

THE  
Empty Box  
AND  
Zeroth  
Maria  
6

EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO





"I'm  
in  
love  
with  
Daiya."

THE  
**Empty  
Box  
Zeroth  
Maria**  
6

**Kokone Kirino**

A girl in the same class as Kazuki. She's cheerful, outgoing, and a bit of a busybody. Daiya Oomine has been a childhood friend of hers since kindergarten, although now he is using a Box in an attempt to rule the world.

**EIJI MIKAGE**

ILLUSTRATION BY  
**TETSUO**





The Silver Screen of Broken Wishes

A Box that exists solely to destroy Daiya's Box, "Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime."  
Launches an assault upon Daiya's mind in the form of a movie screening to force him to renounce his wish.  
Once a target is drawn into the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes, there is no escape.

**Kazuki Hoshino**  
An extremely ordinary young man with a decidedly unusual obsession with maintaining a normal life. He has become a favorite object of study for O. To put a stop to Daiya's Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, he launches a counterattack with the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes.

**Daiya Oomine**  
A cunning cynic with silver hair and earrings. He has no qualms about killing or deceiving if it serves his purposes. Using his Box, Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, he faces off against Kazuki.

Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime

Activates when the target steps on the shadow of its wielder, Daiya.  
It forces the target to recall the "awareness of sin" in the depths of their heart and places them under Daiya's Rule so that he can control them as he pleases.





**Aya Otonashi**

A young woman who refers to herself as a "Box" and lives solely to grant the wishes of others. Rejecting her attachment to Kazuki, she has discarded the name Maria and has decided to live as Aya.

**Yuri Yanagi**

A shy, quiet, and rather skittish girl... but with a cunning mind to rival Iroha Shindo's.



































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































A kind world.

A just world.

Yes, I long for it, deeply. More, more, more than anyone. There's nothing false about my earnest wish.

But...

...despite that...

...the pool of blood before my eyes is just too much.

I know.

I've always known.

Yes,

The truth is,

When I grabbed your hand

In that red world,

All I needed

Was for you

To turn back.

Where am I?

It's a red movie theater. Right, a theater.

That's why a movie is playing.

My actions and the images in front of me are in perfect sync.

"I..."

"I..."

I fall to my knees.

So does the boy in middle school.

"I couldn't care less what happens to me."

*"I couldn't care less what happens to me."*



I cover my tears with both hands.

So does the boy in middle school.

“All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy.”

*“All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy.”*

“Kokone.”

And thus, I—

“I’ll save you.”

—am defeated.

My eyes open.

They were never closed, but now they are truly open.

Aya is reaching for the first aid kit.

Without a moment’s delay, Kazu reaches for her chest and removes the Box. The Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime I gave to her.

Hers is a clean cube-shaped Box.

And Kazu obliterates it.

Though her Box is destroyed, Aya stays conscious and continues tending to Kokone.

I can’t do anything anymore.

I can’t move. I can’t even resist the lethargy of the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes anymore.

So I just watch the last moments of *15 Years Old and Earrings*.

The final scene is in a hallway at a middle school.

Looking at my right ear, Kokone asks me sadly, “You...got an earring?”

Now with silver hair, I answer. “Yeah, because I hate earrings.”

“Is that...” Kokone continues, her expression still sorrowful. “...your way of asking for help?”

Someone’s alarm goes off.



“It’s midnight,” Haruaki says quietly.

In the same instant, the abyss, the pitch-black hole that’s finally made its way to me, attacks. The abyss penetrates my chest, gnaws into me, and forces its way into my body. The theater converges into the abyss, shrinking into a round shape.

As absolute nothingness overtakes me, I feel something.

Loss.

And then I know.

My Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime is gone.

The movie theater begins to lose its form until it is nothing more than a red orb. The abyss grows equally massive in inverse proportion, absorbing me more and more.

Once I’m completely drawn into the abyss, what spreads through me is not darkness, but light.

Light.

And as the light fills every corner of me, someone taps me on the shoulder.

◇◇◇ **Kazuki Hoshino 09/12 SAT 12:00 AM** ◇◇◇

We’re in front of the cinema complex on the third floor of the shopping mall. We’ve been transported here with our relative positions from within the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes intact.

An ambulance wails nearby. We had contacted them earlier, so it should be here soon. The spot where I instructed Kokone to stab herself is less lethal than I told Daiya. At the very least, she won’t be dying in ten minutes. There’s also the fact that Maria is applying first aid, and she has medical knowledge. Unless we’re extremely unlucky, Kokone will make it. If she recovers without any major complications, then everything will have gone as I planned. Still, even if the plan goes off without a hitch— *I’m sorry, Kokone. I’m truly sorry.*

I gaze into the distance, not looking at her where she lies. The mall is empty.



There really is something unnerving about this aspect of the place, since you normally never see it. I remember the four of us, including Maria, shopping here at some point. She did dress me up like a girl, but it was a fun page of my normal life. But my memories of this building are tainted with blood, and that won't ever change.

That is how my normal life crumbles away.

I lower my gaze. There are *six people* here. Me. Haruaki, clenching his fists. Kokone, collapsed and bleeding. Maria treating her. And then— Daiya looks at the owner of the hand on his shoulder, his eyes wide.

"That's right, Daiya," I tell him. "You had it wrong. You were going to lose from the very beginning."

I glance at my accomplice's face and then continue.

"Yes, the owner of the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes...is Miyuki Karino."

Miyuki Karino.

In her high school uniform, she gazes sadly into Daiya's face.

Everything started when I learned she had obtained a new Box. Just as owners can sense the Boxes of others, I gained the ability to sense them once I started coming under a Box's powerful influence.

Hers was devoted entirely to Daiya Oomine. Knowing this, I gave up on becoming an owner myself and decided to use her.

"You would have been able to see her, if only you could have faced yourself. You even would have realized she's the owner. But you couldn't see any of it."

Daiya stares at me in silence.

"Because you were avoiding confronting her."

Karino wordlessly moves away from Daiya.

Even though she went to such lengths and created this Box, she has nothing to say to him.

"Karino's wish was to have you all to herself. But the Box would grant that wish along with her negative feelings. While she does love you, she still holds on



to a hatred for you and how you still bring her pain. She also knows it's impossible for you to be hers alone."

That's why the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes tortured Daiya by showing him the past. Why it tried to rob him of his precious wish. And...why it was effective for only a single day.

"It's not me, and it's not Kokone. Karino is the only one who could possess such a distorted Box. You would have known that, if only your eyes were open to it. But this is what it came to."

Positive that the owner was Kokone Kirino, Daiya hadn't considered anyone else.

Because he needed to blind himself in order to work toward his wish.

"Since I knew the truth, I could tell that your inability to see yourself was why you asked me so much about my conviction and my resolve. But you still kept walking toward your own downfall, so for me, it always....."

My voice suddenly quavers here.

The emotions I had kept bottled up during my face-off with Daiya come pouring out.

I look at Kokone all covered in blood.

Why did I ever do this?

My normal life will likely never return. I've hurt Kokone so much. I put this plan into action without telling Haruaki, and that rift between us won't just disappear. My friendship with him will never go back to what it once was.

How did I get here?

I had no choice but to do what I did, though.

Now that I have the Empty Box.

"For me, it always..."

The emotions well up, and tears stream from my eyes.

"...just looked like you were crying out."



That's right—in the end...

...I had no choice but to take down a friend who was screaming in pain.

"Enough," Daiya mutters, his head still lowered. "Enough about all that."

He limps slowly over to the bloodstained girl on the ground.

*"Kokone."*

She's breathing painfully as he looks down at her and calls her name.

Daiya touches one of the earrings in his right ear. It's the first earring he ever got.

He rips it out.

Blood drips from his ear, but Daiya just grips Kokone's hand with an expression so gentle, it's as if he doesn't even feel the pain.

*"Kokone."*

He says her name again, then adds:

*"I love you."*

His expression is a smile from some other time, the kind of smile no one ever would have seen outside of those movies.







◇◇◇ Kazuki Hoshino 09/24 THU 12:25 PM ◇◇◇

The school day is once again going to end before I exchange a single word with anyone, it seems.

Lunch break. I stretch and look out the window. The weather is fine, and the gentle sunlight is pouring into the classroom. I hear there's a typhoon coming tomorrow, though.

An unexpected pain runs across the back of my right hand. The wound has closed, but it still twinges when I remember it.

When I remove the bandages, the scar still runs straight along my hand.

Each time I see it, I think:

*The things I've done won't go away.*

I faintly sigh as I scan all the empty seats in the classroom.

Kokone is still in the hospital. Her life isn't in danger, but that doesn't mean her injury is insignificant. What's worse, she's now going to have a scar on her abdomen, too, as well as the symbol on her back.

Mogi is still in the hospital as before. Though she doesn't appear any different on the surface, I get the feeling she's a little more distant with me.

As for Yuri, her involvement in this put a burden on her that might have been too much. She's been staying home from school a lot recently, including today. Though she does appear to enjoy speaking with me, it hurts me to see how obviously down she is.

Iroha refuses to see me. According to Yuri, she claims she's fine and there's no need to worry about her, but it's possible she's saying that just to put me at ease.



I haven't spoken with Haruaki once since it ended.

I leave the classroom.

I suddenly don't feel like going to my afternoon classes. Spending time in this empty classroom is just agonizing any way I think about it.

I head to the shoe cupboard. In the hallway, I pass by a few girls and overhear them mention "dog-people" in their conversation.

Dog-people.

In the end, the dog-people never became a worldwide phenomenon. All the former dog-people recovered their memories at once, which led society to accept that the situation had been mostly resolved. Without the mystique, the incident fell out of the news cycle, and the talk shows that had once featured the dog-people day after day quickly found new fodder from the affair between a mainstream idol group and an entrepreneur.

That's how powerful of an incident it was. I'm sure most people haven't completely forgotten about the dog-people. But the topic now feels distinctly in the past.

The dog-people have run their course as a subject of conversation.

That's how things are now. At the very least, the dog-people didn't prompt anyone to deeply ponder their morality. Pretty much no one talks about them online anymore. The Internet is flooded with all kinds of news every day. Right now, the biggest talking point is a manga writer who said some nasty things to a fan. This led to more people yelling at one another, and now it's a full-blown shitstorm. Someone even got arrested for sending a death threat to the author. It makes me cringe a bit to think that this is on the same level as what Daiya caused.

All that said, I don't think Daiya's actions were meaningless. There are probably people out there who are still thinking about the issues he brought up. But he would have needed to keep it up if he wanted to hold the attention of society. The fact is that news has an expiration date.

I arrive at the shoe cupboard. No one reprimands me or stops me as I switch from my indoor shoes to my leather ones.



In the schoolyard, I spot people playing basketball and catch.

Even in a school as full of Subjects as this one, daily life rolls on with little or no change. The Subjects have all lost their memories of the Box. I'm sure there are some individuals among them who were greatly affected. But even that doesn't appear to have had any influence on the normal day-to-day of school.

"....."

Why is that?

Seeing it puts me in a little bit of a bad mood. Even though I stopped Daiya's plans, even though this is exactly what I wanted, the fact that nothing has changed doesn't really make me happy.

I mean, if that's the case, then what are any of us even capable of?

If Daiya can step forward alone with the resolve to let his goals destroy him, and still nothing changes, what does that say about the rest of us? What does it say about our daily lives that they go on just the same regardless of whether one of us is seriously injured or leaves school or just vanishes?

...No, that viewpoint is too similar to Daiya's.

If anything, that's exactly why I have faith in normality. I have faith that, if normal life is able to correct so many extreme changes, I can save Maria by pulling her into it.

The reason I'm getting all sentimental is because I am Daiya's friend, even though he might say otherwise now. I just want him to get *something* for his efforts.

"Daiya..."

Daiya has disappeared again.

I met with him only once after everything, when he came to school after he had officially withdrawn. His hair was black, and he had removed his earrings. I mustered up the courage to speak with him, but all he did was give me a little smile without actually having a conversation.

I have no idea what he intends to do from here on out.



Leaving school, I ride the train and arrive at the five-story apartment building I'm so used to visiting. I've never pressed any buttons in this elevator except for the ones for the first and fourth floors, and I probably won't have a reason to press any others. As always, I punch the button for the fourth floor and head to the door of room 403.

Inserting my copy of the key, I open the door.

Before me is a completely bare room.

No one is here.

Kicking off my shoes, I make myself at home in this empty apartment once again. There's no trace of Maria's presence anywhere, though.

Anywhere.

I could handle the lack of furniture or decorations. There wasn't much of anything in here to begin with, after all.

But there's one little thing that's more than I can stand—it doesn't smell like peppermint.

It was basically Maria's scent to me, and now it's gone.

That makes reality sink in that, whether I like it or not, Maria will not be returning to this apartment.

"Maria..."

She's gone.

After she finished treating Kokone that day, Maria vanished. I don't recall turning my attention away from her, which means Maria had most likely been waiting for a chance to slip away from me. I went searching right away, but I could find neither hide nor hair of her.

Though she is apparently still enrolled in school, I don't think she'll be coming back. That's why she cleared out the apartment.

She probably doesn't plan on seeing me ever again.

Sure, I intend to take Maria back. Of course. I should be able to.

But—I can't.



Just finding Maria gone ends my search before it begins.

“ Ah, ahhh!”

I’m having trouble breathing. It feels as if all the oxygen in my body has been sucked out. I want to see her; I desperately want to see her; my chest is burning. Tears well up in my eyes. The pain is enough to make them spill over, though whether they’re born of sadness or frustration, I couldn’t say.

And then I think something.

*“I won’t let her.”*

I won’t let her leave me.

I will track down Maria, no matter what I have to do. *No matter what I have to do. If I have to kill everyone in the world, then I will.*

I take out the bottle of peppermint-scented oil from my bag. I bought it on the way home from school. I walk around dripping it here and there on the floor. The familiar scent spreads, but it’s not a relief at all. It’s still not enough. Leaving a few drops won’t be enough for the smell to wash over me.

*Just...let...me...breathe.*

“Haah...ah, haah!”

Maria.

The original Maria, before she obtained a Box. The Maria she’s never let me see, new and untouched.

—The zeroth Maria.

*Where are you?*

*If you are inside Aya Otonashi, then I’ll pull you out, even if I have to tear off her skin.*

—Click.

Out of nowhere comes the sound of the door opening.

I panic. I don’t need to say I’m trespassing. I’m even putting down scented oil as if I own the place. If it’s someone from the company that manages these



apartments, I'm in big trouble.

But I realize my worries are unfounded when I see who appears behind the door.

No, I wasn't nearly worried enough.

The situation just got even worse.

It can't get any worse, in fact.

"O."

She presents herself in the form of the woman who somehow resembles Maria.

We've run into each other several times. We've even had relatively mundane encounters that weren't connected to anything major. This time, the implications are different from before.

O has unmistakably arrived here as my enemy.

She is here to take me down.

"Have you made your preparations?" she asks with her characteristic creepy smile.

—*For what?*

I ask for clarification, and O obliges.

"To say your good-byes to this world."

## **Daiya Oomine 09/24 THU 10:45 AM**

I may have lost Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, but I haven't forgotten anything about Boxes. I don't know the reason, but I think it may have something to do with how I knew they existed even before I got one of my own.

I walk the streets of Shinjuku. It's crowded. The number of people is annoying, but it doesn't make me dizzy anymore. I don't see any crimes when I step on shadows. I know that the sludge-like corruption lurks beneath the skin of the people strolling the packed sidewalks, but they don't appear to me like



squirming bags of filth.

They're just people.

I try to brush my earrings, then remember I don't have anything in my ear and smile ruefully.

I suddenly drop to my knees in the middle of the street. I stretch my back and give a snappy bow with my head to the ground, like a karate student to a teacher.

It's a weird thing to do, from anyone's point of view.

*Okay.*

I raise my head. While there are several people giving me odd looks, for the most part everyone simply passes me by and tries not to get involved. That's all that happens when I'm the only one acting strangely. That's all I am now that I've lost the ability to manipulate the masses.

I don't have the power to make anything happen anymore.

".....Heh-heh."

I'm fine with that.

The people flow by without interacting with me.

Yeah, that's how it is.

The world has become a group of people who have nothing to do with me.

It's incredibly freeing.

But—

Someone suddenly taps me on the shoulder as I wade through the throngs.

I turn around, wondering who it could be.

"Oh, it's you."

When I see who it is, my expression turns tense. To be honest, it's someone I had hoped not to see.

"What could you possibly want from me now?"



Her eyes go wide at my rather rude reply, and she makes a desperate appeal. She's so worked up and all over the place, I can hardly make heads or tails of what she's saying. Listening patiently, I finally get the gist of it: She wants me to behave like a god again and set the world straight.

"You want me to lead you again? You know that's not going to happen. I don't have power anymore... You don't care? Sorry, I don't get that... Okay, let me say it loud and clear. I have no desire to do anything of the sort ever again, and I have no intention of doing it, either."

That doesn't satisfy her, though. She's still fervently pleading with me. Pretty persistent for someone with no memory of the Box.

"Responsibility? Yeah, sure. I plan on turning myself in once Kokone's condition stabilizes. Killing Koudai Kamiuchi isn't a crime I can just sweep aside, after all... What? That's not what you're talking about? Okay, then what do you mean by responsibility? ...My responsibility for leading you? I'm telling you—you're free to go. Isn't that enough? .....Huh? That's not true at all. Your life does not belong to me. It never has. It's always been yours, not mine."

Not even that gets her to back off.

"Give me a break here. Don't expect anything else from me. I'm just a high schooler—heck, I'm not even that. I'm just a failure of a person who couldn't even handle high school. Yeah. I'm human."

She persists with her desperate entreaty.

*Guide me, she begs, help me.*

What does she want from me?

I turn my back, realizing that any further conversation is pointless.

"Live however you want from now on."

I won't have anything to do with her ever again.

On that point, I've made my intentions clear.

I have completely renounced every last bit of my former power.

Then my back is hot, almost burning.



“Huh?”

My strength suddenly gives out, and I drop to my knees.

As my knees hit the ground, the blood draining out of me stains them red.

Spitting blood from my mouth, I look up at the one who stabbed me, and I realize. I'd been talking with this girl for a bit now, but I hadn't recognized her at all. Talking with her was like talking with a virtual image.

Now that it's come to this, I can finally take in what she looks like.

She had to stab me to make me acknowledge her existence.

“You're human? Please don't treat me like I'm stupid.” This girl with empty eyes stands over me and says, “You are a god.”

This middle schooler with a bob lowers a large kitchen knife. She rubs the blood over her face like makeup.

“If you aren't a god, then how am I supposed to live? You should be held accountable. You should be held accountable until the very end.”

Screams arise from the busy thoroughfare as people notice what is happening.

“I won't let you.”

She smiles through her welling tears.

“I won't let you be human again.”

With that, the girl runs off, bumping into several people along the crowded street.

Before long, I can't even see her back anymore. But I'm sure the guilt of what she's done will track her down in no time. She'll come up against an overwhelming impasse. The kind world, the just world, will not protect her. That's how our world is.

I might have tried to play at being a god, but I couldn't guide anyone in the right way. This is what it gets me.

“           Ha.”



Blood spills out of my mouth again.

“ Ha-ha.”

This is my reward for my efforts, isn't it? Pitiful. I can't help a wry laugh.

But when I give it some thought, this really is what I get. Why did I think I should feel so free without undergoing any sort of punishment? Did I really believe the things I had done would go away completely?

Even without my powers, I'm still attacking and under attack.

This is reaping what I've sown. I had always imagined my eventual downfall. In a sense, this is just the arrival of a conclusion I foresaw for myself.

And yet.

Knowing that I brought this on myself doesn't change anything.

“.....Don't...make me...laugh.”

I'm filled with regret.

I don't want to be destroyed anymore. I don't want to meet this end. Those desires are gone now, yet this is my end just because I once set the wheels in motion?

There was never any going back for me? ...Shut up. What am I supposed to do? I can't believe how much— “.....I...don't want...to die.”

The blood trickling from my mouth makes the words almost inaudible.

I'm in pain. It hurts. It hurts. I'm in so much pain.

*I want to live.*

*Kokone.*

*Kokone, I want to see you.*

Once blind, I've finally seen the light and come to understand the truth. I don't need to do anything. I could even be a burden. I just want to stay by your side. I've realized that's what I want, and what I have to do... And now, even after this revelation...

*My wish will be crushed just like that?*



*Don't be stupid.*

Fighting back the pain, I rise unsteadily to my feet.

I can't let myself lose so easily. I can't die. There should be a police box nearby. I'll try to make it there.

No one on those busy streets offers to help the bleeding boy. Each and every one of them simply steers clear of me without trying to help. Everyone remains as apathetic as ever in the world I couldn't change.

Is this something else I'm reaping for my trouble?

I try to laugh, but I can't. Simply put, I'm at the end of my rope. My legs are turning to jelly. My consciousness is fading away. The world is spinning.

Then it ends.

I collapse in a pathetic, motionless heap.

Something occurs to me.

If there was someone to help me out of this, they would be the definition of hope.

That's what I think.



*“Are you okay, Oomine?!”*

*I pick him up and cradle him.*

*“.....Aya?”*

*He whispers one word, then closes his eyes.*

*My gray jacket is stained a dark red in no time at all. His wound is worse than Kirino’s was, and unlike back then, I don’t have any first aid implements.*

*Before long, I know I can’t save him.*

*It’s no coincidence that I was able to hurry to Daiya in his moment of need. With nowhere else to go, I had been following him. It didn’t mean anything more than that. Oomine had once given me the opportunity to do away with the “misbegotten” part of my Misbegotten Happiness, so I’d been trailing him in the hope that maybe I would find the same chance again. Chances were slim to none, but I couldn’t give up.*

*When Oomine faintly gasps “You really did come” with faint breaths, I get the impression that maybe he knew what I was doing.*

*But I doubt that’s the case. Oomine once attempted to entrust his power to me. I may have lost Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, but I believe I still embody hope for him.*

*I’m honored, but it hurts to know I won’t be able to live up to his expectations.*

*“Hold on, I’ll call an ambulance. You have to try and stay conscious until then.” I offer him something, knowing it may be no use. He opens and closes his mouth, enduring the pain.*

*“Use.....on me.”*

*“What? What’re you trying to say?”*

*Summoning the last of his strength, he tells me what he wants—the one method that could save him.*

*“Use the Misbegotten Happiness on me.”*

*Erasing my memories of Kazuki Hoshino.*



*That's what using the Misbegotten Happiness on Oomine would mean.*

*No, I'm not okay with the idea. That hasn't changed, even if he has. I spent a whole lifetime with him; he has power over my heart no matter what I have to say about it.—And power is what it is. Kazuki haunts all the more human portions of my heart. He's scattered everywhere, so I can't be rid of him.*

*If I forget Kazu, I won't be myself anymore. I'd become a sort of doppelgänger of myself, just with the same body and purpose.*

*Discarding myself.*

*That is terrifying.*

*I can't believe this... How did I neglect this problem until it came to this? Why didn't I get away from Kazuki from the beginning?*

*Was I lazy, relaxing into the comfort of his presence? Was I enjoying life at the expense of my mission?*

*No.*

*I shake my head internally. My connection with Kazuki is not so frail. It wasn't something I could overcome by just holding on to the right attitude. This may be a strange way of putting it, but my deepening ties to him were unavoidable. There is nothing that could have been done as long as the Rejecting Classroom existed.*

*I accept it.*

*The bond between Kazuki and me is absolute.*

*It's a precious connection born of necessity.*

*And now I will destroy it.*

*"          !"*

*...Don't be afraid, I've said so many times.*

*But if that's true—*

*—I can't help but wonder.*

*Is there any meaning to the "me" who vanishes over and over? She's destined*



*to be lost—so can you say she really exists?*

*What am “I”?*

*But the me who is thinking about these things is suddenly amused.*

*“.....Heh-heh.”*

*What’s the point of going over all this with myself now?*

*“I”—am a Box.*

*A Box with no meaning beyond granting the wishes of others.*

*And here, right before my eyes, is someone who wishes for the Misbegotten Happiness.*

*I smile at Oomine.*

*“Okay, I’ll use the Misbegotten Happiness.”*

*No hesitation. I’m a Box; I shouldn’t have doubts.*

*“Please.”*

*Oomine reaches out with a blood-drenched hand for my cheek. The weak touch of his fingers tells me that this is nearly it for him.*

*“I don’t want to die.”*

*A thought suddenly comes to me.*

*There was once a girl trapped within a looping world who had a similar wish. She couldn’t fully believe she wouldn’t die, and that was the result.*

*Oomine is a realist, so I’m sure he won’t be able to ignore his own fate.*

*Meaning that even if I do use the Misbegotten Happiness, the outcome will be*

*—*

*I decide not to entertain that thought any further.*

*If someone asks to be saved, then my only course is to meet that request.*

*I press Oomine’s bloody hand against my chest.*

*And then I—disappear.*

*Disappear.*



*Disappear.*

*I sink to the bottom of the ocean. It's pitch-black there, and I can't see a thing. Not even my own hands. I can't even be sure of my own form. It's cold, and my body turns numb as it freezes over. I can't tell where I am. I may be the oceanic abyss itself.*

*I can hear distant laughter. Lots of laughing voices. They don't have anything to do with me, though. Plus, their joy is fake.*

*No one can see themselves here, so there's no need for pretense. The water pressure has pressed out the softer parts of me, leaving me in a state I can never let anyone else see. It's my weak self. The girl I used to be. But there's no one here anyway, so it doesn't really matter.*

*The world is far away.*

*I am farther away than anyone.*

*But an unexpected light appears to me in my solitude. It's harsh and intense, like a spotlight catching a criminal. My eyes narrow against the glare.*

*Then she reveals herself.*

*I say the name of the girl who appears.*

*"O."*

*I notice something immediately, though.*

*She's different. No, she is undoubtedly O, but not the same. This form of hers. This girl with the bewitching smile, she's—*

*"Aya...my sister."*

*And then my eyes are opened.*

*How my Box works. How the Misbegotten Happiness remains a failure. How my own actions serve no purpose. How everything I've done until now was just swimming around lost in the pitch-black ocean depths. How my memories have left me ignorant.*

*I understand everything.*

*So what about me? What have I been doing all this for?*



*“Maria.” She says my name. “You remember my wish, right?”*

*“Of course I do.”*

*It’s the only way I can atone.*

*The one thing I can do for my beloved sister.*

*There was something Aya always used to say, and she says it again now. “I want to make other people happy.”*

*“Okay.” All I can do is nod in agreement.*

*“Will you keep making my wish come true?”*

*“Yes,” I reply, and Aya answers with a charming smile.*

*Overjoyed, I try to smile along with her. My head is frozen, though, so I can’t tell if I’m really succeeding.*

*“As you do, you will probably keep wandering. What is flawed and incomplete will remain flawed, but you will never stop pursuing perfection. You will continue to forget yourself in your search for a correct answer that doesn’t exist.”*

*“Maybe so...”*

*“But that’s what you wanted.”*

*“What do you mean? What I wanted?”*

*“To continually seek out the ideal—that is your wish.” She smiles. I always loved that smile. “If you become whole, then you will realize that Aya Otonashi doesn’t exist within you.”*

*“Oh, I see.”*

*So what I’m doing, really, is—*

*“———Anyway.”*

*I do know one thing.*

*I won’t stop, even though what I do may be meaningless in the end, as meaningless as swimming around down here in the depths of the sea.*

*That’s right; I—*



*“There’s no one who can stop me.”*



*I then come to my senses. I’m sitting on my knees in the middle of a busy street in Shinjuku. My posture suggests I have been holding someone, but there’s no one in my arms.*

*I glance down and see that I’m covered in blood. I don’t know why. Surprisingly, I’m not shocked or frightened.*

*I don’t remember anything. But I do know what happened to me.*

*I used the Misbegotten Happiness.*

*There’s a gulf in my head. It’s vast, too large to fill in. A pit so massive that I might start shaking if I look directly at it.*

*Yes, I have lost it.*

*Once again, I’ve become something other than myself.*

*I rise unsteadily to my feet. My body feels strangely light, causing me to stagger. I see myself reflected in a shop window. My face looks awful, as if I’m bearing the misery of the whole world, and I’m so gaunt that I appear completely helpless. I guess this is what I amount to when I forget my resolve.*

*Deciding to go somewhere else, I realize I have no place to go.*

*With no memories of my family, no memories of my friends, I have no mooring.*

*As I stand completely still, a busy-looking man who seems like an office worker bumps into me. He glances at me when I stagger, and he clicks his tongue, then quickly hurries off.*

*—Where am I?*

*—Who am I?*

*I feel as if I’m at the very bottom of the ocean.*

*“ ”*

*I suddenly get the feeling someone is calling out to me.*



*The way they address me brings warmth to my heart. It's so familiar. For a moment, it feels as though asking who it is would be a ridiculous thing to do.*

*I turn around.*

*But the people on the street are paying no attention to me, so there doesn't seem to be anyone who would have called out to me like that.*

*“ ”*

*There it is again.*

*A voice that moves my heart.*

*But I realize something. While I feel as if I can hear the voice, I can't tell what it's saying.*

*“What...?” I touch my cheek. “Why am I crying?”*

*I don't understand.*

*I'm sure, though, that whatever this is was important to the girl I once was.*

*It has nothing to do with me anymore, but maybe it was something I shouldn't have lost.*

*Yes, but still.*

*It doesn't matter to me anymore.*

*I wipe away my tears. No more come to replace them.*

*I haven't forgotten my purpose. Granting the wishes of other people—that is what's important to me. Nothing else. I have to put aside what my former self once cherished.*

*No, I already have.*

*Now then, it's time to find O again.*

*“.....Huh?”*

*What did I just think?*

*I try to pull it back, but nothing comes to me. I can't recall what I was thinking just now. I get the feeling it doesn't really matter, though.*



*I will keep wandering, and that's all.*

*And so I forget O's true nature yet again.*



## AFTERWORD

Hello, Eiji Mikage here.

I have delivered to you the sixth volume of *The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria*. The events of the final stages of this story are things I have envisioned in my head for quite some time now, so it is all the more moving to be able to put them to paper.

This may seem a bit out of the blue, but my motto is “A pro cannot be human.”

It comes from a statement spoken on TV by Oh, a coach of the Hawks at the time whom I admired. My memory of them may be a little off, but here is the gist of what he said:

*“All humans make mistakes. But an athlete who thinks they can’t do anything about their mistakes because they are human will make the same errors again. Thus, a pro cannot be human.”*

I remember being deeply impressed, thinking that having such a strong sense of what it is to be a professional must be what enabled him to hammer out the record he did.

Regardless of whether you’re a pro baseball player or not, I feel that a high level of awareness that verges on going beyond what is human is necessary in adhering to a singular will. I’m nowhere near that level yet, but I’m working hard to try to get there someday.

Now for my acknowledgements.

To my editor, Miki: Thank you very much for keeping things going smoothly amid your exceedingly busy schedule.

To my illustrator, Tetsuo: Thank you for the wonderful art as always. I look



forward to seeing your illustrations every time and consider it to be a part of why I'm writing this story.

Welp, there is only one more installment left in the tale. When I think about it, this has been an undertaking that has proved so difficult, it almost makes me cry uncle each time I turn in another volume. I've made it here at last. I swear that I will write out the story to the end, so I hope you'll come along for the ride.

I will also be unveiling a new project come springtime. I have the feeling that readers of this story will enjoy it, too, so I hope you will give it a look.

I'm pouring my heart into both of them, so please don't go saying *Hurry up and get the last book out!* okay?

Have faith that we'll see each other again.

*Eiji Mikage*



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