concentrate his thoughts. His speech continued lackadaisically, as if he were sleep-talking. "But how? Asai-kun is a high schooler, and I'm the head of the Counter-

measures Department. He can't breach that gap with intelligence or wit."

If Urachi were to pull out all the stops, he could easily eliminate a problem like Asai Kei. It would be a rather simple task to drive him and all his little lackeys straight out of Sakurada. That was what his department was for. He had all authority to deal with ability users.

"Unless he's a complete idiot, he should fully understand how impossible it is to stand in my way."

"I do not think he is an idiot."

"Then that can only mean one thing." His eyes still closed, Urachi smiled. "If he's not stupid, then he must be stupendous. He must have found some way to beat me, and thinks himself superior."

And so, Urachi Masamune began to think. *How does he plan to beat me, exactly?* The very idea was, in a word, impossible. For starters, the boy didn't even have a win condition. *Let's just grant him the fact that he overcame this part of my plan. The ability outburst I accounted for didn't occur. But so what?*

Nothing had changed. All Urachi Masamune had to do was come up with another plan and execute it. Asai Kei was effectively playing a baseball game where Urachi's side would never retire the offensive position. He could make play after play, but the score would only ever remain 0-0. He could never win, and any point scored would devastatingly tip the scales.

How could anyone win a game when they were only ever playing defense?

"Does Asai Kei strictly have to win?" The Index asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Our goal is to remove Sakurada's abilities, whereas his is to preserve them. If he is fighting purely for preservation, there is no strict need for him to win."

That was a fair point. In theory, Asai Kei could accomplish his goal by keeping the status quo. A continual draw could be seen as a type of win in his circumstances.

But Urachi Masamune shook his head. "That's not very realistic. It's almost impossible to force a draw without any

timeouts.” Forcing a draw in this game meant maintaining the current pace for years, and possibly decades, to come. Even a single failure couldn’t be allowed, and the game of endurance would only get more difficult. He couldn’t afford to continue purely as a matter of principle. “If he’s supposed to be rational, then he’d never choose that. He’d go with a winning strategy. But what...”

What was a winning strategy for a side with only defensive plays?

Two possibilities came to mind.

First would be ejection of the opponent due to a rule infraction. The rules of this game were set by the Administration Bureau. It was true that if the Bureau were to turn on Urachi, the situation would quickly flip on its head.

But that outcome was, practically speaking, impossible. Urachi Masamune’s plan was only breaking the rules by forcing the ability outbursts, but his very own Countermeasures Department was in charge of the case. Urachi Masamune had full authority and control over the problem that Urachi Masamune was causing.

Granted, his power wasn’t without its own forms of limitations. There was a department with the authority to check and balance the power of the Countermeasures Department. But Urachi considered it unlikely that Asai Kei would be more versed in the legal and departmental minutia than he. Besides, he had already spent a significant amount of time amending certain rules of the Administration Bureau as to better benefit his plan. He doubted he was facing any significant threats from that sector.

That only left the second option.

A victory condition that was present in any battle, one guaranteed to work if triggered.

That was, of course, to make the opposition wave the white flag. It didn’t matter how, as long as they admitted defeat in the end.

*That said, I don’t think I can be convinced to the contrary.*

But if neither of those conditions could be fulfilled, did Asai Kei have some other plan? Or had he simply set a nearly impossible goal?

It didn't really matter.

"Let's test it, then." Urachi Masamune's eyes flicked open.

"Test what?"

"Asai-kun's methods. You wouldn't happen to have his phone number, would you?"

If Asai Kei planned to use persuasion tactics on Urachi Masamune, he'd never turn down the opportunity for a dialogue.

In fact, the boy would probably be incredibly gracious, no matter the danger he faced.



Asai Kei exhaled deeply, having finally finished his long explanation. He had been talking for some 20 minutes, only pausing when a waiter came in to deliver drinks. He took a sip from the oolong tea on the table before him to soothe his parched throat.

He had explained everything that happened prior to the reset as well as all of his plans moving forward, without hiding a single detail. He even included the realization of Souma Sumire's rebirth and ability.

Looking around at everyone's faces, he asked, "Does anyone have any questions?"

The six faces before him were neatly split into three categories.

The first group consisted of Haruki Misora, Nakano Tomoki, and Sakagami Yousuke. He had already explained the situation to them the previous night, so they were entirely unsurprised. They simply sat watching and listening.

Murase Youka and Oka Eri belonged to the second group. Their faces were etched with serious expressions, and they were carefully observing their surroundings, clearly trying to get more information about how they should react based on the others around them.

That left Ukawa Sasane as the only person looking entirely dissatisfied. She watched Kei with her glare fully present in her gaze, but didn't say a single word.

Kei focused on her first. "Do you have something to say, Ukawa-san?"

She returned his gaze without flinching. "I do. Many things, actually. Too many to be interested in sharing."

"But I brought you here so that we could talk. I won't know unless you tell me."

"You remember our promise, I presume?"

Looking Ukawa straight in the eyes, Kei nodded. "Of course. I'm the only one who could never forget."

He had indeed made a promise with Ukawa Sasane. It was two long years ago, imposed as a restriction regarding the possible rebirth of Souma Sumire.

*You're not gonna go off and bring this girl back to life on your own time. I get to watch over every single step.*

Kei had been forced to accept that promise in order to get Ukawa to cooperate with him at that time. He had broken that promise by taking Souma Sumire out of the photograph without her knowledge or permission.

"I'm dying to hear an explanation."

"Of course. I'll tell you whatever you want to know." Kei rested his elbows on the table before him, interlacing his hands. "I had never intended to keep that promise with you. I believed that there were other factors more important than my own honesty at play."

Ukawa Sasane had made a certain remark two years ago.

*Do you think it's right to bring a dead person back to life?*

Ukawa Sasane wanted to make an ethical judgement over the act of bringing Souma Sumire back to life. That was why she had required full oversight of the process as a condition of her cooperation.

Kei had followed up her question with one of his own. He asked what Ukawa would do if she determined Souma's rebirth to be a mistake. What would she do if she only realized it was wrong after the fact?

She was more than willing to answer.

*If that happened, I'd have to rectify my mistake. Either I kill her, or I die trying. Those'd be the only real options.*

Kei wasn't of the opinion that either of those answers were right.

"I didn't think that either Souma Sumire's death or your suicide were the right answer. As long as either of those outcomes were even remotely possible, I wanted to do everything in my power to prevent them from happening." Lying or breaking a promise were trivial matters compared to either of those outcomes, as far as Kei saw it.

Ukawa Sasane stayed quiet. Kei knew she was strongly guided by her convictions, and figured she was simply giving herself a gut check.

Trying to arrange his sentences carefully, Kei continued, "A person's life is always more important than a promise. Always."

Neither of them looked away, and their steady gaze into each others' eyes continued for a while.

*I get it, Ukawa. You don't have to tell me how selfish I'm being.* He had already betrayed her, and now here he was, both admitting to that betrayal without apologizing and shamelessly asking for her help again. Normally, that kind of behavior wouldn't be acceptable.

*But this is Ukawa Sasane.* She was always and forever the champion of justice. He just hoped his guess that this was the best way to reach her was right.

"All I want is to talk with Urachi-san. A real, honest talk, one where we can part ways with a handshake. I swear I'm not looking for a fight. I just want us to exchange our opinions and ideas. I want you to help protect that place of discussion."

Surely an ally of justice wouldn't abandon two people at odds trying to join hands together.

"I know that you're always the ally of justice, even when it makes you seem cold-hearted. I wouldn't have it any other way. So now that everything's laid out on the table, if you side with Urachi-san, then I can't stop you. If you can't believe me,

and if you think I'm mistaken in what I've shared with you, then that's just how it is."

The precise wording that he had used was more or less another lie. He was already rather certain of the direction that she was leaning.

"But I don't think you'll get the luxury of sitting on the sidelines for this. You're gonna be involved, one way or another."

In the same way that she couldn't help but intervene with the problem of Souma Sumire's revival two years prior, she would not ignore the new problem placed directly before her.

"But you've been watching, Ukawa-san. I'm pretty sure that I can hold up to your standard of justice. Am I right, or am I wrong? You can watch longer, if you have to."

Even as the words left his mouth, Kei fought back a sigh of reprehension. *I don't represent justice in the slightest.* He certainly couldn't be called its champion.

But he had no time to get hung up on the details. Justice was a word that carried great weight, restriction, and shame. Its use was almost entirely a bad thing. But Kei thought it necessary that someone had the responsibility of upholding it.

Ultimately, Ukawa Sasane didn't respond. She simply unfolded her arms, sinking back further into the sofa. Perhaps that was the best she could manage.

But part of Kei was glad that she didn't trust him completely. *I don't even trust myself completely.* Ideals, goals, and morals were all too easy to bend and betray at a moment's notice. If he was honest, that reality was probably what scared him most. He didn't dare say it out loud, but he didn't want to forget that fear, either.

Kei took another look at the room around him. "Anyone else have any-?"

Before he could finish his question, the ringing of a cell phone interrupted. Each cold, mechanical jingle seemed to prick at his heart. He didn't like the sound.

*Here it is.*

Taking his cell phone out of his pocket, Kei saw an unfamiliar number displayed on the monitor. He pressed the an-

swer button, put the phone to his ear, and was met with a familiar, masculine voice.

“Heya.”

“It’s been a while, Urachi-san.”

“Been a while? Has it really? Unless I’m mistaken, we just saw each other a day or two ago.” Urachi’s voice was tinged with amusement, as though he were laughing at something for no reason.

Kei gave his answer in a more subdued tone. “The truth is, I reset after that. From my perspective, we haven’t seen each other since last month.” Not since their meeting in the dream, at least.

“And why did you reset, exactly?”

“Why else would I reset? Something happened that I didn’t like.”

“Oh. What could that be?”

“Well, there was this traffic accident, and Sakurada losing all its abilities, among other issues.”

A short chuckle reverberated from the phone. “So you used your reset to prevent a traffic accident, then?”

“I did.”

“And how did you do that, exactly?”

That was easy enough to answer. “Well, the cause of the accident was a girl accidentally using her ability. Are you aware of what that ability was, Urachi-san?”

“I most certainly am not.”

“It’s written in your notebook though, right?”

Kei could hear Urachi’s sigh. The man sounded exasperated. “Look here, Asai-kun. I’m already holding my cell phone. How do you expect me to pull out my notebook and flip through it one-handed?”

That didn’t really seem like the insurmountable task as he was making it out to be.

Regardless, Kei continued. “The girl’s ability made it impossible for anyone to look directly at her. Everyone in her vicinity was forced to look completely away from her. As a result, a certain driver caused an accident that he could never have seen coming.”

“Oh. That ability speaks to a rather shy person,” Urachi said offhandedly.

*That's putting it lightly.* “Well, I believe the girl was rather embarrassed. She had fallen over just before using her ability, since she tripped on a broken sidewalk tile. No doubt she used her ability since she felt embarrassed about tripping in front of so many people.”

“How intriguing,” came Urachi’s amused response. “So if the girl never fell, then the accident never happened.”

“Indeed.” It was all rather straightforward.

The sidewalk had been lined with several flower-laden planters along its edge. Kei had simply taken a bit of time that morning to move a flower planter right atop the broken tile. Such a clear indicator would help the girl avoid the trip hazard, stopping her from falling, and stopping her ability outburst. No more traffic accident.

“You do understand what you’ve done here, right, Asai-kun?”

“I prevented an unfortunate accident from occurring.”

“Oh, how wonderful. If I wasn’t holding my phone right now, I’d give you a round of applause until my palms hurt. But you’re forgetting something important.” Urachi’s lines were delivered like he was on a stage before an audience. He sounded more like an actor delivering lines than a conversation partner. “Perhaps your actions were entirely good-intentioned. Maybe you only did it out of a pure and noble heart. But a problem occurred before your reset, one worthy of determining the removal of all abilities from Sakurada. It would be your duty to report such a problem. But you...”

Urachi paused. The voice that came out next was low and threatening. “You defied the decision of the Administration Bureau. You used a reset to reverse an official action. That is a violation of the rules, and you will answer for your crime.”

Kei crossed his legs, taking a deep breath before answering. “I think that’s my line, Urachi-san. You orchestrated a fake problem to force the Bureau into an uninformed decision. That is a violation of the rules, and you will answer for your crime.”

“Speculation. You don’t have any evidence to prove that.”

“What if I told you I had an objective basis?”

“Oh, I’d love to hear that. Please inform me of this basis.”

Of course, Kei had no such evidence. Urachi had been incredibly thorough in leaving no traces of his actions.

*But that doesn’t mean I can’t make stuff up.*

“There’s a girl by the name of Souma Sumire. She died two years ago, but came back to life this summer.”

“What of it?”

“She has the ability of future sight.”

A moment of silence was followed by sharp laughter. “I see. So that’s how you’ll play it.”

The Witch’s future sight was considered the most outstanding ability in all of Sakurada. Not even Urachi Masamune could get away with suppressing the existence of another ability user with such power. He would be obligated to inform some kind of department about her.

But, of course, Urachi could never do that. The Administration Bureau learning about Souma Sumire, the second Witch, would cause no end of trouble for him. The Bureau would have the chance to recover its status, making his plan of destabilization all that more difficult. His plan to remove abilities would need significant restructures.

Asai Kei dared to voice the opposition. “Your concealment of Souma Sumire’s existence from the Administration Bureau is a violation of the rules. It is a crime with objective basis, and you will answer for it.”

*Not that this really matters.* Both Kei and Urachi knew how pointless their interaction was. They were just going through the motions, making jabs from safe locations while ensuring that their true motives remained hidden. *I doubt anything I’ve said has even approached threatening him.*

At the end of the day, an ordinary high schooler was up against the head of the Countermeasures Department. Winning via an information war with the Administration Bureau was nothing more than a pipe dream.

Besides, if a few simple explanations were all it would have taken to reach a peace agreement, then Souma Sumire

wouldn't have needed to go through all the trouble she had. It certainly wouldn't have required her death.

That said...

"Why don't we meet for a face-to-face conversation, Urachi-san? Let's quit wasting each other's time."

Urachi was bound to agree. The weaker prey was asking for a meeting with its powerful predator. It was entirely in his favor to accept.

His low voice rumbled. "A meeting is acceptable. But what will we be discussing?"

That went without saying.

*I'm gonna get Urachi Masamune on my side.* That was the singular objective.

"I think we've misunderstood each other somewhere along the way. I want to clear the air between us."

Urachi Masamune's reactive chuckle was quiet, almost muffled, yet more genuine than his other responses. "I see. Fine, we'll do that. I like your pluck."

"Oh, it's nothing like that. I just want things to move along efficiently."

"Efficiently. Good choice of words. I would rather like that, myself. Let's see, now... Very well, let's get together in an hour."

"Why the rush?"

"Is that a problem?"

Urachi's intentions couldn't have been clearer. He didn't want them to have any time to prepare. Specifically, he wanted to put an end to everything before Kei could make another save. After all, they were in their 24-hour period since their reset, which left them at their most vulnerable.

Kei lowered his eyes to check his watch. 9:53 AM. The reset put him at 7 PM the previous day, so he wouldn't be able to save for at least another nine hours. "I'd rather meet up some time tonight or tomorrow. Would that be an issue?"

"Oh, that won't do. I'm a busy man. If you can't meet me right now, I'm just not sure my schedule will open up again."

Kei remained silent as his watch ticked three times. But there had only ever been one answer. "I understand. We'll

meet in an hour, at 11. I'll be in contact with The Index regarding the location."

"Sounds good to me. I can't wait." The phone call was cut off.

Kei threw his cell onto the sofa, taking another look at the six people surrounding him. "I'll be meeting with Ura-chi-san at 11. I doubt it's gonna result in a friendly chat, and we can't save yet." His eyes landed on a particular girl. "I'm in real trouble, Haruki. Would you help me?"

Haruki nodded, offering him a smile. "Of course I will."

Kei smiled back. "Thank you." Then he turned to the others. "I want you all to think about where you stand. I'm gonna leave for the next 30 minutes. If you think abilities should remain in Sakurada, and don't mind taking some risks to protect them, then stay here. Otherwise, you should leave as soon as possible."

Kei stood up from the sofa, looking around the room one final time with a smile. "But if you're on board, I'll see you in 30 minutes."

With those as his final words, he turned his back on the group.



If Asai Kei hadn't brought it up himself, then he was certainly going to suggest it.

*Why don't we meet for a face-to-face conversation?*

It was an incredibly convenient offer.

"How did it go?" The Index asked from the driver's seat.

Still messing with the cell phone, Urachi smiled. "Very well. Looks like he'll be taking the diplomatic route after all."

The Index, reflected in the rearview mirror, furrowed her brow. "I'm not sure I understand. Does he really think he is capable of convincing you?"

"I think he was just forced to admit that he had no other options, more than anything else. He's betting on his one tiny sliver of hope, like some sort of epic protagonist."

But it wasn't wise to try and be the protagonist of real life. Hoping on a miracle was foolhardy at best, and if you dared to involve the others around you, sinful at worst.

"What do you plan to do?"

"Well, what else is there to do? I'm going to arrest him."

He had the fortune to meet with the boy in a situation where he didn't have a backup save. It was the optimal time to neutralize the opposition. That had always been the plan. Luckily, he was dealing with Asai Kei, the kind of guy who would meet with him even in dangerous circumstances.

Urachi looked up from the cell phone he was toying with, focusing on the back of The Index's head. "Something I need to ask you, by the way."

"Of course. What is it?"

"How do you get to the contacts list?"

The Index always handled the phone, so Urachi was rather illiterate in its usage. He had spent time looking over every menu he could find, but even after hitting the gear button, he couldn't find the contacts list.

The Index answered, but not before letting out an exasperated sigh. "There is a dedicated key for that. Press the one that looks like an open notebook."

"Oh, I get it." His problem was focusing too much on the monitor when he should have checked the keys more. "I thought something was off. The user design is certainly faulty when I could find the calculator before the contacts list." He pressed the key as instructed, and finally found himself looking at a list of contacts.

"You really should take the time to learn how to use a cell phone."

"You know what Einstein said when he was asked for his home phone number?"

"No."

"He said, 'Why should I bother memorizing something that I can look up?'"

Urachi noticed that The Index was staring at him in the rearview mirror. "You could just look up that anecdote, too."

Urachi shrugged his shoulders, making sure it would be visible to her. "Well, that's why I'm not Einstein." Even he was privy to memorizing useless information.

The Index sighed. "You can start a call by pressing the biggest button in the middle."

"Ah, I see. Thanks."

With a smile, Urachi Masamune pressed a key on the cell phone.



Kei pushed open the door, stepping into the hallway. Haruki Misora followed directly behind him. Their footsteps echoed on the dark gray floor.

"Kei..." Haruki spoke from beside him, looking up to his face. "Would it not be better to spend more time persuading them?"

Kei assumed she was talking about the other five in the room. "No need." Kei smiled, trying not to seem too self-deprecating. "I know just a little bit about the future." He had gotten just a small glimpse using Souma Sumire's copied ability in the photograph.

*But I only know that little bit.* There was so much more that he didn't know. He didn't know if he could actually subvert Urachi Masamune's plan, or what would ultimately become of Souma Sumire. He had desperately used almost all his resources to ensure that Souma could escape from Urachi first and foremost.

But despite that, there was one thing he was certain of.

*The choice I presented them with was entirely fake.* He had already known what they would do. It was terrible of him, really.

Kei put a hand on the white door at the end of the hallway. It was an emergency exit door leading to a staircase. There was a view outside to the sunny sky, but only through a set of iron bars that made the room feel like a cage. It was almost like there wasn't really anything outside, just a sourceless, light blue strip.

Kei sat down on the emergency exit staircase, glancing up at Haruki. "I'm just running away. I got tired of pretending that I didn't know what I knew, and ran away from them."

Knowledge was exhausting. It didn't matter how sincere he was, and it didn't matter what he was saying, if he knew what the other person would say in response, he felt like a liar. The exhaustion made him appreciate once more just how strong Souma Sumire was. She had been persevering through future sight for such a long time.

Haruki sat down beside Kei. She then looked over, peering into his face with a smile. "I am glad."

Her words came unexpectedly, but Kei found himself unsurprised. Haruki had been making a habit of saying all sorts of unexpected things lately. "What're you glad about?"

"You always force yourself to bear through hardships. I am glad that you allowed yourself the opportunity to run away."

Kei put his hands on the ground, arching out his chest. Glancing into the window offered a view of a tiny wisp of a cloud far, far away. It looked like no more than a fingernail scratch against the sky. "You know... deep down inside, I've always held a bit of pride in my ability."

The ability to remember everything. The ability to never forget.

It wouldn't make him stronger, and it didn't help him run faster. In fact, to most outsiders, it would be rather boring, ultimately summing up to never having to take notes.

"I won't forget. I won't forget why I'm doing what I'm doing, and the goals I've set for myself. I won't forget any of the actions or words from every single person I meet."

Put it all together, and he had himself a pretty nice ability.

Of course, he would be the first to admit that Haruki's Reset or Tomoki's voice projection were much more beautiful. He had always thought that Souma's future sight and Murase's erasures were significantly more powerful.

But Asai Kei's perfect recall really wasn't too bad. The ability to never forget was pure, innocent, and wonderful in its own way.

"I always figured that if I could keep my objectives in mind, I could get through anything. That as long as I remembered my goal, I could go anywhere I needed to go."

He could feel the presence of the girl beside him. But it was more than just a feeling. It was the reality of her existence, transmitted through her intermittent breaths and her trembling heartbeats.

"But then... for the first time... I found something that I wanted to forget." With a repentance directed more towards his mother than God, he continued. "I couldn't stop the thought that I wanted to forget about Souma Sumire, even for just a moment."

Haruki didn't embrace Kei, nor did she take his hand. He was staring off into the sky, so he couldn't make out her expression, either.

As such, the only thing that reached Kei was her voice. It was slightly deep for a girl, perhaps even husky. But it was comforting, like the touch of linen.

"You would not forget." Her voice wrapped around him like a hug. As if she had taken his hand. "Even if you did not have your ability, you would not forget Souma Sumire. Even if your ability allowed you to forget upon command, you still would not use it to forget Souma Sumire. Ability or no, you are Asai Kei, and I do not think you would choose to forget."

She was probably right.

It wasn't even a strength of his, really. It was more a weakness, that inability of Asai Kei to forget Souma Sumire.

"But it's easier to just forget sometimes," Kei countered. "Not to mention it's more efficient and intelligent."

Forgetting was like its own type of ability. It served many uses in life. It was a compassionate mercy granted to humans by God.

"Is it necessary to be efficient? Is being intelligent more important than anything else?"

Kei felt a shift in the atmosphere. He realized that Haruki was smiling. He could picture it so clearly in his head.

"You would not forget that which you know to be most important. You would always move forward, holding onto all your memories with great care."

But what was the most important? He knew it had to be something. Something more important than efficiency or intelligence, located right in the center of his chest, just above his gut.

As for what it was, the simplest answer was... the heart. The intangible heart made of so many wills and emotions all tangled up together.

When it came down to it, humans were inseparable from their hearts. Every action was based on the heart at its core. In fact, the word itself was so broad as to be useless. It could mean so many things.

Kei knew that there had to be a more accurate expression. He wanted to find a more precise word to speak to what he was trying to say.

But he couldn't find one. He knew almost every word in the dictionary, but no matter how much he searched, he couldn't find what he was looking for.

But after a long enough time, he had a different realization. *Maybe I don't need to put it into words.* There was something in the middle of his chest that he couldn't put into words. But even so, both Asai Kei and Haruki Misora believed in it. And that was okay. That was enough.

"Kei." When Haruki called his name, Kei turned his attention from the blue sky to her. A faint smile was spread across her face, and her eyes glittered like jewels as she looked directly at him. "Let us do all we can to accumulate favorable memories. We should make every memory favorable, even down to the most trivial detail, so that your ability to never forget can itself become favorable."

*Ah... that's it.*

Abilities had nothing to do with it.

All anybody really wanted to do was increase good memories and decrease bad ones. That objective was a purpose for living in itself.

*My ability just takes something normal and makes it into something more.* That was all it did. It really was a nice ability. Something worth being a little proud of.

"Alright then, Haruki. Could you promise me something?"

"Promise?"

"Yeah. A promise is the epitome of a favorable memory."

A promise could make him excited, give him something to look forward to, and just make him happy thinking about it. He could really give his all if he had something like that.

Haruki Misora smiled. "What kind of promise?"

"You're fine with anything?"

"Yes. Whatever you would prefer."

"Then, when this is all over, let's make dinner together."

The e-mails from Haruki Misora prior to Sakurada losing abilities had been stuck in his mind ever since he saw them.

*We do not need to find a restaurant. We can make chicken curry in your room.*

*I apologize. Would you prefer to eat out instead?*

The idea that those two messages could have been his final communication with Haruki saddened him to no end. It was a painful and frightening thought.

"We should cook together in my room, side-by-side. I'm not really much of a cook, but I can at least help with the more basic tasks. I can learn the more difficult stuff later on down the line, too."

Even as the words left his mouth, his heart began to warm.

*Did you know, Haruki? This, and this alone, is what everything was for. This is the message that Souma Sumire gave her life to communicate. Well, putting it that way was metaphorical. In a way, everything I say now, from the greatest of blessings to the smallest of formalities, is like direct communication from her.*

But whether he said it in one word or a hundred words, it meant the same thing.

He was now enjoying the fruits of what Souma had given her life for. Something that he valued far more than anything else. She had been the one to deliver Asai Kei's words to Ha-

ruki Misora. Her power was what allowed them to speak once more.

“Chicken curry would be a great start. Could you promise to make some with me?”

For a while, Haruki Misora stared blankly at him. Then she melted into a smile that was sweet as sugar. “I will. Most certainly.”

Nodding, Kei asked, “Should we use Danshaku potatoes, or May Queen?”

Either one was fine, as long as they used whatever came most naturally to her.

He couldn’t wait to try the style of chicken curry that Haruki Misora grew up with.

## 3 - The same day, 10:45 AM

His eyes were closed. Feeling nothing but the rumbling of the moving car, Urachi Masamune brought a certain memory to mind.

It had been two years ago. His second time meeting Asai Kei.

The boy had the Reset ability user standing beside him. Also in his entourage was a boy with a copying ability and a girl who could remake the world as she pleased. Urachi Masamune was in front of The Index, facing off against the boy with other Bureau members beside him.

He still remembered the smile on the second-year middle schooler Asai Kei's face. It was like the boy looked down on the entire world. But there was an unmistakable element of despair in that smile as well. No doubt he was looking down on himself, too.

"I want to bring a girl back to life," the boy said. "I'm looking for an ability that will do that."

The whole situation was a farce. Urachi Masamune had barely been able to hold back his laughter.

Never in the history of Sakurada had there been an ability to bring back the dead, not in such a direct way. The closest ability known was the Reset ability he was already standing beside.

*You were so desperately reaching for something that didn't exist, Asai-kun.*

But then again, the second Witch was alive and well. Perhaps he really had achieved his goal, in one way or another. But that accomplishment was only an extension of the second Witch's power. She had set everything up perfectly in place ahead of time for it. Asai Kei had nothing to do with it.

Two years ago, that boy had waged a war that had no success state.

*And here we are again. What will he do this time?*

Had he matured in those two years, or was he still just a dreamer chasing after an illusion?

*But either way, Asai-kun, I don't see any chance of you winning.*  
 Not as long as persuasion was his ultimate strategy. That simply would not work.

The car stopped, and The Index's voice rang out.

"We have arrived."

Urachi Masamune opened his eyes. The brightness stunned him for a moment. "Alright then, let's get going."

Finally, it would all be over.



The lobby of the karaoke establishment was playing music that he had never heard before. Admittedly, it was possible he had heard the song before, but couldn't remember it. But that was all the same to Urachi Masamune. He couldn't even make out the lyrics well enough to tell if it was a Japanese song or not.

Kagaya stood in front of the reception desk. His well-built figure and black suit looked entirely out of place for karaoke, which Urachi found quite amusing. The poor young employee behind the bar looked terribly confused.

As much as Urachi wanted to keep watching the situation unfold, he knew it would be rude to stare too much. He opted to turn towards The Index beside him. "A little out of character for Asai-kun to pick a place like this."

The Index tilted her head. "Really? It's a pretty typical place for high schoolers to visit, and he can easily rent a private room here."

"No, that's what I mean."

"Hm?"

"The Asai-kun I know would never risk a private room."

Kagaya was with him, as he always was. Wouldn't Asai Kei have considered the possibility of Kagaya locking the door right after entering the room? On top of that, being out in public tended to work in the favor of the weaker party. The whole situation was now skewed towards Urachi.

"Well, I'm sure he's cooked up some sort of scheme," Urachi concluded.

Kagaya returned from the reception desk. "This way," he said, heading deeper into the building. Urachi and The Index followed behind him.

As they waited on an elevator, Urachi pulled his notebook out of his pocket. He opened it to a page that listed all the people with special abilities within Kei's purview.

"It would be quite troublesome if Murase Youka or Ukawa Sasane were cooperating with him," The Index mentioned.

Urachi Masamune never remembered names well, but even so, that pair of names struck up a memory of two powerful ability users. He nodded. "I'm sure he's got at least one of them on his side now."

If anyone else with special abilities was around, they could easily deal with Kagaya's lock. A locked door wouldn't really matter if someone else made a hole in the wall.

The elevator doors finally slid open, revealing a cramped space. Kagaya got in first, positioning himself by the button panel. Urachi and The Index followed in behind him, and the doors slid shut as the elevator motor began whirring.

Still focused on his notebook, Urachi muttered, "You've gathered quite the talented friend group of ability users, Asaikun. It's enough to make a man jealous."

"The number of relationships he has established is reaching an unacceptable level. Not only did he make contact with the Nameless System, he connected with the second Witch before even the Administration Bureau did. On top of all that, the younger generation of ability users is flocking to him, specifically those with a great deal of power."

"It sounds pretty scary when you put it that way. But..." Urachi smiled. "It would be so much easier for him if he had an ability worth relying on."

He was already in checkmate.

The elevator doors opened, and Urachi stepped into the hallway, Kagaya and The Index behind him.

"What do you mean by that?" The Index quietly asked.

Instead of a response, Urachi pointed ahead, asking Kagaya, "Is that the room?"

A boy stood before a door marked, “304”.

“Yes.” Kagaya nodded.

The boy in front of the door was not Asai Kei. It was a slightly taller boy with a crew cut. The boy opened the door, bowing deeply. “Welcome. Please, let yourselves in.”

Urachi stopped in place. “Who are you?”

The boy looked up and smiled. His expression was youthful and pure. “I’m just the doorman.”

Beside Urachi, the Index whispered, “He is Nakano Tomoki.”

*Ah, one of the names in my notebook.* The boy with the ability to send out voices.

“Kei is waiting inside. Please, go ahead.” The boy gestured inside the room with an open palm.

The room inside looked like no more and no less than a karaoke booth. But of course it was. In fact, Urachi had been to that very establishment a few times. He certainly wasn’t against a good round of karaoke.

Asai Kei was seated on a sofa to the right. And that was it. As far as Urachi could see, there wasn’t anyone else in the room.

As the trio entered, the door closed behind them. Evidently the doorman post was ongoing.

Asai Kei smiled, standing up before offering a bow. “Urachi-san, Index-san, Kagaya-san, it’s been quite some time since our last encounter. Thank you so very much for taking time out of your busy day to be here.”

Urachi pointed to the door. “Is that boy in the hallway on guard duty?”

Asai Kei shook his head. “No. His job was only to open and close the door.”

Urachi expected The Index to chime in and call out a lie, but she didn’t. *Was that actually the truth?*

Asai Kei sat back down on the sofa, still flashing his smile. “Shall we sing something?”

Urachi sat down opposite the boy, shaking his head. “As much as I would like to, Administration Bureau employees are not allowed to sing on the job.”

“Really?”

“I dunno. Probably.” It had been intended as a joke, but it wouldn’t surprise Urachi in the slightest to discover that actually was a rule. Bureau members were expected to act particularly serious while on duty. “Now, Asai-kun, let’s move this conversation along efficiently.”

“Ah, but this establishment requires the purchase of at least one drink. The waiter will be along presently to take our orders, so we’ll hold the conversation until then.”

“That’s not a concern. I made sure the staff would not interfere with our room.” That had been the source of Kagaya’s long negotiations.

“I see. In that case, I’ll get right to the point.” Asai Kei smiled by bringing up just the corners of his mouth. “I believe that abilities should remain in Sakurada. I think it would be a tremendous waste to do away with such beautiful, miraculous powers.”

Urachi Masamune smiled back. It was a faint smile that somehow stretched across his entire face. “I believe that abilities in their entirety ought to be removed from the world. It seems obvious to me that any power that would disguise a tragedy as hope is demonic.”

“It would appear that we’re at an impasse.”

“Very much so. If neither of us has room for compromise, then I suppose we are both free to act in our own interests.”

“I wonder about that. Would you agree, Urachi-san, that wanting to erase an ability is the same as wanting to control it entirely?”

“Yes, I would.” An enforced prohibition could be seen as the ultimate form of control. As far as Urachi was concerned, that was the ideal strategy for the Administration Bureau.

Asai Kei offered a deep nod. “Well, then we do agree on one thing. Although I believe this town should have abilities, I also believe that they should be under absolute control.”

Urachi tilted his head. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that we are very alike. At first glance, we seem like complete opposites, but from a different perspective, we have more similarities than not.” Asai Kei narrowed his eyes,

continuing to smile with just the corners of his mouth. "I plan to control all abilities, as well. I will show you what it means to control tens of thousands of abilities without forgetting a single one."

Asai Kei looked forward with quiet, emotionless eyes. His observation was like that of a teacher trying to grade a student's presentation.

Urachi Masamune sighed, shifting his gaze to a random corner of the ceiling. "That's not a job fit for a high schooler."

"I am well aware of that. Controlling abilities would require that one be a part of the Administration Bureau, and even then would require years of service beforehand."

"Not even close. That's not a job even fit for a Bureau member." Not even becoming an employee of the Bureau would be enough to control abilities.

Asai Kei flicked a light smile. "I understand that, as well. It's not a Bureau employee that controls abilities, it's the system of the Bureau itself."

Urachi couldn't help but smile. "That's right. The Bureau wouldn't recognize a dictator."

Urachi took out his black notebook, opening it up. It was getting around the time to start erasing his memories. But before he could make even a single note on the situation, he was stopped by Asai Kei's next sentence.

"But if the Administration Bureau's system is so absolute that not a single Bureau staff member can go against it, wouldn't that make it a dictatorship? Surely you would agree, Urachi-san."

Urachi turned his eyes towards Asai Kei. "Oh, I certainly do."

Finally, they had found something they could wholeheartedly agree on.

The Administration Bureau was held under the dictatorship of its own systems. To that very day, it was still the same tight ship run by its initial three founders.

"That is indeed one of the Bureau's problems, Asai-kun. There is no room for growth or change within the iron grip of

the system's control. If there are any errors, the system won't account for them. They will simply remain forever."

"I know." Asai Kei was still smiling. With that smile and a deep nod, he turned towards Kagaya. Specifically Kagaya, not Urachi. Looking straight into Kagaya's eyes, he spoke. "The people sacrificed for the system can never be saved, can they? The Administration Bureau's system was never programmed to bring back the two members of the Boundary Line."

After the surprise wore off, the recognition set in. Urachi Masamune had to applaud the boy, at least in his head. *I see. This boy is interesting.*

Asai Kei was much more offputting than Urachi Masamune could have ever imagined.

Of course, the couple that made up the Boundary Line were two of the three founders of the Administration Bureau, as well as Urachi Masamune's parents. Kagaya had locked them in time.

*And now he's bringing them up right in front of Kagaya.* Not to mention in front of their child, Urachi, no less.

It was an extremely strategic maneuver. The sacrifice of those two individuals was a much greater burden on Kagaya than it was on Urachi. Urachi had long since accepted their chosen sacrifice, but Kagaya had never been able to reconcile the immense guilt over his personal role in it. From what Urachi could tell, he considered himself as no less than a murderer.

*Who does this boy think he is?* Asai Kei had an extremely precise grip on their psychology. On top of that, he didn't hesitate to take advantage of his knowledge if it could turn the conversation in his favor. He had manipulated everyone into his trap, smiling all the while.

As if trying to break Asai Kei's observant gaze on Kagaya, Urachi chimed in, "Let me make sure I have this straight, Asai-kun. You want to become a dictator over the Bureau in order to eliminate the problems inherent to the system? You think that when someone with heart and determination leads the organization, the errors can be rectified?"

Asai Kei nodded calmly, still smiling. "That about sums it up. But there's one more thing."

"That being?"

"I cannot completely trust myself. It's very possible that I would make a mistake. Something I believe to be right and true could just become another error in the new system, no better than the ones you're talking about now."

"Yeah, that's a pretty natural fear."

"With that said, Urachi-san, I have a request to ask of you."

The boy straightened his posture, his smile went away, and he looked directly at Urachi. The look in his eyes was so serious, as if he were ready for the world to crumble beneath him.

Urachi Masamune closed his eyes. He felt as if he had to reset something.

But that didn't stop him from hearing the boy's voice.

"I need people around who can counsel me. Not systems, but real, feeling people who can watch over my actions."

When Urachi opened his eyes, Asai Kei was bowing to him, and not just as a trite gesture. His forehead was touching the table.

"I believe you could be one of those people. I beg of you, Urachi-san, please work alongside me."

It was a rather straightforward turn of events.

*But do you really think I'd accept that kind of proposal, Asai-kun?*

Of course not.

All Urachi Masamune wanted to do was erase abilities. There was no chance that he would get caught up in a scheme to manage or control them.

Urachi leaned forward slightly, resting his chin in a hand that he supported on his lap. Keeping that position, he nodded. "Alright."

The boy raised his head, betraying his puzzled expression.

Seeing that brought a genuine smile to Urachi Masamune's face. "That sounds like a wonderful proposal. I must say, I'm impressed. I'll support you wholeheartedly."

He was, of course, lying. No doubt the boy knew that as well. But what good would it do him to point out the lie?

*He really thought he could talk me out of it. I suppose he truly is an idiot.*

Urachi had never intended to actually listen. If the boy actually thought he could win via dialogue, he was about to be sorely disappointed.

Urachi Masamune held out his right hand. "Here's to our future, Asai-kun."

Asai Kei hesitantly gripped Urachi's right hand. The boy's hand was soft, childish. It was almost as though it could break if Urachi gripped it too strongly.

Releasing his grip, Urachi pointed beside him on the sofa. "You should already know Kagaya. There's nobody else that I trust more."

Asai Kei lifted his eyebrows ever so slightly. It seemed that he knew what was going to happen next.

Smiling kindly, Urachi continued. "I'm sure that Kagaya will be of great use to you as well, Asai-kun. I'd like the two of you to get along."

Kagaya wordlessly held out his right hand.

Asai Kei responded to the gesture with a sharp glare.

Urachi, meanwhile, only smiled wider. "Is something wrong, Asai-kun?"

Kagaya's ability locked anything that he touched with his right hand. When used on a person, it turned them into no more than an unthinking, unfeeling stone.

"Go on, shake hands," Urachi prodded.

Would Asai Kei take Kagaya's hand? That hand was more dangerous than any gun. To accept would be foolish. His time would stop, and his little game would be over. But to refuse was to end the negotiations. His persuasion would have failed, and the game would still be over.

Would he choose foolishness or cowardice? Neither was desirable, but there was no middle ground.

*So, what will you do, oh great and wise Asai-kun?*

Asai Kei closed his eyes, making him look even younger. He took a deep breath in, then let it out, just once.

Then, his eyelids flicked open. He smiled. "I hope we can get along, Kagaya-san."

The boy raised his right hand, grabbing Kagaya's in a fluid motion.

"It's all over," Urachi Masamune whispered.

"No. It's only just begun," Asai Kei responded calmly. His time had not stopped. After holding Kagaya's hand for roughly two seconds, he let go, leaning back into the sofa. He was still smiling calmly.

Kagaya spoke up in a small voice. "I have forgotten how to use my ability."

Urachi Masamune couldn't help himself. His voice peaked in a loud, sharp laugh. He laughed until he coughed, then clapped his hands together with a loud popping noise. "Oh, Asai-kun, you certainly have a great amount of amazing friends."

"There aren't that many of them, really. But, you're right. They're all helping me."

"It must feel so great to have everything going to plan."

"Not everything. Why, you wouldn't look me in the eyes even once, Urachi-san."

"Of course not. I could never risk such a move."

Asai Kei focused towards Urachi. "When did you notice?"

As if it wasn't obvious. "The fact that you chose a karaoke booth as a meeting place gave everything away."

The boy needed a private room, no matter how disadvantageous. More specifically, he wanted two private rooms directly next to each other. A karaoke booth was the perfect fit. All the rooms were arranged in a regular, predictable pattern.

"Would you indulge me to tell you my theory, Asai-kun?"

"Indeed, by all means."

Urachi stroked his chin in a slow, leisurely motion. "Obviously, you've gathered all of your friends together."

"You could put it that way. I hope they see me as their friend."

"The trick to making friends is to believe that they are your friend, regardless of their circumstances."

"I see. This is becoming quite the learning experience."

“Well, that’s beside the point.” Regardless, it was established that Asai Kei’s compatriots were in the next room over. “Among them is one who can manipulate memories, under the condition that eye contact is established for five full seconds. Oh, what was her name again?”

“Oka Eri.”

“Right. Oka Eri. A wonderful name, that. Also among them is the one who can copy abilities from one person to another. Putting that together, you gained the temporary ability to manipulate memories.”

Asai Kei tilted his head. “The one who can copy abilities is Sakagami-san, but his ability requires direct contact with both people.”

Urachi shrugged. The boy’s bluff was practically transparent. “It’s easy enough to touch you if need be. Making a hole in the wall is simple.”

There would have to be a hole behind him big enough for someone else to touch him, but small enough to be covered by his back. It would be simple enough for the copier to touch Kei and transfer the ability from there. The hole itself would be easy to make, given that he had a friend who could erase anything she touched.

“That said, you gained memory manipulation and used it to make Kagaya forget how to use his ability.”

The boy nodded. “That is precisely what I did.”

Of course, Urachi couldn’t have been wrong. The plan he just laid out was the only possible way for Asai Kei to establish a success state.

“I’m sure you intended to use that ability on me, didn’t you? You thought you could manipulate my memories so that I would do what you wanted.”

It would have been an absolutely barbaric violation against Urachi, but surely Asai Kei would have been smart enough to realize that was the only way to win against him.

*Even so, it was all pointless.*

Urachi Masamune touched Kagaya’s shoulder. “But you see, Asai-kun, all your efforts have been in vain.” Urachi used his ability to rewind a target’s time. By removing a mere ten

minutes, Kagaya would remember how to use his ability. "And just like that, he's back to normal."

Kagaya was glancing around, his eyebrows flicking up in surprise. It was likely he had some memory displacement due to the rewind.

"Perhaps I should repeat myself, Asai-kun. It's all over."

Asai Kei had been listening the whole time without moving, and broke his pose only to tilt his head slightly. "Over? I really don't understand. We've only just begun."

Urachi shook his head slowly, as if his movements alone would be persuasive enough. "Do you think I'm still continuing this pointless ramble for my own enjoyment? Why do you think I just let you use that ability on Kagaya without even warning him when I saw it coming?"

Did he truly think there would be no issues with using an ability on a member of the Administration Bureau?

Did he think he could just get away with sealing a Bureau employee's ability?

If so, he really was stupid.

"This all went down exactly how I expected it to. Using an ability against us was the same as signing your own death warrant."

Urachi had arranged several Bureau members in advance to be on call nearby. Additionally, he had instructed The Index to make a phone call when he clapped his hands.

With perfect timing, the door opened, and men in black suits filed into the room. There were only four or five more people, but it was enough to quickly fill up the small karaoke booth.

With a purposeful change of inflection, Urachi said, "Asai Kei, you have used an ability to obstruct the work of an official member of the Administration Bureau. You will hereby be detained in accordance with the Administration Bureau's formal policy."

The boy was still smiling. It was a tired, worn smile. "Wow... I really don't understand." He looked up at the ceiling, continuing, "How could you think you were the only one biding your time, Urachi-san? How could you be so sure

that you were the only one who knew the other's hand? How could Souma Sumire have so much trouble with someone that makes so many silly mistakes?"

Asai Kei stood up slowly. "I've been waiting for the last two years for the chance to sweep the Bureau's feet out from under them. But I never thought it was all that much worth gloating about."

The boy looked down at Urachi. His gaze seemed to fall down with all the weight of the sky itself. For the first time, Urachi found himself meeting the gaze of those eyes. Those strangely sad eyes.

"Urachi-san. This... is where it all begins."

As he said those words—

Urachi Masamune's body was suddenly wrapped up in a strange floating sensation, like he was falling.



He was putting up the tough guy act, but the situation had deteriorated beyond his expectations.

*This is so exhausting*, Asai Kei mumbled to himself. Urachi Masamune had made every single decision that Kei had dared to hope he wouldn't. But he knew what kind of opponent he was facing. As it stood, their only option was to make a show of force.

*But even so, it's going to plan.* Even the forceful steps had their own purpose.

Kei rushed down a long slide. In fact, the slope was so steep that it felt closer to falling than sliding. The slide shot him out of the karaoke booth and across the road outside. Kei traced directly along its arc at an extremely high speed. Then, he fell down so fast that the cityscape around him seemed to fly into the sky. Just like that, he crashed down into several soft, white pillows.

Kei got the wind knocked out of him as his vision flooded with white. Then, immediately after, his vision cleared away as the entire slide and all the pillows disappeared at once.

By the time Kei could make sense of things, he was sitting in the rear seat of a car. Right beside him was Urachi Masamune, who was also surprised, as would be expected. The man's voice sputtered out with a slight quiver.

"That was... yes. Ukawa Sasane."

"Correct. She only needs one minute to construct anything she desires."

Ukawa's ability allowed her to freely manipulate and control any non-organic matter. In one fell swoop, she created a slide, pillows to catch them, and holes in both the karaoke booth and car.

Urachi smiled in amazement beside Kei. "I don't think I've been on a slide since elementary school."

"That's a shame, they're an excellent mode of transportation. You could consider it primitive, but it works automatically, and it's ecological."

"They do tend to wrinkle your suit, though." The comment was topped off with a playful shrug. All things considered, Urachi seemed to be rather amused. "Well, it seems that we have our doorman in the passenger seat. But who's the one driving?"

Kei glanced up to the front of the car. Just as Urachi said, there sat Nakano Tomoki in the passenger seat. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open. You could even hear him snoring. He looked like a child worn out from playing all day.

But although the man in the driver's seat had similarly sleepy eyes, his shock of curly hair came as a stark contrast.

It was Tsushima Shintarou. He chimed in with a grumpy snort. "Yeah, fill us all in, Kei. Who's the geezer in the fancy suit?"

Kei snickered internally. He doubted it was really in Tsushima's best interests to start insulting someone who was essentially his superior. But since their time of cooperation had already been reset away, it was only natural that they would have no idea who the other was. "I'll explain on the way. Let's get this car moving."

Unless they got going, the Bureau staff would pretty quickly catch up to them. That was why he had turned to Tsushima, someone who could drive.

Tsushima stepped on the gas, but not without a click of his tongue first. The car jolted forwards at a violent speed. "So hey, where are we going, anyway?"

"Just keep heading straight down this street for now."

"Jeez. You know how ridiculous it is for a teacher to ditch work for one of his students, right?"

"Well, this is a pretty ridiculous situation."

Urachi Masamune flipped through his notebook beside Kei. "Hey, driver."

"Hm?"

"Your name wouldn't happen to be Tsushima Shintarou, would it?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"Well, isn't that fantastic?" Urachi closed his notebook, looking up towards the ceiling of the car as if trying to watch the sky. "I truly cannot understand your thought process, Asai-kun."

"How so?"

"How so? How about the way that you use someone on my side as your driver? How does that benefit you? That just seems like you're taking unnecessary risks."

Kei could see his point. "I don't think there was much else I could do. I don't know anyone else with a driver's license."

"So that's why," Tsushima grumbled. "Hey, Kei, it's about time you get to explaining. What exactly is goin' on here?"

Kei really didn't want to go through everything again, but he couldn't just ignore the question, either. Left with no other choice, Kei pointed to the seat beside him with an open palm. "This is Urachi Masamune, the head of the Countermeasures Department in the Administration Bureau."

Urachi grinned from his seat in the car. "Well met, Tsushima-kun. I've heard good things about your work for the Bureau."

The expression in the rearview mirror shifted drastically from listless and vague to sharp and serious. As for which look was closer to Tsushima's natural face, Kei couldn't tell.

"That's a shocker," Tsushima responded.

"You're not the only one surprised," Urachi commented.

Tsushima's voice turned hushed and furtive. "What are you doing with the head of the Countermeasures Department, Kei?"

"I asked him to a meeting, then kidnapped him."

Urachi nodded along with Kei's words. "Indeed. I am presently Asai-kun's hostage. That makes you an accomplice, Tsushima-kun."

Tsushima's eyebrows furrowed. It was possible he still didn't grasp the full scope of the situation, or thought that the kidnapping aspect was something more metaphorical, perhaps even a joke.

*But, just as we said, I'm kidnapping Urachi-san right now.*

Kei interlocked his hands on his knees. "Let me break down the situation for you." When put in layman's terms, everything was rather simple. "Urachi-san wants to erase abilities from Sakurada, whereas I believe that they should be protected."

That was it, at the end of the day.

Urachi cut in, "We are both in stark opposition to each other."

"I called Urachi-san out to meet with me and talk things over. But—"

"But I had no intention of hearing Asai-kun out. Ultimately, I only went along with him so I could take the opportunity to arrest him."

"In response, I decided to kidnap Urachi-san."

"Hold on," Tsushima sputtered, cutting the two off. "That doesn't track at all. How does any of that lead to a kidnapping?"

Kei shrugged half-heartedly. "Because Urachi-san refuses to hear me out through normal means. He doesn't even want to try any form of negotiation. If I want Urachi-san to actually sit down and listen to me, I have to tie him down myself."

Tsushima's brows furrowed yet again in the rearview mirror. "Kei, I'm on his side here."

"I know that much... oh, I see what you mean. But that's exactly why I asked you to drive." Kei smiled. "You had already sided with Urachi before I reset, Tsushima-sensei. I know that you think abilities ought to be taken away. But I figured that since I have to convince you both anyway, why not just do it all in one go?"

Tsushima's gaze in the rearview mirror turned to a glare. "This isn't a matter of efficiency. If he tells me to, I'll stop this car. This is not a kidnapping situation."

That was fair enough. "Fine then, if I must. Why not make it a classic hostage situation?" With a sigh, Kei stuffed his hand into his pocket. His fingers met a cold, hard substance.

Out of his pocket came a small, foldable fruit knife. It was just a cheap little thing that he bought at a nearby store.

*We all have our own little part to play here.*

Kei was never going to stab anyone, and Urachi and Tsushima both knew it. But still, Kei needed to wield a knife, and he had to hold it at Urachi. They needed a whole sham of a performance just to carry out a normal conversation. It was all such a drag.

As Kei started unfolding his knife, Tsushima spoke up. "Kei. You're taking this too far."

"I agree. I shouldn't have to do all this, and yet here we are."

"We don't have to do this." Tsushima's eyes reflected back at Kei in the rearview mirror. They were cloudy, sad, and tired. "Sir?"

"What?" Urachi responded.

"It seems that you were right. I suppose I am Asai Kei's accomplice now."

Urachi Masamune leaned forward, putting his chin in his hands. "You're siding with Asai-kun?"

"For the time being, I don't seem to have any other options."

"You would prioritize your work as a teacher over your work as a member of the Administration Bureau?"

"I wouldn't say this is the work of a teacher."

Urachi shook his head. "I'm not so sure. Asai-kun is quite intentional. I think he knows that you would try to protect him."

"You may very well be right."

"Then why go along with this foolishness?"

"He may not stab you, but he could still stab himself. If I stop this car, then Asai Kei is gonna be the next hostage. Might as well skip the middle man."

Asai Kei lowered his eyes just slightly.

He had known.

Not by any measure of future sight. Just by considering who Tsushima Shintarou was, as a person. His inclusion was only natural once Kei had thought through his possible moves.

Tsushima Shintarou's voice continued. "Besides, that kid really hates violence. Hates it more than anything. Anyone would get exhausted having to do something they hate."

The car continued forward.

Kei, Urachi, and Tsushima all moved along together.

Tsushima kept going. "Adults have a responsibility towards children. If a child is at risk of exhaustion, it's an adult's responsibility to take it on for them."

For just a moment, Kei closed his eyes.

*I have so many people protecting me.*

He really hadn't wanted to use the knife, no matter the reason. He hated it, and he hated his lack of choices.

He dropped the knife back into his pocket.

Swallowing down many other words that he could have said to Tsushima, he instead responded, "Well then, let us begin."

*Now I can start the actual persuasion work,* Kei thought. Finally, he could begin to bring the future he wanted closer, and give it his all.



Ukawa Sasane rubbed her pinky finger, which was encircled by a rough metal ring that clamped down tightly on it.

Ukawa's ability allowed her to freely reshape any inorganic matter. But if she ever lost concentration on what she was changing and how, then it would stop taking effect. So she wore tight rings around her finger to help her focus as she used her ability. She would use the uncomfortable squeezing at the base of her finger as a reminder that she was currently using her ability. It was small, but still helped her.

Ukawa Sasane was currently focusing her powers on the karaoke establishment. She was turning every door and window into walls, to make sure the Bureau employees inside would stay inside. Ukawa was standing on the street outside, staring at the building.

A voice chimed up from beside her. "Done over here."

A glasses-wearing girl, whose name she was sure was something like Murase, was standing next to her. Murase had the ability to erase anything by touching it. She had been tasked with removing the Administration Bureau's means of transportation.

Ukawa turned her gaze towards the other side of the street, and could still see all three black sedans lined up in front of the building. "What'd you do?"

"Poked holes in their gas tanks."

"Oh. Gotcha." Looking closer, she could spot the growing black stains underneath the cars. "Work on those next, would ya?" Ukawa pointed to a row of bicycles parked next to a utility pole. "We'll need two of them. Get rid of the locks."

"We're stealing them?"

"Just for a while. We'll have to vamoose soon." Ukawa took another iron ring out of her pocket, slipping it onto her left middle finger as preparation for a new instance of her ability. Focusing on the feeling at the base of her left middle finger, Ukawa began to imagine what the world would look like once her ability took place.

Murase's voice came in from beside her. "You're a champion of justice or something, right?"

Ukawa could focus on that much without getting distracted. She nodded. "Yup."

"And you're cool with stealing someone else's bicycles?"

"I'm not cool with it, but we gotta do what we gotta do. Those bikes are parked illegally, so they have no right to complain if they're gone when they get back. Besides, I'm a champion of justice, not a good person."

"The difference being?"

"Well, a good person might just let someone else hit them, but a champion of justice would hit back."

Murase frowned. "And how's that going for you, being a self-aware champion of justice?"

"I don't know how to answer that. I should think any champion of justice would know that they are a champion of justice." Obviously, they couldn't be a champion of justice otherwise.

As their conversation progressed, a corner of the karaoke establishment suddenly gave way, crumbling down like a falling sand castle. It was easy enough to assume that was happening due to an ability. Neither of them had really expected the Bureau to be held for long just because they took away some doors.

"Hurry up," Ukawa urged.

"Guess there's nothing for it." Murase reluctantly trudged towards the bikes.

Two Bureau suits came down from the karaoke building.

Ukawa's ability needed about a full minute for activation. *I'd guess there's maybe 20 more seconds to cook up this one.* Definitely too much time.

As she struggled through her options, a warm hand touched her back. "Make eye contact with one of them."

Instantly comprehending, Ukawa glared at one of the suits as they both started dashing towards her. Would there even be five seconds of time?

Ukawa counted in her head. *Five, four, three—*

One of the suits stopped about ten feet in front of her. He put a hand to the ground.

Instantly, Ukawa lost her balance. Her feet sunk into the ground as if she were on deep snow. Glancing down, she saw that the ground below her had transformed into sand.

*Guess we know how they got out of the building now.*

Walking was a bit out of the question now, but that was beside the point. She once again focused her gaze, glaring directly into the other suit's eye. He looked back, and their eyes met straight together.

She continued her countdown. *Two, one—*

Zero. Instantly, the man stopped. He gracefully and immediately spun 180 degrees, tackling down the first Bureau suit who was touching the asphalt, as if trying to protect Ukawa.

Ukawa felt the hand leave her back, and she called out to the people behind her. "Nice one, Sakagami, Oka Eri."

Sakagami had clearly copied over Oka Eri's ability, since they had also come out of the room with Ukawa and Murase.

The two Bureau suits fell over, all tangled up. That was only natural, since one of them had been given new memories that forced him to protect Ukawa at all costs.

"It'd be nice to use my ability myself, but nobody'll look me in the eye," Oka Eri replied.

"Well, guess that is what it is."

"Now they probably won't look you in the eye, either. Not that my memory manipulation isn't easy enough to undo, anyway. So, what now?"

"We need to get outta here, the sooner the better."

Asai had told her that if they were going to be caught, it was better to do so without putting up a fight.

*But hey, if we're gonna get caught anyway, might as well make a spectacular escape.*

Ukawa looked towards the bicycles, her gaze meeting Murase's just as the other girl finished erasing the bike locks.

"What're we doin' with those?" Oka Eri asked.

"Riding them, of course." Ukawa told Sakagami and Oka Eri to get on the same bike as she walked up to the bike Murase was on. The bikes had luggage racks, so they were easy

enough to double up on. Ukawa sat backwards, back-to-back with Murase. "Alright, let's go"

As soon as she said that sentence, a minute had passed since focusing on her new ability usage.

"Get pedaling," she announced, activating her ability.

Her vision shifted dramatically as the world jolted upwards. It almost felt as though she were flying into the sky, and it wasn't just her, or even just her bike. Instead, the ground itself was rising, thrusting her upwards.

A steep slope had suddenly appeared, and the two bikes began sliding right along it, pulled down by gravity. A small shriek came from behind Ukawa.

She immediately voiced her thoughts. "You have a cute scream."

Murase's reply was sulky. "You should at least warn somebody before you do that to them."

The bike was accelerating at just under falling speed.

"Well then, I probably better tell you that this hill won't be here for long." Ukawa took off her rings as she spoke. She wouldn't need her ability for much longer.

She shifted her gaze to the bike beside them. Oka Eri held on to the handlebars, clearly enjoying herself. In stark contrast, Sakagami Yousuke was gritting his teeth, desperately clinging to Oka Eri's shoulders.

"Hey, Sakagami."

The boy responded with the most timid of movements, only daring to shift his eyes to the side.

Ukawa continued, "That look really takes me back. Makes me think of two years ago."

Asai Kei, Haruki Misora, Sakagami Yousuke, and Ukawa Sasane. The four partners in crime, teaming up against the Administration Bureau those two years ago.

Sakagami shoved a smile onto his face. "Guess you're right. I really didn't wanna go back to those times if I didn't have to."

"Figures. You seem like the type who'd hate this kinda thing."

Fighting the Bureau, running for his life... Sakagami wasn't the type to go against societal norms and land in those situations.

Sakagami lowered his eyes. "You're right... I really hate this. I hate it so much that this makes me sick."

"You scared?"

"Of course I am. Who wouldn't be scared? I can't even argue with a teacher at school without my legs shaking up a storm." Sakagami smiled in a way that seemed to be holding back tears. "But I've gotten used to being scared, more or less. I can just hold my breath and get through it."

"Hmm."

Sakagami had been something of a mystery to Ukawa two years ago. He had never seemed like the kind of guy who would rebel against authority.

"So, you hate this, it makes you sick, and you're scared out of your mind, but you're still gonna help Asai?"

Sakagami shook his head. "Oh, I'm really not in this to help Asai-kun."

"You're not?"

"Nope. Everyone else seems so taken by that guy, but to be honest, I've never really been on his side. I don't really want to help him do anything, if it was up to me."

*Oh, I get it.* "You have a crush on that Souma Sumire girl, don't you?"

Ukawa had yet to meet the girl known as Souma Sumire, but she was evidently a person of great interest.

Sakagami's eyes widened, then he broke into a smile. "Well... that more or less sums it up."

"Wait, seriously?"

"Yeah, but..." Sakagami looked down. "But I guess... in the end... I would've ended up hating her, too."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because she lied. She deliberately deceived me. I always thought Souma-san was just another normal girl. Someone without an ability, who always strived to do what was right."

"Seems like that illusion got shattered."

“Quite. When Asai-kun told me the whole story surrounding Souma-san, I was a confused mess. I figured that once I finally sorted everything through, I’d end up hating her.”

*Interesting.* “And how did that go?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m still confused.”

At that moment, the bicycle seemed to have caught on a pebble or imperfection. There was a violent jerk, and the sound of the wind in Ukawa’s ears cut into a new tune.

Sakagami’s voice was just barely audible over that shift. “Because despite the lies... despite all the things I had wrong... I just can’t bring myself to hate her. Maybe I’ll end up hating her some day, but a part of me thinks it’ll be worth thinking of her fondly. Because—”

He had spent the past while looking down, and his gaze suddenly shot up. “Because somehow, the thought of hating Souma-san is way scarier than the idea of fighting the Bureau, or being chased down by a bunch of adults.”

Ukawa Sasane smiled. “Y’know, you’re a real brave coward.”

Sakagami Yousuke smiled back. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

*Wrong.* “That’s not true. Really, it takes a timid person to be truly brave. Bravery is pushing forward, no matter how afraid you are.”

That was why Ukawa Sasane could never be brave, no matter how much she wanted it. She was never afraid, so nothing she did could ever be out of courage. She felt like Asai Kei and her were similar in that way. It was probably true of Urachi Masamune, too.

But even in the face of all those people, there was someone who exemplified her point still more perfectly.

“Take Haruki Misora. No matter what she does, I wouldn’t really call her brave.”

That girl wouldn’t hesitate to play a game of Russian Roulette where it was her turn six times in a row.

"She's really just nothing but love and trust, and to be honest, not a single shred of courage."

But despite having no courage, Haruki Misora could do anything and everything.

After all, at that very moment she was there, alone, the closest to the enemy.



"Why are you here?" The Index asked.

Haruki Misora responded with complete calm. "I am here to meet someone. That someone is not you."

While Asai Kei, Urachi Masamune, and all sorts of Bureau officials were all running about, Haruki Misora had remained alone in the karaoke booth. She had waited in her room until being sure that all the Bureau members had left the opposite room.

When she got out in the hallway, she was confronted by The Index. Still, that was one of the expected outcomes, so she wasn't surprised.

The Index glared harshly. "You're not gonna run?"

"Running away is not part of the role I have been assigned."

"Role?"

"It matters not if you capture me. I still do not need to run away. My only purpose is to complete the role I have been assigned."

Haruki had separated from Kei, Murase, Ukawa, and everyone else, waiting for the perfect timing.

"Was this role given to you by Asai Kei?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"You trust him too much," The Index mumbled in exasperation.

Was that really true?

"Do you not trust Urachi Masamune, given your position?"

The Index shook her head in pure-hearted disgust. "That's unrelated. Your relationship with Asai-kun is entirely different."

"What about it is different?"

"I doubt Urachi-san. He scares me and, quite honestly, I probably hate him."

*I see.* "You were correct in describing us as completely different."

Haruki could understand The Index's fear, at least to a degree. It wasn't as though she didn't fear Asai Kei in the slightest. That said, she was entirely perplexed with the idea of hating him. She couldn't wrap her head around the fear aspect, either. Maybe The Index was miscategorizing two completely separate emotions with the singular name "fear".

The Index stared at Haruki with all the harshness of pointing a gun. "If I were convinced that Urachi-san was in the wrong, I could leave him. But you would follow behind Asai-kun whether he was right or wrong, wouldn't you?"

Haruki tilted her head. The Index's remark was completely incorrect. As if she was working off entirely wrong premises.

When she thought about it for a while, she realized what was wrong. "If I thought that Kei was in the wrong, then I would argue with him."

"I've never seen you do that."

"Because I have never thought him to be wrong before."

"That's impossible." The Index sighed in exhaustion. "Nobody can live their whole life without making a single mistake. You trust Asai-kun too much. It's like you don't even have your own will."

Haruki had heard that before from many different people in many different situations. But no matter how many times she heard it, she had never been able to accept it. She had never brought herself to nod along with it. Perhaps that was because it was up to her to put a voice to things that were bothering her.

Which meant—

"I do have my own will. I have emotions and philosophies that drive me."

"Sure doesn't seem that way to me."

"But I do."

Haruki herself had only come to recognize her will recently. It was hard enough to come up with a way to describe it to others even theoretically, but she was certain that it was real.

"I am always watching over Asai Kei. My emotions and philosophy have determined his actions to be right. I have, fully and entirely of my own will, decided to believe in him."

Whenever she rationally thought things through, Haruki Misora came to the conclusion that Asai Kei was in the right. That was all there was to it. She was not ignoring her will by any means.

"I think reality is contrary to your expectations. I can believe in him because of how strong my will is."

The Index knitted her brow. "No matter what you say, everything comes off as overly exaggerated."

Haruki Misora tilted her head again. "Is that so?"

"That aside, Asai Kei has abandoned you here. Do you really think that was right of him?" The Index challenged.

*Abandoned?* "I do not understand what you mean."

"He left you here all alone. How else could you describe this? Surely Asai Kei would know that leaving you here could only result in you being taken in by the Bureau."

*Even assuming that anything she said was correct...* "How exactly did he abandon me here?"

"Because you'll be taken in by the Bureau."

"Being taken in by the Administration Bureau does not pose a problem." Being nabbed by the Bureau quickly would be much safer than what would happen after running away from them. On top of that, she wouldn't be targeted by any dangerous abilities, and would be removed from the threat of further ability outbursts.

Haruki stared straight into The Index's eyes. "Besides, I likely will not be taken in by the Administration Bureau."

"Why?"

"Because this was Kei's decision."

"It's up to Kei whether or not you get captured?"

*Precisely.* "Asai Kei is never wrong."

Him being wrong only meant that there was no right answer.

The Index shrugged. "Well, it's true that all my colleagues went after the rest of your friends."

"That seems to be the case."

"But even by myself, I am confident I could capture you."

"True. I am certain as well. However..." Haruki looked to the hallway corner. "We are not alone."

The Index followed her line of sight. The corner was far enough away and dark enough that it was hard to see well.

But before long, there was the unmistakable echo of footsteps. They thumped along slowly, the sound of a heavy, purposed walk.

Haruki Misora knew well enough who would appear at the end of the hallway. It was one of many things that Asai Kei had already predicted.

Haruki Misora returned her gaze to The Index. The woman's ability was not well suited for capturing people. "I highly doubt that you could handle two people at the same time."

The Index nodded. "True enough. But..." The footsteps went quiet as the man stopped. "I'm not the one who's out-numbered, am I?"

A Bureau official stood at the end of the hallway. One known by the name Kagaya.

The Index folded her arms across her chest. "It would seem that not everything has gone to Asai-kun's plan."

Haruki inwardly shook her head. *No. This is exactly what he told me.*

Haruki's purpose in staying was to meet Kagaya. Turning towards him, Haruki spoke. "The discussions have finally begun."

The most important discussion, the one that would determine the very future of Sakurada, had already started in a certain car.



"So then, let us begin," said Asai Kei.

Tsushima Shintarou showed no sign of interrupting from the driver's seat. Nakano Tomoki sat in the passenger seat, his eyes still closed.

Urachi Masamune, seated beside Kei, shrugged his shoulders. "Do you really think you are capable of convincing me?"

"Oh, most certainly."

"Well, despite appearances, I'm a pretty stubborn guy. Much more so than you might think."

"But you're also composed. If anything I say has merit, I'm sure you'd be willing to concede that."

Urachi rested his chin in his hands, shifting his gaze to the scenery out the car window. "Eh, whatever. Guess I'm your prisoner now anyway. If I can't get up, I've got nothing else to do but listen to you talk."

Kei took his own glance out the window. The car was driving down an east-west road that headed straight across Sakurada. It was an ordinary road, the kind that you'd find in the outskirts of any regional city. He recognized a suburban bookstore that he'd been in a few times as they passed by.

"So, what kind of talk will we be having this time?" Urachi asked.

"The same conversation we've been having; the one about abilities in Sakurada," Kei answered. "Should abilities be in Sakurada, or should they be removed? That's the only argument worth having."

"Then it's not worth starting up again. We've both clearly stated our sides, and are convinced in our opposing points of view. If we really want the other person to come to our side, then war is the only way that will happen."

Kei shook his head. "I can see why you would think that. And it very well may be that there are situations where the only way forward is to punch someone. But this is a different situation."

"And what makes it so different?"

Well, for one, this decision could have a verdict. A third party could decide whether Asai Kei was right, or Urachi Masamune. But it wasn't worth drawing out all the details.

Kei forced the conversation forward. "No matter how I look at it, Urachi-san, I can't see abilities as a bad thing. I can't see the world being a better place with them taken away."

"Really? I could see that without even having to take the time to think about it."

Kei nodded. "I do see that abilities can both help and hurt people. And of course, those who have been helped would like them, while those who have been hurt would hate them."

"And those two lines of thought run parallel."

"Well, sure. If you're only looking backwards."

But nobody could draw two perfectly, theoretically parallel lines. People were naturally more distorted than that. Thoughts never worked out as perfectly straight lines, and if they were drawn out long enough, then the intersections were inevitable. If they hadn't intersected in the past, then they very well could in the future.

"Are you familiar with the plank of Carneades, Urachi-san?"

Urachi nodded slightly. "A skeptic's discussion of the comparison between one person's life and another."

Carneades was a philosopher who, among other things, offered up the ethical thought experiment known as the plank of Carneades.

Say that a ship was wrecked, leaving the entire crew to be thrown into the sea. One sailor clung to a singular plank floating in the wreckage. The plank itself wasn't very large, looking just barely solid enough to support his weight.

Then, another sailor reached out to grab the same plank. He wanted to try using it to float, but if both sailors held onto the same plank, then it would sink. The first sailor pushed the other away, and he survived while the second drowned.

"Do you think the sailor was right in his actions, Urachi-san?"

If the man had done nothing, then the plank would have sunk, likely leading to both of their deaths. The man killed

someone else in order to ensure his survival. That was indisputable.

Urachi Masamune nodded. "I think the sailor did the right thing. It's better for one person to survive than for both to die. Besides, it's only human nature to desperately cling to survival. I think everyone should do their best to survive."

"I see."

"What about you? Surely you wouldn't say that we should just find a way for both of them to survive?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking. The best outcome would be getting both to survive."

Urachi smiled. "That answer avoids the very purpose of the thought experiment. Such a ridiculous answer doesn't understand the premise."

"The premise, you say?"

"Exactly. What's impossible is impossible. With the plank of Carneades, one of them has to die. That premise is absolute. Surely you can understand that."

Kei decided to neither confirm nor deny Urachi's claim. Instead, he continued speaking calmly and consistently. "Well, Urachi-san, stories just like that have been told since the beginning of time. Putting lives on the line, directly killing someone, indirectly killing someone. People have debated this exact issue for generations."

"Your point being?"

"I know a very similar story."

Asai Kei gently closed his eyes. He couldn't stop the wave of immense guilt, but he spoke nonetheless. "A certain boy had a special ability. His right hand could stop anything it touched from changing... which was to say, it could stop the target's time."

A certain man appeared before the boy one day. That man was the one who kept all the rules of the world in line. That man's death would change the rules so drastically that chaos would erupt across the entire world. The only way to prevent such chaos was to stop his time, so the man could never die.

The boy stopped his time to protect the rules of the world. One person was sacrificed to protect the happiness of many.

“Now then, the question.” Kei smiled. He didn’t know what kind of expression he should make when having such a conversation. “Did the boy do the right thing?”

Urachi Masamune’s natural smile disappeared, to be replaced with a displeased glare. “That’s a really bad joke. There’s no place for that question to even be asked. Kagaya did the right thing, and besides, it wasn’t even his decision to make. The Administration Bureau forced it all on him.”

Kei looked into Urachi’s eyes. “Alright then, say Kagaya rebelled against the Administration Bureau’s decision. Let’s say he felt too guilty to stop your father’s time. Would that have been the wrong thing to do?”

There was a moment. For just that slight period of time, Urachi Masamune was lost for words. For the first time that Kei had seen, he wasn’t putting up an act, and was genuinely confused and taken aback.

Kei smiled. He really didn’t want to. But he smiled. “It’s the same problem. If you couldn’t bring yourself to push another person off a plank, and you both drowned, would that be wrong?”

Urachi shook his head. “You can’t compare those two situations. Sacrificing someone for yourself and sacrificing someone for the world are completely different choices.”

That was probably true. But that answer avoided the very purpose of the thought experiment.

“Then let me rephrase that.”

Survival. Protecting the peace of the world.

“You kill one person, and absolute happiness for the world is guaranteed. But are you wrong for not being able to make that sacrifice?”

“Yes, you’re wrong,” Urachi spat. “It’s not the right decision. Spoiling yourself with your own weakness and kindness is naive, and it’s a disservice to society. People have to make decisions every day that make some unhappy so that everyone can be happy.”

Kei nodded. “That’s a very strong way of thinking.” It was strong, and it was just. “But you can’t force that strength upon everyone else, Urachi-san. Do you really expect everyone else

to calculate the value of the people around them no differently than a series of mathematical gains and losses?"

Kei didn't expect an answer. Urachi Masamune was smarter than that. He could think through all sorts of things quickly and efficiently. He was, at his core, a pure and kind person, and he wouldn't be able to immediately offer an answer to such an unanswerable question.

So Kei continued. "If I'm honest, I think either answer would be sufficient." Anyone could choose whatever suited them. "If the sailor holds onto his plank, pushes another off, and survives, then we should praise him for his courage. If he couldn't bring himself to push the second sailor off, and they both died, we should praise him for his deep compassion. Both answers are correct."

When one side was decided to be right, the other was made necessarily wrong. But whether something was good or bad was a decision that everyone needed to make for themselves. In every case, what mattered was the choice. Sometimes, people had to make a choice while they were suffering. But once that choice was made, all that was left to do was believe in it.

"For the plank of Carneades, I said that both people should survive. You called that a ridiculous answer that didn't understand the premise. And you were absolutely right. One person does have to die with the plank of Carneades. But..."

Kei looked back out the window. Sakurada flowed past him. The view wasn't anything special. They could have been anywhere.

"But if we think of the plank of Carneades as a real problem, something that's actually happening, and not just a thought experiment in our heads, then the whole story changes."

A sailor pushing someone off to survive wasn't the problem. Whether he was guilty of something or not didn't really matter.

"It becomes a warning, something that needs to be prevented from happening again. So that if the same accident were to occur in the future, both people could be saved."

The story only boiled down to one thought: A tragedy happened. Nothing more, and nothing less. The obvious reaction was to find a strategy to prevent the same tragedy from happening again. How could the premise be changed to make sure nobody would ever experience the same tragedy? That was what mattered.

Urachi Masamune shook his head. "What on Earth are you even talking about, Asai-kun?"

*Isn't it obvious?* "I'm talking about Sakurada's abilities."

He wanted to wipe away every tear he could. He wanted to smile as much as possible.

And when it all came down to it, when he wanted to sum up the entire conversation, it was rather simple.

"This is about Kagaya-san and your parents. We're past whether he did the right thing, or the wrong thing, to either of them. We need to be thinking about what's best to help everyone else we can in the future."

The future always took precedence over the past. The past was just reference material for future decisions. And future decisions should always be about how to avoid giving things up. How to help everyone. It was obvious.

"Who's everyone?" Urachi asked.

"Everyone involved in this problem. Kagaya-san, your parents, and of course, you. Think this through with me. How can all four of you be happy?"

"I'm already happy. All the better if abilities are out of the question."

"But what about the other three? What about, for example, something that Kagaya-san could do to erase all the guilt he feels towards you?"

That question didn't even really need thought.

With a sigh, Urachi answered, "To remove his ability from my parents."

Kei smiled. "Exactly."

"That would be impossible. My father's ability must be protected above all else. Without that ability, the world would fall into chaos."

“Yes, that’s right. But it’s not your father that’s the most important, it’s his ability.”

Urachi’s eyes quivered. He fully took in what Kei was saying.

Kei offered another smile, a heartfelt one.

“So all we have to do... is separate the ability from the ability user,” Asai Kei concluded.



Ukawa Sasane and Sakagami Yousuke were talking on the backs of their bikes, so they couldn’t separate the two very much.

Oka Eri was left with no choice but to ride directly beside Murase Youka.

*Oh, man. There’s definitely something wrong with me.*

Villains weren’t supposed to be concerned with the convenience of others. Just as she was getting ready to pedal harder, a voice shot out towards her.

“I didn’t expect this. Thought you’d get all stubborn and refuse to help Asai.”

Murase Youka. She had never liked that girl. But ignoring the comment would just feel like running away, which would only serve to make her feel worse than she already did.

With no other choice, Oka Eri pushed on a smile. “It’s complicated. There’s a lot at play.”

Wind always flew directly in her face when she was riding a bike. It was like her own personal headwind as she soared through the sky. It felt good. Even better on a stolen bike.

Oka Eri rang the bike bell for no particular reason. But some unseen part of it must have rusted, because the only sound to float out and away was dim and sloppy, falling into the rest of the scenery behind them.

“I really don’t get what Senpai’s deal is. It’s like, he looks just like he used to two years ago, but then he also doesn’t.”

She was just talking to herself, really. She didn’t want a reply.

And yet one came.

"Hard to imagine Asai as a middle schooler."

"He was shorter. By a lot."

"Well sure, but anything else?"

"I dunno." Oka Eri stood up, shoving the pedal down. The action caused her to shift slightly off-balance, prompting a small yelp from Sakagami behind her.

Murase Youka pushed her own pedals down, clanking the gears forward. It put the two of them right back next to each other, so Oka Eri started the conversation back up.

"Senpai is incredibly selfish."

"Yup."

"But at the same time, he never really considers himself."

"That's true, too."

"I just don't get it."

That wasn't entirely true, though. She could get it. Or at least, there was a small part of her that understood.

The bike rode over a small pebble. It wasn't much, but still made them bounce several times, eliciting more noise from Sakagami.

"Far as I can tell, I think I'll always hate Senpai. He's always getting on my nerves. Pissing me off."

Oka Eri looked up to the sky. It was a little scary to keep riding without knowing what was ahead, but she pedaled on anyway. "He asked me to the movies not too long ago." Probably just trying to hang out and get closer.

"Really? Did you go?"

"Of course not. He invited me to your school festival, and I didn't go to that, either." And that was what pissed her off so much. "I bet this is all the same to him. Sure, he needs my ability. But it's all the same as the movies or the school festival to him."

No doubt he included her in his plans so that they could get closer together. He definitely had that kinda angle. Asai Kei was always calculating that way. He always had everything planned down to the finest detail.

"That's what makes him so much like he used to be two years ago."

Asai Kei was probably the only guy out there who would use a revolution against the Administration Bureau as an opportunity to get closer to a kouhai.

*But... I knew that.*

There was an ideal that Fujikawa Eri had wanted to chase when she became Oka Eri two years ago.

In all honesty, that ideal was probably closer to the current Asai Kei than it was to the current Oka Eri.

Someone who'd do anything to achieve her goal. Who would never stop until she found a way. Who always wore a daring smile.

That strong Asai Kei who Fujikawa Eri had always wanted to be.

"...And that's what pisses me off so much."

The words she muttered probably didn't reach Murase Youka, instead just drifting off behind them with everything else.



Asai Kei bent up the corners of his mouth into a smile.

It was easy. The answer was so simple.

"All we have to do, Urachi-san, is get Sakagami-san to copy your father's ability. Once it's transferred somewhere else, Kagaya can lock it there, and your father will be free."

Urachi Masamune's face scrunched in displeasure. "That would change nothing. You would just be sacrificing someone else instead of my father."

"What if we didn't use a human, then?" Sacrificing another person was never even on the docket. "Why not try copying the ability onto a cat, for starters?"

"A cat?"

"Yes. By sacrificing a cat instead of a human, we can help your father and Kagaya-san at the same time."

Technically, to save both parents, they would need two cats.

Urachi Masamune took a notebook out of his pocket, flipping through its pages. "That's impossible from the out-

set. There's never been precedent for a non-human having an ability. Besides—" His hand stopped on a specific page. "Sakagami Yousuke's ability. Yes, it only works on humans. Bringing a cat or a dog along would be pointless."

But was that really true?

"What makes you so sure that an ability can only be copied onto a human?"

"Well, I can't be sure. Abilities vary greatly between all cases."

"Then just take a shot in the dark. Most important issues can be reasoned through if you think about it."

With a resounding thump, Urachi closed his notebook.

"To put it simply, it's a matter of will."

Sakurada's abilities only worked if the user wanted them to. Conversely, if they weren't desired, they wouldn't work. That rule was absolute.

"A cat would have no will to use an ability for itself," Urachi concluded. He sounded bored, but he was definitely right.

It was time for checkmate.

"I have a friend whose ability lets her share her consciousness with a cat. That would allow a cat to have the same level of consciousness as a human."

All said, Kei didn't really like the method. He didn't want to have to even sacrifice a single cat. It went against his ideal. He wanted to do everything he could to make even individual cats happy. After all, he wanted to be God.

He wanted to be all-powerful, saving anyone he wished with a wave of his hand. Without ever having to make sacrifices or keep other people down. It was all he had ever wanted. He still wanted it. But, no matter how much he wished for it, he knew it was unattainable.

*This is the most I can do.* Sacrificing a cat instead of a human. He still didn't have anything better at the moment.

He continued in a monotonous drone. "With the utility of a few abilities, it would be possible to save your parents. Sakurada's abilities can do more than you give them credit for."

Urachi Masamune stared directly at Kei, shaking his head lightly. "So what?" His voice continued on in the same tone he had kept prior, as if he were reading from the back of a book. "Let's say it goes magnificently; My parents and Kagaya are saved. So what?"

Little by little, his voice got louder. "So an ability saves someone once. That doesn't mean anything. Even if you only count the exceptional cases where abilities help others, that's not enough of a case to make them worth keeping around."

Kei refused to break eye contact. "Alright. How many will it take, then? How many people need to be helped to justify an ability's worth?"

"It's not a matter of amount," Urachi spat, almost shouting. "People shouldn't rely on uncertainties like abilities in life. They need to accept difficulty and despair, choosing to live in spite of reality."

Kei took a deep breath. He had almost reflexively shouted back, but it felt silly, so he let out the breath as a sigh.

*That's not my style anyway.*

He didn't like conversations where the only person heard was the loudest. It was like a screaming match between animals. Or even worse, like a fight.

Keeping his voice subdued, Kei answered. "You are the one who can't accept reality." Because abilities were real. "You are the one trying to create a fantasy world where you can push away abilities, pretending like they never existed, and make reality what you want it to be."

Surely Urachi was aware of that himself. If a first-year in high school could see it, then surely he could.

"What if we actually just gave it our all? Avoiding risk is only natural, but we can't let risk keep up from moving forward. Let's just take a single step forward, even if it's a step of fear. That's how we can make reality a better place."

Urachi Masamune let out a breath. It almost sounded like a short, self-deprecating chuckle. Or maybe it was a sigh of exhaustion. Kei wasn't sure even he knew.

"Look, Asai-kun... there might be some merit to what you're saying." Urachi's eyes still showed rationality and sin-

cerity. They were calm and mature, yet a boyish spark remained.

*Yeah, we really are alike.* Now Kei was convinced.

Asai Kei and Urachi Masamune both had their own childish streaks. They both had their own weak points. And all they wanted to do was keep those weaknesses from showing to anyone else.

“But no matter how right you may be,” Urachi continued, “I will not be moved. I am convinced that abilities are evil. That is an unchangeable reality.”

His voice had petered down into little more than a whisper. He now sounded the part of a lonely child.

“I thought so. Didn’t think I would be able to convince you,” Kei admitted, dropping his eyes. “Yeah... I knew that.”

Words could serve many convenient purposes, but sometimes they weren’t enough. Sometimes, no matter how much two people wanted to understand each other, they just couldn’t.

*Man, I really am a cheater.* He knew it was a low blow.

“I apologize, Urachi-san.”

From what Kei could tell, Urachi had genuinely listened to him. The man had taken it in, carefully paid attention, and followed his emotions and beliefs.

*But I’m not like you.* Kei was more cowardly than that.

“The truth is, I was never trying to convince you.”

*I never wanted to admit defeat.* He wanted to be capable of always fighting, refusing to give in no matter the circumstances.

But he couldn’t think of anything else to do, so he gave up. Just like his decision to sacrifice a cat.

Kei had never really intended to have a conversation with Urachi Masamune.

Asai Kei looked towards the passenger seat. “Thanks, Tomoki.”

Tomoki, who had been keeping his eyes closed in a feigned sleep, sat up quickly. He rubbed his eyes, turning around. “Hm? We done?”

Nakano Tomoki's ability was to make his voice heard. His messages were one-way, and couldn't be avoided by any means that Kei knew.

In order for his ability to work, Tomoki needed to picture the person it was going to. That was the reason for his role as the doorman. By the time Urachi and his entourage showed up to the karaoke establishment, everything was already set up for their chosen persuasion tactics.

"Just one more thing," Kei added, checking his watch. 11:30 AM. Right on schedule.

His smile vanishing, Kei continued.

"It's as you heard, Kagaya-san. With the right abilities, we can save those who would otherwise remain unsaved."

The obvious was finally put into words.



"Kei decided that you would be our focus, rather than Urachi-san," Haruki Misora stated.

She stood in the hallway of the karaoke establishment, The Index and Kagaya before her.

Kagaya was looking into the distance just higher than anyone else stood, his expression dazed. No doubt he was listening to the ongoing conversation between Kei and Urachi, courtesy of Nakano Tomoki's ability.

Haruki recalled what Kei had told her.

*Our secret ingredient will be Kagaya-san.*

Urachi Masamune's goal was to erase all information about abilities from Sakurada. He needed Kagaya to deactivate the ability placed on his mother to make that happen. Meaning Urachi's final plan hinged on undoing Kagaya's lock.

It went without saying that only Kagaya could undo his own ability. If they could get him on their side, Urachi's plan could not succeed.

*I'm going to start by drawing Kagaya-san over to our side. If we do that, Urachi-san will have no choice but to join us as well.*

Haruki Misora checked the time on her cell phone. 11:30 AM. Right on schedule. Holding her cell phone in one hand, she walked up to Kagaya. "You have a decision to make."

For all intents and purposes, Kagaya still looked mechanical. Just another expressionless and emotionless Bureau suit, sucked into the system.

"If you have the ability to save someone you want to save, then you should take that chance. If you have the opportunity to correct a past error, then it should be taken advantage of. What will you choose, Kagaya-san?"

A world without abilities, or with them. Urachi Masamune's ideals, or Asai Kei's.

His choice to make.

"Kei once said that abilities were not special powers at their core. He compared them to convenient tools, like a car or cellular phone. He believes them to be as much a part of a person as a hand or a foot, or the words they speak."

If that was true, then no matter which world he chose, things would remain the same. People would be able to do what they could, and be unable to do what they couldn't.

"A doctor cures illness, a researcher develops technology, a baker bakes bread, and a mother caresses her child. In the same way, a person uses their abilities. To Kei, those actions are all one and the same."

For a brief moment, Haruki Misora closed her eyes. She got the slightest inkling that she was about to cry. Her emotional needle swung around in a strange direction that was neither happiness nor sadness, neither positive nor negative.

"Asai Kei—" She forced her eyelids up. The Kagaya she could then see looked oddly young. Like a small, vulnerable child. "All he desires is to make the world around him as good as it can possibly be. And to accomplish that, he believes that by making more people happy, he himself can become happier."

That was how he had always been, ever since she first met him. A boy that hated the sadness of the world, and carried it as if it were his own. A complex and chaotic character that was nonetheless so staggeringly simple.

“And Asai Kei wishes for you to be happy, too. He will labor for you, seeking long and hard to find what your best outcome could be.”

Choosing to persuade Kagaya wasn't a matter of efficiency to Kei. She knew it was more than that.

He was always thinking of others, those who were sad, those who were suffering, and he never forgot them. After all, he wished for everyone's happiness. Of course he would do that.

“So you get to choose too, Kagaya-san. Is Asai Kei right, or is he wrong? Make your choice.”

As far as Haruki Misora was concerned, he was more right than anyone else. No matter how much he had to consider, and no matter how many doubts he had, he always came out as right.

*Asai Kei is never wrong.*

It wasn't because he was particularly smart. It wasn't because he was incredibly talented.

It was because he was the boy who would hold unfailingly to what he knew to be right, and never forget what he stood for. That boy could never be wrong.

“Kagaya-san. It is your choice to make whether you believe that his proposed ending will make you the happiest.” Haruki Misora held her cell phone out towards Kagaya. “If you press the call button, you will be connected to Asai Kei, with Urachi Masamune right beside him.”

Kagaya took the cell phone with trembling hands.

Haruki turned away from him, walking the opposite direction. She had been informed before that it was difficult to talk on the phone when somebody was standing right nearby. She didn't really get why that would be, but she decided to be considerate nonetheless.

“Hey.” The first voice to break the silence came from The Index. “I don't get this at all. What's going on here?”

Haruki Misora stopped in place, looking towards the other woman as she answered. “Kagaya-san has joined our company, just as Kei planned.”

The Index frowned. “But he was just forced into it.”

Haruki nodded. "Yes. That is the way Kei tends to work."

He would prepare the right option, and offer it in a way where there was no other choice but the right option he had selected. That was his typical MO.

"Now, with that said—" Haruki Misora glared at The Index. "I have not yet heard my apology."

The Index only looked on with a puzzled expression, as if she had missed something. "Apology?"

Haruki nodded. "Kei was right, and he did not abandon me. I was correct to believe in him of my own will, following my careful observations."

Although even Haruki herself had a hard time believing it, she was in a bad mood. She had been for quite some time.

For as long as she could remember, Haruki had always thought that she would be the only one to understand just how right Asai Kei was. Nobody else could, and quite frankly, that never bothered her. It was up to each individual to decide what they thought.

But things had changed.

Now, she wanted everybody to see and accept Asai Kei for who he was.

After watching for a while longer, The Index eventually let out an exhausted sigh. "Fine, fine. I was mistaken. But—"

"But?"

"But it's a bit overkill to believe in everything he does just because it's right."

Was that true? Haruki wasn't sure. If she couldn't believe in what was right, then wasn't it her feelings that were actually the overkill? If any kind of trust was excessive, it would be trust in something that wasn't actually right.

Or at least, that was what Haruki Misora thought.



He remembered their last words before they went to sleep. The sleep that they expected to last forever.

"This was something we all decided on."

"To us, you are the perfect form of salvation. Nothing more, and nothing less."

There was an eight year gap between the times the two of them were put to sleep. But regardless, everything they said was the same.

"We knew you would be born long ago. That was why I could entrust this city with my ability. That was why I chose to live on."

"We were even able to have a child. He's such a good boy. He can be overly zealous at times, but he's got such a strong spirit."

Their words were so exactly alike that he could hear them overlapping.

"The knowledge of your birth gave us such great joy."

"So if you're tempted to hold on to any feelings of guilt over this, don't."

Kagaya recalled those words he could never forget.

"Hold your head high."

"You're doing the right thing."

But, of course...

He had never really been able to believe them.



The call that Kei had with Kagaya was very brief.

"You will have my support for this venture."

He then asked Kei to hand the phone to Urachi. Their conversation wasn't very long, either. Kei could only hear three short sentences.

"It's me." "Ah, I see." "I understand."

Then Urachi handed the phone back over. The call had already ended.

Urachi looked down, pressing his palm into his forehead. Kei couldn't tell what kind of face he was making. "So, Asai-kun, is this all going to plan?"

"It is."

Kei had figured it would be significantly easier to bring Kagaya over to his side than Urachi Masamune. On top of

that, doing so would present a significant structural problem to Urachi's plan.

"Where did I go wrong?" Urachi mumbled.

Not that it was really a question of having done something wrong.

Urachi kept his head down, looking like a runner exhausted after finishing a marathon. "Was I ignoring Kagaya's real feelings?"

That was getting closer to the truth, but he was missing a particular nuance.

"I think what you were really ignoring were your own feelings," Kei offered.

Urachi raised his eyes, looking towards Kei. "Mine?"

Kei nodded. Urachi was blind to his own weaknesses. "I know that you trust Kagaya-san. You might trust him more than you even recognize. It was never a question that Kagaya-san would always side with you."

If Urachi had thought it through a little more, he probably would have seen it coming. A guy in Kei's position had almost no choice but to target Kagaya. Now, Urachi knew that much, and had kept Kagaya back at the karaoke place instead of going after everyone else. Kei, assuming Urachi would do that, had also kept Haruki at the karaoke establishment.

But Urachi was only concerned with protecting Kagaya from physical threats. He should have known how effective emotional manipulation would have been against Kagaya, but he ignored that aspect.

And that was because Urachi trusted Kagaya, and only Kagaya. He would have never dreamed of a world where Kagaya was willingly not on his side.

*And really, it's the same for me.* Kei couldn't imagine a world where he didn't have the support of Haruki Misora. If someone managed to turn her, then his defeat would be ensured.

Urachi Masamune shook his head. "When did you discover that as my weakness?"

"In the time that you can't know."

"You mean... when abilities disappeared?"

"Yes. The time that I reset away."

It happened on the night that all information about abilities disappeared from Sakurada. Kei ran all through the town in the rain, ultimately finding Urachi Masamune, a civil servant who knew nothing about abilities.

"And what... did you do that night?"

"I talked to you. For a good two hours." They talked about all sorts of trivial things as Kei listened earnestly to Urachi Masamune's voice. "I got to know you in those two hours better than you might think."

And that was all he did. He spent two hours trying to get to know Urachi. It was nothing special. But he did come to realize just how much that man trusted Kagaya.

Urachi smiled weakly. "Ah... You're so different from me."

"Actually, I think we're quite alike."

"I could never use the same kind of inefficient methods that you do."

*Is that really what he thinks? Kei looked back out the window. I thought this was an incredibly efficient method.*

Asai Kei and Urachi Masamune definitely had differences somewhere.

The car drove alongside the river. It was a long path, but the river was destined to eventually make its way into the ocean. Kei turned his eyes back into the car, stinging from the reflection of the light off the water. He saw that Nakano Tomoki had closed his eyes again in the passenger seat. *Maybe he's actually asleep this time.*

Tsushima Shintarou sat in the driver's seat, holding onto the steering wheel without saying a word. Kei wondered how much of the conversation he was understanding. Nothing had been explained to him prior, so it was possible that he didn't get anything, but at the same time, Kei felt like he fully grasped the situation.

"Urachi-san," Kei called. It was time to start pulling in the future he desired. "I now hold the key to your plan. You cannot win unless I give it back to you."

Now there was nothing to be over. His agenda could never advance.

Urachi Masamune raised his head, looking Kei in the eye.

"I want to have control over every ability," Kei continued. "I'll join the Administration Bureau, gain authority over various abilities, and remake the system that controls them to suit my ideals. And Urachi, I want you to help me. I need your strength."

Urachi's eyes had yet to waver. They were exhausted, but they were strong. "And what exactly are your ideals?"

That was an easy one. "To avoid misfortune, and if at all possible, eliminate its very existence."

"That's childish. A ridiculous fantasy. Do you really think something like that could happen?"

Asai Kei smiled. "No. It can't." Anyone could see that was an impossible ideal. "But we can solve problems one at a time. Even if our goal is an eternity away, we can still take our own steps towards it."

They didn't have a time limit, after all.

Humanity had been chasing after such futures for thousands of years, and maybe even longer. Hoping to improve problems, if only by a fraction. Hoping to be as happy as possible. It was the foundation of civilization.

There was no need to change that in the future. It was a goal worth spending humanity on, theirs or otherwise.

"We can accept reality, while still refusing to give anything up. We'll have enough allies on our side to build a new system that can outlive us. And then, even if it's a thousand years or ten thousand years down the line, we can stand in that fantasy land of victory."

Maybe they couldn't reach their ideals. But that didn't mean they had to stay in place. If the goal was to save everyone in the world, and he only ended up saving one person, that didn't make the effort worthless.

"As long as we don't give up, then we'll never be able to lose. Nobody can say what's unachievable if we're willing to spend an eternity of our own time on it. As long as we don't stop moving, we can go anywhere."

Urachi Masamune simply stared for a while, his eyes betraying no emotion.

But then, he smiled again. It was another mask-like smile, but maybe that truly was his honest expression. "I'm not interested in some fairytale about what could happen in a thousand years." He tapped his temple with his index finger. "What do I get out of lending you my assistance?"

He was finally giving in.

Kei prepared to say what he had planned for such a situation. Not that what he had prepared was particularly interesting. "When I make a mistake, you'll be the first person to know. Everyone will have full knowledge of my actions, and you'll always have the option to turn on me."

He wished he could put it more directly. He just wanted to join hands with Urachi. It wasn't all that complicated, but he had to resort to such roundabout methods to make it happen.

"Besides," he continued, "If I'm an obstacle to your goals, it would help you a lot more to have me as an ally than an enemy."

"And what good is it to build up allies who only follow you in theory, while increasing the number of people who could betray you?"

"Well, I should think that's obvious." Kei smiled, bending up the corners of his mouth. "Because someday, you'll become a real ally. I will eventually convince you that the future I'm dreaming of is better than the future you dream of. The only way I can do that is to have you by my side, even as a fake friend."

Unless they were face-to-face with one another, they could never understand each other.

"I think we really are similar, Urachi-san. The only differences between us are our beginnings and our ends."

Urachi Masamune, born in Sakurada and growing up around abilities as a natural part of life. He thought the reality of abilities was actually just a problem.

Asai Kei, born in a faraway town only to visit Sakurada. To him, abilities were like hope itself made manifest.

"I think that we're similar enough that we could understand each other if we really tried. And even if we can't fully

understand each other, we can at least try, and get most of the way there. We just have to believe that we can.”

Like an innocent baby believing the random string of babble coming from its mother to be real words. An innocent mind that truly tried to decipher and understand the possibilities. The possibility of understanding, of getting to know someone.

All they could do was believe that some day, they could be moving forward together, both seeking the same goal.

“So let’s be friends, Urachi-san. Even if it’s only in name. Even if it’s only just for now.”

Kei held out his right hand.

He couldn’t imagine pursuing a different future.



Urachi Masasmune was resting his chin in his hands. He glanced at the boy’s hand out of the corner of his eye.

“You know, Asai-kun... I rather detest handshakes.”

The lukewarm feel of a stranger’s palm made him shudder.

Suddenly, his father’s hand came to mind. The morning of the day that his father was to go to sleep, he placed his hand upon the young Urachi Masamune’s head and spoke.

*You are incredibly strong. But you must learn weakness.*

It was just a random memory. There was no reason for it.

“I detest many things, actually. Meetings with lots of people, childish and impossible dreams, other people’s hands. I detest them all.”

He gently closed his eyes. He was so tired. He had been laboring away for so long, and he felt like all his fatigue was hitting him at once.

He put his right hand into his pocket, his fingertips brushing upon the familiar feeling of his notebook. It was the notebook with every single one of his plans. For the last few weeks, it had even served as his substitute set of memories.

“Something else I detest is putting things in my pocket. I don’t even have a cell phone.”

He had never enjoyed carrying a notebook around. He was waiting eagerly for the day when he didn't need it any more, and could throw it away.

He opened his eyes a crack. Asai Kei's right hand was still held out before him.

Urachi Masamune turned his head to look out the window. The streets of Sakurada passed by.

*I detest this town, too.*

The very notion of a town that would accept something like abilities made him shudder.

But he wanted to be able to like the town. He wanted to make a sincere effort towards liking the things he hated.

He could still feel his father's palm atop his head.

*If you know weakness, then you can learn forgiveness.*

But remembering a few words wasn't going to change anything. Nobody else was allowed to determine how he felt.

*People learn compassion so they can forgive themselves.*

His eyes remained focused on the familiar sights of the city.

Urachi Masamune held out his black notebook toward the boy.



## Chapter 3

# A Boy and a Girl

The girl who rode the swaying train did not know.

She was missing something. There were important memories that she did not have, and yet she did not know.

If a person left Sakurada, they would forget about abilities. The girl who had forgotten her ability had no need to question who she was.

Everything regarding two years ago and that summer had been rewritten into false memories. As far as she knew, she had every reason to believe that she was just another normal girl. She wasn't even aware that she believed that, so her belief was impenetrable.

In a way, it was probably its own form of happiness. She was able to live in her own sort of dream state, and even if it was a lie, she was happy, and nobody could take that away from her.

The train began to slow down as it approached a station. The man opposite her stood up to disembark, but nobody else got on the train.

*Should be the next station.*

The girl looked out the window, finding a round clock on the platform. It was almost 4:30 PM. 4:30 PM in late October, approaching evening but not nearly nighttime. But it was

dark enough that the birds flying before her only looked like silhouettes against the vanilla landscape.

The train doors shut as it began moving again. She listened as the announcer proclaimed the next stop, a town called Sakurada.

The train rocked back and forth, making clacking sounds not unlike the ticking of a second hand.

The girl thought about the boy.

The next day was a day off of school, making up for the school festival that had occurred on Sunday. The girl considered the ways that she could spend her day off with the boy. Perhaps it could have been considered mundane, or small-scale, but the girl was considering her possibilities with all seriousness.

*I probably don't even have to go to the effort of making up a reason.*

The train continued smoothly down its straight track.

*But still, a good excuse would probably come in handy.*

Just something trivial that they both would know was nothing more than an excuse. One that they didn't even really need. Something they could conveniently use as a pretense. Getting a present for someone, or a café that was just too fancy for her to visit by herself. A nonsensical, good-enough reason to go and see him the next day.

The girl continued picking her brain for ideas.

She couldn't help but twitch her mouth up, smiling softly.

The train swayed with a noticeable groan. The clock that she could no longer see continued to tick forward invisibly.

The girl looked out the window. She noticed the wonderful contrast between the electrical lines and the still-lit but softly dimming sky.

Her face was reflected in the window, likely due to the brighter lighting from inside the train. It was a face she knew well. The one she made while she practiced her smile.

At that point, both the train and the girl crossed a line. The invisible line that separated Sakurada from the rest of the planet.

The girl was thrown into an entirely different world.

She didn't know when it began, but the change was reflected in the window as her face became horribly distorted. All of a sudden, she couldn't even recognize who it was.

*What... is this?*

She gripped her head tightly.

Information seared through her brain like a powerful, drug-induced episode. Her vision blurred with tears that she couldn't even understand at first. The pain suffocated her until she closed her eyes, and the moment she did, she forgot that she was even crying.

*Stop it!*

She screamed, and yet didn't make a sound.

*Stop it! Please!* she screamed to some unknown entity.

But then, an instinctive recognition switched on inside her. A great, unbearable something began clawing its way out from within.

Her memories. Violent memories.

Sakurada. A town of ability users. Her ability. The events of two years prior. A girl's death. What that girl lost. What she could never have. The hurt. The hurt that never ended.

She was past the end of her plan.

There was nothing that could save her anymore.

*Oh. I didn't know... I was so fragile.*

She could never bear the weight of all those memories.

She heard something break. It all became unbearable, and yet they didn't stop. A war raged inside her.

*Asai Kei.*

The girl remembered the boy. The boy who went through so much pain in an effort to save a girl who died two years ago. A girl that looked so much like her.

*I'm sorry.*

She was sorry. She couldn't think of anything else. She was just sorry.

*I was wrong this whole time.*

But surely she had figured that out some time in the past.

*I'm sorry, Kei. I don't think any of it was actually for you after all.*

She definitely wouldn't get the chance to see him tomorrow.

"I'm sorry," she quietly muttered, once and for all.

The girl laid down on her seat.

The train roared forwards. Eventually, it reached a large curve, slowing down as it went in.

The sky outside the window was painted red by the setting sun. The world darkened further into more silhouettes.

A nearby passenger called out to the girl, concerned. But she didn't respond. The girl had closed her eyes, no longer capable of understanding the noises around her.

The girl had stopped thinking. She had switched off her consciousness in order to protect herself from her memories.

She had abandoned herself, becoming little more than a quiet, empty vessel.

Souma Sumire slept.

# 1 - The same day, 5 PM

Nonō Seika knit her eyebrows in displeasure. Her pure white skin stood out magnificently in the dusktime light. Haruki Misora sat beside her in front of the shrine up the low mountain.

"First, put everything you can think of into Box A," Nonō said.

Haruki listened carefully, her hand on a cat that was beside her.

"Then, take a good look at the box. Then, as you find problems with things in Box A, place them into Box B."

Haruki tilted her head. "What is this about?"

"A long time ago, an old man taught me how to find what's right."

"What is right?"

Nonō Seika nodded. "Ultimately, everything has something wrong with it, even if you don't recognize it at first.

But if you can acknowledge its problems and still find it to be right, that is something that can be truly righteous.”

Was that true? “Are you absolutely sure that nothing in existence is purely right?”

“If there is, I haven’t found it.”

“What about cats?”

“They can be quick to use their claws, and they can lead a lonely existence sometimes.”

That came as a surprise. “I thought you loved everything about cats, from the tips of their ears to the ends of their tails.”

“I do love them. Of course I do. Even the ones that are quick to use their claws and ignore you on their own selfish whims.”

That didn’t make any sense.

Haruki looked up at the evening sky. It had been clear and sunny all day, but the evening had brought clouds that reflected and absorbed the yellowish-pink light, creating beautiful gradations throughout. It was so beautiful that it almost looked fake.

Nonō Seika gently stroked the cat in her lap. “Sometimes what you love is a separate category from what’s right. Cats have their good and bad sides to them, but I love them all the same. Even their bad parts.”

Haruki repeated the girl’s words for a second time in her head.

Suddenly, it clicked. It hadn’t made sense until someone else explained it to her.

Righteousness was not the same as emotion.

It was something in the way of a discovery for Haruki.

*I wonder why that is? I had always thought that the right things needed to be loved unconditionally as a matter of fact.*

And, of course, she still believed that.

But maybe the world didn’t work that way. Perhaps that was why her conversation with The Index had broken down so terribly.

“Would Kei have his own problematic places as well?”

“Of course he would. That’s only natural.”

“But where could he ever be wrong?”

"I don't know. But do you really think it's impossible for him to be wrong?"

Haruki Misora wanted to nod in response, but couldn't bring herself to. She felt like doing so would be overlooking something important.

As she struggled, Nonō spoke back up. "Personally, I think it'd be a bit tragic if you truly thought Asai Kei could never do wrong."

"What would be so tragic about it?"

"Asai himself." Nonō's eyes had been focused on the cat in her lap, but they quietly raised up. Her wispy black hair fluttered around her ears. "If Asai Kei is the boy who can do no wrong, then the very moment that he makes a single mistake, he will cease to be Asai Kei. That would be so tragic. I could never take being held to the standard of living a life with no mistakes."

Haruki Misora shut her eyes tightly.

After some time, she noticed a foundational contradiction from within herself.

*Asai Kei is never wrong.* She had always believed that.

*He always makes too many sacrifices.* And that made her sad.

But those two statements were one and the same. It was the same observation from two different perspectives.

Asai Kei could never make mistakes, so he always had to sacrifice. He had to always be right, which meant he had to take on all the hurt. When she finally recognized those thoughts for what they were, she realized that she had thought them for a long time.

But maybe she hadn't ever been fooled. Maybe she had always known, yet turned a blind eye to it.

*Asai Kei is never wrong.* Without that foundation, Haruki Misora had nothing to live for.

She heard Nonō Seika's voice. "That's why it's important for us to distinguish between what's right and what's wrong. But we can recognize what's wrong while also treating it as something that's right. Because if we can't... then no matter how strongly we believe in something, it just won't last."

Haruki opened her eyes to see the other girl smiling.

“You look like you’re gonna cry.”

Strangely enough, Haruki had been feeling like crying an awful lot as of late. It was as though she had become more fragile recently.

She shook her head for no apparent reason. “I think there are many more things I have to consider.”

All she could do was examine everything one by one. Even when it came to the things that she had seen before, but chosen not to pay attention to.

Haruki Misora breathed out. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, even though she hadn’t cried. “I still do not know how Asai Kei could be wrong.”

She recalled The Index’s words.

*It’s a bit overkill to believe in everything he does just because it’s right.*

Maybe if knowing what was right wasn’t enough, it would be worth searching for some of his mistakes.

Despite her smile, Nonō Seika let out an exhausted yawn. “Me, too. I also have some things I need to calm down and think about.”

*Oh, right.* The conversation had changed course at some point, but Haruki Misora had initially come to the shrine in order to convince Nonō Seika towards taking action.

Kei himself was supposed to go and see her, but he had gotten somewhat busy, so Haruki went in his place. Evidently, Kei had to attend some kind of confusing meeting with Urachi Masamune. He had said it was mostly a cleanup job, covering up what had occurred just earlier.

The reason he had wanted to go and see Nonō was to request her help in rescuing the two individuals who made up the Boundary Line. Kei had theorized that by combining Sakagami Yousuke and Nonō Seika’s abilities, a cat could gain and use a person’s ability. If that were true, then Kagaya could lock the cat in that condition, making the ability permanent. That would leave Sakurada’s Boundary Line, now only kept in place by Urachi’s frozen parents, to a cat rather than a human. Ideally, that would allow Urachi’s parents to live normal human lives again.

But, that solution still came with its own big problem: they would be sacrificing a cat rather than a human. And that was a condition that they would have to make Nonō Seika accept.

"I can't do it," she said.

"Is a cat more important than a human?" Haruki asked.

"Even as long as I considered them to be equal, it wouldn't be worth sacrificing one for another."

That was a fair argument. Haruki asked another question. "Are humans and cats equal?"

"I... love cats more than humans," she answered after a tortured silence. Her voice was small, and she was clearly upset. She made spasms of frowns that seemed like jolts of pain. "I get it, okay? I know that I'm a human. I know that it's right to choose a human over a cat."

But sometimes what was loved was a separate category from what was right.

*Nonō-san isn't gonna just nod along and go with it, Asai Kei had said. But she'll listen. She'll take it seriously without denying it on principle. For today, all we have to do is bring up the suggestion.*

That meant that by having proposed the idea, Haruki's work for the day was done. It was about time, too, as the dusk had spread considerably, and night was falling fast.

"I will return home now," Haruki stated, standing up on the steps.

"I'm gonna stick around for a bit." Nonō hugged the cat in her lap with both hands. It was a rather forceful gesture, coming from her, and the cat sounded a half-hearted yowl in surprise.

"I will return at a later date."

"Mm."

Haruki took one step away, then two. Then, she turned around. "We will not be stopping the cat's time forever, Nonō-san. Kei plans to find a way eventually where not even a single cat would need to be sacrificed."

Nonō Seika was still clutching the cat. It thrashed about for a time, but ultimately accepted the embrace.

"I know."

The darkness obscured the girl's face, and Haruki couldn't see her expression. Similarly, Haruki figured that her own face was likely hidden from view. But Haruki wasn't even sure what kind of expression she herself was making.

She turned around and began walking away again.

Asai Kei had said something else.

*In the end, she'll go along with what we ask.*

But Haruki Misora knew that the smile he had made when he said that was nowhere near approaching genuine.

She wondered if she should call him to inform him that it was done.

Carefully making her way down the dark, unstable mountain path, she pulled out her cell phone. It was almost 5:30 PM.

Just as she was making her way to the contacts list, her phone rang. The caller's name appeared on the monitor as Asai Kei. It was like a miracle. Something even more mysterious than an ability. She quickly pressed the answer button.

"Is that you, Kei?"

She knew it was, but felt like she had to check for some reason. She had always done so, ever since getting her own cell phone.

She heard his voice. "Yeah. Are you with Nonō-san?"

"I am. I was just starting to head home."

"Thanks for the help. The thing is, I've got a favor to ask you."

His voice was stiff. Whatever the favor was, it didn't sound like something he liked very much.

"Please, Haruki... I need your help."

Haruki Misora lightly bit her lip.

*Please.* He almost never used that word. Probably because he knew that when he did, she would always do what he asked.

It was like an order that couldn't be refused. Which meant he was ready to accept full responsibility.

Which meant that he was once again going to shoot first and ask questions later, wearing himself out in the process.

But when he followed up, his tone carried a contradictory chill.

“Souma Sumire fell into a coma. I want to help her.”



Asai Kei sat on the edge of a sofa that had lost most of its cushioning. His whole body was slack, and his head was hanging low.

He was in the lobby of a hospital whose visiting hours had long since ended.

The only sound was a single set of steady, paced footsteps, headed directly his way. When the sound stopped right nearby, Kei lifted his head.

Ukawa Sasane. She looked down at him for a moment, then sat beside him on the opposite end of the sofa. She thrust a red cardboard box towards him. “You eat Kit-Kats?”

That got Kei to smile, like the flicking of a starter switch. “I really appreciate that, but I’m actually thirsty.”

“Then go drink some water.”

“I just don’t want anything sweet right now.”

“Hm.” She pulled back the red box. He expected her to rip open the packaging right there, but she didn’t. Instead, she just placed the box between the two of them. “So how’s Souma Sumire doin’?”

“Still asleep. Unfortunately, that’s all I know. They only just checked her in.”

“Did you tell them to take her here?”

“I asked Urachi-san for a favor.”

“Wow. You worked all that out fast.” Ukawa put her chin in her hand, gazing into Kei’s face. “Did you know this would happen?”

“No.”

Kei had been able to utilize the ability of future sight for ten minutes the previous night. But he hadn’t seen enough of the future. All he had been able to do was guarantee that Souma Sumire could escape from Urachi Masamune. He had

been so focused on that singular goal that he knew hardly anything of what would happen afterwards.

"I did know this was a possibility, though," he admitted.

Ultimately, Kei had instructed Souma Sumire to leave Sakurada. It was the most effective way for her to escape Urachi, since once she left and forgot her ability, the Bureau would have less reason to act against her. She was quite literally powerless out there. It certainly wasn't a permanent solution, but it was enough for a single night.

*But I knew.* He knew what it would mean to take Souma out of Sakurada and put her back in. Her memories were so special, and even tragic. Forgetting that and becoming a normal girl, only to suddenly have it thrust back upon her, was more than he could expect anyone to take on. Not even Souma Sumire would be able to handle it.

*...Actually, it's because she's Souma Sumire that she couldn't handle it.*

He remembered how she cried in the bathroom the night before his reset. Then, there was what she said before leaving.

Goodbye.

*No doubt she'd already reached her limit.*

Souma Sumire seemed like an unparalleled genius, someone with infinite knowledge and wisdom. But she was just a girl in middle school. She was fragile. She felt pain and hurt. Yet she had pushed past it all, enduring everything and charging right along for such a long time. It was a recipe for a breakdown.

Souma Sumire had to have known that she would break down once she finally reached her self-imposed goal. And she had long since passed that point.

He couldn't stop his guilty smirk. "Y'know, Ukawa-san... This outcome was pretty obvious."

Taking her out of Sakurada and putting her back in was only ever going to scar her deeply. It was obvious, once he thought about it. Of course, he had imagined the possibility. He had probably been more or less certain, but still went through with it anyway, since it was the most efficient solution.

*Don't give me that! his mind screamed at him. How long does she have to coddle you? How many times do you have to hurt her before it's enough?! Efficient? What a bunch of crap. Just tell me what's so efficient about cornering Souma Sumire into a space that she can't escape from!*

It was disgusting.

It wasn't anywhere near the place his ideals called him to be, and he hated it from the bottom of his heart.

"So what's your plan now?"

"To follow the plan. I'll go save her."

Of course he would.

As long as he used stronger words, it would make him look stronger.

"This was always the plan. She was hurt, just like I planned. So now I'll go help her, just like I planned."

*I hurt her, and I help her.*

He was the worst. He wasn't in the right at all.

And really, he didn't deserve to even try and save Souma Sumire. The number one person who had caused the most pain to Souma Sumire was by far Asai Kei. He was the last person who should be the one to go help her. But he would ignore that, follow his own selfish desires, and go help her anyway. Even if he didn't have the right, he wanted to reach out to her.

"I don't think you're righteous, Asai Kei."

As if he didn't know.

"You're not good, or pure, and you're certainly no champion of justice."

He already knew that.

"But I still think there's a hero inside you."

Her voice came off as comforting. But it still hurt. Kei grimaced, but she continued on.

"No matter how badly you want to become omnipotent, you can't. But you never let that stop you from dreaming of a world where you can help everyone around you. No matter how weak or cruel you look, and no matter what others on the outside might think, you always act the hero."

She was wrong. "I'm just selfish, is all." A selfish coward, who couldn't accept reality and had no choice but to try and change it. He could only ever put up resistance, always in the position of running away.

"Y'know something, Asai? What you call selfishness, other people call effort."

That didn't matter. "Call it whatever you want." It didn't change his actions. "Besides, Ukawa, if I'm not righteous, then that just makes me your enemy, right?"

Ukawa Sasne gazed at him, her face unreadable. Then, the corners of her mouth lifted. "I'm not in the business of kicking someone who's already so clearly down." Her voice maintained its typical calm. "I don't hate you. I don't even dislike you, really. But watching you makes me sad."

Before he could even ask why, the champion of justice continued. "I'm not the one who can protect you or save you. You've already decided who's allowed to do that, and no matter how long I wait trying to do that, you won't let me." With a quiet mutter, she added, "It's like my justice just isn't good enough."

She stood from the sofa, looking down at Kei. "Where's Haruki?"

"She's headed here now."

"Guess she'll always be on your side, at least."

Kei shook his head. "It's different this time, actually."

"Oh?"

"She laid out a condition for me."

When Kei had been telling her everything over the phone, she responded with, *I have my own request for you. If you listen, then I will cooperate.*

Haruki Misora had said something like that. She never laid out conditions for her cooperation.

"Hm," Ukawa Sasane chuckled. "She's a kind girl."

"That she is."

By demanding compensation, she was trying to accept some of the responsibility. Evidently she was taking her own steps towards bearing some of Asai Kei's burdens.

"She's always been there to protect me." A smile made its way to Asai Kei's face despite his exhaustion. It just wouldn't be right to say that kind of line with any other expression.

"Get yourself some chocolate when it's all over. A tired boy needs his chocolate." Ukawa Sasane began walking away with loud, echoing footsteps.

Her small box of Kit-Kats was left on the sofa.

Kei picked it up, slipping it into his pocket. It brought back memories of his first meeting with Ukawa Sasane, when a girl came up to him offering a Kit-Kat.



Haruki Misora arrived at the hospital around 6 PM. It was directly next to a small park, located in the vicinity of Nanasaka Junior High.

Darkness had already fallen, and Haruki was walking quickly. She went to the back entrance as Kei had told her to, pushing the door open. The doorknob was unexpectedly cold.

She found a guard station near the entrance, but it simply had a sign stating, "On patrol". The green exit light was the hallway's only illumination. Haruki walked forward, her footsteps loudly echoing.

She found a white iron door at the end of the hallway with light leaking through its gaps. She pushed open the heavy door. The lobby beyond was lit so brightly by fluorescent lights that she had to squint her eyes to adjust.

A number of sofas were lined up in the lobby, their backs facing her. She saw Kei sitting in the closest one to her. She closed the iron door with both hands, dashing towards Kei.

Kei turned around, probably having heard either the door or her footsteps. "Heya, Haruki," he greeted with a smile.

Haruki smiled back. "Good evening, Kei." She sat down next to him.

Kei had his elbows on his knees, resting his chin in his hands. "Sakagami-san will be here before long."

"I apologize for my selfishness."

"Don't say that..."

Haruki had said something on the phone earlier.

*I have my own request for you. If you listen, then I will cooperate.*

Of course, she would have cooperated with Kei even if he refused her request. But she also knew he would never have refused.

*I want to remember everything I have experienced since first meeting you.*

She wanted to remember all the time she had ever spent with Kei, including the time she had lost to resets. She wanted every word he said and every expression he made at her to be available to her.

If Sakagami copied Kei's ability over to her, then even such an impossible feat would become possible.

"But do you really have to remember, no matter what?" Kei asked.

He knew how much memories could hurt someone, and with his ability to remember everything, he knew what a blessing it was to be able to forget.

"Yes. I must."

"Why?"

"So that I can understand you."

Looking back, Haruki could see that all of the last two years had been building towards that goal.

*I trust Asai Kei.* Of that, she was sure. His value was the one thing she could be sure of.

*But I don't know him.*

In fact, she hardly knew him at all. There was so little about him that she could understand.

"I want to remember everything about you, and if that shows me your flaws, then I want to understand them."

Before she had to go see Souma Sumire, she wanted to think about Asai Kei one more time.

His mouth curled in embarrassment. "If it's flaws you're looking for, I have plenty."

"And yet I do not know about them."

"That's strange, considering how long we've been together."

"I..." Haruki tucked her chin down, her eyes lowering. "I do not think that I truly tried to understand you at all before today."

She had claimed to want to know him, yet never took a single step to do so. She let herself be satisfied with the things he normally said and the faces he normally showed her.

Because after all, to know was to change what she saw. And Haruki Misora had never once desired to change the way that she saw Asai Kei. Even the thought scared her.

Haruki Misora put all her strength into lifting her eyes, and it came slowly, as if she were pulling up a great weight. She gazed directly into his eyes. "I had hoped that you would never change."

She had thought that Asai Kei could always remain the same. A single, unchanging truth, who could never be any different, and who would always be right. That thought gave her peace of mind.

"I was terrified that the way I saw Kei, the one whom I adored above all others, would change."

But she could never trust him in the truest sense as long as she thought that.

She was trapped and confused for so long, and she had never realized it. Like the fear of a monster under her bed or in her closet, lurking in the darkness. She was no more than a small child, terrified of that which didn't even exist.

But now, as she calmly thought it through, she realized how ridiculous she was.

She needed to open her eyes, observe him, and see what problems might come up. Would doing so make him lose value in her eyes? Not at all. It couldn't. That was even less likely than a monster hiding in her closet.

*Because I already trust him.* That had always been true, and she had always kept it close to her, dear to her heart. *I just let myself get confused.*

But it was time to open her eyes. It was okay to look at him, straight at him, and see him.

Asai Kei had a look on his face that she couldn't recall ever seeing before. He looked surprised, confused, even frightened. He was unsettled. A rare look for him.

"Is something wrong, Kei?" Haruki asked, tilting her head.

"I was just surprised," he admitted, smiling bashfully. "That's the second time you told me you have feelings for me."

The fact that he could be surprised by something like that made for her first new discovery.

"When was the first time?" No matter how hard she thought, she couldn't remember that happening, much to her own disappointment.

"You'll remember that day before long."

He somehow managed to answer her without answering her at all.

The two spent some time chatting aimlessly after that. Books they had been reading, movies that caught their interest, ways they liked to spend their days off.

It was like any other day, but she valued that time.

It took Sakagami another fifteen minutes to arrive. He pushed open the iron door, making his way into the lobby. He looked jumpy about something.

Kei exchanged some standard greetings, then turned towards Haruki. "Are you ready?"

Haruki Misora nodded. "Yes. Please do it."

Sakagami stood behind them, touching Kei and Haruki's backs. Sakagami's ability allowed him to copy one person's ability onto another. When Kei used his ability, Haruki would gain the same effect, allowing her to remember even time that had been reset away.

"Okay, here we go," Kei said.

Memories flashed into her head.

She remembered.

She remembered everything about everything.

Haruki Misora closed her eyes, clutching her head in her hands. Memories continued to swell painfully inside her mind.

Asai Kei's ability could only relay the absolute truth. His memory was not affected by slight assumptions, mistaken association, or unsure guesses at something happening in the corner of his vision. He remembered the past as it was, and nothing more.

*Wow. His version of the past is so sterile.* There was no fog or disruption, no lies or deception. It allowed Haruki Misora to carefully and individually examine each and every detail of her past.

She could remember everything in the last two years since she had met Asai Kei. All his words, actions, facial expressions, breathing patterns, even his body temperature at different times.

Which meant she could finally remember Asai Kei.

He was like a great collage of many different, even contradictory, parts. He was kind and cruel, smart and stupid, bold and sensitive, strong and weak.

But that in itself was nothing special. Everyone was like that. Everyone was a mix of contradictory parts. The parts were all the same, with the only difference being the balance between them.

But that was okay.

*Because Asai Kei is special... to me.*

Haruki Misora realized that truth once more.

*He has the greatest balance of anyone I've ever known.*

He was beautiful, and he was comforting. Everything he did, said, and thought was so cruelly beautiful.

She couldn't stop herself from crying. She hadn't even known what it meant to cry just a short while ago, but she realized she had been crying for a long time.

Her tears were like a representation of pure emotion. But they were also something else. Just like how three primary colors combined to make black, and three other primary colors combined to make white, when strong elements came together, the result was shockingly pure.

And then, Haruki Misora found it. That memory.

It was two years ago, on the roof of the southern middle school building. The first time she confessed her affections towards him.

*I am quite certain that I like you.*

She had spoken such tender-hearted words in complete ignorance.

She opened her eyes as the memory of that rooftop, and everything else relating to Asai Kei, returned to her. Through her tear-blurred eyes, she saw Asai Kei watching her with an anxious expression.

“How was it?”

Haruki smiled, ignoring the tears running down her cheeks. “I found a mistake that you made.”

If anything, it was Haruki Misora’s mistake. But it could also be accurate to call it a mistake that they made together.

“Two years ago, when you kissed me on the rooftop...”

When Haruki Misora confessed her affections.

When she mumbled, “I don’t know” following a kiss.

“The truth is... I was happy.” She just hadn’t known what that feeling was called.

*That’s how ignorant I was back then. I couldn’t understand it.*

She had no clue what to label the new emotion blooming throughout her whole being, and all she could do was mumble, “I don’t know.”

Asai Kei sighed. “Guess that means I was too cowardly to face it straight-on.”

“I never faced it, either.” It had taken her so long to find it. She had walked in circles, only now finally finding what she had been looking for.

Haruki Misora stood up. “I will go wash my face.” Crying was the right response, but she couldn’t cry forever. Besides, her vision was blurred, and there were times that called for a direct gaze. “Then, we will go and see Souma Sumire.”

Now that she had remembered all of Asai Kei, the fog had cleared.

*The best thing I can be doing to make everyone around me happy is to go and see Souma Sumire.*



Haruki Misora left, leaving Asai Kei and Sakagami Yousuke alone in the lobby. Kei was still sitting on the sofa, and Sakagami was standing beside him.

"Asai-kun..." Sakagami's hands were clenched into fists, and he had a worried expression. "You look... really tired."

Kei shook his head. "I just need some sleep. I didn't get nearly any last night."

"I see." Sakagami offered a helpless smile. "I'm tired, too. Very. I heard the most ridiculous story, then stood up to the Bureau, and now Souma-san collapsed. It's almost hard to believe that anything I experienced since yesterday actually happened."

It had happened, though. All of it.

"I'm sorry, Asai-kun," Sakagami said.

Not understanding, Kei looked up at him, only to find the other boy staring at a corner of the floor.

"I can't help thinking that maybe if everyone could be as strong as you, you wouldn't have to run yourself ragged all the time. If everyone else could be a little more capable, then we wouldn't have to push everything onto you."

Kei shook his head. "This is all happening for my own selfish ends. I deserve the punishment. In fact, I should be the one apologizing to you. I dragged way too many people into this."

Sakagami Yousuke's eyes suddenly shot up, meeting Kei's eyes with a reproachful gaze. "Asai-kun... to be honest, I..." He trembled pitifully, like a lonely, destitute child on a cold night. His voice was weak and broken. "I... I always... hated that about you. You just think you're better than everyone else, don't you? You think it's more efficient or whatever for everyone to just do everything on their own, right?"

Sakagami looked so cowardly that Kei knew he shouldn't lie. So he couldn't confirm or deny the question. "I don't like myself the way I am. I have a lot of problems. I'm nowhere near perfect."

He was nowhere near the ideal he set for himself. There was always more, always further to go, always another step. He could always have done something different.

"But... you're right. I usually figure it's just more efficient to do it myself."

Kei paused for a moment. Taking a deep breath, he continued, "The only exception was Souma Sumire. I totally believed that she and she alone was better than me. But now, I can see that wasn't entirely accurate."

Souma was strong, and she was capable. But he discovered that she, too, had her own weak points. In fact, her desire to just give up on everything might have made her the weakest of all of them.

"See... That's what I hate so much." Sakagami was grimacing, although he looked close to crying. "You're talented, and you know it. You know how special you are, so you can forgive others for their weakness and mistakes. But you never make room for your own weaknesses. You're so arrogant."

Kei couldn't really argue.

Some day, he planned to control all of Sakurada's abilities. Just like a god, he would provide happiness and protection for everyone.

He knew that goal was out of reach. And in a way, it probably was arrogant even to aim for it.

"Look, I'll admit that you're amazing. You're practically a magical wizard." Sakagami's head shot down once more. Despite standing, he was yet again looking down lower than Kei was. "But... even if I can't do something as well as you, or not as efficiently, and even if I don't have the courage to do it alone... doing what I can for Souma-san and for everyone's happiness still counts in my book."

*Yeah... he's right.*

"So, like... I'm doing this because I want to. You can't just say that I got dragged into it."

His words were slapdash. They clearly hadn't been thought through. If anyone was being arrogant, it was him.

Kei could feel a spark of appreciation inside himself towards that seemingly timid boy. There was something there

beginning to show, a small, inconspicuous part of him that Kei could love. "I'll be going to Souma after this," he responded.

"Yeah."

"But I want you to stay here, Sakagami-san." Kei understood him, agreed with him, and was even starting to like the guy. But he still couldn't stop himself from speaking arrogantly. "Haruki and I would be the best people for this job, so I need you to leave it to us."

Kei was waiting for a disagreement. He wanted Sakagami to tear into him with arguments he couldn't refute. He wouldn't change his mind, but he still wanted to bleed, and to feel it.

Sakagami glared at Kei, tears in his eyes. "Right. Go take care of it."

Kei hadn't expected that.

"I really wanna beat the crap outta you right now. I wish I could just rush up to Souma-san's side, but... I can't go there. I can't cross that line. I'm not a beast like you." He gave a clearly forced smile. "Not everyone should become a beast. I'm at least proud to be a coward."

Kei stared into the boy's earnest eyes. For once, Sakagami didn't look away.

Kei was actually the first to break eye contact. He glanced down, nodding. "I getcha. You're right... you're better off the way you are."

Even a coward like him had something to bring to the table.

Sakagami looked straight at Kei, his smile turning somewhat hostile. "I lied."

"Huh?"

"Thing is, if I went to see Souma-san right now... I just don't know what I'd say to her."

Seeing that it was probably an act to cover up his embarrassment, Kei smiled.

Sakagami Yousuke might have been weak and cowardly, but even he could do what was right in ways that Kei would normally never notice.

## 2 - The same day, 6:50 PM

As Souma Sumire was currently unconscious, there was only one way to go see her. That one way was why Kei had asked Urachi Masamune to arrange Souma Sumire's transfer to a specific hospital: the hospital that housed Katagiri Honoka.

Katagiri Honoka's ability created an entire world within her dreams. On top of that, she could invite anyone sleeping nearby her into that world. Kei hoped that her world was the place where he could meet with Souma Sumire.

It was almost 7 PM. Kei and Haruki walked down a hallway, guided by a tall doctor. They went up to the hospital's very top floor, a place that was normally off-limits.

"You're the first visitors aside from Administration Bureau staff to be admitted twice," the doctor admitted with evident surprise.

"There are some circumstances." There were in fact so many circumstances that Kei found it hard to sum everything up in a straightforward way. He did his best to cover everything up with a hurried smile.

"Right this way," the doctor stated, stopping before a hospital room that was directly next to Katagiri Honoka's.

"Thank you very much," Kei said, sliding the door open. The doctor excused himself.

The hospital room was a standard, four-bed space. Three of the beds were empty, but the one below the window on the right had its curtains closed. Kei walked towards it. He noticed that Haruki Misora had stopped at the room's door, but he kept going.

He opened the curtain.

Below the window and washed in the moonlight was Souma Sumire, sleeping. Her eyes were closed, and she was somehow smaller than Kei had ever seen her. She almost looked like a creation, like Kei could pick her up and she would hardly weigh more than a two-by-four. She slept with-

out any expression on her face. Her face was paler than Kei remembered. Something about her lips was different, too.

Asai Kei stared intently at Souma Sumire.

Looking at her worn-out appearance pricked at his heart. It created a fresh cut that he could feel bleeding and festering.

A voice called from behind him. "Kei." It was Haruki Misora. She had come beside him at some point, and was now staring up at him.

Kei was going to call the girl's name, but he stopped.

His instincts cried that he should reach out and hug her, but he stopped.

Perhaps by touching her, the wound would begin to heal. He could stop the bleeding, it would eventually stop hurting, and over time would become a simple scar. But that wasn't good enough. He needed that pain. He needed to stand before Souma Sumire with that pain pricking at his chest.

"I have discovered another problem that you have," Haruki interjected.

He knew his problems would never be limited to just one.

Kei tilted his head. "What's that?"

"You are far too willing to allow yourself to get hurt."

"You think so?"

"Yes. Souma Sumire has a similar flaw."

That made Kei reflect for a moment. It was true that Souma Sumire never hesitated to act in ways that hurt herself, and it was a great flaw.

But he still wanted to argue. "I'm a coward, so I only hurt myself to the point that I can still be healed." He wasn't like Souma Sumire, who would damage herself far beyond repair.

"But I do not want you to get hurt, even in the slightest."

*Yeah... That's a better way to think of it.* "I'll try to be careful."

He meant it. He would truly do his best to be careful.

A knock sounded at the door. Kei went and answered the door, finding a nurse on the other side. She seemed to be in her late twenties, and she carried a silver tray with a pitcher of water, two glasses, and four white pills. The pills were just sleep aids, but they looked like something much more.

Kei smiled at Haruki Misora. "Alright, let's go."

All he needed to do to meet Souma Sumire was take a pill.



She looked up at the southern sky.

She waited in cold isolation. The sun had already set, and no matter how long she looked at the southern sky, it would offer her no warmth. There was only the moon, shining like cold, icy water.

But she still looked up at the southern sky, desperately grasping onto that moonlight.

*Light. Warmth.*

Maybe it would be a warmth like the feel of his body near hers.

She hoped to see him soon.

*But I know that he'll hurt me.*

She didn't want to hurt any more. She was scared of the sadness and the pain.

A voice called down from on high. "Sumire-chan." A blue bird flew through the night sky, illuminated by the moonlight.

Souma Sumire stretched out her hand towards the blue bird. It was too high for her to reach, but it flew down, landing on the back of her hand.

"What's wrong, Sumire-chan? Why are you so sad?"

As Souma Sumire watched the blue bird, a question came to mind. If the bird was only lit up by the moonlight, could she be sure that it was really blue? Was she perhaps mistaking a completely different color for blue, only seeing she wanted to see?

"Hey, Tytyl... could you listen to my request?"

The blue bird nodded in a very human way. "Of course. Anything for you."

"Really? You'll give me anything I ask for?"

"Yeah. I always wanted to try granting a wish for once."

Souma Sumire smiled. "In that case, Tytyl... I want to be just like you."

Tyltyl was essentially the world's god. He wasn't exactly a god in the greatest sense, but he could do just about anything he wanted.

"Make me like you, able to do anything I want. Able to go wherever I please. I want the freedom to fly through the sky and more."

She could do anything.

She could go anywhere.

But there was only one thing she wanted, and one place she wanted to be.



He opened his eyes to a white ceiling.

Asai Kei sat up, looking around. He found Haruki Misora sitting on the bed beside him. The bed where Souma Sumire had been lying was empty, making it certain that he was in the dream world.

"Good morning to you, Kei," Haruki greeted.

"Morning. Kinda weird to say that in a dream." Kei got out of bed and put on his shoes, taking a few quick stretches.

A young girl sat in a metal folding chair in the corner of the room. Mytyl. The form that Katagiri Honoka took within her dream world. "It's been a while," she said sulkily, standing from her chair.

"You're right, it has been a while."

"I had expected visitors more often."

"Well, it's not that easy to get in here, but I'll try to pay more attention to that from now on."

She smiled. "Just kidding. But please come if you can. I'll give you some really yummy cake."

"I'll look forward to it," Kei said with a nod. "Have you seen Souma Sumire?"

"Nope. Tyltyl has, though." Mytyl's smile vanished, and her eyes lowered. "What on Earth happened to her?"

What happened to her was the same thing that had happened before.

“Souma wore herself out, and kept allowing herself to get hurt. Eventually, she crossed a line, and it was only then that everyone else could finally see it.”

If only he had been more sensitive. Maybe if he had paid more attention to her two years ago, the cycle would have been more obvious.

He couldn't stop her from dying the first time. But maybe he could see to her wounds this time before she did irreparable damage to what little self she had left.

“So what now? Are you here to save her?” Mytyl asked.

“I am. Or at least, I'm planning to.”

“So what's that make you? Some kinda hero?”

“No. Just Souma's friend.”

Mytyl sighed. “Guess you can't do anything about that.”

Nope. Some things couldn't be changed. “I'm gonna go see her for a bit.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“Probably.” Kei could only imagine one place where Souma Sumire would go.

Mytyl furrowed her brow. “There's... something I should tell you first.”

Kei tilted his head. “What would that be?”

“Tytyl... made Sumire just like himself.”

In the dream world, Mytyl and Tytyl were like gods. They could do almost anything their hearts desired.

With a serious, yet childish, expression, Mytyl asked, “Should I turn her back?”

Kei smiled, shaking his head. “No. It's actually better that way. I prefer that Souma be all-powerful.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to talk to her in her most selfish state.” It would be better for Souma Sumire to be a god.

“I see.” Mytyl's face held a complicated expression. She was smiling, yet she also seemed angry. “Tell me something, wouldja?”

“What's that?”

“Last month... why did you save me? Was it... for the same reason you're trying to save Sumire now?”

That was a difficult question to answer.

He almost told her it was the same, but as he thought about it, he stopped himself. They were actually entirely different scenarios.

"I want to make as many people as happy as possible," he finally answered. "To that end, I don't mind putting a bit of work in."

It was okay to get a little worn out, or to get a little hurt. In fact, becoming disliked or getting betrayed were practically guaranteed outcomes.

"But, at the same time... I have my own priorities. I'll put more focus on the happiness of someone I know over someone I've never met. I want my friends' happiness more than my acquaintances'."

Asai Kei wasn't a god, so he couldn't treat everyone equally. Some things needed a sequence. "Souma Sumire is the second most important person in the world to me, and I want her to be happy."

Mytyl watched Kei closely, gazing into his eyes. "That kind of ranking only really benefits the person in first place. Sumire is curled up all alone right now because being in second place is worthless."

She was probably right.

"Are you going so that you can put Sumire in first place?"

Kei shook his head. "I'm going so she can be content with second."

Mytyl chuckled softly. "You're a really horrible person."

Kei nodded. "Yup. Selfish, too."

But he had a future to pursue. If it took being horrible and selfish to get there, then that was what it took.

"Then get outta here," Mytyl said.

"Right. I'll be back."

Asai Kei began walking away, followed closely by Haruki Misora.

To go and find Souma Sumire, the high-minded, stray cat of a girl who never let people into her heart.



Souma Sumire curled up all alone in a dark place.

There was no light. She couldn't see anything. And yet she knew that Asai Kei was in the world. Souma Sumire had become like a god within the dream world, and could learn anything she wanted to know.

She knew that Asai Kei was getting closer.

She had expected him to start with the tetrapods. If not there, then he would look on the rooftop of the southern middle school building.

But he hadn't.

He had unhesitatingly headed straight for the place she was.

He really never was wrong.

*He's the only one... who actually understands me.*

He came closer with quiet footsteps. Like the approach of the night or the day. Great changes in the world always came quietly.

*I'm so scared of him.*

He was undoubtedly going to approach her with a gentle, outstretched hand. He was definitely going to try and save her.

And that was scary.

*I don't understand. I just don't.*

*Why am I this scared of being saved?*



"...Here?" Haruki Misora asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Asai Kei nodded. "I can't imagine her being anywhere else."

The apartment building they approached wasn't particularly large. It was an ordinary, familiar place. The place where Asai Kei lived.

Kei stepped onto the stairs almost unconsciously. They were the stairs he climbed every single day. He explained as he began walking up.

“Souma doesn’t think of herself as Souma Sumire right now.”

The southern rooftop of Nanasaka Junior High. The tetrapods piled up on the river bank. They were memorable places, alright. Memorable for the Souma Sumire that died two years ago. But not for the girl they were going to meet.

“This is the only place where we have a memory in common.”

Making curry together.

A girl crying in the bathroom, then eating curry with her afterwards.

Those were the only memories he shared with the current Souma Sumire who he had pulled from a photograph that summer. Granted, he had reset those events, so technically, she didn’t even have those memories.

*But she knows about them.*

Souma Sumire had spent countless hours gazing into the future. Her ability allowed her to know about time lost to resets. She had even abused her future sight to recreate curry recipes over and over in her mind, and she remembered each attempt. Of course, she would also remember the setting of that memory: a normal, one-room apartment.

Kei didn’t dislike stairs. Each and every one got you up to a higher point. Each offered the same rise in elevation. Even just a single step gave Kei a newer, higher vantage point over the town of Sakurada as he climbed up and up the stairs.

“How will we go about saving Souma Sumire?” Haruki asked.

That was something he genuinely didn’t know. “I can’t think of anything.”

“Really?”

“To be more accurate, I’m giving it thought, but I haven’t come across a solution yet.” He just didn’t know what would be best. “But I can’t afford to not see her. As far as I can tell, the best choice for now is to keep pushing forward, and see her face-to-face while sharing my genuine feelings with her.”

“Do you...” Haruki’s voice was quiet and modest, almost blending into the surrounding shadows. “Do you think that

the Souma Sumire we are headed for is the same person as the girl we knew two years ago?"

Asai Kei shook his head. "I don't think I could ever know that for certain." Maybe nobody could. "Is the me that I feel after a reset the same me as before it? Is the me I wake up as the same me that went to sleep? I don't really know." Ultimately, nobody could really be certain. They could only believe. There wasn't anything else to do. "But the thing is, Haruki... either way, the end result is the same."

"The same, you say?"

"The Souma we're going to see could be the one I've known since two years ago, or it could be a completely different Souma, born from an ability. Either way, my job is the same."

He would face her the same way, and tell her the same feelings.

Two sets of footsteps echoed out into the night sky. Their rhythm was very similar, yet there were slight, marked differences.

Haruki Misora's voice was delivered with the slightest of sighs. "If there were two of you, then we would have a simple solution."

Asai Kei once again shook his head. "No point thinking about that." It just wouldn't work.

*Even if there were two of me, both of them would only want to be with you.* He thought that, but didn't put it into words.

They reached the top of the stairs. Before long, they would find Souma Sumire.

Kei walked down the landing, looking out at Sakurada. *I just want to act normal*, he thought. He didn't think he could pull it off, but he wanted to try. *I'm just a high schooler going out to see a friend.* That kind of mood would be nice. *And look, the moon is still so beautiful to look up at, just like every other night.*

Asai Kei stopped in front of the door that he returned to every day. He turned to the side, facing Haruki Misora. "Once this is all over, let's have a Kit-Kat together." He still had the red package in his pocket that Ukawa Sasane had left him.

"Did you say... a Kit-Kat?"

Kei smiled. "While we're having a chocolate break, we can plan out making curry together."

Haruki Misora nodded, her expression turning very serious. "We shall make the most delicious curry in the entire world."

"Mhm." As long as they were in the kitchen together, that would be easy.

Kei looked at his watch. 7:15 PM. Perfect timing.

"Haruki..." he began, loosening the strap of his watch. "Save."

24 hours had passed since the time Kei returned from the Sakurada with no abilities through a reset. It had been an exhausting 24 hours. Just like the last four months since July, and the last two years since that summer.

*But all that time has value, and I wouldn't replace it with anything else.* That time had gotten Asai Kei to where he was.

"7:15:20 PM," Haruki announced, her cell phone in one hand.

Kei slipped off his watch, shoving it in his pocket. Time was no longer important. "Alright, here we go."

Asai Kei unlocked his door and turned the knob with familiar, practiced motions.

By the time the door was opened, Haruki Misora had vanished from beside him. Not that it came as any surprise. No doubt it was what Souma Suimire wanted, and now, she was like Tytyl.

*I don't mind if it's just the two of us.*

Kei took off his shoes, walking into his room. It was dark inside, but the stunning moon shone outside his window. Only a sliver of its light was allowed through the closed curtains.

The light showed him someone crouched next to his bed, almost looking like a rolled-up blanket.

"You should've at least turned on the lights," Kei started, flicking the switch as he entered.

When the lights turned on, he felt as if he were in a new and unrecognizable space. Souma Sumire was curled on the

floor, hugging her knees in a small ball, like a stray cat left alone on a rainy day.

"Why... why did you come here?" Her gaze was fixed on her knees.

"This is my room. Where else would I go?"

"There's nothing for you all the way off in the dream world."

Kei shrugged. "Well, according to Tomoki, my job is to wipe away a girl's tears."

"I'm not even crying."

"Oh, really?"

"Nope."

"Well then, I'll stop your inner tears." It was embarrassing to say, but it was genuine nonetheless.

Actual flowing tears could be wiped away, but there was no magic that could stop the tears of someone's heart.

Kei headed to the kitchen. "I'll make some coffee. Don't have much else here, unfortunately."

But as he grabbed the kettle, Souma whispered, "Don't want any," in a tiny voice.

Just like that, the kettle he was holding disappeared without a trace. For the slightest moment, he could still feel its weight, but then that was gone, too.

He definitely couldn't do anything she didn't want.

Kei walked over to Sumire, sitting down next to her. She didn't even look up, only continuing to stare down at her knees.

It was so quiet. The only sounds were the hum of the fluorescent lights and her shallow breathing.

Silence was comfortable. Kei rather liked silence. But he knew he had to break it.

If logic would be enough to get through to her, then words might have been an option. He could just write down the main points on a notepad and call it a day. But things didn't work that way because, in the end, emotions made almost every decision. Not even a million words could break through that. He couldn't even trust the dictionary. He just

had to hope that his emotions could be effectively conveyed through sound.

To have a conversation, and to allow them to reach each other, Kei began speaking.

"There's been a lot on my mind lately. It's like when you can't sleep, and just stay up later and later. I have all these questions I can't answer, and my mind just goes through them over and over and over again."

He always ended up that way when he thought about abilities and Souma Sumire.

"Can you believe it? Just one girl makes it impossible for me to see the bigger picture. Instead, I end up feeling like I'm staring at these impossibly large, unmovable structures."

Perhaps there wasn't much of a difference between thinking about one girl and thinking of the whole world.

"I know." Souma answered, her head still bowed down. "Thinking of you makes me feel like I'm tackling the entire world at once. Maybe using 'the world' sounds exaggerated, or like something you'd hear in a fictional story, but... that's how it really is."

Any intelligent adult would know the difference between an individual and the world. The difference could be easily represented by a few formulas. That had to be the right way to approach those two topics.

*Meaning that I am entirely in the wrong here.*

Sometimes, or if he was being honest, most of the time, it was hard to appreciate the difference between hurting one person and hurting a larger group of people. Emotions always destroyed his perception. Eventually, even those distortions would become a natural part of his perceived reality.

"I want to grow into an adult," Kei admitted. "One who can understand the differences between those two concepts, and who doesn't always have to question them."

That much would be necessary to become capable of managing Sakurada's abilities. The capability to choose one option, discard the other, and keep moving forward.

"But that's not where I am right now. And I think it's okay for me to imagine you to be as big as the world right now."

Even naiveté had its place where it could be acceptable. Kei believed that even that could be used to save someone.

Souma neither confirmed nor denied his statement, so Kei continued. "I've been thinking a lot about rights recently. My rights to a single girl. My rights to the world. Really, they end up in the same place. What rights do I have to decide someone else's happiness for them? How far do I get to go? What happens when I make a mistake I can't take back and can't possibly take responsibility for? Makes me wonder if it's better to hold back out of fear of failure."

It always came back to him. Even when he thought he had an answer pinned down, given enough time the question would come to haunt him again.

Souma Sumire remained unmoving.

Kei could never handle girls who were staring down. They always looked ready to cry, and it made his heart hurt.

"Did you find an answer?"

Her voice was delivered like a judge bringing the gavel down. Kei was supposed to answer, but it was as though her question had already reached the final verdict. Of course, the question couldn't be answered, but someone had to answer. It was why Kei had come.

"I don't have rights over anyone. There's really nothing I can do about mistakes I can't take responsibility for. But even so, I have to keep moving forward."

Kei searched for the words that could reach the girl, words that would separate her from the world and define her relationship to it. He spoke slowly, thinking hard.

"Even if you're doubting, you still have to believe. Even when you have to give up on something, don't give up on everything. And then, you go. You walk ahead even if your steps are unsteady, and maybe you have to stop for a while, but you keep going."

There was no other way forward.

"Sometimes there's not an answer, but we still have to keep looking for it and refuse to give up."

Souma Sumire made her first movement. She shook her head, ever so slightly. "That's not an answer, Kei."

And she was right.

Kei took a deep breath. He thought about how he answered the unanswerable question of whether or not abilities ought to remain in Sakurada. It wasn't a logical answer. But he was once again facing an irrefutable fact.

He couldn't just leave a girl in that state. It went without saying.

Kei checked in on the pain in his chest. It was still bleeding, still throbbing. Paying close attention to it, he said, "I don't... think I can save you."

Asai Kei had been the primary reason for all of Souma Sumire's hurt. In fact, there was a way of looking at her tragedy such that it was entirely Asai Kei's fault.

*I'm the only person in the world who shouldn't be saving her.*

He could never save her. And yet.

"At the same time... I can still help define your happiness."

Even if he didn't have the right, he would keep on. Even if he couldn't take responsibility, he would push forward. He couldn't stop moving.

"I will find your happiness."

The girl shook her head again. "I don't have... anything like that."

Her voice was hoarse. He remembered that voice. It was the same one she spoke with at the bus stop, in the rain, two years before.

"Because... I made a mistake that I can't take back."

She spoke in sobs, without a single tear in her eye.

"I'm sorry. I... wanted to save you. I wished for your happiness. But... I'm so sorry. All I did was hurt you."

*Oh... that kind of mistake.*

*We're worrying about the exact same thing.*

Shouldering the burdens of problems with no solution. Trying to force an answer, doubting, giving up, making sacrifices, and yet still believing. They were scared of the exact same thing.

That realization finally gave him the words he wanted to say to her. He closely watched the girl as she sat there curled

in a ball. "There's only one thing that I can truly claim as my right. One thing that I can freely decide."

It was his own since birth, and he could hold onto it until the day he died.

*I am free to decide my own feelings.* That decision was the one thing he could hold with pride.

"I think that you, more than anyone else... have saved me."

*Hey, Souma. My chest still hurts.* With every second that passed, it only hurt more.

"Don't you doubt it for a minute. The happiness that you created for me is my true and real happiness."

*That's the only thing I have to believe.*

Asai Kei shut his eyes tightly. He wasn't crying, but he felt like he was beginning to fight back tears. "I promise... It's my true, real happiness."

Asai Kei was the one person in the world least qualified to save Souma Sumire.

But he was also the only person in the world who could affirm her to the level she deserved.

*What a selfish thing to think.*

The words that Souma Sumire needed to be told were somewhere deep in Asai Kei's heart. He had been looking for those words for a long time. Since before he ever met Souma Sumire. Since before ever coming to Sakurada, even.

And it was thanks to Souma that he could finally put to words the one thing he had always wanted.

In a way, they were words purely meant for Asai Kei. They were so personal that nobody else could really value them.

But he believed.

*Souma Sumire is someone who has truly accepted all of who I am.* She could empathize with him, all the way down to his heart of hearts. She had been through pain, suffering, and turmoil for all the same reasons he had.

*So even the words that I needed could resonate with her.*

They were words that had always been within him, and he had always believed them, but he was only recently starting to appreciate that even the smallest of sentiments had value.

“Everything that you’ve done has played a part in saving me. I’m grateful for every single thing you did. Don’t you ever think otherwise. Everything you said and every effort you made protected me, just as you wanted it to.”

Asai Kei continued to talk about his own egotistical version of the future, underhanded though it may have been. “You make me happy. I can face the future with a smile because of you. So please... keep helping me from here on out.”

The world had every kind of sadness, but it wasn’t without solace. It could offer a paradise that was too good to be true, warm places with happy rules that were secretly prepared for you.

*That’s what I’d always been looking for.* And now he finally understood. That paradise really did exist.

There was a place that could grant happiness with no downside, and it was right where he stood.

Because when it came down to it, to help someone was also to help yourself. Making someone happy and becoming happy were mutual events. When a hero saved someone, he was also saving himself. But it didn’t have to be that overstated. It could be a birthday present, a morning greeting, or even a handshake. As long as the other person smiled, it was enough.

*If I can use her power to smile, then maybe it can become her reason to smile, too.*

The world tended to be a place where too much happiness began to feel like a lie, or an issue waiting to be resolved. So Kei looked back at all his memories, every single one, and offered a smile from the bottom of his heart.

“Thank you. Because of you... I can be happy.”

He could tell her that undeniable truth with sincerity.

Souma Sumire’s shoulders started to shake. He wanted to wrap them up in a hug, but he couldn’t.

“It’s too bright,” she mumbled, her voice hoarse. In an instant, the room’s lights went out. She only looked up once all the lights were off.

Souma Sumire stared at Kei from the other end of the dark room. “Kei... no matter what happens, you’re always

you.” Her quiet voice trembled. “And that... hurts for me to watch.”

Asai Kei stood up, walking over to the window and throwing open the curtains.

The beautiful moon’s light made Souma Sumire’s eyes sparkle.

Forcing on another smile, just like he always did, Kei said, “I knew it. You are crying.”

There was no magic that could stop the tears of someone’s heart.

But actual flowing tears could be wiped away.

He may not have had any rights to her, and he certainly couldn’t hug her, but he firmly believed that she deserved to have her tears wiped away, too.

Asai Kei walked up directly next to the girl. He bent down, holding her cheek in his right hand as he stroked under her eyes with his thumb. Her cheeks were still warm from those tears.

“Look into my future.” He was scared, but he kept speaking. “Don’t worry about the ending that you defined for yourself. Look into the real future. One month from now, six months, a year. I know that somewhere in that future, you’ll find a place where I can stand and see you smiling. Look for it.”

Souma Sumire was still crying, held in his hand, her mouth screwing up into strange shapes. “Look, Kei. If you want that, then I’m sure that would happen. But I’m... scared of that future. A future where I can’t have you, but I still can smile. You know?”

He didn’t know. But he couldn’t just shut her down, either.

Then, her expression changed. She became more like the Witch. Like someone forcing themselves to show a fake emotion.

Souma Sumire showed a smile that was nothing like a smile. “But that’s okay.” Her expression would have been eerie under most circumstances, but she had chosen her words

carefully. Instead, her smile was contradictory, yet innocent. "I'll do as you say, as long as you follow one condition."

A condition.

"Really? Well, if I'm capable, then I'll do it."

Souma Sumire's oddly beautiful smile never dimmed. Tears glistened on her cheeks. "It's simple. You'll play a game with me."

She leaned forward. Kei's hand was still on her cheek. Their intensely close eyes met. They were close enough for Kei to feel her breath as she spoke.

"If you win, then I'll follow you. Even into a future where I'm sure I'll become capable of smiling naturally before long."

That wasn't the kind of outcome that should be left up to a game. But Kei stopped himself from objecting.

*I trust Souma Suimre.* He didn't even know what it would mean to doubt her.

Kei dropped his hand from her cheek. "Okay. What if you win?"

"Then you'll do as I say. I'll be the one deciding our futures."

Kei watched the girl, bathed in the moonlight. Her beauty was so striking as to almost make her look inhuman. "And what kind of future would you have for me?"

Her head tilted ever so slightly. "You will give up everything that you've been so attached to for so long, Kei. You will become mine. We'll live here, in the dream world. We'll live our own quiet lives together, like two little stones."

It went without saying that those were unacceptable conditions.

She did nothing but stare into his eyes for a long, long time. The silence became deafening. His ears began to hurt. For just a moment, Asai Kei held his breath.

He thought about her intentions. He couldn't be certain, but he thought he was close to the truth.

He exhaled, nodding. "Okay. So, what kind of game are we playing?"

She didn't break eye contact, but while her eyes remained unchanged, her smile vanished. It was like all the color had

drained away from the world, taking her expressions along with it.

"You haven't said my name once since coming into this room, you know. You're probably trying to be considerate. I get that. But..." Her voice alone retained color. It was a cool color, like the sound of quiet sobbing. "Please, Kei... say my name."

Souma Sumire. A duplicate girl that was pulled from a photograph. A girl made to be a Swampman. A girl constructed by someone else. The second Witch. The second Nameless System.

A girl with tears running down her cheeks who didn't even know her own name.

"If you can say my name right... then you win."

*Yeah. I should've known.*

This time around, he could understand her.

*This is just how sad she is.* So beautiful, yet so sad.

Asai Kei drew in a breath, preparing to say the girl's name.



Asai Kei touched the doorknob. Instantly, his body vanished.

*Souma Sumire has separated Kei and I.*

A part of Haruki Misora felt regretful. She wondered if she should have suggested that they hold hands.

With no other options, she touched the cold doorknob herself. The door was already unlocked, and somehow, that told her all she needed to know about why she was there.

She pulled the door open.

The room lights weren't on, but a faint glow spread throughout the room regardless. Haruki removed her shoes, pressing forward.

Moonlight shone through the window. Illuminated in that light was Souma Sumire, sitting atop the bed. She had her hands clasped in front of her chest, as if she was making a prayer to God. She turned her gaze towards Haruki, offering

a smile that was just as strange as it was beautiful. "Good evening, Haruki. You're late."

Haruki stopped at the room's entrance. "Good afternoon, Souma Sumire. What do you mean to imply by saying that I am late?"

"What do you think I mean?"

An idea struck Haruki, and she pulled her cell phone out of her pocket.

She had saved at 7:15 PM as per Kei's orders. From her perspective, it had only been a minute or so since then. But according to the time on her phone's monitor, it had been nearly 45 minutes.

*I must have lost consciousness for 30 minutes or so.* Whether it was closer to sleep, or even disappearing from the world entirely, Haruki couldn't know. Perhaps she had just lost all memory of the past 30 minutes.

Either way, it didn't matter.

"Have you met with Kei?" Haruki asked.

"Mhm. We had a nice talk."

"And where is he now?"

"Here in my hands."

Haruki's natural assumption was that she was making some kind of metaphorical statement. But she couldn't stop the curiosity needling in her chest from watching Souma Sumire's hands, which had remained clasped in front of her chest.

"Please open your hands."

Still smiling, the other girl tilted her head. "Are you serious?"

"Do it."

Souma Sumire opened her hands. She kept them together with her palms up, as if trying to scoop water.

In her hands was a black pebble. It was quite similar to the pebble known as the MacGuffin.

"What is that?" Haruki demanded.

Souma Sumire raised the corners of her mouth. "Kei and I made a promise. We played a game, and if he lost, he would become mine." She looked down at the pebble in her hands

with clear amusement. "And he lost the game. So now he's here, with me."

She was lying. She had to be. "That is impossible," Haruki denied with all her strength.

Souma Sumire tilted her head. "Why? I have the same powers as Tyltyl right now. I could turn him into a little stone if I wanted."

"I am aware of that."

"Then what, you think Kei could never lose?"

That wasn't the issue. "You would never wish to do something like that, Souma Sumire."

Souma loved Asai Kei, perhaps even more than herself. Asai Kei was number one in her world.

But the girl's smile never dimmed. "That's quite the assumption, claiming that I'm really Souma Sumire."

She suddenly shifted the pebble to one hand and, with a wave of her arm, tossed the pebble towards Haruki.

Haruki's breath caught in her throat. Her entire line of sight was diminished to a tiny parabola in the air. She reached out with her whole body towards the pebble, losing her footing and tumbling down in the process, but still managing to catch it.

Laughter floated through the room. "Well, isn't that something? If that pebble isn't actually Asai Kei, then what's with all the panic?" Her laughter sounded genuine, as if she truly found the situation amusing. "Listen here, Haruki Misora. That stone is Asai Kei. He can't see anything, and he can't hear. He can't talk or reach out his hands. But he can think. That stone holds Asai Kei's consciousness."

*Why?*

"Ah, you want to know why I did this? Then fine, I'll tell you." Souma crossed her legs, putting her chin in her hands. "A stone can't sleep. That means it can't leave the dream world. He will remain trapped here, forever. But not you. You will wake up, and have a very difficult time trying to get back. And while I'm here, I have all the power of a god."

Haruki Misora looked up at Souma Sumire.

Souma Sumire looked down upon Haruki Misora.

“Give up. Asai Kei is mine.”

*Oh, I see.* In that kind of situation, Kei would have smiled. At that thought, Haruki did. She bent up the corners of her mouth, smiling so much like he did.

Haruki Misora stood up. Now Haruki was looking down. “You will have to forgive me for not choosing my words carefully from here on out.”

Souma frowned ever so slightly, her face shifting to a somewhat lonely expression. “Well, looks like our Haruki Misora has almost become human.”

“Two years can do that to a person.”

Souma Sumire nodded. “Very well. Not like you have to be picky and choosy around me, anyway.”

“In that case...” Haruki Misora glared at Souma Sumire. “This is completely ridiculous. You cannot possibly own Asai Kei like this. And you know that, which is why you let me into this room.”

There wasn’t any point in unlocking the front door. If she wanted to play god and flaunt her magic powers, then she would have just kicked anybody who got in the way out of the dream world.

If Souma Sumire truly owned Asai Kei...

*Then she would never have wanted to see me.* It was pointless.

“You are doing no more than throwing a tantrum. You think that sitting around and sulking will get you what you want.”

Souma Sumire shook her head. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

As if she didn’t understand. *You’re smarter than me, and I get it.*

If she really couldn’t understand, it was only because she didn’t want to understand. She was running away from reality.

Haruki Misora held the stone up to her face. “Something like this would never satisfy you. You just want Kei, right? So you were hoping that I would simply hand him over.”

Souma Sumire was quiet for a while. Then, she started chuckling softly. In between her laughs, she said, "I see. That's a pretty effective strategy."

Her laughs began to sound like choked sobs. Her shoulders were shaking as if with silent tears. "I mean, that just makes sense, right? After everything I've done. I devoted my life and even my death to him, and if I started sulking, he wouldn't just leave me alone, right? It's obvious that he would follow me all the way into the dream world and reach out his hand to me, isn't it?"

The girl illuminated in the moonlight looked so beautiful, and yet so inhuman. She looked more like a creation designed to appear human.

"Maybe all of this boils down to being a ploy where I tried to take him from you. I mean, if I really turned him into a stone, you wouldn't just let him stay like that. He's the only person special to you, more important than yourself, and if it was for him, you could convince yourself to leave."

Her shoulders stopped trembling, but the smile had never left her face. It remained splotted along her features, like the grin of an evil witch. "All that said, give me Kei." She slowly extended out her right hand. "I'll lift his curse."

Haruki Misora tightly gripped her right hand, wrapping her left around it protectively. *I don't want to.* She never wanted to give it up.

"Did you know?" She closed her eyes, holding the stone before her chest in both hands. "In the past, I was capable of using my ability all by myself." That had been true before the summer two years ago.

*I thought my ability had no value back then.* She could use it, but nothing would ever change. She could never truly take away anyone's tears, so her ability was reduced to being useless in her mind.

*But I still used my ability to follow my rules.* She could use her ability without having to follow his instruction.

Then everything changed when Souma Sumire died. She used a reset, and Souma Sumire died in a world where she had previously lived. And Asai Kei was hurt.

*I couldn't use my ability of my own volition after that.*

She hated the thought of the same thing happening again. She didn't want the only boy who would remember both before and after a reset to get hurt again.

*...No, wait. That was inaccurate.*

If she was really concerned about him being hurt from using resets, following his commands to use them made absolutely no sense. After all, if more problems were to occur, then he would only be hurt more.

Put simply, she was just a coward.

*I was scared that he wouldn't like me.* Scared that she would do something herself, screw up, and make him hate her. The thought of the singular, most important person in her world hating her was unbearable.

She lacked the courage to even try, being reduced to nothing more than a cowardly child.

"And what, now you can reset by yourself?" Souma Sumire's voice echoed. Her tone was sharp, provoking.

"I can." She could use her ability, and bear the responsibility of it.

Haruki Misora knew it was time to accept the burden that she had been shoving onto the boy all this time. She made up her mind.

*I can use my ability.*

An ability was like breathing. It wasn't learned from someone else, it was done by starting with the belief that it could be accomplished. If she had confidence in her capability, then she could use her ability.

She imagined Kei's voice coming from behind, telling her, "Reset."

Haruki Misora opened her eyes.

But then, the very moment before she was going to use her ability...

Her eyes landed on Souma Sumire's face. She took in the other girl's screwed-up mouth and the facial features making up her expression.

"What's wrong now?" the girl asked.

A quiet voice rose from inside Haruki's chest.

*This is weird.* Something didn't fit.

Then she finally realized what was happening.

"Souma Sumire..." Haruki Misora began to understand her. It should have been obvious, but it had taken her so long to realize.

She lost all her strength. "I am sorry," she mumbled impulsively.

All her practice was paying off. She could see the difference.

"This whole time... you really have only ever thought about Kei."

Souma Sumire's facial expression and screwed-up mouth were a crying face.

Her cheeks may have been dry, but that expression was meant for shedding tears.



Souma Sumire knew.

The girl wouldn't be able to use her own Resets. Not that she couldn't, she just wouldn't.

She heard Haruki Misora's voice.

"I am sorry."

*You really shouldn't apologize. This is all because of my plan anyway.*

"This whole time... you really have only ever thought about Kei."

*No. It was all about me. This is what I wanted most.*

Souma Sumire fell down backwards, lying down upon the bed.

She was so tired. She covered her eyes with her right hand, as even the moonlight had become unbearably bright.

She struggled to push her voice out. "Well... it's not like I could avoid seeing this future."

Was it all about trying to get Asai Kei for herself? Did she turn him into a stone to try and negotiate with Haruki Misora?

Of course not.

"You've gotten two whole years with him. Not even you would be inhuman enough to just give him up, obviously. Even if I did have some kind of master plan to that end, Kei would have just seen through it, obviously."

*And he would always prioritize you over me... obviously.*

*Oh, now I want to cry again.* But she also didn't want Haruki Misora to see her in tears.

"It's not like I'm incredibly good at planning all of this out, or anything. I can't stop myself from having feelings."

She was just there, being knocked around by her own feelings. She was always getting swept away by so many things out of her control.

"I am sorry," Haruki Misora apologized, again. "I have acted horrendously. I should not have doubted you in that way."

Haruki's voice made it obvious that she was crying. Souma couldn't help but envy her ability to cry openly.

"Oh, whatever. If you're not fooled, then it doesn't matter anyway."

Souma had genuinely wanted to fool Haruki all the way through to the end, resulting in a reset. But it didn't work. She had looked through numerous futures during conversations with Kei, and there just wasn't a way to make it happen.

*No matter what I did, right before the very end, I was always found out.* She always got busted as just a subpar actor.

"I should have known that you would never do something like turn Kei into a stone."

Of course not. That wouldn't mean anything. In every case, Souma Sumire only wanted to protect Asai Kei. Taking something away from him just wasn't a choice she ever considered.

The stone was just a stone. The little pebble known as the MacGuffin that she nabbed from his desk drawer.

"You did this for me. You lied so that I could become capable of using my power of my own accord again, right?"

Souma Sumire shook her head. "It wasn't for you."

Kei would be taking on the responsibility of every ability within Sakurada. If Haruki Musora really wanted to be by his

side, then she at least needed to be able to handle her own responsibilities.

"You can't just let him protect you forever. He's trying to save the entire world, and you're the only one that can save him."

Souma tried to think of it as a rite of passage. Not for Kei, but for herself. Unless she made space for Haruki Misora, then she wouldn't be able to move forward.

"I don't want to be by his side unless I can be held responsible for my own ability," Souma concluded.

She heard footsteps. They were very close by, and she realized that Haruki Misora was approaching her.

"I must apologize. I..." Haruki sat down on the bed, right beside her. "I have always envied you."

Souma Sumire jolted her right hand, which had been covering her eyes, and looked up. Who envied who now? "I think I should be the one saying that."

Haruki Misora shook her head. Her face was still streaked with tears. "Do you know what my ideal is?"

Souma didn't want to answer, but she did anyway. "To be close to Kei." She couldn't really think of anything else.

But the other girl shook her head. "Not quite. To be smart, have an excellent ability, and for him to always rely on me. That is what my ideal would be." She looked over at Souma. "Souma Sumire... I always wanted to be like you."

Souma couldn't stop herself from smiling. It was so ridiculous. "Well, Haruki Misora, I always wanted to be like you."

To be Asai Kei's ideal girl two years ago, without having to put up an act. To be the one he was always watching, even if she had no ability.

And over the course of two years, he had gently guided her into becoming a more normal girl. Because for some reason, the less that she resembled the ideal Haruki Misora of two years prior, the more Asai Kei loved her.

*I wanted to be like you. A normal girl that he could fall in love with.*

It had been her forever ungranted dream.

"Think it would have been better if our positions were reversed?" she asked on a whim.

What if Souma Sumire was Haruki Misora, and Haruki Misora was Souma Sumire? Would that have been preferable?

Haruki's face turned serious as she shook her head. "I think if the situation were reversed, then everyone would only end up with one-sided longing for the other."

She was right. It probably would go that way.

*We're all really selfish when it comes down to it.* But to think that there were such kind places in the world where it was okay to be selfish.

Haruki Misora was no longer crying. She rubbed her eyes to get rid of her tear stains, then smiled. She bent up the corners of her mouth, so much like Asai Kei would. "I have decided."

"On what?"

"Someday, I will be worthy of being by Kei's side in the same way you are. If both of us are competing for the same spot, then my selfishness can be satisfied."

Souma Sumire made a face. "Well, that's a cheap shot."

"Indeed it is."

Lying down, Souma Sumire couldn't help but smile. It was a forced smile, yet it was still half genuine. "He just asked me to keep on helping him in the future."

Even small things like that could genuinely save someone from the kind and cruel places of the world.

"I'm still the better partner for his business acumen, so I'm not just gonna give that position away."

Souma Sumire closed her eyes.

"Where is Kei right now?" Haruki asked.

"He already woke up." More accurately, she kicked him out so he wouldn't interfere in her talk with Haruki.

Souma felt the other girl lay down beside her on the bed.

"In that case, it is time for us to go as well."

Instead of a nod, Souma took a deep breath in. His scent coming from the pillow faintly tickled her nose.

Souma Sumire relaxed.

It was time to sleep, so that she could wake up.



# Epilogue

In the brief moment before she woke up, she remembered.

“Souma Sumire.” It was his voice. “No matter what happened, you are still Souma Sumire.”

She had rigged the game, of course. No matter what name he ended up calling her, she would accept it.

The Witch. The Nameless System. He could have called her a completely random name, and she would have gone by it for the rest of time after. But she also knew those other outcomes weren’t possible.

“You’ve always been Souma Sumire. Once you came out of the photo, you heard Tomoki’s ability.”

*Can you hear my voice?* Souma Sumire’s message from two years prior.

It was so strange. “Why... do you believe that?” From the very start, he had acted as though it were obvious she had heard that voice.

“Because I know how you think.” Asai Kei smiled. It was childish and showy. “I mean, c’mon, Souma. If his voice really hadn’t reached you, then... A kind person like you wouldn’t say that it was up to me.”

That was a terrible reason. He could be a real idiot at times.

“After everything I’ve done to you... doesn’t it bother you?” How much pain and suffering was it fair to expect someone else to take?

*I’m not worth trusting after all that. That goes without saying.*

But his confident smile never wavered. “Of course I know what you’ve done. You’ve helped me and protected me. That’s all you’ve ever done for me. I have every reason to believe in you.”

Souma Sumire closed her eyes.

*Oh, man. This is why I didn’t want to see him. Why I had been so scared.*

She could feel a smile rising from the depths of her heart. The kind that made her forget about her guilt and irresponsibility towards him, and actually begin to forgive herself.

“But the thing is, Kei... until you decide, I’m not able to believe in myself.”

Not even hearing Nakano Tomoki’s ability would be enough to convince her that she was Souma Sumire. She had known that.

*I planned out everything, even preying on my own weakness.* Her emotions were so mixed up that she didn’t know what was what anymore. She was crying before she even knew what was happening. She wasn’t sure what those tears meant, exactly, but she knew that she had to apologize to him. She couldn’t smile yet.

“I’m so sorry, Kei. I made you carry my burdens again.”

*Say my name.* She knew what that really meant. *Tell me who I am. Give me an identity.* And now he was responsible for every single day that she went by Souma Sumire. All of Souma Sumire’s joys and sorrows were his burden to carry.

“That’s all I’ve ever done... this whole time.” Every single day of the last two years. She was so underhanded. So stupid, so selfish, so pathetically weak. “I kept pretending that it was for you, but I think that from the very beginning... I only ever planned this out for myself.”

It didn’t matter what kind of tactics she had to use. She just wanted him to see her face before going to bed. To think

about her for a long time, longer than he ever considered Haruki Misora.

But there, in the center of her tear-blurred vision, Asai Kei was smiling. Yet it was a different smile than before. It was a fearless smile, where only the corners of his mouth bent upwards.

"Well, Souma... you may not know this about me, but I'm incredibly selfish."

Her heart immediately rejected the notion. No. She had always known that. Because to him, kindness and selfishness were one and the same.

And he was so kind. Kinder than anybody else.

"Two years ago, when I decided I would bring you back to life, I accepted the reality that I would have to bear all the responsibility for that. It wasn't really something for me to decide, but I did anyway."

"I know that." She had known from their very first meeting atop the tetrapods. She had known, and that drove all her decisions. "But come on, Kei. Everyone has burdens they don't want to carry, things they just want to leave behind."

He was just a first-year high schooler. The age where it was considered the most acceptable to be selfish, not in the way he thought, but in the actual sense of it.

"Even if it's just a little too heavy, I think that's the way it should be." He stared at her intently. He never looked away. His powerful eyes gazed into her. "My ability lets me go on without having to leave anything behind. That was all that I wanted, to move forward while carrying everything."

*But I knew that. I knew all of that.*

About his kindness. About how he was too sincere to choose her, even as a lie. And about the guilt that he had to live with as a result of those two factors. His sincere wishes crushed by the weight of everything else pushed upon him.

*I've never seen anyone more beautiful.*

He was so consistent. A truth that was never distorted, even to the point that it was sad.

The moonlight shone upon Asai Kei.

Souma Sumire rubbed her eyes. She couldn't keep looking through distorted vision forever. It was time to stop crying. She had to be able to look directly at Asai Kei.

Souma Sumire wiped away her tears.

When she woke up, he was the first thing she saw.

He was illuminated by the moonlight as he had been in the dream world, more beautiful than any fiction could portray, and yet real. He sat on a metal folding chair, looking at her.

"Good morning, Souma," he greeted.

Souma Sumire quickly flipped her gaze up to the ceiling, suddenly feeling embarrassed. She watched the white hospital ceiling above the bed.

"Were you watching my face as I slept?"

"Should I not have? I thought you looked rather pretty."

"I guess it's just as well. Not even I've been able to see it, actually."

Souma Sumire sat up in bed. She spotted her shoes placed by the side of the bed, slipping them on before standing up, finally calming down as she pressed the wrinkles out of her clothes. "So, this is purely a question of curiosity. There's no ulterior motive, and I'm not placing any blame here."

"Ok. What's that?"

"Why are you beside me, and not Haruki?"

"Well, I had two reasons." He calmly nodded. "For one, I just had a feeling that you would wake up first."

"Why?"

"I don't really know. Maybe it's just a miracle that I was right." He delivered the line like it was a light joke, but even that sounded earnest coming from him.

He was the kind of guy where confronting the Administration Bureau over an ability was just business as usual, but it was a miracle to pick the person who woke up first.

*Well, as far as I'm concerned, having him be beside me is a miracle.* At least she wouldn't wake up in a bad mood from waking up to see him staring at Haruki. Better to be embarrassed than to be sulking. "What's the second reason?"

He pointed at the window. "The moon is really pretty tonight."

"Huh?"

Asai Kei took a look around the hospital room, and Souma Sumire followed his gaze. The room had four hospital beds in total, two by the window and two further in. One of them was still surrounded by curtains.

"You were sleeping by the window, and Haruki wasn't."

*Well, that's something.* The lovely moon was making its own miracle happen. It wasn't much, and it could be easily overlooked, but it was a miracle nonetheless.

Souma Sumire stretched, watching the moon outside of the window. She had only been asleep for a few hours, but it had felt so much longer than that.

She hesitated for a moment on whether or not to share what she was thinking, but made up her mind and just did it. "Oh, right." Trying to act as naturally as possible, Souma Sumire turned towards Asai Kei. "I've... lied to you in the past."

Quite a few times, actually. It was something she wanted to make sure she rectified that night.

"How so?" Asai Kei smiled, tilting his head gently.

Souma Sumire pointed an index finger at his chest. "The thing is, I actually really hate communicating, or anything indirect like that. From now on, Kei... I just want you to listen to my voice."

The boy's face shifted to a strange show of surprise. Then, he smiled. He looked genuinely happy to have heard her say that. "Okay. You got it, that's what I'll do."

Souma Sumire nodded, trying to look as serious as she could manage. It took everything she had to push down her smile, but she wanted the moment to be serious. "Very well, then. I must be off."

"You're leaving?"

"I really don't like the idea of seeing Haruki's face right now."

"Where will you go?"

It was only when she was asked that she realized.

She had absolutely no idea where she would go. Her mind was in complete shambles. But it would be a terrible idea to try and go back to that abandoned hotel.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter. If I wander around aimlessly for long enough, then I’m sure The Index or someone will come and pick me up.” She had a hard time believing that the Administration Bureau would just leave a person with future sight to do as they pleased.

She walked to the hospital room’s exit, Kei on her tail. She figured he was probably trying to see her off.

Souma stopped before the white door. Looking back, she stated, “Just one more thing.”

The rather childish tilt of his head could be seen by the moonlight.

“Make sure you’re careful with onions. They’ll burn fast if you don’t keep a close eye on them.”

Unfortunately, she couldn’t see his expression well with his back to the light. But somehow, she was certain that he was smiling.

“Okay. I’ll be careful. Thanks.” He held out his hand. “So then, Souma, I look forward to our future together.”

Souma Sumire let out the breath she had been holding in, also pushing her hand out. “So do I, Kei. See you later.”

They were too far away to embrace, but they were at just the right distance to shake hands.

It was tragic in its own way, but she had to admit that it was worth at least a spoonful of happiness.



As Souma Sumire left, Asai Kei turned on his heel. It was time to take his own first step.

A set of curtains opened, and Haruki Misora popped out. “Has she gone?” she asked. She looked like a child playing hide-and-seek.

“Yeah. You woke up about halfway through or so, right?” Kei crossed the room, sitting down in a metal folding chair.

"I did," Haruki answered, nodding. She moved to stand at Kei's left.

"Why didn't you come out?"

"No particular reason."

"No particular reason?"

"I felt that seeing Souma Sumire would be somewhat embarrassing."

"Well, she didn't really want to see you either, for what it's worth."

It at least seemed like they didn't hate each other. Perhaps, if just a few things were different, they could have even become good friends.

Haruki Misora stared straight at Kei. "Do you wish for Souma Sumire and I to get along?"

That was quite a question. Kei couldn't just nod or shake his head for something like that. "Well, you at least don't want anything bad to happen to her, right?"

Haruki nodded, her expression serious. "Yes. That is absolutely true."

"And if she was in trouble, you would help her, right?"

"Most likely, if it were in my power to do so."

"Then that's good enough." Perhaps not the best, but it worked.

Haruki Misora smiled, looking entirely at peace. "That makes me glad. I do not know what I would have done if you asked me to be her friend."

"You don't want that?"

"I think it is best for her and I to have a slight amount of hostility towards each other. That seems natural, not to mention comfortable."

"You really think so?"

"I do." Haruki Misora smiled, showing a rare flash of mischief in her expression. "I do not think you would understand."

*Well, I guess that's her version of natural. Perhaps a bit odd in terms of wording and expression, but natural. I like that.*

"So then, Kei, does this mean that everything is over?"

"For now, yeah."

It would never be over in the truest sense. Problems were never-ending. But they could at least afford something of a break. The past few days in particular had been quite hectic. It was time for a chocolate break, and to fulfill some wonderful promises.

"In that case, we should make dinner together," Haruki proposed.

"Mhm. We'll go shopping for it tomorrow."

"I have one more thing to add." Haruki Misora walked around to the back of the metal folding chair, placing her hands on both of Kei's shoulders.

Kei looked up into her face. "What's that?"

"I think I will begin growing my hair out."

"Sounds great, but why?"

"I remembered something earlier." A smile spread across her face. It was a natural, gentle, and altogether new kind of smile. "You once told me that my long hair was beautiful. Do you remember that?" she asked, tilting her head.

Asai Kei looked out the window, feeling a bit embarrassed. The moon was as beautiful as ever, shining down upon Sakurada from the sky.

No doubt it was somewhere very far away. In some cold, lonely place where it couldn't even shine on its own. Instead, it looked elsewhere from afar, completely unaware of its own beauty.

But the moon was unquestionably the most beautiful thing in the night sky. Its brilliant, noble light shone the brightest.

He thought for a moment about the girl that was so much like it. Then he suddenly felt silly, closing his eyes.

Then he finally answered her question. "Of course. I pride myself on a good memory, you know."

The girl's small hands were still on his shoulders. His continual wish was that he would never forget a single thing, all the way down to their weight and warmth.



And so, the girl watched the boy.

He was a very complicated, yet very simple boy.

He was always moving forward, perhaps standing in place for a moment, but never letting anything stop his continual forward momentum. He was always thinking, sometimes letting fear catch him with worry, but never allowing himself to give up. If he happened to make a mistake, he would start over, redoing it the right way.

But there was nothing exceptional about any of that.

It was no different than a child regretting their failure. No less genuine than the sadness a person felt once they realized they had lost or broken something. No more real than the wish to be happier as a result of those events.

Such natural and obvious desires were his true nature.

The Sakurada Reset. A holy revival. Changing the world in the right way.

At the end of the day, that was all he desired. To carry all sorts of hardship, moving forward and seeing both dreams and reality in places where neither could normally be seen.

The girl walked forward, matching the pace of the boy. Their rhythm was so much like the ticking hands of a clock.

With each step, the scenery before them changed in subtle, but very real ways. It was possible that some day, the boy and the girl could be standing in entirely different places.

But no matter where she was, the girl would always be watching a narrative unfold. The narrative that came from the single prayer that every obvious and even childish emotion could be remembered forever.

The narrative of a boy who never forgot yesterday, carrying that prayer into tomorrow.



## Afterword

Originally, *Sakurada Reset* was published from 2009-2012 under Kadokawa's Sneaker line of books. The series you just completed was republished through Kadokawa with several additions and corrections. As I thought through the republishing, I considered all sorts of edits to the text, but in the end I kept the story as it was while only changing the more detailed writing expressions to suit my current tastes. By no means do I want to reject the book as I wrote it for the Sneaker publication, but as long as I was editing it, I felt that being honest to the book meant putting the best I had into the current version. Were the revisions a success? A failure? Maybe it's not for me to say, but at the very least, I had a lot of fun with the process.

*Sakurada Reset* was my debut work, and the series in which I by far learned the most about writing novels. Every single book helped me discover more about crafting sentences, constructing a story, and overcoming(or avoiding) obstacles that got in my way and made me feel hopelessly stuck. I used to say that this series was everything I ever learned jammed into one package, but perhaps it's more true to say that everything I ever learned from this series continues to grow and flourish in the form of each new book I write.

This series is the narrative of a boy who aspires to be God, and works to realize all his ideals despite being unable to be-

come God. Put another way, it's the narrative of a girl who cut her hair, until she began to grow it out again. Put yet another way, it's the narrative of a girl who lied for the sake of a boy, until she could admit that what she had said was a lie. All of these narratives were written from the set of values that I had believed to only be natural when I was a child. I still believed in them when I was writing the Sneaker publication of *Sakurada Reset* as a 24-year-old, and that has yet to change even now. So this series is themed around something that feels incredibly natural to me, something that I wouldn't trade for the world.

Thank you so very much for reading this series to completion. I tried putting together various words that I know in as thoughtful a way as I could manage. What did you think of it?

If even a sentence of this novel was to your liking, then nothing could make me happier.

Kouno Yutaka, February 2017

## Messages from the translation team

**ShwampBam, Translator** - In May of 2023, I had said that the Plastic Memories visual novel would remain my longest project, that I wasn't interested in translating novels because it would be too hard, and that I really liked the Sakurada Reset anime. Now, in January 2025, almost two years later, none of those statements have held up very well. Let's address them one at a time.

Although these could be famous last words, I do see this book series as actually being my longest and largest project. Although I certainly want to continue novel translation (and have no shortage of ideas for projects to pick up), at the moment I do not plan to pick up any series longer than three volumes. I'm more of a shorter series guy to begin with, and the new stage of life I'm finding myself in right now also would be better suited to spending a little less time on hobbies. I called this project my unpaid second job for a while, and that is very true, and I had a harsh cycle of grinding the series only to massively burn out for a few weeks to a month at a time. I think a slower pace on smaller projects will help me keep up the work while not getting too overwhelmed with any individual story I decide to work on from here on out.

As it turned out, translating novels was in fact really hard. Really, really hard. Add to that my complete obsession with following correct syntax and writing rules for a small fan project that nobody was forcing me to work on, and you've got hours of time spent sweeping six volumes to make sure that the usage and translation of "sayonara" is consistently said as "goodbye" and that goodbye was not used for any other farewells, so it can remain special for the one snippet of conversation that acts as its payoff. That said, I think taking on such a daunting project actually pushed me to perform better in ways I wouldn't have otherwise. Volume 1 was rocky and, quite frankly, poorly executed. I literally rewrote almost the entire prologue at one point because my original version was horrendous. But it took till about volume 3 to really get my skills and capabilities to level out, and the fact that this was one big project pushed me to go back and fix those previous problems so the series as a whole could retain consistency and quality. If they had been three individual volume projects, I likely wouldn't have bothered to resurrect an old series just for a few patches, and that could have marred the overall quality of our project compendium moving forward by having such blatant skill curve blemishes.

On top of all that, going back to check the anime at various points was excruciating. I haven't been this upset at a supposed "adaptation" since reading the Toradora novels. I mean, I guess it's just surprise surprise, another adaptation did a poor job, but man, it really got on my nerves. They couldn't even bother to get the blocking right in the final scenes, so little details like Souma sitting on Kei's bed as a power move get lost, or they just slap a boring-looking office phone in the Witch's room instead of the specifically described antique silver phone that is mentioned on several occasions. Those little things really matter to me, but I guess it's not like anyone will force me to watch the series again. If you enjoy the series, that's great and all, but I hope you can appreciate how much was truly lost when the show is mostly people talking, and

they still didn't bother to add in so many conversations that thickened out the plot and characters.

I could go on, but that's enough whining. On to the positives, because in this translator note, there will in fact be several.

I loved working on these books. The story, characters, dialogue, foreshadowing, just everything was so well done. I felt like I really got to know our main characters, and truly understand them. The abilities felt so fleshed-out and thought through, with several interesting and creative uses for them that showed Kouno actually cared about how they interacted with the world, and not just the plot or the singular scene. Little changes in Haruki's speech at times, Kei slowly maturing and moving towards new growth, and Souma's tragic and insightful interludes. I'll be up front and say my favorite part of the story was volume 5. Isolation is the theme that I always resonate the strongest with due to my past negative proclivities, and writing Mytyl's monologues as she succumbed to the world that she created for herself, yet could never be truly satisfied by, reminded me so heavily of the life that I had once lived. But that scary step of reaching out and trusting someone else really does make all the difference.

Onto the thanks. As always, a massive, oversized, incalculable thank you to Shaggy. He once again changed a project from being just a few lines of English slapped on a Japanese aesthetic to a full-on, legitimate translation. Personally, I always prefer reading volume compilations over keeping a constant, page-by-page internet connection, so I wanted to make sure that was prioritized in my releases. Shaggy went on and did the impossible like he always does, learning everything along the way yet providing a product of ridiculous quality that's more than I could ever ask for. If you liked anything about the compilations or cover designs, make sure to let him know, because he deserves all the credit in the world.

Another shoutout to ShadeSlayer for his proofreading. Both of us were very excited for this project, and he really helped smooth down some of the bumps on the road. I always like to have someone checking my work, and he knows how to correct me even when I don't want to hear it, making the end result better than I could have done alone. He also served as my vent when I wanted to whine about how bad the anime adaptation was, so everyone in the discord server be grateful.

Lastly, thank you for reading. I mostly started these translation projects so that I could personally get to read them, and if someone else enjoyed it along the way, then cool. But to actually see numbers go up as people who cared about this specific project joined the server and looked at the website was a new one. I'm glad that I wasn't the only one excited to read through this series, and that I got to provide something that others could look forward to. To those who've been here from volume 1, thanks for putting up with such a rocky start, and to those who joined later, thanks for enjoying the series alongside me!

My DMs are always open on Discord, and join our server if you want more updates for our current and future projects! I don't really have any other socials, but if you see a Shwamp-Bam anywhere, it's probably me. Please let us know if you enjoyed reading, even a single comment means the world to me. I've already got the next novel I want to work on in mind, and though it will be a big change of pace, I'm very excited for what new challenges may lie ahead.

Until next time!

**Shaggy, Compiler** - Wow, does time fly! Back in July 2023, Shwamp asked if I could create English covers and compile EPUB and PDF versions for his translation. Much like with the Plastic Memories visual novel project, this was a first for me. Because of that, I had to learn how to compile a book for physical printing.

Some of the PhotoShop skills I picked up while working on PlaMemo came in handy for editing the covers. Formatting the text was a bit of a learning curve since I decided to use Adobe InDesign. It took some time to get comfortable with the software, but once I set up paragraph styles and incorporated a few grep changes (thanks, letter “a”), importing text became pretty easy, when I didn’t have to reinstall InDesign, that is.

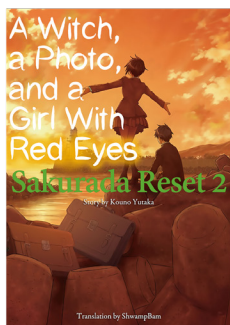
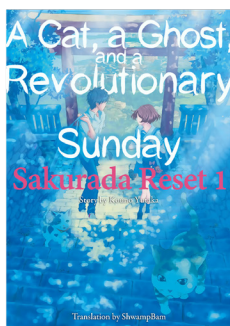
Once the PDFs were ready, creating the EPUB and making a few tweaks in Sigil was a piece of cake. One thing I like about the EPUBs is that they work perfectly on my 2011 Nook Simple Touch, even in the newer EPUB 3 format. Seeing the test prints of each volume that Shwamp made was also awesome, it’s pretty cool to see something I’ve had a hand in being made physically. I’m looking forward to seeing the final ones.

I’ve been scrolling back through my DMs with Shwamp and comparing my original edited covers to how they look now. Honestly, I’m really happy with how they turned out in the end. I’m also including some of my ugly, not ugly, early designs here, just because I can. (I’m gonna make this hard on myself when I make the EPUB). The first two weren’t good at all, I was throwing words on a page to make ‘em stick. Three, four, six, and seven had little to no changes from concept to final. While one, two and five had drastic changes from concept to final.

Concept



Final



On another note, I recently set up the Novels site under our own domain, using the novels subdomain on [islaexecutionsquad.com](https://islaexecutionsquad.com). While the main site doesn't have anything yet, I'm hoping to have something ready for it within the next few months. It'll have links to our manga projects and a revamped manual experience. Speaking of, has anyone here read the manual?

Lastly, shameless plug: follow me on BlueSky (@shaggy.islaexecutionsquad.com) and check out my GitHub (shaggythecat) for updates on other projects I've worked on or am currently involved in, if I post anything about 'em.

Now that it's finished, I can finally read Sakurada Reset.



**ShadeSlayer, Proofreader** - It's hard to say everything I feel as this project comes to a close. At this point of my life, this project has spanned a tenth of my lived experience. In some ways it feels like this project has been a witness to that time, seeing me through the good, the bad, and everything in-between. I get to reflect upon the ways that both I and the project have grown and matured. And all the while, I got to witness my best friend get to translate one of his favorite series, and grow in his own creativity and writing skills. It has been a pleasure getting to be a part of this, I hoped you enjoyed it as much as we did. I hope that you too can choose to live in a world where a child-like wish can become reality. See you in the next project!